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DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE
ENDANGERED SPECIES PROGRAM**

TELEPHONIC INTERVIEW TIME (10:25)

**RIO GRANDE CUTTHROAT TROUT (HOST – SARAH LEON WITH CHRIS
KITCHEYAN, JOSEPH CHAVARRIA, AND GILBERT GUTIERREZ)**

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

P R O C E E D I N G S

(Music plays.)

MS. LEON: This is Sarah Leon for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. And I'm on the phone today with Chris Kitcheyan, Supervisory Fish Biologist at the Service's New Mexico Fish and Wildlife Conservation Office; Joseph Chavarria, Environmental Director of Santa Clara Pueblo Office of Environmental Affairs; and Gilbert Gutierrez, the Field Team Lead there at the Santa Clara Pueblo. For over a decade, the pueblo has worked to restore the Rio Grande cutthroat trout to the headwaters of Santa Clara Creek.

While the pueblo has faced a number of obstacles over the years, that have threatened to scuttle this work, it has continued to move forward with efforts to conserve this rare fish, so that it can endure into the future. Joe, I was hoping you could get us started today by telling us about the Pueblo's interest in the Rio Grande cutthroat. What historical and cultural value does this species and other species of fish and wildlife have?

MR. CHAVARRIA: This species and any other species, big game species, small game, fish, are all tied into our tradition and cultural way of life, which have always been there. Our people have been established within the Santa Clara Canyon for who knows how many centuries. I mean there's been battles fought to preserve that Santa Clara Canyon and Creek, so there was a lot of conservation thought of protecting this creek,

and even yet, today, it is instilled into us from our elders that we have to protect the limited land we have, and resources we have.

So it's just a protection of everything. And so seeing the impact that the stocking operation, it was having on the Rio Grande cutthroat, when fishing on the reservation was opened to the general public, kind of became concerned, starting to see less and less of the Rio Grande cutthroat in the stream.

MS. LEON: Would you tell us more about the Pueblo's work to help restore this species to Santa Clara Creek headwaters?

MR. CHAVARRIA: Our work with this species began in 1997, with us contacting the US Fish and Wildlife. We went through this process of shocking the stream annually.

It's been a great process of working with a lot of people to get the fish reintroduced into the Santa Clara Creek, and we've had some major obstacles over time. In 1998, we had the Oso fire, which hit the north side of the Santa Clara Canyon right up to the Santa Clara Creek. Then in 2000, we had another major fire – the Cero Grande fire – which totally devastated the creek. Now with the Las Conchas fire, it totally devastated the whole canyon. Prior to these fires, we had good data to show what kind of species we had within the Santa Clara Creek. We had the Rio Grande cutthroat, the rainbow trout, which was stocked, and then a hybrid species, which was the cuttbow. So back in – I believe it was 2005, we were able to submit and work on a Tribal Wildlife Grant to implement a process of re-introducing the Rio Grande cutthroat.

When that first proposal went in, we were going under the assumption that we would have safe population of Rio Grande cutthroats in the upper headwaters of the Santa Clara Creek and Turkey Creek watershed. And so we went through that process of gathering fish and shocking. We worked with the Mescalero Fish Hatchery, and took about maybe 100 fish down to the Mescalero Fish Hatchery, and kept monitoring them and working with them. And with Chris's assistance, we were able to also get the fish to take them to...what was the name?

MR. KITCHEYAN: Dexter National Fish Hatchery and Technology Center did the genetics.

MR. CHAVARRIA: So we went through and did the fin clippings and submitted the fin clippings, and that was when we came back with only two having 80 percent DNA of Rio Grande cutthroat and one 90 percent. And so that was a total blow to the project. I mean that was years of work down the drain. We had to reorganize, brainstorm, what could we do. We came up and said: "Well, maybe we can ask the New Mexico Game and Fish if they'd be willing to give us some pure cutthroats to establish that population in Santa Clara Creek." So, we went through and spoke to our Tribal Council and were able to pass an MOA through Tribal Council resolution, with the New Mexico Game and Fish to acquire at least 200 fish that were going to be released in the Santa Clara headwaters this past September. But the fire came and got us.

One thing to mention, too, is that we were able to also work with the Santa Clara Governor's Office and the Santa Clara Tribal Council to get a resolution passed to have Rio Grande cutthroat waters established in the headwaters and small lake up in the canyon area.

We were going through the process of also building a fish barrier, so that we could at least have protected waters for our Rio Grande cutthroat when we put those 200 fish that we were supposed to get from the New Mexico Game and Fish Department. So that's it kind of in a nutshell.

Also, with our Tribal Wildlife Grant, we didn't want to have our people mad at us for closing that higher area. That is one of the most pristine areas on the reservation – was, I guess, and people would love to be there. And with that fish management area, we had the area closed off for five years, where no fishing was allowed. We also put into that grant you have for three years, stocking of rainbow trout within the lower three ponds or lower areas below the fourth pond. And so that was how we tried to work with the community.

MR. GUITIERREZ: That whole process really was time-consuming because we had to deal directly with our Tribal Council, and that also meant dealing with the individual parties that make up our Tribal Council. And just to get that designation of that area was not an overnight thing. We had numerous meetings with the different individuals, representatives from the different parties.

There's four parties in our Tribal Council, and that meant having Joe, Chris and myself presenting to the Council, just to keep them up to speed on what we were trying to do, and that we were not taking away the rights of the various members to go up into these areas, but rather to protect the waters to establish Rio Grande cutthroats within that area.

MR. KITCHYAN: The partnership that we have with Santa Clara, it's exceeded expectations, just to see the tribe take the initiative to say, okay, we want to do this, you know, that was the key point right there. When this project was initiated, there was a lot of partners involved. And I think one of the cool things about this is Santa Clara was actually sending out email messages to all its partners, inviting them to the canyon, you know, seeking guidance, seeking suggestions on what we can do to have a successful project.

Because of the success of this project, this project is kind of used as a template. So you have other tribes such as Jicarilla and Mescalero, who are now standing on the outside looking in and watching this to see how it's doing, and what exactly did Santa Clara do? Without these partners, it would be difficult to actually save these species. So, you know, it just gives us that advantage, as far as trying to save and conserve. And when you are able to work with tribes like this, who are taking that initiative, it's a good feeling.

MR. CHAVARRIA: Working with Chris, the relationship expanded just from being a working relationship to where we have built ties and friends with the people down here in the office. And knowing that he was there for us and Native American, it made us feel relaxed and eased to work with him and invite him onto the reservation, and have him assist us.

MS. LEON: How has the Los Conchos fire impacted the Rio Grande cutthroat trout program, and what has it meant for the Pueblo?

MR. CHAVARRIA: The fire started from a tree falling on the electrical line. It grew to 45,000 acres. That was on a Sunday. By Monday, we knew the fire was fairly close to our reservation. Wednesday, the fire totally engulfed the reservation and the upper headwaters. I don't know how to explain it. I was crying. Other grown men were crying, to see our land burn. You could see the flames rising up from within the canyon. It looked like the gates of hell. Flames were higher than the mountains, just a bright orange and red.

A lot of questions of what did we do – why were we being punished? It was something that impacted the whole Pueblo. The Pueblo wasn't ready for the devastating impact of this fire because the fire burnt through the two previous fires. When a fire should lay down in a previous burn, this fire just went through both of them and burned what wasn't burned in the previous fires. We had no rain, no snow, and so we had just dry conditions and wind, and the odds were just stacked up against us. We lost the battle.

This Los Conchos fire knocked us on our back. We're totally down. I think we're way back beyond step one. And we have to see after this Los Conchos fire where we go from there in the next five to six years. And that's what we're looking at, looking at post-fire remediation projects of how we can establish this creek of how it used to be prior to the Los Conchos fire. It's going to take a lot of work.

MS. LEON: Well, thank you Chris, Joseph and Gilbert for telling us your story, and of course, for your efforts so conserve this rare species. We wish you all of the best in these hard times. For the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, this is Sarah Leon.