

Fish Out of Water

Dams push pallid sturgeon to the edge

IN THE MURKY WATERS of the Missouri and lower Mississippi river basins, one of the largest freshwater fish in North America is making its last stand.

For generations the pallid sturgeon, whose ancestors coexisted with dinosaurs, swam freely in rivers from Montana to New Orleans. But dam building in the 1900s disrupted the rivers' natural sediment, flow, temperature and oxygen levels. This destroyed much of the sturgeon's spawning grounds. Any eggs that do hatch head downstream where they suffocate and sink to the bottom of oxygen-deprived reservoirs.

No wild-born pallid sturgeon—protected as an endangered species since 1990—has survived to adulthood for four decades, and fewer than 125 of these six-foot-long fish survive in the wild in Montana and western North Dakota in the Yellowstone and Missouri rivers. All are nearing the end of their lifespans.

To prevent this fish from going extinct in the wild, Defenders filed a lawsuit in February against the Bureau of Reclamation, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) for failure to comply with the Endangered Species Act (ESA). The corps and reclamation bureau operate two dams in the upper Missouri River Basin that prevent sturgeon from reaching spawning grounds and trap them when they return downstream. Defenders amended the lawsuit in May when plans were announced to replace an existing dam with a larger one near Glendive, Montana.

“We’re asking the court to call time-out on this project until the agencies have completed the legally required studies and reconsidered the

irreversible harm that will follow if the Yellowstone River is permanently blocked to fish migration,” says Steve Forrest, Defenders’ Rockies and Plains program senior representative. “With valuable taxpayer dollars and the sturgeon’s future at stake, we’d like to see solutions that guarantee passage for the sturgeon and other fish while also delivering irrigation water. We’re not going to stand by while these agencies cause irreversible harm to pallid sturgeon and to this last great naturally flowing river.”

The proposed replacement dam would be a higher, more substantial, concrete dam designed to serve irrigation. FWS is stating that the proposed artificial fish channel or “ladder” for the new dam is all the fish need and plans to allow the corps to drop other modifications previously required by the ESA. But biologists believe it unlikely

the channel will provide adequate passage to allow enough sturgeon to reach spawning grounds, and it is possible that no sturgeon will use the bypass at all.

“The pallid sturgeon cannot afford to continue to lose their young to dams,” says Forrest. “The way these dams prevent the pallid sturgeon from successfully reproducing is the riparian equivalent of continuously chopping down trees with eagle nests. The species just can’t stand up to that level of destruction.”

—HEIDI RIDGLEY



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This dam on the Missouri River keeps pallid sturgeon (above) from spawning grounds.