



# News Release

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## **Endangered Species Being Considered In Valley Water Storage Decisions -U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Salt River Project Seek Public Input-**

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) and Salt River Project (SRP) invite the public to participate in determining the scope of alternatives and issues to be included in the analysis of the effects of Horseshoe and Bartlett dam and reservoir operations on threatened and endangered species. SRP seeks to develop a Habitat Conservation Plan for the operation of Horseshoe and Bartlett on the lower Verde River that may result in the flooding of recently established and occupied southwestern willow flycatcher breeding habitat. In turn, SRP will seek a Service permit to “take” flycatchers and other sensitive species and habitat that may result due to the routine operation of the reservoirs.

Occasionally, low rainfall and snow-melt in the Verde watershed result in the near drying of Horseshoe and significantly lowered water levels at Bartlett. As Horseshoe water levels declined during the present drought, dense riparian vegetation, principally willows, have become established at the upper end of the reservoir. The new habitat resulted in the subsequent immigration and expansion of a population of southwestern willow flycatchers. A brief period of heavy rain in the watershed this spring nearly filled Horseshoe and partially submerged the flycatcher habitat. SRP was able to drain the high water for storage downstream in Bartlett prior to the flycatchers’ return for their breeding season. No water was lost from the system. When precipitation and runoff conditions are sufficient, SRP stores water in the upper Horseshoe flood pool for the City of Phoenix.

Horseshoe and Bartlett operations may also affect threatened bald eagles, endangered razorback suckers, and yellow-billed cuckoos - a candidate for Endangered Species Act protection, as well as other native fish species in the drainage. Federally listed species are protected from “take,” including harassment or harm resulting from altering or destroying their habitat. The Service may however, under limited circumstances, issue permits to take federally listed species when such a taking is incidental to – and not the purpose of – otherwise lawful activities and the taking does not jeopardize the continued survival of the species.

When rain and snow runoff conditions again replenish water-stores required by SRP’s customers, new habitat now relied upon by flycatchers will be periodically inundated. This refilling of the reservoirs will adversely affect the breeding habitat and will result in the harassment, harm, and possible death of some flycatchers. SRP is in the process of developing the Horseshoe and Bartlett Habitat Conservation Plan (HBHCP) to minimize and mitigate (offset) impacts to affected species and their habitats resulting from continued operation of the reservoirs. SRP will submit the HBHCP to the Service in anticipation of Service approval of the plan and issuance of a permit for the incidental take of listed species.

Concurrent with the development of the conservation plan, the Service and SRP are preparing an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) to analyze the physical, biological, social, and economic effects of the proposed HBHCP and its reasonable alternatives. Developing the HBHCP and EIS is a public process. Identifying potential alternatives to the conservation plan, as well as significant environmental issues related to the conservation plan, is called scoping.

Public input provided during scoping will be analyzed in the EIS process and, as feasible, integrated into the HBHCP. The Service will fully consider information developed in the EIS to evaluate SRP's proposed HBHCP and its alternatives as it renders a decision on whether to issue a permit for SRP's dam operations to take listed species. Public comment will again be solicited once a draft EIS has been developed.

To initiate scoping and the EIS process, SRP and the Service have proposed three HBHCP alternatives:

1. Proposed action – Service issues an incidental take permit authorizing the continued operation of the reservoirs at full capacity, possibly with modified operating goals along with implementation of the HBHCP to minimize and mitigate the potential take of flycatchers and other federally listed species.
2. No action – No incidental take permit is issued by the Service – this would require SRP to do everything within its control to avoid any take of listed species in its operation of the dams (keep long term water storage level below current habitat levels).
3. Other HCP alternatives – Service issues an incidental take permit for the HBHCP involving modification of operations at the SRP-operated reservoirs on the Verde River together with measures to minimize and mitigate the take of listed species.

The Service and SRP will host a public information and scoping meeting to solicit comments on the scope of the EIS on July 15, 2003, from 6:00-8:00 p.m. at the offices of Salt River Project, 1521 Project Dr. (Galvin Pkwy. and Van Buren St.), Tempe, AZ. Additional information and scoping comment sheets are available by contacting Mr. Steve Spangle, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 2321 West Royal Palm Rd., Suite 103, Phoenix, AZ 85021 (voice 602-242-0210, fax 602-242-2513) or at <http://arizonaes.fws.gov>. Scoping comments should be sent to Mr. Spangle by August 15, 2003.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal Federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting and enhancing fish, wildlife and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service manages the 94-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System which encompasses more than 535 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands and other special management areas. It also operates 70 national fish hatcheries, 64 fishery resource offices and 78 ecological services field stations. The agency enforces Federal wildlife laws, administers the Endangered Species Act, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, and helps foreign governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Aid program that distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to state fish and wildlife agencies.

<<http://arizonaes.fws.gov>>

Note to Editors: Color photographs (image library) of the affected species are available on the Service's website at <http://arizonaes.fws.gov/> or by request from the listed contacts.