



File Code: 1920/2500/2670-3

Date: October 8, 2003

Mr. Brian Kelly
Field Supervisor, Ecological Services Field Office
(Mountain Prairie Region)
US Fish and Wildlife Service
4000 Airport Parkway
Cheyenne, WY 82001-1599

Dear Mr. Kelly:

As part of our consultation on the Medicine Bow Revised Land and Resource Management Plan, I would like to reaffirm our commitment under section 7(a)(1) of the ESA to conserve listed species within the Platte River Basin. We strive for balance in conservation and recovery of species that reside and/or breed on the Forest along with those species that reside and breed downstream from the Forest.

In a March 5, 1999 letter to your regional director, the Forest Service summarized its programs under Section 7(a)(1) for all NFS lands in the Platte River Basin. A March 12, 1999 response from your regional office affirmed that these efforts were “consistent with and illustrate a strong commitment to the intent of Section 7(a)(1).” Since 1999, concerns about water yield from forested landscapes in the Platte River Basin have continued to be important in discussions about endangered species in this Basin. Because the relationship between vegetation management and water yield is an important one, we initiated discussions with representatives from your office to determine how best to address this issue in the consultation process on the Revised Forest Management Plan. We determined that an updated 7(a)(1) letter that addressed this and other issues would be the best vehicle to document our actions and continued commitment to species conservation in the Platte River Basin.

In the context of the portion of the Platte River Basin within the boundaries of the Medicine Bow NF, this letter provides an updated description of the programs the Forest and the Region continue to implement to help conserve threatened and endangered species in the Platte River basin.

We believe that the Rocky Mountain Region and the Medicine Bow National Forest are meeting their section 7(a)(1) obligations to consult with and seek the assistance of your agency when carrying out a variety of programs for the conservation of all listed species within the Platte River Basin that the Region and Forest have a reasonable opportunity to affect.

Rocky Mountain Regional Contribution

To offset impacts from historic minor water depletions, as well as additional minor water depletions that might occur between 1995 and the implementation of the Platte River Recovery Program, the Forest Service contributed \$95,000 dollars to the FWS to support recovery of Platte River Species through habitat restoration. A portion of these funds continues to be available to anyone to offset minor water depletions as they may occur. At the time of the transfer of these



funds in 1996, your regional office concluded that this action demonstrated “exemplary initiative in support of conservation of Platte River listed species through innovation application of the Endangered Species Act.”

Since the inception of the Cooperative Agreement to develop the Platte River Recovery program in 1997, Region 2 of the US Forest Service, has

- Worked alongside the USDI-Bureau of Reclamation and other agencies on the analysis for the draft Platte River Programmatic EIS, and Platte River Recovery Implementation Program
- Provided data and technical support to assist Bureau of Reclamation contractors Chuck Troendle and Jim Nankervis in the preparation of their 2000 report, ” Estimating Additional Water Yield from Changes in Management of National Forests in the North Platte Basin”, *2000 Report Enclosed*
- Funded additional investigations by Troendle et al that resulted in the 2003 report “The Impact of Forest Service Activities on the Stream Flow Regime in the Platte River” *2003 Report Enclosed*, and
- Actively participated in the development of the Program Water Plan for the Platte River Recovery Implementation Program, including the Federal Depletions Plan, and the Forest Service Vegetation Management Plan.

The region will continue to work actively with this process until it is completed.

Medicine Bow National Forest Contribution

The Medicine Bow NF is committed to supporting Regional programs and has incorporated the findings of the reports mentioned above into its planning process.

The March 26, 2003 letter from your regional office commenting on the Medicine Bow Draft EIS and Draft Plan identifies piping plover, least tern, pallid sturgeon, whooping crane, bald eagle, Eskimo curlew and the western prairie fringed orchid as downstream species in Nebraska that could potentially be adversely affected as a result of the Medicine Bow Revised Plan. The bald eagle is the only species that resides and breeds on-site. The Biological Assessment discusses the bald eagle including the conservation measures the Plan will employ to assist in its recovery. The remaining six species are not known to reside or breed on the Medicine Bow. 943,000 acres of the Forest lie within the Platte river Basin (approx 5% of the basin above North Platte, Nebraska). The Medicine Bow National Forest continues to seek innovative ways to contribute to the recovery of the species.

The Medicine Bow Revised Plan provides a framework for implementing programs that support recovery of endangered, threatened, and proposed species and their critical habitats on the forest, including those in the Platte River basin. Examples of subgoals and strategies from the revised Plan that will benefit the Platte River species are:

- Improve and protect watershed conditions to provide the water quality and quantity and soil productivity necessary to support ecological functions and intended beneficial water uses. (Subgoal 1.a)

- Identify water use facilities that create water quality and quantity conditions incompatible with desired conditions for aquatic and stream-based resources. Collaborate with state and local governments and other interested parties and consider state law when determining ways to rectify these incompatibilities. (Strategy under Subgoal 1.a)
- Provide ecological conditions to sustain viable populations of native and desired non-native species. (Subgoal 1.b))
- Cooperate with US Fish and Wildlife Service in development and implementation of conservation and recovery strategies and plans for plant and animal species listed as threatened, endangered, proposed, or candidate under the Endangered Species Act. (Strategy ‘i’ under Subgoal 1.b)

Please see the enclosed Goals Objectives and strategies section of the Revised Forest Plan for additional direction that may indirectly assist conservation and recovery of Platte River species. Our Water Conservation Practices (WCP) Handbook includes direction that must be followed when implementing projects on all Forests and Grasslands in Region 2 of the Forest Service. This WCP Handbook is also enclosed.

Throughout the planning process, we worked with cooperating agencies (the State of Wyoming, seven southeastern Wyoming county conservation districts and Converse and Carbon counties) to address the vegetation management and water yield relationship in the Medicine Bow revision. We have articulated the broader context of changes in water yield based on natural vegetative growth cycles and disturbance regimes, as well as the specific Forest contributions to changes in water yield through vegetation management. Each alternative in the EIS provides for and models water yield as an outcome of vegetation management from timber harvest, fuels treatment, prescribed fire as well as natural processes such as wildfire and insect and disease. A full discussion of how these numbers were modeled is contained in FEIS Appendix B – Description of the Analysis. The following table taken from Appendix B displays estimated water yields predicted to occur on the MBNF as a result of projected human activities and predicted natural processes.

Estimated Water Yield Due to Changes in Vegetation (Average AF/yr¹)

FEIS Alternatives	A	B	C	D DEIS	D FEIS	E	F
Timber Harvest (AF-yr)	1165	1142	1118	1062	1000	916	0
Fuel Treatments (AF-yr)	266	372	372	425	425	425	234
Wildfire (AF-yr)	116	168	251	278	278	198	390
Insect and Disease (AF-yr)	127	175	220	290	290	290	453
Total (AF-yr) ²	1674	1857	1961	2055	1993	1829	1077

¹ Average annual water yield for the first 10-year cycle of the planning period.

² Provides and indication of the relative difference between alternatives by including timber harvest, wildfire, fuels treatment and insect and disease, which vary by alternative.

S-2 Table contains estimates of activities that are projected to occur as part of meeting Plan goals and objectives through surveys, monitoring and land treatments. Here are some examples of activities planned in Alternative D-FEIS (the selected alternative) that will benefit Platte River Basin Species. There are many more activities listed in the S-2 Table that is enclosed with this letter.

Alternative D-FEIS-Activities and Outputs in 10 years or (desired condition level)

Type of Activity	Amount /unit of measure
Stream Surveys	18 miles per year
Instream flows maintained or enhanced	6 miles per year
Water Quality Monitoring	6 stations per year
Stream/Riparian Restoration	5 miles per year
Inventory Riparian Area Condition	15 miles per year
Improvement to streams and lakes with water quality impairment	3 miles per year

We also worked with cooperators to identify specific geographic areas or groups of watersheds where there would be opportunities to emphasize vegetation management with a focus on optimum long-term water quality and water yield. Those geographic areas include: Encampment River, Upper Douglas and Middle Fork. *A map of the geographic areas is enclosed.* Vegetation management in these areas will focus on ecological maintenance and restoration towards the historic range of variability, and will move us toward desired conditions for forest and watershed health.

The Forest will continue to cooperate with the FWS and to seek and engage in opportunities, such as those described above, for the conservation of all listed species the Forest has a reasonable opportunity to affect. The Biological Assessments contains an analysis of effects conservation measures and recovery plans are predicted to have on those species. For species that do not occur on Forest Service lands, we will continue to seek innovative ways to contribute to the recovery of these species. We look forward to your comments on our actions under Section 7(a)(1) to conserve listed and proposed species that may occur in the Platte River Basin. We also look forward to continuing our work with you in the Platte River basin wide recovery program.

Sincerely,

MARY H. PETERSON
Forest Supervisor

Enclosures

- 1) March 5, ltr (US Forest Service)
- 2) March 12 ltr (FWS)
- 3) “The Impact of Forest Service Activities on the Stream Flow Regime in the Platte River”, Troendle 2000
- 4) “Estimating Additional Water Yield from Changes in Management of National Forests in the North Platte Basin”, Troendle 2003
- 5) Goals, Objectives and Strategies (Excerpt from Chapter 1 Revised Medicine Bow Plan)
- 6) Watershed Conservation Practices Handbook (FSH 2509.25 Dec 18, 2001)
- 7) S-2 Activities and Outputs Table (Medicine Bow FEIS)
- 8) Geographic Areas map (Med Bow Revision)