

Corps supports Missouri River flows that help both reservoir users and river users

Statements are being made in the media and other venues that mischaracterize plans for managing flows on the Missouri River in 2003. Following are Army Corps of Engineers responses to some of these statements. Also, there is a description of the 2003 Annual Operating Plan for the Missouri River.

Statement: The “flow to target” plan will devastate recreation in the three big reservoirs in Montana, North Dakota and South Dakota.

Reply: Flow to target conserves water in the reservoirs while simultaneously meeting downstream needs. If the amount and pattern of runoff during the 2003 nesting season for the terns and plovers were similar to 2002, more than 546,000 acre feet of water would be conserved in the big reservoirs with a “flow to target” operation versus a 30,000 cubic per second (cfs) flat release. That’s nearly a foot of water in the big three. At the same time, minimum flows to support navigation would be provided. Downstream rainfall could make that 546,000 acre feet greater or smaller depending on the amount, location and timing.

Statement: Captive rearing of terns and plovers doesn’t work and has killed birds in the past.

Reply: Since 1995, the Corps has collected 456 tern eggs and 575 piping plover eggs for captive rearing. Of these, 83% of the tern eggs and 82% of the plover eggs successfully hatched. During the same period, 7,072 tern eggs and 9,275 plover eggs were laid and attended in the wild. Of these, 60.5% of tern eggs and 61.7% of plover eggs hatched. Hatching rates in the controlled setting are 22.4% higher for terns and 19.3% higher for plovers than their wild counterparts.

Of the chicks hatched in the captive facility, 81.2% tern and 87.6% plover chicks fledged and were released back onto the Missouri River or its tributaries. This compares with wild fledge rates of 58.8% for terns and 58.7% for plovers during the same period.

Statement: Moving birds to a brick building is a death sentence.

Reply: The University of Wisconsin-Madison conducted “An Evaluation of Captive Rearing as a Management Tool for Piping Plovers in the Great Plains” from 1998-2000. This research project showed that pre-migratory post-release survival of captive reared birds was the same as wild reared birds. Of the captive reared birds that returned to the breeding grounds, six paired with wild adults and nested. All exhibited normal incubating and defensive behaviors.

Statement: The terns and plovers species are in trouble on the Missouri River.

Reply: The number of chicks that fledge per adult pair is the measure of how well a population is doing. The Fish and Wildlife Service has established a goal of .70 chicks per pair of adults for terns and 1.13 per pair of adults for plovers, computed on a 3-year running average, as the goal for the Missouri River. Achieving this production rate insures the population is stable or rising. During the 2002 nesting season, a record 1,134 piping plovers adults were found on the Missouri River system. They produced a record number of fledged chicks. The 3-year running average fledge ratio for 2000 –2002 was 1.64, well above the established goal. Tern nesting was also very successful during 2002. The third highest fledge ratio and the second highest number of chicks fledged were obtained in 2002. The 3-year running average fledge ratio for the years 2000-2002 was 1.18 for terns, also well above the established goal. The 3-year running average fledge ratio goal has been equaled or exceeded for both species since 1998.

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2003 Missouri River Annual Operating Plan

The 2003 Annual Operating Plan for the Missouri River describes how the system of reservoirs will be managed throughout the year. Given low reservoir levels due to the drought, the plan provides only minimum flows for navigation and anticipates shortening the season length by five days in November. A final determination on the length of shortening will be made after the water storage check on July 1.

The plan presents a “steady release” schedule during the nesting season of the interior least tern and piping plover. The two birds are listed for protection under the Endangered Species Act.

Enough water will be released to meet minimum navigation flow targets, support river recreation and meet water quality standards. A release rate of 30,000 cubic feet per second (cfs) from Gavins Point Dam provides minimum navigation service at least 90 percent of the time between June 15 and August 15. Downstream tributary contributions could provide enough water to allow for lower releases.

The Corps prefers a slightly different plan, called “ flow-to-target.” Under this plan, releases would be gradually increased throughout the nesting season to meet minimum flow targets as the tributaries dry up.

The flow to target plan simultaneously meets downstream needs and saves 546,000 acre feet of water in the three largest reservoirs. That could reduce the anticipated decline in the reservoirs by nearly a foot, depending on the rainfall, or lack of rainfall, downstream over the summer.

The Corps and Fish and Wildlife Service have agreed to consult on the flow to target plan to see if it could possibly replace the steady release plan for the 2003 nesting season. The Corps has submitted its biological assessment of the operation to the Service. It is available at www.nwd.usace.army.mil.

The final Annual Operating Plan is now available at www.nwd.usace.army.mil. Copies have been provided to an extensive mailing list. It is also available by writing to: Water Management Division, 12565 West Center Road, Omaha, NE 68144.