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Recovery Act-funded project creates first Gila trout season in Arizona

Safford, AZ— The American Reinvestment and Recovery Act funded a project to stock more than a thousand Gila trout in native waterways in Arizona, creating the first-ever Gila trout season in the history of the state while continuing efforts to bring the native fish species from the brink of extinction.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) utilized nearly \$140,000 in Recovery Act funds in 2010 and 2011 to stock Gila trout in Frye Creek and Frye Mesa Reservoir and conduct Gila trout restoration in the creeks of Ash and Marijilda in southeastern Arizona's Pinaleño Mountains. The project was done in cooperation with the Arizona Game and Fish Department (AZGFD) and U.S. Forest Service's Coronado National Forest.

The Gila trout were stocked in Frye Creek and Frye Mesa Reservoir on Feb. 23 by the Arizona Game and Fish Department with the help of federal agencies and private organizations, including Trout Unlimited and Arizona-based San Pedro Flycasters.

The Service's Mora National Fish Hatchery and Technology Center in Mora, New Mexico provided the fish stock. Service and AZGFD hatchery staff members transported the fish from hatchery trucks to 55-gallon drums that were airlifted by a Papillon helicopter to the high-elevation Frye Creek and reservoir. Around 800 Gila trout were stocked in the reservoir and an additional 650 were stocked at various places along the creek.

The native Gila trout is the focus of restoration and recovery activities at the Mora hatchery. The trout, found only in the headwaters of the Gila River Basin in Arizona and New Mexico, was upgraded from "endangered" to "threatened" under the Endangered Species Act in 2006, due to decades of conservation activities.

"Funding from the Recovery Act has allowed this strong cooperative effort between state and federal agencies to create the first Gila trout season in Arizona and further the Service's mission to reestablish the Gila trout population in its native, historical range," said Service Southwestern Regional Director Benjamin Tuggle.

Tuggle notes the Recovery Act project also created two wildlife technician positions with AZGFD to perform on-the-ground work duties related to Gila trout restoration efforts.

Frye Creek and Frye Mesa Reservoir is the third site in Arizona where Gila trout have been released. Gila trout were reintroduced to Frye Creek previously in November 2009. The Arizona Game and Fish Commission created the first-ever season for native Gila trout at Frye Mesa Reservoir with a one-fish bag and possession limit. The creek is currently off-limits to fishing.

Robert Woods of Flagstaff, Arizona caught the first state-record Gila trout at the reservoir on Feb. 28. The trout measured 19 ¼ inches long and weighed 3.35 pounds. AZGFD Fisheries Specialist S. Jason Kline says the project will continue to grow and thrive thanks to the hard work of a many different agency staff members and volunteers.

“Frye Mesa Reservoir is a blue-ribbon Gila trout fishery now. With the addition of the Gila trout, Mount Graham in the Pinaleño Mountains is the only place in the world where anglers can fish for five different species of trout, which are Gila, Apache, rainbow, brook and brown,” Kline said. “This area could become a trout fishing destination.”

The new recreational fishing area could provide an economic boost to nearby communities. An economic impact study conducted by the Service shows that per fishing trip, resident anglers spend around \$72 and non-resident fishermen spend about \$116 on items such as food, gas, equipment and lodging.

Regional AZGFD supervisor Raul Vega is encouraged by this historic project and what it means for the survival of the Gila trout.

“It’s so amazing to think that the Gila trout was nearly extinct fifty years ago, but here we are now where fisherman can once again fish for the native species,” Vega said. “We wouldn’t have been able to do this without Recovery Act funds. It definitely helped elevate the scope of the project.”

The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act provided \$3 billion to the Department of the Interior. Of that amount, \$280 million went to the Service to fund job-creating investments in critical infrastructure and facilities, habitat restoration, and energy efficiency and renewable energy. The Service’s Southwest Region received \$28.8 million for construction, energy-efficiency, habitat-restoration, and other improvement projects at national wildlife refuges, fish hatcheries, and other public and private lands.

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