

**Great Plains Region
Billings, Montana**

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FEIS on Platte River Recovery Program Released

The Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) for the proposed Platte River Recovery Implementation Program (Program) was released today by the Department of the Interior, according to Mike Ryan, Regional Director of the Bureau of Reclamation's Great Plains Region.

In 1997 the Governors of Colorado, Nebraska and Wyoming and the Secretary of the Interior signed a cooperative agreement to jointly pursue a basin-wide effort to improve and maintain habitat for four threatened and endangered species which use the Platte River in Nebraska. The four species are the whooping crane, interior least tern, piping plover, and pallid sturgeon.

The cooperative agreement established a Governance Committee with representatives from the three States, water users, environmental groups, and Federal agencies. The Committee's charge was to formulate a detailed proposal to improve and maintain habitat and to provide compliance with the Endangered Species Act (ESA) for certain existing and future water uses in each State.

The FEIS, prepared jointly by the Bureau of Reclamation and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, analyzes the Governance Committee's proposal and three other alternatives for the first 13-year increment of the Program. The FEIS focuses on potential impacts of the proposed Program on habitat for the four species, as well as on river flows, reservoir storage, water deliveries, water quality, land use, the target species and their habitat, other species, hydropower, recreation, agricultural and regional economics, social and cultural resources.

The FEIS identifies the Governance Committee Alternative as the Department's preferred alternative. Once the Secretary of the Interior decides to implement the preferred alternative, a Secretarial record of decision (ROD) will be released. The ROD cannot be signed until 30 days after public release of the FEIS. For the Program to be implemented, the Secretary of the Interior and the Governors of the three States must sign a program implementing agreement. The State legislatures and the U.S. Congress will make decisions on funding the Program.

The Preferred Alternative improves habitat conditions in the Central Platte Habitat Area (lands along the Platte River from Lexington to Chapman, Nebraska) for the three target bird species (whooping crane, interior least tern, piping plover) by:



- Increasing the achievement of Fish and Wildlife Service target flows for the species by roughly 130,000-150,000 acre-feet on an average annual basis, primarily by increasing river flows in the spring, summer, and early fall.
- Leasing or acquiring land habitat in the Central Platte Habitat Area from willing sellers and restoring habitat. Habitat restoration focuses primarily on restoration of wet meadow areas and areas of wide unvegetated river channel.

Regional Director Ryan said, “I firmly believe that this collaborative, basin-wide approach to resolving the endangered species issues is the best way to provide for the needs of the species and ensure that the current use of water can continue. Trying to address ESA requirements separately for each of the hundreds of Federal and private water projects in the Platte River Basin would be vastly more expensive for water users and almost certainly less effective for the species.”

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is preparing a biological opinion on the preferred alternative to determine if it provides for the long-term conservation of the target species as required under the Endangered Species Act. This is expected to be released in early June 2006.

The FEIS will be posted on the Platte River website on May 23, 2006, at: <http://www.platteriver.org>. The Notice of Availability for the FEIS is expected to appear in the Federal Register May 24, 2006.

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