UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE
ENDANGERED SPECIES PROGRAM

TELEPHONIC INTERVIEW TIME (09:38)

COLORADO PIKEMINNOW (HOST – BRYNN WALLING WITH TOM CHART)

This transcript was produced from audio provided by USFWS Endangered Species Program

P R O C E E D I N G S

(Music plays.)

MS. WALLING: Hi. This is Brynn Walling for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Today I have on the phone Tom Chart. Tom is the director of the Upper Colorado River Endangered Fish Recovery Program. How are you today, Tom?

MR. CHART: Very well, Brynn. Thanks.

MS. WALLING: Today Tom is going to tell us about the Colorado pikeminnow, one of four endangered fish found only in the Colorado River. Could you start by giving us an overview of the species and what factors led to the species becoming endangered?

MR. CHART: Sure, Brynn. Colorado pikeminnow is the largest minnow in North America. It can attain sizes, historically, of four to five feet long and body weights of 60 to 80 pounds. Those were recorded down in the lower basin. As time has moved on and the populations and river system has been impacted, we really find wild producing populations of these fish only in the Upper Colorado River basin.

But, again, a real large fish for a minnow and extremely long-lived like all the Colorado River fish are, too. To age this fish out to 40 to 50 years old is not uncommon for the adult. Also typical with a long-lived species is they do not become sexually mature until they're 8 or 9 years old.

This species of fish also migrates long distances within the river systems itself. We have fish that move 200 miles on an annual basis to find discreet spawning areas and then they return to their home ranges later after they've spawned.

The reasons why the species has been listed is that we blocked portions of the river with low-head diversion dams and that's blocked some of these migrations that they've had. We've also changed the flow patterns in the rivers as water has been developed, as well. The other thing is that they are competing now with a myriad number of non-native species that have been introduced to the system, as well.

MS. WALLING: What does recovery mean for this species?

MR. CHART: The recovery means self-sustaining populations. In other words, that we're not augmenting their population with fish from the hatchery and they're completing their lifecycles out there and they're doing it with such a frequency and in such a way and in a number of places such that the biologists are convinced that their populations are gonna persist through time.

MS. WALLING: Can you tell us some of the biggest challenges to recovering the species?

MR. CHART: With this species traveling long distances in the river, it's critical to the way they complete their lifecycles. Throughout places like the Colorado River over by Grand Junction, there's this historical series of low-head diversion dams that are used to divert water from the main stem Colorado River out onto irrigated fields. Some of those low-head diversion dams have been in place for nearly 100 years. Low-head means between five and ten feet tall, which is certainly enough of a hurdle that a Colorado pikeminnow cannot cross that portion of the river.

One of the things that we had to do on the Colorado and also at Gunnison River was to provide passage around those low-head diversion dams. We've been able to do that and complete those now on the Lower Gunnison River and then at three locations, three low-head diversion dams, on the Colorado River main stem itself.

Non-native fish is really another key consideration. The Colorado River system, historically, only supported 13 species of native fish. That's a lot of habitat to support relatively few native species. What that allowed for was the introduction of a lot of non-native fish, whether that was to develop sport fishing a long time ago or just accidental introductions of fish.

But because there was only 13 native species out there, this was one of the systems that provided a lot of niches for these non-native fish to become established, as well. If we had 13 natives, you compare that now with reports of

between 50 and 60 non-native species that live throughout the Upper Colorado River system.

Trying to control the impacts associated with those non-native fish is really a huge component of where the program is right now. We're trying to remove a couple of bad actors, like smallmouth bass and northern pike, which seem to be the non-native fish that are creating the greatest impediment to our ability to recover the endangered fish right now.

One of the things we've been focusing on since day one has been flow management. We understand and we're trying to recover endangered fish while water development continues out there. We're trying to balance the Endangered Species Act against the law of the river, people's rights to develop water in the system.

But we're also working with the water user to find a flexibility in the system to provide the flows that a species like Colorado pikeminnow needs not only to migrate to spawning areas, but also to provide the habitats that their young need to complete the important first year of their life. A lot of work has been devoted towards identifying the needs of the endangered fish and then working with the water users to try to find the flexibility in the system to provide those flows for the fish, as well.

MS. WALLING: What progress are we making toward recovery of the Colorado pikeminnow?

MR. CHART: We're really gathering some pretty strong data sets on Colorado pikeminnow populations. We actually have population estimates that reach back to 1992 now on the Colorado River sub-basin and back to about the year 2000 on the Green River sub-basin. We can see with a fairly long data set like that, we're starting to understand how a wild animal like this survives and fluctuates through time in a highly variable system like this.

What we're finding with Colorado pikeminnow is that populations appear to be relatively stable, both on the Green and the Colorado River sub-basin side of the basin. We've been able to, I think, hold the line with this species of fish. That's really important when we consider that we've been able to demonstrate relative population stability through periods of draught like we saw in the early 2000's and we're experiencing in 2012 here, as well, and in the face of these fluctuating non-native fish populations, as well.

So it appears that the population of Colorado pikeminnow really has been stable despite a litany of impacts to the system over 100 years and non-native fish that have come and gone throughout the years, as well. I think we're getting a fairly good handle, indications at least, that we are operating the system and managing flows in the system and reconnecting habitats and managing those non-native

fish in a way that this population is giving us the indications that it will persist through time.

MS. WALLING: Can you discuss the cooperative partnership of your program and how it's proven successful?

MR. CHART: This is kind of what makes this program work. We have basically ten stakeholders that have been sitting at the table since 1988. The thing that I think really makes a program like this work and contributes to the staying power of a program like this is that you develop trust over the years. We have the biologists that are dedicated and working out there to understand how these populations behave through time and the specific impacts we see with the non-native fish.

But then you also have the water users themselves that understand where the flexibility in terms of water storage really lies in the system and where they can bend their operations to not only keep the water users whole, but deliver the water we need to see for the recovery of the endangered fish.

Now on a more specific scale, we have been working with our state partners, the wildlife agencies from Colorado, Utah, and Wyoming, to change the message out there about these non-native sport fish. The message is changing now. We have to get the word out that we need to work on developing sport fishing opportunities for the recreation community out there that are truly compatible with what we're trying to do in the large rivers. In other words, focus on species that they can catch for recreation that once they get into the river, of if they get into the river, do not present the types of threats that we're seeing from a species like smallmouth bass and northern pike.

We cannot do that as a recovery program without having our state partners. There's collaboration and cooperation on so many different fronts. It's kind of what the program is all about. It occurs on a lot of different fronts; on the ground, talking to Congress, and getting the message out the public, as well.

We also have a sister program, San Juan Program. They're dealing with a lot of the same issues that we are in the Green and the Colorado River sub-basin; water management, non-native fish issues. They're trying to recover two of the endangered fish because those are the only two that were found down in that portion of the basin; Colorado pikeminnow and razorback sucker.

In that situation, it's a little bit different. They are using a strong hatchery program. But the numbers of fish that that San Juan Program are starting to accumulate in terms of pikeminnow and razorback out in the main channel of the San Juan River system is really phenomenal. It's certainly another one of those indications that we're on the right track to recovery. The numbers of fish the biologists are catching out there, in other words, hatchery fish that are hanging

on, finding each other, and reproducing in the San Juan system, as well. It's another pieces of this entire upper basin recovery effort.

MS. WALLING: Thank you, Tom, for meeting with us today.