

# Stakeholders Unite for Flycatcher

by Christopher J. Botnick



**A Southwestern willow flycatcher feeds its young.**

USFWS photo by S. & D. Maslowski

**Q:** *What do you get when you cross 14 scientists from various disciplines, numerous Native American tribes, 15 federal agencies, and over 200 community representatives, including ranchers, farmers, water and power interests, environmental representatives, federal and state land managers, and local governments?*

**A:** *Possibly the most successful example of early stakeholder involvement translating into effective recovery action.*

At first blush, the obstacles to a meaningful recovery plan for the southwestern willow flycatcher (*Empidonax traillii extimus*) seemed insurmountable. Although numbering only 900-1,100 individuals, the flycatcher's range sweeps from the plains of west Texas to the California coast and from Mexico into the Rocky Mountains of Colorado and Utah. The listing of this bird as endangered ignited emotions across the southwest. Farmers and ranchers were opposed to regulations that they perceived might impede the productive use of their land. Environmental organizations and individuals weighed in on the benefits of biological diversity and conserving adequate habitat. Native Americans—the first inhabitants of the Western Hemisphere—feared seeing their tribal rights compromised by federal environmental law. Decisions on flycatcher recovery involved political jurisdictions across six states and necessitated coordination across Regions 1, 2, and 6 of the Fish and Wildlife Service.

Further complicating the process is the unique habitat of the flycatcher. The southwestern willow flycatcher depends upon one of the most critically endangered habitats in North America—south-

western riparian ecosystems—of which approximately four percent remain. While this habitat has always comprised a very small portion of the southwestern landscape, it is disproportionately important to wildlife and plants. Southwestern riparian ecosystems typically support far greater species diversity than the surrounding upland ecosystems, supporting many species of birds, mammals, fish, plants, reptiles, amphibians, and invertebrates. These valuable habitats and the species that depend on them are imperiled by the impacts of the region's rapid human population growth and dispersion. Destruction and modification of riparian habitats have been caused mainly by water diversions and groundwater pumping, dam and stream channelization, clearing of vegetation, livestock overgrazing, disruption of the natural hydrologic cycle, and the introduction of non-native plants. In the rapidly growing west, these trends could only be expected to continue.

Stuart Leon, the Service's Recovery Coordinator for Region 2, knew that the success of the recovery effort would require stakeholder involvement early in the planning process and throughout the flycatcher's range. Stuart and the scientists on the recovery team spent the better half of a year criss-crossing the southwest and meeting with various constituencies, many of whom initially mistrusted the Service and assumed that its representatives would not listen to their needs. The challenge was to overcome geographic, jurisdictional, and emotional obstacles to produce a plan that would lead to species recovery with buy-in from the stakeholders involved.

In 1997, the Service initiated a recovery planning process for the flycatcher

that ultimately would span five years. To organize and coordinate the effort, the recovery team established six recovery units (further subdivided into management units) based on watershed and hydrologic units within the bird's breeding range. Basing the organizational structure of the team on the biology of the flycatcher provided a means to characterize populations, structure recovery goals, and facilitate recovery actions that would closely parallel the physical, biological, and logistical realities on the ground. Further, the use of recovery and management units ensures that populations will be well distributed when recovery criteria are met.

To manage the myriad stakeholder interests, the Service established recovery team "subgroups," consisting of a technical subgroup, six implementation subgroups, and a tribal working group. The technical subgroup consisted of 14 academic science advisors, whose

function was to compile and review scientific information, develop recovery goals and strategies, and recommend recovery actions. The implementation subgroups consisted of more than 200 community representatives across the Southwest, including ranchers, environmental representatives, water and power interests, state and federal land managers, and local governments. The role of the implementation subgroups was to advise the Service's Regional Director and the technical subgroup on the feasibility of recommended recovery strategies, as well as to implement recovery actions on the ground.

The recovery team employed several creative ideas to help keep the various interests informed and involved. For example, the technical subgroup developed "issue papers" to address major issues involved in flycatcher recovery, such as cowbird parasitism, livestock grazing, tribal perspectives, fire manage-

ment, and invasive species. Once these issue papers were developed, they were posted to a mutually accessible website where stakeholders could comment on the research. This process allowed the recovery team members to incorporate feedback from stakeholders across the spectrum of interests.

The subgroup and issue paper approaches ensured the use of the best available science and addressed the major technical and logistical challenges to recovery before release of the draft recovery plan for public review. The public then was given 210 days to comment on the recovery plan. In response to public comments, the recovery team addressed 87 distinct issues in the final plan. For a conservation and recovery effort of such scope and complexity, this approach proved to be of great value.

Because of the effort to reach out broadly to the public, stakeholders on all sides gained a better understanding of the biology and needs of the flycatcher as well as the perspectives of others around the table. Stakeholders felt not only that they were better informed on the issues, but that their voices had been heard before the final recovery plan was released on March 5, 2003. As a result, stakeholders across the spectrum will be involved in the implementation phase of recovery. As Stuart Leon commented when reflecting on the effort, "Everyone who chose to participate in this process can find their influence in that plan."

"Fitz-bew! Fitz-bew!" Thanks to the cooperative efforts of hundreds of stakeholders, the commitment of participants on the recovery team, and flexibilities built into the Endangered Species Act, the sneezy song of the southwestern willow flycatcher may be heard for generations to come.

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#### ***Riparian habitat along the San Pedro River in southern Arizona***

*Photo by Jim Dick*

