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January 27, 1986

Memorandum

To: Acting Regional Director, Bureau of Reclamation, Lower Colorado Regional Office, Boulder City, Nevada

From: Acting Field Supervisor

Subject: Biological Opinion, Parker II Division, Channel Modification Project, Colorado River Front Work and Levee System

This is in response to your request of October 25, 1985 for formal Section 7 consultation, as provided for by the Endangered Species Act of 1973 (as amended). The action under consultation concerns the subject proposed channel modification project. Its location is in the Parker II Division which includes that section of the Colorado River from Agnes-Wilson Bridge near Parker, Arizona to the Palo Verde Diversion Dam near Blythe, California.

On April 4, 1985, the Bureau of Reclamation (BR) requested a list of threatened and endangered species that may be affected by the proposed action. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service responded to that request on April 22, 1985.

The following listed species were considered in this consultation; bald eagle (Haliaeetus leucocephalus), and Yuma clapper rail (Rallus longirostris yumanensis).

The following background information and biological opinion are based on information furnished by the BR, several field inspections, data in our files, and conversations with various individuals familiar with the species and project area.

Background Information

The intent of the Channel Modification Project is to alleviate problems caused by substantial shifting of the river channel. These problems include:

1. High sediment loading of the Colorado River through Parker II Division;

2. Property losses by erosional forces of the river;
3. Uncontrolled changes of the river channel; and
4. High cost of dredging to reduce downstream sediment loading.

The BR is looking at four alternatives for the proposed channel modification project. The major features of the project include dredging of existing channels, dredging of new channels (dry cuts), riprap of banklines, and construction of training structures and jetties to contain and direct river flow. Associated features include dredge material disposal sites, backwaters created by dry cuts and training structures, and bankline roads for construction access.

1. Alternative A - This alternative would require extensive modification of the river channel. It involves 320 acres of dry cuts, 95 acres of dredging, 15.7 miles of riprap, and 14.0 miles of training structures and jetties.
2. Alternative B - This alternative would essentially maintain the river within the existing channel. Only one small dry cut would be needed along with 110 acres of dredging, 7.6 miles of riprap, and 11.9 miles of training structures and jetties.
3. Alternative C - Alternative C combines aspects of both A and B. It would include 130 acres of dry cuts, 120 acres of dredging, 11.3 miles of riprap, and 9.9 miles of training structures and jetties.
4. No action - This alternative would maintain the river channel as needs arise.

Bald Eagle

From one to five wintering bald eagles have been sighted during annual surveys of the lower Colorado River by the California Fish and Game Department. However, no sightings were made in the Parker II Division.

Bald eagles in Arizona are found primarily near lakes and ponds and are secondarily associated with streams and rivers. Habitat preference is apparently based on suitable perching and roosting sites, wintering conditions, and available prey.

Bald eagles have not been observed in the Parker II Division, probably because of lack of suitable habitat and the proximity of human activity associated with most of the existing large trees that could be used for roosting and perching. Implementation of the project alternatives is not expected to adversely impact the bald eagle.

Yuma Clapper Rail

Yuma clapper rails are year-round inhabitants of the lower Colorado River drainage area.

However, relatively few winter in the United States. They are found along the lower Colorado River from the Needles, California area south to the delta in Mexico. They have also been found along the lower Gila River in the Dome and Mohawk Valleys and near Buckeye, Arizona; the Salt River east of Phoenix, Arizona; Picacho Reservoir in Pinal County, Arizona; the Salton sea; and in wetlands adjacent to the All American Canal.

Population estimates during the breeding season for the Yuma clapper rail from the Colorado River delta north to Needles was about 1,700 birds for the years just prior to 1983. Because of high flows in 1983, much of the rails preferred breeding habitat was lost. The current population level is unknown but probably less than 1,700. The Parker II Division was censused for Yuma clapper rails in the spring of 1969-70, 1974-75, and 1979-85. Survey results ranged from seven rails during the 1980 survey to 40 rails in 1981. Clapper rails censused in the Parker II Division account for less than 10 percent of the total number censused during the annual spring census on the lower Colorado River.

The preferred breeding habitat of the Yuma clapper rail consists of freshwater marsh dissected by narrow, open channels of water, mats of downed vegetation, nearby high ground, and shallow water. The breeding season is from late March to mid-July. Breeding territory size has been estimated from 0.87 to 3.99 acres for paired birds.

Data indicate most Yuma clapper rails migrate annually, leaving their breeding habitat in September and October for Mexico and returning by March or April. Little information is known concerning their migratory habits. Since they are relatively weak fliers, long, sustained migration flights probably do not occur. Rails may move from marsh to marsh during their nocturnal migration. As previously indicated, some rails do over winter along the Colorado River within the United States.

Approximately 129 acres of non-contiguous marsh habitat would be lost as a result of the construction of Alternative A. Alternative B would result in the loss of 48 acres of marsh, and Alternative C would result in the loss of 109 acres. Marsh habitat would not be lost as a result of the No Action Alternative. By superimposing the project alternatives over known Yuma clapper rail locations, we estimated that up to 17 rails could be lost. This loss would represent approximately 1% of the estimated pre-1983 population.

Destruction of habitat is the major threat to the continued existence of the Yuma clapper rail. Noise from human activity and pollution may also affect the Yuma clapper rail. The primary objective of the 1983 Yuma Clapper Rail Recovery Plan is to insure the continued survival of a total breeding population of 700-1000 Yuma clapper rails in the United States.

Biological Opinion

Based on the preceeding information, it is my biological opinion that construction of the proposed project is not likely to jeopardize the continued existence of the bald eagle, or the Yuma clapper rail.

Of the alternatives described in the channel modification project, only the no action alternative would protect the habitat and promote the conservation of these two listed species.

The following conservation measures are provided to assist in recovery of the Yuma clapper rail.

1. Any marsh habitat destroyed or adversely affected by the project should be replaced in kind by the creation of new habitat or enhancement of existing habitat.
2. No dredged material from construction or maintenance of the project should be placed on any marsh habitat.

Further consultation is not required unless the plan is modified beyond that which was considered herein, new species are listed which would be affected by this plan, or new information becomes available which reveals impacts not considered in this consultation.

Frank M. Baucom

cc: Director, FWS, Washington, D.C. (OES)
Regional Director, FWS, Albuquerque, NM (SE) (AHR)
Director, Arizona Game and Fish Department, Phoenix, AZ
California Fish and Game Department, Blythe, CA

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