



# Listing of the Alabama Sturgeon

## The Issue

*On May 2, 2000, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced its decision to list the Alabama sturgeon as an endangered species primarily due to its low population numbers and subsequent lack of ability to sustain itself through natural reproduction.*



## The Background

The Alabama sturgeon is a slender, golden-yellow, freshwater fish that was historically widespread in the Mobile River Basin of Alabama and Mississippi. It grows to about 30 inches in length and weighs two to three pounds. Once so abundant that it was caught and sold commercially, it has now become one of the rarest fish in North America.

## The Questions and Answers

The listing has generated a substantial number of questions. Here are the most frequently asked questions and the factual answers.

### **What caused you to decide to list the Alabama sturgeon as an endangered species under the Federal Endangered Species Act? Why weren't protections under State of Alabama law enough?**

The ESA and its implementing regulations require us to consider five factors to determine if a species is endangered or threatened. These factors are: present or threatened curtailment of range or habitat; over utilization (i.e., commercial, recreational fishing, etc.); disease or predation; inadequacy of existing regulatory mechanisms; and any other natural or man-made factor affecting its continued existence. In considering these factors, the appropriateness of our decision is obvious. While habitat degradation and curtailment and overutilization contributed to the current conditions of the Alabama sturgeon, the most immediate threat to the species is its low population numbers and subsequent inability to sustain a viable population.

We are also directed to consider actions taken by the State to protect and conserve the species or improve its status. While State law currently protects the sturgeon from overutilization, the primary threats to the Alabama sturgeon are its small populations size and its reduced range. Complicating these threats are the limited knowledge of its life history and habitat requirements. Current protections afforded under State law do not fully address and eliminate these threats.

### **What protection does the Alabama sturgeon receive as a listed species?**

Listing will increase current State penalties for illegal "take" of the Alabama sturgeon. Also, Federal agencies must consult with the Service to conserve listed species on their lands and to ensure that any activity they fund, authorize, or carry out will not jeopardize the survival of a listed species or adversely modify designated critical habitat. Finally, Federal agencies must also pursue actions to recover species to the point where they no longer require protection and can be delisted. For more information, see Q&A No. 2.\*

### **What is the next step in the process to recover the Alabama sturgeon? What activities are now underway to help prevent the fish from going extinct?**

We plan to invite the parties to the Conservation Agreement and Strategy, as well as other interested parties, to participate in developing a recovery plan. In the interim, increased efforts are underway by State and Federal fisheries biologists to collect Alabama sturgeon for breeding purposes.

### **Who will be responsible for the Alabama sturgeon recovery program the Fish and Wildlife Service or the State of Alabama?**

The State and the Service will remain partners in recovery of the Alabama sturgeon. For more information, see Q&A No. 8.

\* See the more extensive Questions and Answers on the decision to list the Alabama sturgeon that appear in a separate document.

### **Will the Alabama sturgeon that are captured still be put in the State's Marion Fish Hatchery?**

Yes.

### **How many Alabama sturgeon are in captivity and what sex are they? What happens if you can't catch any more Alabama sturgeon?**

There are currently two male Alabama sturgeon in captivity at the Marion State Fish Hatchery. Contingency plans for lack of breeding stock will be developed during the recovery planning process.

### **Does listing the sturgeon stop current navigation channel maintenance dredging activities in the Alabama and Tombigbee rivers?**

No. The Corps of Engineers and FWS examined river activities and potential conflicts that might arise from listing the Alabama sturgeon. In 1994, this resulted in a joint determination (a "White Paper") by the Corps and the Service that the annual navigation channel maintenance dredging programs would have "no effect" on the sturgeon and would not need to be eliminated, modified or altered should the species be listed. In addition, there are already four federally listed species in these rivers, one of them, a sturgeon; and channel navigation maintenance has continued unimpeded.

### **Does listing the Alabama sturgeon hurt economic development in Alabama?**

No. Economic concerns raised during the 1993 and 1999 comment periods are based on the assumption that navigation on the Alabama and Tombigbee rivers would be halted if the Alabama sturgeon were listed. As noted in the previous question, the Corps of Engineers and the Fish and Wildlife Service have determined that navigation maintenance would not be eliminated, modified or altered should the Alabama sturgeon be listed. That position has been reconfirmed in writing by the Corps and the Service. Therefore, the basic assumption is wrong, and the prediction of dire economic consequences are without substance.

### **How does the listing of the Alabama sturgeon affect funding that has been provided by Congress to recover the species?**

The listing decision will not affect the Service's funding commitment for the Alabama sturgeon. For more information, see Q&A No. 23.

### **Why did we need to list this fish when the cooperative restoration efforts for the Mobile River Basin aquatic species have been progressing?**

The Alabama sturgeon is in danger of becoming extinct, and the Service is required by law to propose listing species whose status is imperilled. The fish has disappeared from about 85% of its historic range in the Alabama and Tombigbee rivers and their major tributaries in Alabama and Mississippi. Only five Alabama sturgeon have been captured in the last four years, despite intensive efforts to do so. Nevertheless, listing the species is only one step in its recovery process. It will continue to take the combined efforts of all participants in the Mobile River Basin Coalition to bring this species back from the brink of extinction. For more information, see Q&A No. 1.

### **Some people still claim that the Service did not have sufficient scientific information to conclude that the Alabama sturgeon is a distinct species from the common shovelnose sturgeon. How do you respond to that?**

The Service is required to use the best available scientific and commercial information in making listing decisions. The Alabama sturgeon is nationally and internationally considered a valid species. The Alabama sturgeon was initially described as a distinct species in a peer-reviewed, widely distributed museum periodical (Williams and Clemmer 1991). The species was considered valid in a catalog of fishes of Alabama (Boschung 1992) and in a catalog of fishes of North American (Mayden et al. 1992). Species status was reassessed, reaffirmed, and published in the ichthyological journal *Copeia* (Mayden and Kuhajda 1996). This paper is the most thorough and comprehensive analysis of Alabama sturgeon systematics and taxonomy published to date.

The Alabama sturgeon is listed as a separate species in State fish books for Alabama (Mettee et al. In prep.). Thus, the Alabama sturgeon is currently recognized as a valid taxonomic species and will continue to be so recognized unless overturned at some future date by the scientific community through the formal publication and peer review process.

### **How many comments did you receive on this listing decision? How many "for," and how many "against"? Did you take these figures into account in the listing decision?**

During the comment periods, we received approximately 4,000 cards, letters, and reports concerning the proposal. Most expressed opposition to, or concern about the proposed listing; however, a number of individuals supported the action. Under the Act we may only consider scientific and commercial information in arriving at our determination. We may not consider the popularity of a listing action.

### **Why do you think so many people opposed listing the Alabama sturgeon?**

Opposition to the proposed listing primarily centered on perceived economic effects of the action, questions about taxonomy and science, and the adequacy of current State conservation actions to protect the sturgeon.

### **For more information on the proposed listing, please contact:**

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Information on the sturgeon is also available at: <http://www.fws.gov>.