



# News Release

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## Corps conducting public meeting on sandbar creation

OMAHA – The Army Corps of Engineers will conduct a public meeting in Bismarck on January 20, 2005 to review and discuss opportunities to create and maintain sandbar habitat to help recover the populations of the interior least tern and piping plover. These birds are listed as endangered and threatened respectively under the Endangered Species Act.

The meeting will be held at the Bismarck Civic Center Exhibit Hall, Room 105, 601 East Sweet Ave., beginning at 6:30 p.m. Following a brief presentation by the Corps, the public will have the opportunity to comment and ask questions. The meeting is part of the process to develop a Programmatic Environmental Assessment of the impacts of this work as required by the National Environmental Policy Act.

The work is part of the Corps' overall compliance with the 2003 Amended Biological Opinion issued by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in January 2004. Similar emergent sandbar habitat creation work was completed last year on the Missouri River near Ponca, Neb.

“This is a good news story for these protected birds,” said Kelly Crane, project manager. “The Corps is dedicating considerable resources of people and funds to help recover the populations of these birds in areas where they are known to nest.” Both terns and plovers began using sandbars created last June while final grooming of the sand was still underway. Eventually, more than 60 nests were built.

Thousands of acres of nesting habitat were lost when the Missouri River dams and reservoirs were built and the river channelized. Additional habitat must be created for these birds to recover. They nest on low-lying barren sandbars. The natural coloration of the eggs is their only protection from predators. The amount of habitat in all reaches of the river is declining from the combination of erosion and vegetation. While the reproduction goals are currently being met, as the amount of habitat declines, that trend will reverse.

The Service recommended in its biological opinion that there should be 25 acres of sandbar habitat per river mile in the reach from Garrison Dam to the Heart River by 2005 and 50 acres per mile by 2015. The Corps and Service will establish a monitoring and evaluation program to determine if these recommendations are appropriate for the birds' long-term survival or if less acreage will be sufficient.

Much of the recent nesting success of the piping plovers is due to increased habitat available within the reservoirs as water levels have dropped because of the on-going drought. When reservoir levels return to normal, that habitat will be lost.

The Corps is proposing a plan to use mechanical means for creating and shaping new sandbars and chemical spraying on established ones to remove vegetation. The work will be planned to avoid to the extent possible residential areas, marinas, municipal intakes, other areas with high concentrations of recreational boating, and environmentally and culturally sensitive areas. The islands and sandbars occupied by nesting birds will be off-limits to people only during the nesting season from mid-May to mid-August.

There are no proposals, studies or plans to increase releases from Garrison Dam to scour existing sandbars or create new ones. The 2003 Amended Biological Opinion does not include recommendations for such actions.

When the three upper reservoirs recover from the current drought, the Missouri River Master Water Control Manual contains a provision for “unbalancing” them on a three-year schedule to benefit game fish reproduction. This unbalancing may also help scour vegetation from existing sandbars. This is not planned in the near future and would only be undertaken when the reservoirs return to near-normal levels.

The material for the new sandbars will come from the riverbed. The proposed projects will be designed to minimize the affect on the existing erosion pattern. Because of the shifting of sandbars from natural erosion and deposition, some recurring maintenance will be necessary to retain the desired habitat acreage.