



News Release

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Corps announces release of Biological Assessment on Missouri River changes

OMAHA — The Corps released today its Biological Assessment (BA) of the flow changes and physical alterations it is proposing for the Missouri River’s navigation channel and system of reservoirs. The BA represents the first formal step in a new attempt to resolve the decades-long dispute over water use, while at the same time protecting and enhancing wildlife habitat along the river.

“Management of the reservoir levels and flows of the Missouri River may be the most contentious watershed management issue in the country today,” said Brig. Gen. William Grisoli, Northwestern Division Engineer. “The proposed action in our biological assessment describes physical and management changes of the river that sustain existing uses while contributing to the recovery of the listed fish and birds. The Corps believes the proposed action in this biological assessment provides the best balance for serving the purposes of the dams and reservoirs as authorized by Congress, meets the Corps’ trust and treaty obligations to the Tribes, and complies with environmental laws.”

This document marks the re-initiation of the Corps’ consultation with the US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) on the biological impacts of proposed changes to Missouri River System operation, and is required by Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act. The purpose of the BA and the consultation is to allow the USFWS to determine whether or not the new plan sufficiently protects threatened and endangered species, including the interior least tern, piping plover, and pallid sturgeon.

Assuming receipt of a favorable Biological Opinion from the USFWS, the Corps will be able to proceed with the development of a Final Environmental Impact Statement and a new Master Manual to govern the operation of the river system. The Corps hopes to be able to release drafts of these documents for public comment early next year so that the new Master Manual and a 2004 Annual Operating Plan can be in place by the beginning of the 2004 river operating year, March 1, 2004.

The need for a new Master Manual became evident during the drought years of the 1980’s. Drought conservation measures are a key feature of the proposed action, and include changes that will begin reducing the amount of water that is released from the reservoirs earlier during periods of extreme drought. More details on the drought conservation measures are contained in the Biological Assessment and will be further explained in the final Environmental Impact Statement.

The Biological Assessment and additional information are available on the Northwestern Division website at www.nwd.usace.army.mil and the “Hot Topics” section of the Corps website at www.usace.army.mil