

Middle Rio Grande Project

The Middle Rio Grande Project was authorized by the Congress to improve and stabilize the economy of the Middle Rio Grande Valley by rehabilitating the Middle Rio Grande Conservancy District (MRGCD) facilities and by controlling sedimentation and flooding in the Rio Grande. Today, irrigation deliveries to MRGCD and the Six Middle Rio Grande Pueblos with prior and paramount water rights are complicated by maintaining flows for the endangered Rio Grande silvery minnow (silvery minnow).

The silvery minnow was listed as endangered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in 1994. An alliance of environmentalists sued Reclamation and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in 1999 for alleged Endangered Species Act and National Environmental Policy Act violations (*Minnow v. Keys*). Reclamation, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service have joined with other entities in the Middle Rio Grande Endangered Species Act Collaborative Program which seeks to protect and improve the status of endangered species, while meeting water needs of people in the Middle Rio Grande Basin in accordance with all applicable laws.

Major Project Benefits

Irrigation water is supplied to MRGCD for about 90,000 acres, including the six Middle Rio Grande Pueblos. These acres are planted in alfalfa, corn, grains, fruits and vegetables. Multiple years of drought have plagued the valley. Storage in upstream reservoirs has been substantially reduced to provide supplemental water flows for the silvery minnow. In July 2002, the Rio Grande Compact restricted storage in post-1929 upstream reservoirs until the useable Rio Grande Project storage in Elephant Butte and Caballo reservoirs reaches 400,000 acre-feet. Useable storage is not expected to reach 400,000 acre-feet in 2003. Reclamation continues to lease water from willing lessees for the silvery minnow.

A Low Flow Conveyance Channel (LFCC), with a designed 2000 cfs capacity, runs along the Rio Grande for about 58 miles, from San Acacia Diversion Dam towards the narrows above Elephant Butte Reservoir. The LFCC collects seepage, and pumps installed along the LFCC are used to return this seepage to the Rio Grande. This water supplements river flow in the silvery minnow and endangered southwestern willow flycatcher critical habitat areas that regularly run dry.

Reclamation facilities in the Middle Rio Grande Project, in conjunction with facilities built and maintained by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, have greatly reduced the threat of uncontrolled flooding in the Middle Rio Grande Valley. Several restoration projects are taking place along the Middle Rio Grande to restore habitat for the silvery minnow and allow for controlled overbank flooding for the riparian areas. This type of flooding does not endanger people and property.

Major Project Facilities

The Middle Rio Grande Project includes El Vado Dam and Reservoir, three diversion dams-Angostura, Isleta and San Acacia, the Low Flow Conveyance Channel, and 202 miles of canals, 580 miles of laterals, and 405 miles of drains. The diversion dams break up the habitat of the silvery minnow, so engineers are studying the feasibility and options for allowing fish passage at San Acacia Diversion Dam. In the meantime, Reclamation is assisting the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in rescuing the silvery minnow.

