

LCC Connecticut River Pilot Meeting

1/15/14

Summary points from the USFWS Connecticut River Coordinator/Executive Assistant to the Connecticut River Atlantic Salmon Commission (CRASC)

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I have provide some very brief bullets below that I hope will help convey important information as the Connecticut River Coordinator for the USFWS, a fisheries position created in 1967, to work with the basin state agency and federal agencies to restore migratory fishes.

- On 1/13/14 spoke with Scott Schwenk reviewing existing information, current management efforts, and significant pending regulatory process and measures – in brief. Sent him Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission-Draft CTR Shad Habitat Plan, ASMFC Diadromous Fishes Habitat Report - compendium. We have various CRASC plans for river herring, American shad, NOAA blanket recovery plan for SNS – no habitat component, and draft CRASC sea lamprey and American eel plans. Plans have population metric objectives, fish passage objectives and generic statements regarding habitat - nothing rigorously quantitative.
- The USFWS membership in the congressionally created CRASC (predecessor agreement started in 1967) with NOAA and basin partner State Fish and Wildlife Agencies, have a priority interest in restoring a suite of native diadromous fish species, that with a single exception of striped bass, are all at all-time low levels of abundance and have other significant issues (loss of older age classes and repeat spawners, fish passage, hydro power operations – which have taken precedent for staff work). The Service, via the US Fish Commission, was founded on restoring anadromous fishes over 130 years ago. This group of fishes should remain our priority with many tens of millions of dollars invested by power companies and state and federal agencies in restoration efforts to this date over four plus decades of work. Progress has been made and I think we are on the cusp of many positive advances with the five main stem FERC relicensing underway for regulatory changes, Holyoke downstream passage advanced development, recent research findings (USFWS/USGS studies), and the refocusing on species other than salmon.
- The LCC should have a focus on resource priorities for the Service and its partners. The fact that for diadromous fishes habitat data are absent in the main stem, should highlight the need and opportunity to address this, attempting to bring some parity to existing LCC data with terrestrial GIS quantified cover types.
- The reasons for this situation of lacking habitat data are many and I can elaborate if need be, basically priorities and limited resources have been the factors – (remove dams/fishways/pop assessment for status and trend data, regulatory work, pop enhancement initiatives, special research on passage issues)
- Extensive habitat evaluations were completed by CRASC agency members (over 20 years) but directed at Atl. salmon spawning and nursery habitats specifically (many hundreds of miles in tribes), which agencies are no longer engaged in restoring.

- The agencies are focused now on American shad, American eel, blueback herring, alewife, shortnose sturgeon (ESA), sea lamprey – and potentially Atl. sturgeon (ESA) extirpated. The vast majority of critical habitat utilized by all these species is in the main stem river and lower reaches of major tribs to first barrier from Bellow Falls to river mouth (240 rkm).
- Given these facts, it seems appropriate to not side step the issue because it presents a challenge, but address the need head on. A habitat assessment for primarily the main stem river should be a priority task to make the LCC effort complete and truly address priorities that reflect many decades of intensive agency work that include many river users' significant investments over the same period. Scaling of an effort or, phasing of an effort, could provide data to work with in the short-term that could be built upon. Aerial image can provide a first cut to note visible habitat features (SAV beds, hard bottom rapids/rips, impoundments extent – with data available on from FERC Application documents (e.g., Turners Falls and Vernon Dam) for GIS mapping and layers. Fishery biologists could provide further inputs, but do not have the GIS expertise of in most cases ability to direct such tasks to staff.
- Look forward to talking more on this.