NWX-DOI-FISH & WILDLIFE

Coordinator: USFWS External Affairs
July 22, 2016
10:00 am CT

Operator: Welcome and thank you for standing by. At this time all participants are in a listen-only mode. During the question and answer session you may press Star 1 if you would like to ask a question. Today's conference is being recorded. If you have any objections, you may disconnect at this time. I'd now like to turn this call over to Mr. Ken Warren. Sir you may begin.

Ken Warren: All right. Thanks a lot. And good morning everybody. And again, my name is Ken Warren. I am the Public Affairs Officer here for the services - South Florida Ecological Services Office in Vero Beach.

Again, thanks for joining us on this call. And it's going to be an informational briefing about the Service's and the Corps' agreement to modify water management in the everglades in a way that speeds up everglades restoration.

The agreement comes in the form of a new permit called the biological opinion, which the Service had issued to the Corps. This agreement will speed up restoration, recover endangered species and provide benefits to a lot of

wildlife that are not listed currently. And it will also improve conditions in Everglades National Park and in Florida Bay.

With me here today in Vero Beach is our Florida State Supervisor for Ecological Services Larry Williams along with Bob Progulske who is our Everglades Restoration Program Manager and Miles Meyer, one of our Supervisory Biologists.

On the phone in Jacksonville representing the Corps are Eric Summa, their Planning and Policy Division Chief for the Jacksonville District along with (Eric R.); Senior Project Manager Donna George; Environmental Branch Chief Gina Ralph; Senior Hydraulic Engineer (Van Crawford); and Tim Murphy, the Deputy District Engineer for Civil Works.

During this call there will be a brief opening statement by (Eric) and Larry and their opening remarks will be followed by a question and answer session as directed by the operator. I'm not going to turn it over to (Eric) who will tell you about the Corps' actions. (Eric).

(Eric R.): Thank you so much Ken and thanks to everybody this morning who has joined us today. I'd like to thank the Service for inviting us to participate in this call to discuss the biological opinion they have issued to us today.

I think it's important to provide the folks on the call some background about the process. So in accordance with the endangered species act, the Corps has been consulting with the Service to assess the conditions of the endangered Cape Sable Seaside Sparrow in relation to our water operations in the Southern part of the everglades.

During this consultation the Service determined that current conditions within the sparrow's habitat threatened its survival. As a result of this consultation, we've been coordinating closely with the Service to determine what measures we the Corps can take to improve the sparrow's habitat, ensure we're able to operate our water management system in compliance with the Endangered Species Act and doing this while also balancing the needs of our multiple project purposes.

The biological opinion issue today identifies operational modifications and an expedited schedule for everglades restoration initiatives that will promote suitable nesting habitat for this rare bird.

In terms of operational mods, we'll implement additional seasonal closures to outlet structures in Water Conservation Area 3A with the flexibility open under high water conditions between October and November.

We'll also implement adjustments to our operations in the South Dade Conveyance System. This will enable additional water to flow into Biscayne Bay during the dry season. It will also enable increased flow toward Eastern Everglades National Park as a result and as a result extend hydro periods during the early dry season.

In terms of our everglades restoration initiatives, we're working to construct critical infrastructure in the Southern everglades as expeditiously as possible. This infrastructure is being constructed as part of ongoing everglades restoration projects.

These projects will help restore flows to Everglades National Park and Florida Bay and will provide additional operational flexibility that will benefit the many species that call everglades home.

Unfortunately, despite these positive actions the Corps' taken, much more work is needed to places this species on a positive trajectory towards recovery.

Modeling has demonstrated the modification of schedules for these structures and the water management operations by the Corps in general contribute in just a small but important way to improving conditions for this important species.

Successful recovery of the sparrow requires continued collaborative efforts among our partnering agencies. We'll continue to work with the Service and our partners to find helpful initiatives that can aid in this effort.

That being said, I'd like to thank you all for your time and turn the call back over to Ken and Larry.

Ken Warren: Thanks a lot. Now over to Larry.

Larry Williams: Thank you Ken. Hello everybody. I appreciate you making time for today's call. Today the Fish and Wildlife Service is providing a new biological opinion to the Corps that covers their water management operations in the everglades.

And this biological opinion is going to help recover imperiled species like the Cape Sable Seaside Sparrow. But it's also going to help speed up big picture everglades restoration.

The main focus of the biological opinion is that the Corps is going to speed up some of the restoration projects and some of the restoration steps. So the biological opinion gives advice on how to avoid and lessen any impacts to threatened and endangered species. And it also gives the Corps coverage under the Endangered Species Act in case a small amount of impacts does happen.

So the new biological opinion is the result of months of collaboration between the Corps and the Fish and Wildlife Service. But it's also included a lot of reaching out to partners like the South Florida Water Management District, Everglades National Park, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission and the Miccosukee and Seminole Tribes.

We had to reach out to all of these partners because this biological opinion covers a really big landscape. And like I said, it's going to improve conditions for the Cape Sable Sparrow but it's also going to improve conditions for snail kites, wood storks and it's going to help get more water to Florida Bay and into Everglades National Park.

I think that a lot of people are familiar with the background on Cape Sable Sparrows but I want to cover that in a little more detail. Their numbers are at the lowest on record. We estimate there's about 2400 birds now. And that is down from about 6500 birds in 1992.

When Hurricane Andrew came through in '93, the heavy rainfall had a big affect on sparrow habitat and sparrow nesting. And it cut the population roughly in half and the population has never recovered.

Recently it's been on a downward trend and it's at a record low. So we think that it's really important to put in some provisions that will help Cape Sable Sparrows start to recover.

So the actions that are agreed to between the Corps and the Service in this new opinion we expect that they're going to stem the decline of the sparrow population. They're going to stop that downward trend.

But we know to get full recovery of the sparrow population, we're going to have to have help from a lot of other partners, not just the Service and the Corps. It's going to take efforts by the park, the Water Management District and the Florida Fish and Wildlife Commission and other partners to actually truly recover the species back to a healthy level.

The Corps deserves major credit for speeding up this restoration. They're speeding up several construction projects and they're also going to change somewhat how they move water through the system.

For example, they're going to decrease the amount of water that goes through the S12 A and B structures, which is a unnatural path for the water. That path actually sends water over high elevation ground where normally it wouldn't be.

And instead they're going to send water under the new Tamiami Trail Bridge, which is something that we've all been wanting to see for a long time now. And the water is going to go on into Everglades National Park and on into Florida Bay. So big restoration outcomes that are going to be affected by this new biological opinion.

So that's it. Again, thank you for your time and your interest in this. And with that, I'll turn it back to Ken.

Ken Warren: All right. Thanks Larry. And everybody, that concludes our opening statements. So we'd now like to answer your questions. Operator, can you please start the question and answer session?

Operator: Yes. At this time if you would like to ask a question, you may press Star 1. Please remember to un-mute your phone and record your first and last name clearly when prompted. In the event that you would like to withdraw your question, you may press Star 2. Once again, to ask a question, press Star 1 and record your name. One moment please as we wait for questions.

Okay. Our first question comes from Jenny (Sattlevich). Jenny, you have an open line.

Ken Warren: Jenny Staletovich.

Operator: It's - hi, Staletovich.

Ken Warren: From the Miami Herald.

Jenny Staletovich: Yes. So could you all talk a little bit more specifically about the operations? I know, you know, over this wet season you had increased flow in the L29 with that extended schedule change. So is that going to be permanent or just could you provide some more specifics please.

Ken Warren: Yes. We'll send that question to (Eric) and his team.

(Eric R.): Hey Jenny, could you please just repeat your question just clarity sake so we can give you the best response?

Jenny Staletovich: Yes. Sure. I just wondered if you could be more specific about some of the changes you're going to make. I know there was that - the emergency change in the schedule for the L29 (in the everglades) and the level. Does that mean that's going to be a permanent change? Or just if you could be a little bit more specific. And also, you talked about speeding up some construction, changing that schedule. If you could also talk about that please.

(Eric R.): Sure. So we're currently operating the system under deviation from ERTP as a result of a state requested temporary emergency deviation that you referenced to address high water levels in 3A.

So I think what you're asking though is how does this particular opinion bear on that action. So this particular opinion basically it's not related specifically to the emergency deviation; its own operating plan and opinion all together.

So how it changes operations basically there are certain structures - outlet structures from WCA 3A that now will be operated on a different schedule

specifically in the months of October and November as a result of this biological opinion.

So we're talking about during the end of the wet season we'll have operational closures that we did not have prior to this biological opinion. And if that's helpful - I hope that that's helpful. We can also go into how those additional closures will address or how it will impact water in 3A - the current stage levels in 3A. Be helpful?

Jenny Staletovich: Yes it would. And you're talking about the S12 A and B. Those are the ones that would be closed at the end of the wet season then.

(Eric R.): That's correct. It's actually more than just those structures. But those are some of the structures that have had many of the questions associated with them.

But basically, yes, we have a couple of different scenarios. It's always condition based. So the amount of rainfall that we have in the system affects the stages that we have in the various water conservation areas.

So but under median - let's just start with under low flow conditions. Low rainfall, low flow conditions this biological opinion has no impact at all on the stages in 3A.

So let's bump it up to median conditions. So we're talking about a median rainfall, median stages in WCA 3A. According to the calculations there will be a 41,000 acre-feet of additional water that would be retained in 3A during October specifically.

This amount will be lowered as we move into our subsequent increments where we're trying to change the operations further for the benefit of everglades restoration initiatives.

But it's initially 41,000 acre-feet. So what does that translate to in terms of inches in WCA 3A? Well the stage would increase with that 41,000 acre-feet by 1.1 inches. And again, that's under median conditions.

So let's bump up the conditions one more stage to moderate to high wet conditions. So we're talking about conditions where we're not in the highest stage of 3A.

In the highest stage of 3A the closures that are discussed in this biological opinion do not apply. In other words, if the stages are high and high, then those structures would be open to provide the flood relief necessary for human health and safety and the multiple project purposes that the Corps is responsible for.

But under moderate to high wet conditions, we would be retaining an additional 163,000 acre-feet of additional water in 3A. And again, that's just during October to December. And the potential affect on the stage in 3A would be an increase of 4.4 inches. Hopefully that's helpful. And if we can clarify further, happy to.

Jenny Staletovich: (Unintelligible). Thanks.

Larry Williams: This is - Jenny, this is Larry Williams with the Fish and Wildlife Service. I want to add something to that. The stage changes that (Eric) just covered, you

know, those are based on modeling and, like he said, those are based on different scenarios of the flow coming into 3A.

But I want to make really clear that within this biological opinion is the requirement to send more water down the L29 canal, which would get it out of 3A and back in Shark River Slough under the new Tamiami Trail Bridge. And in that way we're hoping that those stage increases never happen.

And the arrangement to send water down that canal will be a permanent arrangement and provide permanent relief to that chronic problem in 3A.

Jenny Staletovich: Okay. So just be sure I understand. So the changes in the L29 are going to become permanent so it will go - I guess the new level is eight feet as opposed to seven feet or…

Larry Williams: Yes. The changes - as described in this document, the canal would go to 7.8 feet by March 1 of 2017. And it could go to 8.5 feet by March 1 of 2018. And those would be permanent changes.

Jenny Staletovich: Okay. I'm sorry. You said those two - would you just say them again?

Larry Williams: Sure. So it would go 7.8 feet by March 1 of 2017. And that's called Increment 1 Plus. That's the title for that increment. And then it would go - it could go up to 8.5 feet by March 1 of 2018. And that's known as Increment 2.

Jenny Staletovich: Okay. Got it. Thank you.

Ken Warren: Any other follow ups Jenny?

Jenny Staletovich: Fine. But if Bob could talk a little bit about the sparrow conditions and the numbers; I know that earlier this year I think they were - I think like the worst we've seen in 30 years. So what - if he could talk a little bit about that.

Bob Progulske: Sure. Good morning Jenny. This is Bob Progulske. You know, currently, you know, the annual populations are based for the sparrows - Cape Sable Seaside Sparrows are now completed by Everglades National Park.

The number was around 2400 this year. And as Larry indicated, that's one of the lowest on record. So the sparrow numbers are definitely down this year. And interestingly enough though, you know, sparrows will continue to breed at least based on the work that the research was doing again this year.

Sparrows will continue to breed basically till about the first part of August. You know, they don't have a calendar. So it varies year-to-year. But with the continued closures of the S12 A and B now, the - we do still have breeding in sub-pop A - sub-population A of the Cape Sable Seaside Sparrow we have nesting and breeding. Likewise we do in sub-pop B also, which is our largest sub-population.

And this is based on intensive plots that the - we have some top scientists out there doing intensive plot research in both sub-pop A and B. And they have confirmed that breeding is continuing.

So it appears and, you know, once again, as (Eric) said about water management, sparrow breeding and species breeding is the same way. It's all conditional. Every year is a little bit different.

But we're actually having drier conditions in the later part of July going into August than we did, you know, during the normal dry season. So sparrows are continuing their breeding activity. In fact this week there was another nest found in sub-pop A. So we're hoping that the latter part of the season is going to help bolster the population. But we'll have to wait and see (to know) what happens next year.

Ken Warren: All righty. Operator, any other questions?

Operator: No further questions at this time. Once again, if you have a question, you may press Star 1 and record your name. And there are no questions in queue.

Ken Warren: Okay then. Well, if there are no further questions, I think that will wrap it up. And I just want to thank everybody for taking the time to call in. And if you have more questions, please feel free to give me a call. Again, my name is Ken Warren, W-A-R-R-E-N. My number is 772-469-4323.

And I do want to announce that the news release and associated materials including a link to the actual biological opinion are posted to our Web site here in Vero Beach. And I'll give you that link right now, which is www.fws - that's F as in fish, W as in wildlife, S as in service .gov/verobeach one word.

And also if you have any questions that are more appropriate for the Corps, feel free to call my colleague Jen Miller in Jacksonville. Her number is 904-232-1613.

So once again, we'll say are there any further questions and if not, guess we'll call it a day. Thanks for calling in and everybody have a great weekend.

Operator: This concludes today's conference. Participants may now disconnect and speakers please standby.

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