



# News Release

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Caption: One of 23 yearling endangered Colorado Pikeminnow captured by New Mexico Department of Game and Fish biologists in the San Juan River in 2016. This is only the second time ever that yearling fish have been captured the San Juan River. Photo Credit: New Mexico Department Game and Fish

## **Endangered Colorado Pikeminnow Produce Young in Response to Increased San Juan River Flows**

FARMINGTON, NM - In the spring of 2016, the San Juan River Recovery Implementation [Program](#) and Bureau of Reclamation released water from Navajo Dam to imitate spring snow melt. Endangered Colorado pikeminnow responded by producing young. Conditions in the river were so good for the young fish that they survived into the fall. Winters are hard for any animal but it appears those young fish also survived through winter 2017. This is the first time in 20 years that biologists have seen such a successful response to flows by Colorado pikeminnow.

Another release of water is occurring this spring and biologists hope Colorado pikeminnow will respond the same way they did in 2016.

We think of a minnow as being small, like the ones people use for bait when fishing. But the Colorado pikeminnow is big – growing up to six feet long historically -- and that is not a fisherman's tall tale. Humans used to eat this fish, calling it the "Salmon of the Southwest" and sold it as food during the mining years of the late 1800s.

This once common, long lived, and migratory species was the top native predator in the San Juan River. Today, few adults are captured and reproduction is rarely observed, much less survival of young.

In spring 2016, Navajo Reservoir, which feeds the San Juan River, had enough water to make a spring peak release possible. Released water met up with water from the Animas River. Downstream at Four Corners, the river experienced flows of 8,000 cubic feet per second for eight days. Typically, flows in the river hover closer 1,000 cfs at that spot.

Colorado pikeminnow are known to produce young after a spring high river flow. So, in the summer, biologists from American Southwest Ichthyological Researchers went to look for tiny Colorado pikeminnow. And they caught 543, the most ever captured. Then, in the fall, New Mexico Department of Game and Fish biologists went to see if any of the tiny fish had survived. And they found 23 juvenile Colorado pikeminnow! Previously, only a single juvenile Colorado pikeminnow had been captured which was in 2015.

Colorado pikeminnow are now swimming in the San Juan because of the efforts of the San Juan River Recovery Program. This program is made up of water users, the Fish and Wildlife Service, the Bureau of Reclamation, and other federal, state, tribal and non-governmental agencies.

In the early 2000s the Recovery Program began stocking hatchery fish. The hope was that these fish would survive, respond to seasonally released flows, and produce young that survive to adulthood.

At the Recovery Program's recent meeting in Durango, Colo., Sharon Whitmore, the Program's Coordinator, was happy to hear biologists had caught young Colorado pikeminnow this spring. This means the fish produced in 2016 made it through the winter.

Whitmore said, "The Recovery Program's goal is to remove Colorado pikeminnow from the endangered species list. Seeing annual production of young in the San Juan River is a big step in that direction."

Added Tom Wesche, University of Wyoming professor emeritus and long-time member of the Program's Biology Committee, "Certainly finding these young fish naturally produced in the river and surviving through often harsh winter conditions is great news for all the Program's collaborating partners and hopefully represents important progress along the road to species recovery."

The amount of water released from Navajo Reservoir in 2016, does not happen often. Not only did it help Colorado pikeminnow, but it also improved habitat in the Special Trout Water recreational fishery below Navajo Dam. And the high flows helped remove debris from the river, reducing flooding risks for communities downstream of the reservoir.

For more information about Colorado pikeminnow and the Recovery Program's work to recover it and another endangered fish, the razorback sucker, see the Program's website, <https://www.fws.gov/southwest/sjrip/>.



Caption: Adult Colorado Pikeminnow captured in the San Juan River, NM by US Fish and Wildlife Conservation Office biologist, Bobby Ray Duran. Photo Credit: US Fish and Wildlife Service.