



Independent Scientific Review Panel
for the Northwest Power & Conservation Council
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Memorandum (ISRP 2010-28)

August 25, 2010

To: Bruce Measure, Chair, Northwest Power and Conservation Council

From: Eric Loudenslager, ISRP Chair

Subject: Final Review of the Upper Columbia Programmatic Habitat Project (#2010-001-00)

Background

At the Council's July 7, 2010 request, the ISRP reviewed a revised proposal for the [Upper Columbia Programmatic Habitat Project](#) (#2010-001-00) and point-by-point responses to our May 4, 2010 review ([ISRP 2010-12](#)) which requested a response. The Upper Columbia Salmon Recovery Board (UCSRB) is the project proponent, and the Upper Columbia Regional Technical Team (RTT) provides guidance ranging from identification of reach-specific limiting factors through quantified evaluation of project proposals and analytical workshops.

This project is designed to replace 14 Biological Opinion (BiOp) non-Accord habitat projects from the FY07-09 solicitation cycle that represent approximately \$3.5 million in annual funding. The programmatic approach is intended to maintain an effective habitat protection and restoration effort in the Upper Columbia (Columbia Cascade Province) and address BiOp objectives. Specifically, the proposal states that the recovery of Endangered Species Act (ESA)-listed salmon and steelhead populations in the Upper Columbia (UC) Region is dependent on the implementation of habitat restoration and protection actions identified in the Upper Columbia Spring Chinook Salmon and Steelhead Recovery Plan (Recovery Plan) and the Upper Columbia Regional Technical Team's (UCRTT) Biological Strategy (UCSRB 2007; UCRTT 2008).

In our preliminary May 2010 review, we requested a response on three scientific issues and asked for more information on the proposed project selection process. Our review below is organized by these four issues.

Recommendation

Meets Scientific Review Criteria (Qualified)

The ISRP is generally satisfied with the response documents. Our qualification is that the project proponents prepare retrospective reports for ISRP review in years 3 and 6 of this 7 year project in order to verify that assumptions about administrative streamlining, project selection

efficiency, and action effectiveness are proceeding as anticipated. The retrospective summary report in year 3 should address actions outlined in Figure F-1 (page 52): Watershed Action Team(s) developing Multiyear Action Plans with the Regional Technical Team and Implementation Team subsequently developing targeted solicitations. The retrospective report in year 6 should summarize the implementation of restoration activities following the targeted solicitation, and update the ISRP on monitoring and effectiveness evaluation of restoration actions. Given the dependence on other RM&E efforts to evaluate the effectiveness of this process, these retrospective reports also should summarize results from research efforts in the project area that are relevant to project restoration plans and indicate how these results have been incorporated into the project prioritization process.

Additionally, the ISRP would like to emphasize the need for a strong adaptive learning component, especially because the project covers a variety of restoration efforts, each of which can yield important lessons. Because there is no formal M&E element in this umbrella project, we recommend that an M&E coordination plan be formalized with organizations engaged in monitoring fish populations and watershed conditions in the area.¹ The plan should ensure that population and habitat trends are being monitored with sufficient precision that responses to restoration can actually be measured so that success or failure can be determined.

Comments

1. Existing habitat projects implementation and results in the subbasins of interest

The response provides more detail about the 14 existing habitat restoration projects that would be terminated (as individual projects) and consolidated into this umbrella project. The ISRP appreciates that the status of each of the 14 projects was summarized in the BPA cover letter and listed in Table 1. We wish that at least some information about project effectiveness had been summarized in either the response or BPA cover letter where results were available (for example, the Entiat River ISEMP intensively monitored watershed studies), but the Upper Columbia Salmon Recovery Board (UCSRB) admits that post-implementation biological effectiveness monitoring has been spotty. Given the generally poor condition of anadromous salmonid ESUs in this region of the Columbia River Basin, we feel that knowing how well existing projects are achieving their objectives should be a high priority and summary reports of implementation and effectiveness monitoring should be available (some projects have filed reports in Pisces, but others apparently have no reports). Nevertheless, the response materials have provided a much clearer picture of the status of the existing projects, and the monitoring agreements between individual project proponents and monitoring entities in the affected subbasins.

¹ The ISRP notes that a monitoring proposal has been submitted by the UCSRB as part of the RME Categorical Review: 201007500 - Upper Columbia Implementation and Action Effectiveness Monitoring. The ISRP's review of that proposal is not complete so we do not include an assessment of whether that proposal meets any of the monitoring needs described in this memo. Our review of that proposal will be completed by December 2010.

2. Details about the objectives, work elements, methods, and metrics

The UCSRB provided thoughtful answers to many of the ISRP's questions and have offered a reasonably persuasive argument for why the new approach to planning and administering habitat restoration projects represents an improvement over the existing piecemeal approach and administrative structure. The point that high priority reaches can be targeted for integrated restoration actions under a streamlined umbrella project, as opposed to a more fragmented, opportunistic suite of individual projects, is compelling as long as priority areas are justified by the best available science and project selection is accomplished in an unbiased way. The point-by-point response gives us hope that this will be done.

As in our earlier review, the ISRP feels that the likelihood of improvements at the watershed scale will depend on the details of project planning, execution, and monitoring. The revised proposal discusses the process of project selection and implementation, but does not go into details because some of the actions that would be funded through this umbrella project have not yet been outlined. Scientific oversight will be provided by the Upper Columbia Regional Technical Team (UCRTT). One of the ISRP's original concerns was the potential for conflict of interest if one or more UCRTT members have review authority over a project in which they have direct or indirect involvement; however, the response makes clear that sufficient measures are in place to safeguard the selection process against such a situation.

With respect to the identification of limiting factors and the use of models such as EDT to assist in priority reach identification, we recommend that the data and assumptions that were used to develop the limiting factors assessment be reassessed on a continuing basis. Results from research efforts in the project area should be used to update assumptions in EDT (or other models) about the relationships between habitat conditions and VSP parameters. In addition, periodic (e.g., 3-5 year) field reassessments should be carried out to verify or adjust assumptions about habitat conditions needing improvement. The Upper Columbia River subbasins are highly dynamic and can be strongly influenced by such factors as droughts or wildfires. These unpredictable, but inevitable, events can override well-intended restoration efforts unless care is taken to promote environmental resilience. Careful re-examination of limiting factor assumptions at regular intervals can help ensure that restoration efforts are focused where they can do the most good and help avoid situations that require expensive, frequent maintenance.

3. A BiOp RM&E plan

The ISRP continues to worry that this large project will not have a formal M&E component, but rather will be forced to rely on existing monitoring efforts in the region, or anticipated expansions of M&E programs currently in place. Our concern is based on experience with many other areas of the Columbia River Basin where monitoring, analysis, and reporting do not get the attention and effort they deserve, with the result being that many learning opportunities are lost. This concern is particularly acute with regard to this project as the application of habitat restoration measures at a large scale offers a significant opportunity for improving our understanding of the benefits to fish populations that can be achieved through the manipulation

of freshwater habitat. We appreciate the hard work and good faith the UCSRB has put into coordination with existing monitoring programs, and we hope that project selection will include significant incentives for projects to incorporate both implementation and effectiveness monitoring, or develop an agreement with another organization or program to accomplish these assessments. We also hope that plans for a solid M&E component will be a basis for project selection. The ISRP is often critical of weak post-treatment monitoring (or the lack of any implementation or effectiveness monitoring), and we hope that this new administrative structure will place M&E near the top of the priority list so it can learn from the actions it funds.

4. Review Process

In yielding its review function to the UCRTT for scientific assessment of actions at the individual project level, the ISRP expresses confidence in the membership of the UCRTT as well as local experts to guide project selection and administration in a fair and objective manner. We suggest that it would be appropriate for the UCSRB to prepare retrospective reports at year 3 and year 6 for ISRP review. The review would also involve a combination of presentations and site visits in which the emphasis would be on results. Additionally, a retrospective report should also address the “higher level” issues of landscape restoration strategies and how they have been implemented and evaluated in the Upper Columbia subregion. This is one of the first proposals to consolidate multiple habitat restoration actions under an overarching umbrella that potentially offers administrative efficiency and a landscape-based strategy (another is proposed for the Willamette River subbasin), and it would be most useful for the leading entity to summarize their findings at 3 and 6 year intervals for comparative purposes.