



News Release

**US Army Corps
of Engineers**
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OMAHA – The Army Corps of Engineers will release its 2003 Annual Operating Plan for the Missouri River reservoir system by the end of January.

It will describe how releases from the system of reservoirs will be managed throughout the year. Given low water levels in the reservoirs due to the current drought, the plan will provide only minimum flows for navigation. It is anticipated that the season will be shortened by five days in November. A final determination of the length of the shortening will be made after the water-in-storage check on March 1.

The AOP will present 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 would be released to meet minimum navigation flow targets, support river recreation and meet water quality standards. A release rate of 30,000 cubic per second (cfs) from Gavins Point Dam, near Yankton, S.D., would provide 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 U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has confirmed to the Corps that steady to declining releases from June 15 through August 15 would comply with the Endangered Species Act.

The Corps informed the USFWS that it prefers a slightly different plan for the tern and plover nesting season, which is referred to as a “flow-to-target” operation. Under this plan, releases would be gradually increased throughout the nesting season to meet minimum flow targets as the tributaries dry up. Nests threatened by rising water or erosion would be moved to higher ground when possible.

Threatened chicks and eggs would be collected by biologists for captive rearing at the Corps’ “bird house” at Gavins Point and subsequently released.

“We prefer the ‘flow to target’ option because it simultaneously meets downstream needs and saves nearly 250,000 acre feet of water in the three biggest reservoirs,” said Brig. Gen. David Fastabend, Northwestern Division Engineer. “That could reduce the anticipated decline in the reservoirs by 4 to 18 inches, depending on the contributions by the downstream tributaries,” he said.

The Corps and the USFWS 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.

“We will await the results of our consultation with the USFWS before the operation during the nesting season is finalized, said General Fastabend.”

The final Annual Operating Plan will be published late this month. Copies will be provided to an extensive mailing list. It will also be available at www.nwd.usace.army.mil or by writing to: Water Management Division, 12565 West Center Road, Omaha, NE 68144.