

News Release

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE (at 1:00 p.m. Eastern)

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U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Issues Biological Opinion for Apalachicola-Chattahoochee-Flint River Basin

PANAMA CITY, FL -- Future water control operations as outlined in the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' proposed updated Water Control Manual will not threaten the continued existence of federally protected mussels and the Gulf sturgeon found in the Apalachicola-Chattahoochee-Flint River Basin.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service at the same time determined in a Biological Opinion that the updated plan will not adversely modify critical habitat designated for those listed species.

This biological opinion completes the Service's consultation with the Corps, which is required by the Endangered Species Act (ESA) on the updated water management plan that guides its operation of five federal dams and reservoirs in the basin. The Biological Opinion is based on the best available science and focuses on protecting the Gulf Sturgeon and three mussels listed under the ESA.

After reviewing the current status of the listed Gulf sturgeon and the three mussels and designated critical habitat in the basin as well as the immediate and cumulative effects of the proposed action, the Service concluded that implementing the Water Control Manual's updated operations will not jeopardize the continued existence of the Gulf sturgeon, fat threeridge, purple bankclimber and Chipola slabshell and will not destroy or adversely modify designated critical habitat.

The Biological Opinion lists three mandatory, reasonable and prudent measures necessary and appropriate to minimize the impacts of incidental take of the Gulf sturgeon and the three mussels:

- **Adaptive management:** Identify ways to avoid and minimize take and implement alternative management strategies within the scope of the authorities of the Water Control Manual as new information is collected.
- **Water Flow and Water Quality Stations:** Develop and implement a monitoring program associated with permanent monitoring stations within the ACF Basin for water quantity and water quality parameters related to listed species effects.
- **Species Monitoring:** Monitor the level of take associated with the Water Control Manual and evaluate ways to avoid and minimize take by monitoring the abundance, density, frequency of occurrence, survival, and growth of all four listed species in the action area. The previous Biological Opinion required monitoring just the mussels during low flows.

“The Biological Opinion requires the Corps to incorporate adaptive management approaches to improve how it implements the Water Control Manual to protect endangered species and their habitats in response to changing flows and changing climate,” said Cindy Dohner, the Service’s Southeast Regional Director. “This is an opportunity for the Corps to better understand the impacts of its operations on these listed species and their habitats in the ACF River Basin.”

In addition to these measures, the Service also specified several discretionary conservation recommendations in the biological opinion that could help minimize or avoid any potential adverse effects, mostly related to changes in river flow, of the Corps’ action and/or develop information useful for the conservation of listed species. One of these includes continued development of a conservation agreement to support the greater recovery efforts of listed, at-risk and candidate species in the basin.

Overall, the Service believes the Corps has reached a reasonable balance between operating these dams and reservoirs, limiting impacts to listed species.

“The Service expects to continue to work with the Corps and state agencies to monitor the response of sensitive mussels and fish to flow conditions resulting from the operation under the Water Control Manual,” Dohner added.

The Corps is in the process of completing the related Environmental Impact Statement, which describes and evaluates impacts of a range of operational alternatives affecting the quality of the human environment. This statement is required by the National Environmental Policy Act. The Corps released its draft Environmental Impact Statement last year and intends to incorporate the findings of the Biological Opinion in order to finalize both the Environmental Impact Statement and Water Control Manual documents later this year.

The Biological Opinion can be found online at: www.fws.gov/panamacity/acf.html.

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