



US Army Corps
of Engineers

News Release

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Agreement reached on 2003 Missouri River plan

The Army Corps of Engineers and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced today that they have come to agreement on a water management plan for the Missouri River reservoirs for the late spring and summer of 2003.

The plan complies with the requirements of the Endangered Species Act while reinforcing the reliability of the system of reservoirs to meet the multiple congressionally authorized project purposes.

Of particular concern are two migratory birds, the endangered interior least tern and the threatened piping plover, listed for protection under the Endangered Species Act. Their nests, found on low-lying, barren sandbars, can be threatened by rising river levels.

The endangered pallid sturgeon was also addressed. Restoration of shallow water habitat and population augmentation efforts continue. The long-term needs of the pallid sturgeon will be addressed in the upcoming discussions on the Master Water Control Manual.

The Service and the Corps agreed to a plan that, when compared to the 30,000 cubic feet per second "steady flow" presented in the 2003 annual operating plan, meets downstream needs while minimizing loss of habitat and impacts to listed species and drawdown of the three biggest reservoirs. The agreement is a combination of "steady flow" features from the final AOP and elements of a "flow-to-target" plan.

It takes advantage of the likelihood of effective downstream tributary flows during the early part of the nesting season through an initial steady release rate. These tributary flows will allow for lower releases from the dams during the nesting season. If runoff conditions permit, those releases will be maintained throughout the nesting season. If downstream flow targets cannot be met at that rate, releases will be increased in order to meet them.

The plan is to set a release rate of 26,000 cfs to 27,000 cfs from Gavins Point Dam, near Yankton, S.D., when the birds initiate nesting. This normally occurs during the period May 8-20. Further increases throughout the summer may be necessary to support downstream flow targets as tributary contributions to the Missouri dry up.

Additionally, use of three Kansas River Corps reservoirs that are authorized to provide Missouri River flow support will be used if appropriate. They could provide additional water to meet the Kansas City flow target, which may reduce the releases needed from Gavins Point Dam, thus limiting impacts to the birds. However, there is currently insufficient water in the Kansas

reservoirs to provide Missouri River flow support. Minimization measures are in place to reduce the impacts to the birds if higher releases from Gavins Point are required. These include moving nests, to the extent possible, to higher elevations on the sandbars if they are threatened with inundation.

This plan differs from an actual “flow-to-target” operation because releases will not be decreased during the nesting season. Decreases can threaten nesting birds by encouraging them to nest on sandbars that are likely to be flooded if higher flows are necessary later in the nesting season to meet downstream targets.

The Corps and the Service also discussed whether tern and plover eggs and chicks threatened by inundation from navigation flows would be moved off the river into the Corps’ captive rearing facility at Gavins Point. The agencies agreed not to use it this year. However, its use may be reconsidered for research purposes or to minimize losses associated with flood control operations

“The Corps and Service agree that the plan minimizes impacts to the birds and loss of their nesting habitat, minimizes reservoir drawdowns, and provides more reliability for the congressionally authorized purposes of the dams and reservoirs,” said Brig. Gen. David Fastabend, Northwestern Division Engineer.

“We have worked collaboratively with the Corps to address the issues associated with the near-term operation of the Missouri River System in 2003,” said Ralph Morgenweck, Director of the Fish and Wildlife Service’s Mountain-Prairie Region. “The water management plan is for this year only, and the Service remains committed to implementing the long-term measures necessary to return ecological health to the Missouri River.” Discussions on the Master Manual, which governs long-term water management of the Missouri River Mainstem Reservoir System, will begin soon.

After the last of the birds have left the nesting grounds in mid- to late-August, water management will return to a true flow-to-target operation, most likely at the minimum service flow level.

The eight-month season is expected to be shortened by six days, ending at the mouth near St. Louis on Nov. 25. Additional shortening is possible if drought conditions persist. That determination will be made after the water-in-storage check on July 1.

A description of the revised 2003 Annual Operating Plan, along with the supplemental biological assessment and supplemental biological opinion are available on both the Corps website: <https://www.nwd.usace.army.mil/> and the Service website: <http://mountain-prairie.fws.gov/missouririver>.