

**U.S. Department of the Interior**  
**BUREAU OF RECLAMATION**  
**Albuquerque Area Office**  
**Albuquerque, New Mexico**

**Finding of No Significant Impact**

**Sandia Priority Site**

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Date

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Date

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## **BACKGROUND**

At the present time the Rio Grande is eroding the east river bank at the Sandia Priority Site project area, allowing the river channel to be undesirably close to critical irrigation and flood-control facilities. The banks of the Rio Grande are dangerously close the east levee system (less than 100 feet from the levee) and present potentially serious threats to project facilities and public health and safety. At high flows the east river bank could continue to erode, possibly breaching the east levee system and flooding private, Pueblo of Sandia, and Middle Rio Grande Project facilities. Short-term, pre-emergency activities, in the form of riprap placement along the east river bank, were implemented in 2003 (TetraTech 2002). Threatened and endangered species are also of concern along this portion of the Rio Grande.

The purpose of this project would be to prevent damage to the east levee system by reducing the probability that high flows will cause further erosion of the east river bank. This action would also provide additional bank stability and reliability in the project area. A secondary purpose of the project would be to take advantage of opportunities provided by the proposed action to restore, improve, and enhance habitat for threatened and endangered species in the project area.

## **SUMMARY OF THE PROPOSED ACTION**

Reclamation proposes to reconstruct the east river bank and realign the existing river channel at the Sandia Priority Site (proposed action). The proposed project design involves splitting the existing river flow into a main channel and a network of secondary channels, and installing bendway weirs and other river bank stabilization treatments. The benefit of using bendway weirs is that they provide additional bank stability and reliability during high flows, which would protect the east river bank against erosion. Another benefit of bendway weirs is that, once installed, they should require only minimal maintenance. Installation of rootwad revetments, debris piles, and deformable banklines would be used in combination with the bendway weirs to increase the complexity of the river bank and provide low-velocity zones with structure and cover near the river bank, thereby benefiting aquatic life in the project area. Bar and floodplain surfaces would be designed to improve connectivity with the river and allow for natural recruitment of cottonwood and willow species. Additionally, the infrequently inundated terrace surfaces between the levee and the Rio Grande would be recontoured and planted with native vegetation. A Rio Grande silvery minnow habitat feature would be constructed in the project area to benefit this native aquatic species. The total area of disturbance would be approximately 40.2 acres. Construction would take approximately 6 to 8 months to complete.

## **ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS RELATED TO THE RESOURCES OF CONCERN**

The effects of implementing the proposed action and reasons for a Finding of No Significant Impact are addressed in detail in the Environmental Assessment and summarized below:

Federal and State Listed Species – No southwestern willow flycatchers (*Empidonax traillii extimus*) are known to nest within the vicinity of the Sandia Priority Site, and no suitable nesting habitat exists on-site. Potential effects to nesting birds would be addressed by performing construction operations in the winter months before nesting season begins. A monitoring plan for wintering bald eagle (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*) would be implemented during construction.

Rio Grande silvery minnow (*Hybognathus amarus*) may be found in the project area, and individuals may be adversely affected by construction within the existing river channel. However, temporary earthen berms (i.e., fish barriers) would prevent additional Rio Grande silvery minnow from moving into the active construction area of the river channel. The construction techniques, combined with refugial pool management in the proposed action, are designed to minimize contact with the Rio Grande silvery minnow and the potential for harm or harassment. The proposed action would not result in the destruction or adverse modification of Rio Grande silvery minnow critical habitat. Any adverse affect to Rio Grande silvery minnow would be limited to an unknown number of individuals in the immediate area of dewatering and channel construction. Harm to individual minnows may be unavoidable during construction and, therefore, Reclamation has requested “Incidental Take” for the proposed action.

Native Vegetation – The near-term loss of vegetation that would result from implementing the proposed action would be offset by the long-term creation of enhanced habitat and, in the short-term, by aggressive revegetation in the form of planting and seeding all disturbed areas. These efforts would result in the overall improvement of the existing habitat.

Noxious Weeds – Implementation of the proposed action has the potential to result in the introduction and establishment of State-listed and other noxious weeds. A number of State-listed noxious weeds already inhabit the Sandia Priority Site. However, an aggressive revegetation plan, combined with removal of existing exotic species and thorough cleaning of all equipment before arriving on site, would minimize that potential. Reclamation, in cooperation with the Pueblo of Sandia, would monitor the project area following construction (i.e., 3 to 5 years) for noxious weeds and would treat them as necessary.

Erosion and Water Quality – During construction, the use of Best Management Practices would contain most runoff within the active construction site. The re-establishment of native vegetation at the Sandia Priority Site following construction would ultimately reduce the area’s contribution to turbidity in the Rio Grande.

Air Quality – Fugitive dust from construction activities would be minimized by the application of water to disturbed areas where equipment is being used during dry periods. Fugitive dust from the implementation of the proposed action would not be expected to result in adverse effects to air quality at the Sandia Priority Site, particularly within the context of the surrounding land uses.

Cultural and Archaeological Resources, and Sacred Sites – Section 106 consultation with the New Mexico State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) will be handled under the terms of a Programmatic Agreement, which sets out guidelines for the consultation process regarding Middle Rio Grande river maintenance projects. Native American tribes were consulted for the Programmatic Agreement. A copy of this Programmatic Agreement is contained in Appendix A.

Indian Trust Assets – The Sandia Priority Site is located within Native American Indian Trust lands as part of the Pueblo of Sandia. Reclamation has coordinated extensively with the Pueblo of Sandia for this project.

Environmental Justice – Implementing the proposed action would result in no adverse effects to minority or low-income populations.

Visual Resources – Effective revegetation and burying of much of the proposed bendway weirs would minimize effects to visual resources as a result of construction activities.

## **ENVIRONMENTAL COMMITMENTS**

The environmental commitments to minimize potential adverse effects listed in Chapter 2, Section 2.6 of the Environmental Assessment will be implemented during construction activities and as part of the post construction site restoration activities associated with the proposed action.

## **COORDINATION**

The Pueblo of Sandia was consulted regarding the purpose and specific design of the Sandia Priority Site Project. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service was notified regarding the proposed action and protected species potentially present in the project area were identified. The New Mexico Environment Department and the Pueblo of Sandia were consulted regarding Clean Water Act Section 401 compliance. Reclamation will prepare a Stormwater Pollution Prevention Plan for the project and submit a Notice of Intent to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency for Clean Water Act Section 402 compliance. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers was consulted regarding Clean Water Act Section 404 permitting and compliance. The New Mexico Department of Game and Fish (NMDG&F) “New Mexico Species of Concern” website (NMDG&F 2005) was consulted to determine if any State-protected animal species could potentially occur in the project area. The New Mexico rare plants website (NMRPTC 1999) was consulted to determine if any State-protected plant species might occur in the project area on non-Pueblo lands (see Appendix B). Section 106 consultation with the New Mexico SHPO will be handled under the terms of a Programmatic Agreement, which sets out guidelines for the consultation process regarding Middle Rio Grande river maintenance projects. Native American tribes were consulted for the Programmatic Agreement. A copy of this Programmatic Agreement is contained in Appendix A. The Bureau of Indian Affairs was also consulted by Reclamation on behalf of Native American tribes. Reclamation consulted with the Middle Rio Grande Conservancy District (MRGCD) through correspondence. Reclamation is committed to coordinating with the MRGCD throughout construction to ensure that the proposed action does not affect MRGCD activities.

## **CONCLUSION**

In accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969, as amended, and based on the analysis in the Environmental Assessment, Reclamation has determined that implementing the proposed action presented in the Environmental Assessment for the Sandia Priority Site would not result in a significant impact on the human environment and does not require preparation of an Environmental Impact Statement.