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For Release on: July 15, 2005

Federal, State Agencies and Conservation Group Form Partnership to Protect Lower Yellowstone Fishery

Three federal agencies, a Montana state agency and a national conservation group have formed a partnership to protect and enhance endangered pallid sturgeon populations in the Lower Yellowstone River at Intake Diversion Dam near Glendive, Montana. Dan Jewell, Montana Area Manager for the Bureau of Reclamation, said that Reclamation sees this new partnership as an opportunity to collaborate in reaching sound resource management decisions for the operations of the Lower Yellowstone irrigation project in accordance with the Endangered Species Act.

Construction of the Reclamation-owned dam began 100 years ago this month. It is a 12-foot-high rock-filled crib weir which diverts water from the Yellowstone River into a canal and lateral system that provides water to about 55,000 acres of cropland in three irrigation projects.

According to Jewell, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has identified the Lower Yellowstone River as a priority recovery area for pallid sturgeon. The diversion dam poses a barrier to the migration of the sturgeon to historic spawning habitat. Fish entrainment has also been identified as an issue at the diversion dam. Fish, including pallid sturgeon released above the dam, can become trapped in the main canal.

Reclamation; the Army Corps of Engineers; U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service; Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks; and The Nature Conservancy signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) in Helena, Montana, on Friday July 8. The MOU calls for the five entities to work together to evaluate and then design and build modifications at the dam that would allow pallid sturgeon to pass upstream and which would reduce fish entrainment into the main canal.

Jewell said the MOU partners will also work together on complying with environmental laws and securing public and private funding for the project.

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