



PLATTE RIVER RECOVERY IMPLEMENTATION PROGRAM (PRRIP or PROGRAM)

Technical Advisory Committee (TAC) Virtual Meeting Minutes

Monday, August 17th, 2020

Technical Advisory Committee (TAC)

Bureau of Reclamation (Reclamation)

Brock Merrill – Member (2020 TAC Chair)

State of Colorado

JoJo La – Member

State of Nebraska

Elizabeth Esseks – Member

Jennifer Schellpeper – Alternate

Upper Platte Water Users

N/A

Downstream Water Users

Brandi Flyr – Member

Jim Jenniges – Member

Mike Drain – Alternate

Executive Director's Office (EDO)

Jason Farnsworth, ED

Chad Smith

Tim Tunnell

Malinda Henry

Kaley Keldsen

Kari Mohlman

Mallory Jaymes

Scott Griebeling

Tom Smrdel

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service)

Matt Rabbe – Member

Jeff Runge – Alternate

Tom Econopouly – Alternate

State of Wyoming

Barry Lawrence – Member

Jeremy Manley – Alternate

Environmental Entities

Rich Walters – Member

Andrew Pierson – Alternate

Colorado Water Users

n/a

Participants

Andrew Caven – Crane Trust

Dan Sternkopf – Nebraska DNR

Dave Zorn – CNPPID

Joel Jorgensen – NGPC

Michelle Koch – NGPC



WELCOME & ADMINISTRATIVE

Introductions – Merrill called the meeting to order at 1:02 PM Central Time. Smith noted the use of the Microsoft Teams participant list would be used to identify meeting attendees and read the list as roll call.

Agenda – Farnsworth added a 5 minute overview of the EA AOP plan for 2020-2021 to the end of the original meeting agenda.

Minutes – **TAC MOTION:** La moved and Walters seconded to approve the May 28, 2020 TAC virtual meeting minutes. Minutes approved.

[FINAL May 28, 2020 PRRIP TAC Virtual Meeting Minutes](#)

LAND MANAGEMENT

Tracts 2019001 and 2020001 Restoration and Maintenance Plans – Farnsworth provided an overview of TAC concerns/suggestions voiced in response to the land management plans sent out for tracts 2019001 and 2020001. General points of discussion included:

- Tree clearing in addition to the work originally proposed on tract 2019001 to create additional wetland meadow habitat on the Chapman Complex. Tunnel pointed out that these changes directly contradict the Land Management Framework developed to guide future Land Management Plans based upon learning over the First Increment.
- Additional habitat creation and monitoring for other species of concern such as the Regal fritillary butterfly and Henslow’s sparrow
- Additional work to create potential tern and plover habitat on in-channel islands within tract 2020001. Farnsworth asked for clarification from Rabbe on the extent of work required, whether the work would require an Individual 404 permit, and to clarify the objective of additional work suggested.

Additional Tree Clearing on Tract 2019001

Caven began the TAC discussion of the proposed changes to the 2019001 Land Management Plan with the idea that this tract provided a unique opportunity for expansion of existing wetland meadow habitat due to the presence of Gothenburg Loam soils in areas that are frequently flooded, similar to that of Dippel. He mentioned that the removal of trees from these areas would likely benefit Sandhill cranes that use the area, could benefit Whooping cranes, and may benefit tier-1 NGPC species of concern like the Regal fritillary and the Henslow’s sparrow.

Rabbe added that previous program acquisitions over last 5-7 years may not have presented the types of circumstances that worked to create a wet meadow (like the Pawnee Complex). This site has better depths to groundwater and seems like it offers a better possibility to restore a functional wet meadow (given it will take time to establish). As long as it does not affect target species or cost makes it infeasible, this could be a good place to try it. There are power lines to the north, think about how cranes use the Trust, this might encourage use away from the power lines. Whether cranes use corn or grass more, we know they do not use riparian forest. Not arguing for going back to other properties, just suggesting taking a good look on this specific property. This represents a unique opportunity not present on the landscape in this geographic area. Has the EDO run the cost estimate to do this clearing? Tunnell said no. Farnsworth said it would be about \$50,000-\$60,000 at a minimum, \$100,000 on the upper end.



Farnsworth presented depth to groundwater at the 2019001 tract as compared to Mormon and Shoemaker Islands. The 2019001 tract depth to groundwater is slightly deeper than Mormon Island and shallower than that of Shoemaker Island.

La asked if tree clearing was for target species or for other species of concern. Caven said models suggest whooping cranes select for areas like this in the migratory pathway at large, maybe there is an argument in the Platte. Not an objective reason to not do this for the benefit of target species. Clearing the trees would benefit non-target species like Sandhill cranes and Regal fritillaries. Henry asked for clarification from Caven regarding the potential use of this restored meadow by Regals given data published by Caven that demonstrates Regal use of relict, but not restored grasslands. Caven said that this is due to inadequate restoration that does not include the Regal larval host plant. He said that the purpose is to improve connectivity from existing wetland meadow to the south. Farnsworth asked about the appropriateness of land types to the north for Regals. By removing additional trees, we are connecting grassland to the south to river and cropland to the north. Caven said that Regals can disperse up to 7 km and that there is appropriate habitat within this distance to the north.

La said it sounded like the answer to her question is, it “could” benefit the target species and “might” benefit other species of concern. What is the purpose of this action? Would it be for the target species or is the main reason for other species of concern. Rabbe said the first objective is for target species. Farnsworth said we could have staffing resource allocation issues. Caven said the Trust could be a partner in monitoring this in their 3-year wet meadow study. Caven and Henry will work together to do a survey for Regal fritillary presence on the tract. Rabbe said it would offer up another place for a grad student to do research. The Program would treat it no different than any other properties. Caven said he agrees with Rabbe. The argument being made is based off habitat models.

Smith asked about the ability to develop a wet meadow post tree clearing. Caven said work with Prairie Plains Institute to obtain appropriate seed mixture including violet host plants for Regal fritillaries. Walters said we are talking a small chunk of trees so the effort would not be large. TNC could be a partner too in seeding and monitoring..

Tunnell asked if we want to do just above-ground clearing. Caven said do the best we can to clear as much woody vegetation as possible, do light disking, and get a good seed mix. Tunnell said above-ground clearing has been problematic on other properties with stumps causing problems with weed sprayers. It may be necessary to clear and grub the property to set it up for a greater chance of success.

La asked about a previous comment about this being a more historical approach to management that has been tried before. We have to keep in mind potential benefits to other species that may be obtained through this additional tree clearing and meadow restoration.

Merrill said a case could be made to clear all trees but need to go to the GC with a cost benefit analysis. Farnsworth said we can do that. Merrill said the GC needs to know the cost, there is awareness that the Program is supposed to do what it can to prevent the listing of additional species. Drain said maybe there are cost savings to be had by clearing all the trees and not stopping at an artificial boundary. Rabbe said it should be an apples to apples cost analysis with things like noxious weed spraying, etc. He just wants to make sure it is an accurate evaluation of what the costs are. Caven said this is an opportunity to have a crown jewel east of Highway 281 and the Sandhill cranes are moving that way.



Runge asked about costs for current approach, cost for amended approach, and should also ask at the expense of what? Alternative land management, water acquisition, etc.

In-Channel Tern/Plover Habitat

Rabbe said looking back on in-channel island creation historically, on a portion of these islands we should try to dress them up a little and make them more usable by terns and plovers. In addition to tree removal, consider leaving root wads on site to reduce erosion; clean sand on top; etc. Farnsworth asked if we will go over the individual permit threshold if we implement these actions. Rabbe said it is a good point, talk to the USACE and see what they say. If it moves us out of the realm of what the Program is already permitted for, that might stop this. Let us get clarification on that first. Jenniges asked if this is the 10 acres, or if this is in addition to the 10 acres of MCA habitat. Rabbe said this would run us through the Extension with our in-channel acreage requirement met.

Does \$8,667/year cap on MCA island spending prevent us from clearing vegetation off these islands? We might want to develop a cost estimate for all of these islands and compare it to a total cost of \$8,667 x 13 years of the Extension. Just looking at doing some things that might provide incremental benefits of the ongoing MCA work and see if we can do it in a cost-effective way within our existing permit. Farnsworth said he can circle back with HDR to see what the permit implications might be. The EDO can also work with Rabbe to see where MCA islands should be created and how to game this out. Rabbe agreed.

EXTENSION ADAPTIVE MANAGEMENT PLAN

Formulation of AMP Working Group (AMWG) for moving forward with AMP – Smith presented the EDO's plan for creating a small, technical working group for developing the adaptive management plan for the extension. The EDO has not decided on the members of this group yet, but is considering the following criteria for selection:

- Small group (6-10 members)
- Blending of expertise from various parts of the Program
- Technical knowledge to assist in the development of testable hypotheses and appropriate experimental design
- Time availability for active participation in regular meetings

Drain mentioned that an AMWG essential to getting to an agreed-upon AM Plan. He agreed that the AMWG should be a small group, if too big it will not work. AMWG will not set policy, just need technical focus to get over key issues. Need this model again to get to a revised AMP. Member composition will not be just a subset of the TAC. The EDO needs to look for overlapping expertise that would be helpful and a blending of folks from various parts of the Program. Do not be worried if you are not in the room, you will still have the possibility of input. Meetings generally kept to just the members.

Caven made the suggestion that if the GC does not accept a small group, the EDO could consider having each PRRIP entity category select their own representative.

NEW LEARNING

Science Policy Brief: Swift et al. 2020 – Runge opened the discussion by saying that since there is no pending management action for terns and plovers, there is not much to say about this paper. The implications of this need to be based on management. He gave a brief recap of the paper – renesting is not a successful strategy for piping plover population maintenance. Incidences of renesting were low.



Nests that have not failed have higher success rate than nests that have failed and subsequently renested. We can dive into this if we find a critical uncertainty that is important to reduce for the PRRIP. Runge mentioned that this lower renesting potential may affect our breeding pair estimates based upon nest counts. Henry said that was an implication from the paper she had not thought about in addition to the possibility of increasing the 5-day interval in the breeding pair estimator to an 8-day interval. This suggestion is a good one and will be considered. Henry said that she and the Biology Team have discussed the article and potential implications to population growth. The team has been working on predator identification and management strategies that focus on reducing nest and brood predation, in an attempt to reduce the need for renesting. Runge said we do not need a policy brief at this time but might need one in the future.

[Swift et al. 2020](#)

Science Policy Brief: Alexander's response to EDO Memo – Farnsworth summarized the response from Jason Alexander to the EDO memo. Runge said until we have specific conceptual models and management actions planned out, it would be best to put this dialogue on hold. Farnsworth said Alexander suggested some additional research in the lower Platte which would be a good idea.

[Alexander Response to EDO Memo](#)

ADDENDUM TO MEETING AGENDA

EA AOP PLAN FOR 2020-2021 – Farnsworth said the EDO talked with the Service about the EA AOP for 2021. The EDO suggested key Program learning priorities would be discharge and whooping crane stopover incidence in the spring and fall and germination flow in the summer to prevent vegetation germination. The Service is finalizing the AOP and will provide to the TAC. TAC members can contact Econopouly with further questions or comments.

TAC MEETING REVIEW & WRAP-UP

Merrill provided a summary of the items discussed and the action items listed below.

Upcoming Meetings:

- EDO will send out AMWG invites sometime in September, with the intention of convening in early October to review Program Learning during the first 13 years and get everyone on the same page.
- TAC meeting in October (specific date TBD) to discuss FY2021 PRRIP budget and other items.
- 2021 AMP Reporting Session – **February 2021** @ Omaha, NE (specific dates TBD).

TAC MEETING END

Meeting adjourned at 3:15 PM Central Time.

Summary of Action Items/Decisions from August 17, 2020 TAC Virtual Meeting

- 1) Approved May 28, 2020 TAC Virtual Meeting minutes.
- 2) EDO will provide a cost/benefit analysis for tree clearing off the entire 2019-001 tract in comparison to the original land management plan submitted to the TAC for consideration. Costs should include that of tree clearing and wetland meadow restoration and maintenance over the long-term versus that of the original 2019001 Land Management Plan.



- 3) EDO will determine whether an Individual 404 permit is necessary for additional work on the in-channel islands on the 2020001 tract. From there a cost estimate for in-channel island clearing over the next 13 years will be done to see if the work will exceed the \$8,667/year x 13 years MCA cap.