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Public has until April 25 to make comment on fish project

By Joanna Dodder

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Post



Special to the Review

State and federal agencies hope to start their first native fish restoration project on the Upper Verde River this year.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Arizona Game and Fish Department sought public comments about the project during a public meeting in Prescott this week. Approximately 50 people heard a presentation about the project and asked numerous questions.

They generally expressed support, although some had concerns about the ability to access and fish in the area.

The only public access to the area is via hiking upstream or downstream from public access points on the river such as Old Highway 89.

The project would take place in the narrow 20-acre Stillman Lake near the Verde River headwaters. The lake formed above a natural sediment berm at the Granite Creek confluence.

Officials would relocate as many native and non-native fish as they could, then treat the lake with a low-toxic chemical to make sure the remaining non-native fish are gone.

Then they'd stock the lake with native razorback suckers, desert suckers, Sonora suckers, roundtail club and speckled dace. The razorback is the only one of these fish that is federally endangered.

It's possible that non-native fish could return to the lake during flood events, said Shaula Hedwall of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

However, this site probably offers the best chance right now to restore native fish in the river, said Andy Clark, regional fisheries program manager for the Arizona Game and Fish Department. It's rare for non-native fish to enter the lake from above, and a spring keeps the lake level relatively constant.

At the least, the native fish would have more time to grow larger and multiply before the non-natives eat them, officials said.

If the Arizona Game and Fish Commission and the public support the plan, the project could start as early as this fall. It's been in the planning stages for several years.

While it's a federal project, the state Game and Fish Commission must support it because the Game and Fish Department owns part of Stillman Lake.

The department has purchased four parcels totaling 796 acres along the Upper Verde River and part of Granite Creek, using Heritage Fund money from the Arizona Lottery proceeds. The goal of the purchase is to help protect the river and the native species that depend on it.

The Verde River already has lost the native woundfin and possibly the spikedace. Researchers haven't seen the spikedace in about a decade, but they still harbor hope

that it's there.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service recently designated the upper 43 miles of the Verde River as critical habitat for the spikedace, but decided not to include the middle or lower Verde River.

The agency cited local complaints about economic impacts as one major reason for leaving out the middle Verde (Verde Valley), even though the middle Verde already is a designated critical habitat for the razorback sucker.

A 1993 federal analysis also concluded that the Upper Verde River through the Prescott National Forest is eligible for "recreational" status under the Wild and Scenic River Act. However, the U.S. Forest Service has never completed the analysis necessary to reach a final determination. The Prescott National Forest hasn't decided whether to revisit that issue during its upcoming plan revision work.

The Prescott National Forest also has a long-standing application to the state for reserved water rights on the Upper Verde.

The Forest Service has been experimenting with the effectiveness of removing non-native fish in the Upper Verde for the last four years.

The Arizona Game and Fish Department finished a draft Upper Verde fisheries management plan a couple years ago and it could be done as early as this year, Clark said. The draft tries to meet the needs of the native fish while also supporting sport fishing, he said. It proposes stocking non-native fish in the lakes around Prescott but managing the Upper Verde for native fish. The department has not sought public comment on the draft.

Cattle grazing, roads and human water demand are among the reasons for the native fish decline.

But the "nail in the coffin" was the introduction of non-native fish into the Verde, said Pam Sponholtz of the Fish and Wildlife Service.

Researchers have pulled a host of non-native fish out of the Verde, including flathead catfish, common carp, channel catfish, red shiner, green sunfish, largemouth bass and smallmouth bass. Non-native crayfish and bullfrogs also thrive there. Of the thousands of fish in Stillman Lake, only about 2-3 percent are native, officials said.

The Arizona Game and Fish Department stocked most of these non-native fish species in the river decades ago, said Dave Weedman, the department's aquatic habitat coordinator. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has stocked non-native fish throughout the country too.

Just like the U.S. Forest Service responded to public demand and tried to put out every wildfire, the wildlife agencies responded to public demand for more sport fishing opportunities.

It took decades for the environmental impacts of both of these actions to become obvious. Wildfires have become catastrophic because of overstocked forests, and non-native fish are killing off native fish.

The Forest Service and Fish and Wildlife Service now are spending millions of dollars to restore forests and streams to more natural conditions.

One person at Monday's meeting asked why people should care about saving native fish.

For one thing, the Endangered Species Act says it's important, Clark said. It's important to him as well, he noted, recalling how excited his daughter became when she caught her first native fish.

"The roundtail chub is a fantastic sport fish," Sponholtz said.

Audience member Dick Clark noted that people used to treat the Pacific yew tree as a trash tree until they found out that it contains a chemical to help treat ovarian cancer.

Hedwall quoted the late conservationist Aldo Leopold: "To keep every cog and wheel is the first precaution of intelligent tinkering."

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