

White Sturgeon Recovery Conservation Program

Grant County Public Utility District



Celebration participants watching the fish in the holding tank before release

Introduction

On April 3, 2007, the Department of Ecology granted Water Quality Certification to the Grant County Public Utility District (PUD) for the operation of their Priest Rapids Project. Under this Certification, Grant County PUD is required to develop and implement a White Sturgeon Recovery Plan in consultation with the Priest Rapids Fish Forum (PRFF). The PRFF is made up of Grant County PUD, Department of Ecology, the tribes, and agencies with fish management authority. There are many individual goals and objectives for the plan. However, the overall goal is to increase natural reproduction of white sturgeon in the project area through reproduction and

release to achieve a population that is appropriate for the available habitat. Recreational and tribal harvest is a secondary benefit of this goal.

Problem

The development of dams along the Columbia River Basin has had negative impacts on white sturgeon populations. White sturgeon in the middle and upper Columbia River now reside in human-controlled and impounded reservoirs between dams. While these populations are able to reproduce, the juvenile or larval fish have a very poor survival rate in the natural river, which leads to population declines. Some researchers believe this is likely due to regulation of river flows; flooding of historical critical spawning and rearing habitats; and increased numbers of native and non-native predators due to habitat alteration, introduction of exotic species, and increased pollution.



A potential future fish biologist participating in the event.



Participants passing sturgeon to release them into the river.

Project goals

The Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) license required Grant County PUD to develop a White Sturgeon Recovery Plan. As part of the PUD's efforts to restore these fish, more than 9,000 were released into the mid Columbia River during the last week of April 2011. The sturgeon were offspring of adult natural broodstock collected from waters near traditional Wanapum Tribal fishing grounds.

A ceremony to celebrate the White Sturgeon recovery effort was held on April 28. A truck transported the 10-month-old sturgeon from the hatchery to the ceremony site. Then over 60 people formed a "human chain" to pass buckets containing sturgeon to release them into the river.



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Rex Buck, Jr. and other Wanapum Tribal members blessed the fish at the event and spoke of their importance to Wanapum and Yakama Native American cultures. Other speakers at the event included Paul Ward and Donella Miller from the Yakama Nation, and Grant PUD's Assistant Manager, Chuck Berrie and Senior Biologist, Mike Clement.

Each fish released contained a passive tag that biologists can use to identify the fish when they are caught. These tags allow the researchers to track their movements, growth, and survival within the river over the next 20+ years. About one percent of the total sturgeon released also contained a sonic tag that emits a signal that can tell the biologists specifically where they are located without the need to catch the fish. These tags will work for up to five years.



Mike Clement, Grant PUD, & Donella Miller, Yakama Nation, speak at the event.

Milestones and outcomes

The program started with the development of the management plan after license issuance in 2008. In 2010, broodstock collected from sturgeon at several locations were spawned to produce over 9,000 baby sturgeon. With the release of these fish, the next step is to monitor and observe where they go and what they do.

Project highlights

The conservation program will help the sturgeon recover over time, allow for increased tribal and recreational fishing, and improve the health of the river ecosystem for future generations.



Marcie Mangold, Ecology's 401 Certification Lead.

Partners

- Bureau of Indian Affairs
- Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission
- Grant County Public Utility District
- U.S. Fish and Wildlife
- Washington's Departments of Fish and Wildlife, and Ecology
- Wanapum Band of Priest Rapids
- Yakama Nation

Funding

The White Sturgeon Recovery Conservation Program is paid for by Grant County PUD ratepayers at about \$150,000 to \$200,000 a year.

For more information

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