

RECLAMATION

Managing Water in the West

**PROPOSED
NATIVE FISH RESTORATION PROJECT
LOWER BLUE RIVER**

**Clifton Ranger District
Apache Sitgreaves National Forests
Greenlee County, Arizona**

Scoping Information
and
Opportunity to Comment

**U.S. Department of the Interior
Bureau of Reclamation
Phoenix Area Office**



March 2009

Introduction

This Scoping Notice/Opportunity to Comment is being offered to the public to allow early and meaningful participation in the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) review of a native fish restoration project proposed by the Bureau of Reclamation. After the public scoping period has ended, Reclamation will prepare an Environmental Assessment (EA) to evaluate the potential environmental consequences of the proposed project.

The proposed project includes construction of a fish barrier, removal of nonnative fishes, and restoration of native fishes in the lower 11-mile reach of the Blue River, on the Clifton Ranger District, Apache-Sitgreaves National Forests (ASNF), Greenlee County, Arizona (Figures 1 and 2).

Background

The proposed Blue River fish barrier complements other similar projects being implemented by Reclamation to assist with recovery and conservation of federally listed fish and amphibian species in the Gila River Basin. Fish barrier construction was initially mandated by biological opinions on impacts of Central Arizona Project (CAP) water transfers to the Gila River Basin issued by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) in 1994 and 2001. These biological opinions were incorporated into and superseded by a third opinion (2008 CAP biological opinion) on May 15, 2008.¹ As stated in the 2008 CAP biological opinion, the strategic placement of fish barriers is intended to “prevent or hinder upstream movements of nonindigenous fish and other aquatic organisms into high-value native fish and amphibian habitats.”

Habitat destruction and alteration were the principal causes for declines of native fishes in the American southwest prior to the mid-1900s; however, in the past several decades, it has become apparent that the presence of nonnative fishes precludes or negates benefits from habitat protection and restoration. Introduction and spread of nonnative fishes now are considered the most consequential factors preventing sustenance and recovery of imperiled native fishes in the Gila River Basin and other drainages of the southwest.

The Blue River drainage currently supports five species of native warm-water fishes: longfin dace, speckled dace, desert sucker, Sonora sucker, and threatened loach minnow. Gila trout (a cold-water species) occurs in tributaries of the upper Blue River drainage. Suitable habitat for threatened spikedace and roundtail chub is also present in the drainage. Historically, the native fish community may have included spikedace, chubs, flannelmouth sucker, razorback sucker, and Colorado pikeminnow. Nonnative warm-water species that have been reported in the Blue and San Francisco Rivers include channel catfish, flathead catfish, common carp, red shiner, fathead minnow, and mosquitofish.

¹ The 1994, 2001, and 2008 biological opinions on CAP water transfers to the Gila River Basin are available at <http://www.fws.gov/southwest/es/arizona/Biological.htm>.

Purpose and Need

The purpose of and need for the proposed native fish restoration project is to protect populations of loach minnow and Chiricahua leopard frog that reside in the Blue River drainage against future upstream incursion of nonnative aquatic organisms from the San Francisco River. The action is also needed to remove the threat posed by nonnative fishes that already occupy lower reaches of the Blue River. Loach minnow is known to inhabit the entire reach of the Blue River main-stem, some of its tributaries, and portions of the San Francisco River near the confluence. Chiricahua leopard frog is found along upper portions of the main-stem and in certain tributary streams.

Additional benefits would accrue from protecting the existing native fish community and securing habitat for reintroduction of roundtail chub and spikedace. Implementation of the proposed action would meet one of the primary conservation measures of the 2008 CAP biological opinion, which requires a fish barrier to protect existing populations of loach minnow and Chiricahua leopard frog, and to facilitate replication of the New Mexico Gila River population of spikedace in the Blue River.

Previous Scoping

Initial scoping was conducted in 2004 and included listing the proposal on the ASNF Schedule of Proposed Actions and mailing scoping information to more than 700 individuals, agencies, and organizations. Distribution of the scoping notice was followed up with a community meeting in Blue, Arizona, on March 5, 2005.

The 2004 scoping notice solicited comment on two proposals: (1) construction of small fish barriers, application of a piscicide to remove nonnative fishes, and reintroduction of Gila trout in several headwater streams of the Blue River drainage (identified in the scoping document as the Forest Service proposal); and (2) construction of a fish barrier on the main-stem Blue River and reintroduction of specified native warm-water fishes (identified in the scoping document as the Reclamation proposal). After consideration of public input, the agencies decided to address each proposal in separate NEPA compliance documents. The two proposals are not connected actions, as defined under Council of Environmental Quality regulations at 40 CFR 1508.25(a), and thus can be addressed separately.

Proposed Action

The proposed project would be implemented by Reclamation, in cooperation with the Forest Service, the Arizona Game and Fish Department (AGFD), and the FWS, to meet the purpose and need stated above. It includes four primary elements: (1) construct a concrete barrier in the Blue River approximately ½-mile upstream from the confluence of the San Francisco River; (2) use of mechanical methods to eradicate nonnative fishes in an 11-mile reach of main-stem river between the barrier and Fritz Ranch; (3) restore

populations of roundtail chub and spikedace to suitable habitat in the river; and (4) monitor native fish populations in the river following restoration. The AGFD would take the lead in nonnative fish removal and native fish reintroduction.

The site of the proposed barrier is not accessible by road; therefore, construction material, equipment, and personnel would be transported to the work area by helicopter. Concrete would be batched onsite. No road construction would be authorized.

Alternatives to the Proposed Action

Section 102(2)(E) of NEPA requires that no action must be considered as an alternative in an environmental review whenever there are unresolved conflicts about the proposed action with respect to alternative uses of available resources. A description of no action is also customarily used in EAs to provide the baseline for comparison of environmental effects of the action alternatives against conditions that are representative of the status quo.

In addition to no action and the Proposed Action, other alternatives to meet the purpose and need will be considered during scoping.

Decision Framework

The Responsible Official for the EA is the Area Manager of Reclamation's Phoenix Area Office. This Official must decide whether to implement the proposed action, another action, or no action. The Responsible Official for the Forest Service (ASNF Supervisor) must decide whether or not to authorize the use of National Forest System (NFS) land for implementation of the project. If the Forest Service authorizes the project, Reclamation would construct the proposed barrier on NFS land, and AGFD, in cooperation with the Forest Service, FWS, and Reclamation, would coordinate the removal of nonnative fishes and reintroduction of spikedace and roundtail chub.

Preliminary Issues

In accordance with Department of the Interior NEPA regulations at 43 CFR 46.300, Reclamation has determined that an EA is the appropriate level of NEPA compliance to evaluate the potential environmental consequences of the proposed project. NEPA applies to Federal actions; therefore, the first step in determining the scope of the EA is to identify key issues related to the effect of the proposed Federal action on the existing environment. Public input during this initial scoping process will help us focus the EA on relevant environmental issues.

We anticipate the following issues will be addressed in the EA:

- effects to biological resources (including special status species)
- effects to cultural resources
- effects to water resources
- effects to Wild and Scenic River eligibility status
- effects to recreation
- effects to soils, sediment transport, and fluvial morphology

Consistency with Resource Management Plans

The ASNF manages NFS land in the Blue River watershed in accordance with the *Apache-Sitgreaves National Forests Plan* (Forest Plan; USFS 1987, as amended) and other national policy and direction, including the Endangered Species Act (ESA). The proposed action was determined to be consistent with the goals, objectives, standards, and guidelines in the Forest Plan, as follows:

- Protect areas that contain threatened, endangered, or sensitive species (page 15).
- Cooperate with AGFD on proposals for reintroduction of extirpated species into suitable habitat (page 15).
- Maintain habitat to maintain viable populations of fish species and improve habitat for selected species (page 15).
- Manage threatened and endangered fish habitat to achieve declassifying in a manner consistent with the goals established by the FWS and AGFD (page 46).

Forest Service policy is to recover threatened and endangered species so that special protection measures provided under the ESA are no longer necessary and to ensure, through appropriate management practices, that non-listed native species do not become threatened or endangered because of Forest Service actions (FSM 2602, 2670). Policy also is to encourage or initiate repatriation of listed species onto suitable unoccupied habitat when such actions promote recovery of the species (FSM 2674). The National Forest Management Act of 1976 (PL 104-333, as amended) requires the Forest Service to provide for the biological diversity of national forests consistent with overall multiple-use objectives of the planning area and to maintain viable populations in the planning area.

How to Comment and Timeframe

You are encouraged to offer comments on the scope of the upcoming EA, including potential environmental issues and alternatives to the proposed project that would meet

the stated purpose and need. For your comments to be considered in the draft EA, they should be submitted by April 27, 2009. Please include your full name and address and project title (Lower Blue River Native Fish Restoration Project) with your comments. Comments should be submitted to Mr. John McGlothlen, Bureau of Reclamation, 6150 West Thunderbird Road, Glendale, Arizona 85306. Facsimiles may be sent to Mr. McGlothlen at 623-773-6486. Hand-delivered written comments may be submitted to the above address, Monday through Friday, between 7:30 a.m. and 4:00 p.m., excluding Federal holidays. E-mail comments may be submitted to jwmclothlen@lc.usbr.gov. Please include your full name and address with your e-mail.

By law, the names and addresses of those providing comments are available for public review. However, individuals may request that their name and/or address be withheld from the record. These requests will be honored to the extent allowable by law. If you wish your name and/or address withheld, you must state this prominently at the beginning of your comment letter. All comments from organizations or businesses will be available for public inspection in their entirety.

For additional information concerning the proposed project, please contact Mr. McGlothlen at the address above, by telephone at 623-773-6256, or by e-mail at jwmclothlen@lc.usbr.gov.

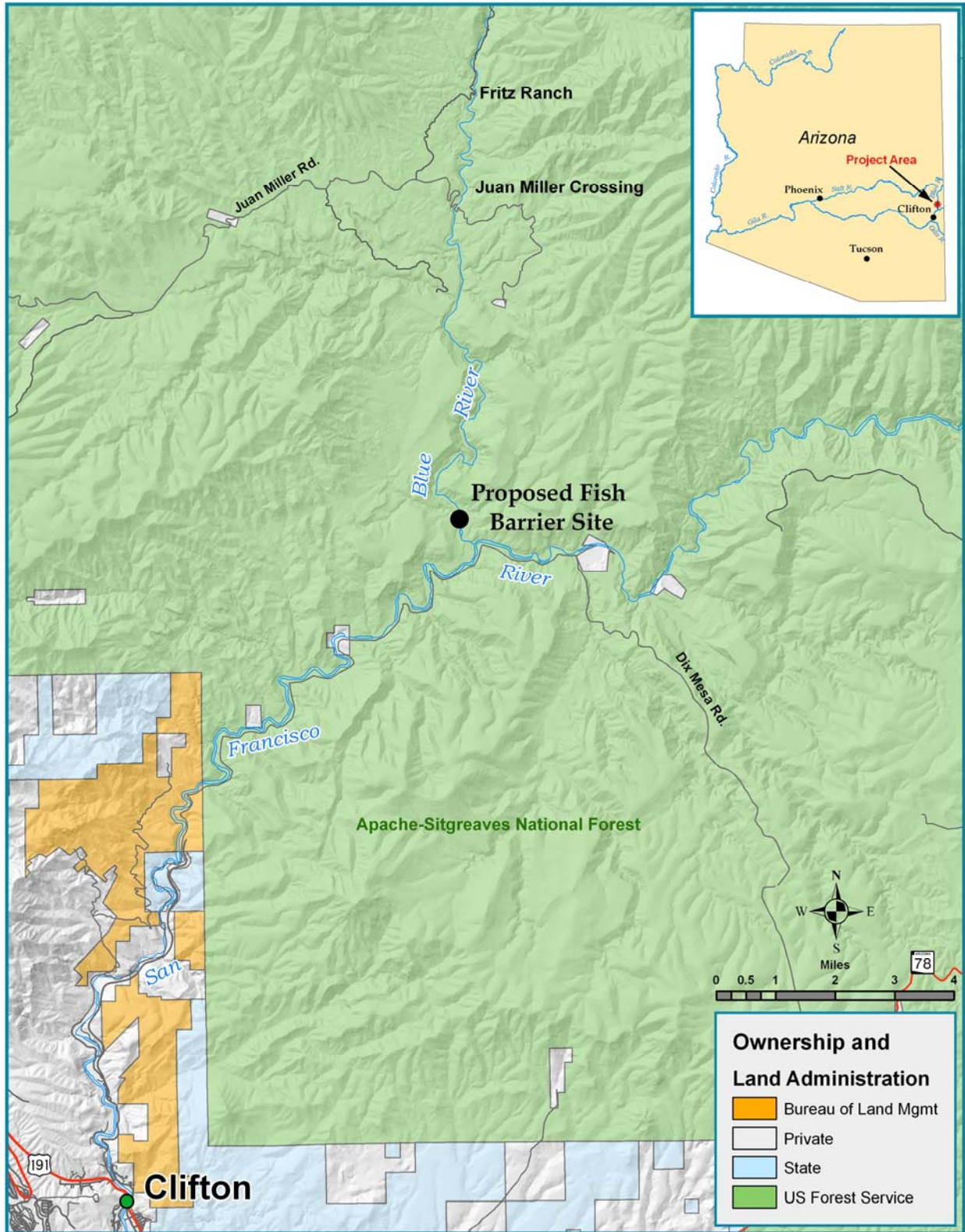


Figure 1. Project area.



Figure 2. Location of proposed fish barrier.