

Meeting Date: November 16, 2023

Agenda Item No. 5.B.

Agenda Item: Snake River Sturgeon Management Plan Final (ACTION) **Bureau Chief**

Approval: LH

Prepared by: Brett Bowersox, Fisheries Coordinator

Summary of Public Comments:

Following the July 2023 Commission meeting, Department staff released the draft Snake River White Sturgeon Management Plan for public comment from August 21 to September 24. The comment period was announced to the general public through press release, the IDFG website, social media, email invitations and a virtual public open house meeting. Additionally, agency partners and relevant stakeholders received letters via email specifically inviting them to provide comments. Agency partners invited included: Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, Idaho Power Company, Nez Perce Tribe, Shoshone Bannock Tribe, Shoshone Paiute Tribe, US Forest Service, US Fish and Wildlife Service, Bureau of Land Management, Bureau of Reclamation, Idaho Department of Water Resources, Idaho Department of Environmental Quality, County Commissioners, and other relevant agencies. Responses were categorized as either (1) supporting the plan, (2) support with concerns, or (3) did not support the plan.

Support: Total count: 19 (public = 15; agency partners = 4)

Summary:

We received 15 (45%) supportive responses from the general public, which included 9 written comments. Specific comments included support and lack of support for providing a limited harvest opportunity for sturgeon above Shoshone Falls, support for the cooperative sturgeon hatchery program between Idaho Power Company and IDFG, and support for angler involvement in sturgeon data collection.

We received 4 (100%) supportive responses from agency partners. Specific comments were included from the Idaho Power Company (IPC) and Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW). These comments included technical corrections, and suggestions to clarify portions of the text. The Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife and Bureau of Reclamation responded in support of the plan with no specific comments.

Actions:

We did not incorporate the supporting public comments regarding harvest opportunities as the plan only identifies investigating the potential of a harvest fishery. Additional data is being collected to assess feasibility of sturgeon harvest above Shoshone Falls, and future engagement with the Commission and the public would be needed prior to proposing a harvest fishery. The remaining public comments provided context but did not warrant changes in the plan. We did include the vast majority of comments provided by IPC and WDFW, which helped correct technical details and recommended conservation actions.

Support with Concerns: Total count: 13

Summary:

We received 13 (39%) responses supporting the plan, with concerns from the public. Specific comments included a mix of support and do not support for a potential harvest fishery above Shoshone Falls, concern regarding angling during periods of poor water quality, a desire for sturgeon stocking in the upper Salmon River, stricter regulation of sturgeon fisheries (e.g.

minimum line weight requirement, no sturgeon angling at night), and support for angler involvement in sturgeon data collection.

Actions:

We added reference to sturgeon sampling which has occurred in the main Salmon River and a Future Work goal to continue to monitor the main Salmon River for the presence of White Sturgeon. The lower Salmon River is contained within the plan as part of the Hells Canyon reach. White Sturgeon naturally occurring in the Salmon River have access to the main and upper Salmon River drainage if environmental conditions promote natural recruitment. We did not incorporate remaining comments into the plan. See above regarding comments for and against providing a harvest fishery. Regarding angling effects during poor water quality, the department is currently conducting a project to evaluate potential effects.

Do Not Support: Total count: 4

Summary:

We received 4 (12%) responses which did not support the plan. Two comments were not in support of providing a harvest fishery and one comment was in support of providing a harvest fishery. The final commenter was unsupportive of sturgeon stocking below American Falls Dam and felt it was negatively impacting the trout fishery.

Actions:

We did not incorporate these comments into the plan. See above regarding comments for and against providing a harvest opportunity. Public sentiment surrounding sturgeon stocking above Shoshone Falls (including below American Falls Dam) has been overwhelmingly positive.

Notable changes to the plan:

As a result of public comment, Department staff incorporated several suggested changes to improve the draft plan. Most comments suggested minor edits, however some were more significant. The following summarized the significant changes since the draft plan was presented in March:

- Increased specificity regarding spawning flow triggers and duration of flows needed to promote sturgeon recruitment events in the C.J. Strike to Bliss reach
- Updated the Upper Salmon Falls to Shoshone Falls reach report to include 2022 data collected by the Idaho Power Company
- Updated Hells Canyon reach sturgeon life stage survival estimates in Appendix A.
- Identified the potential for shorter timeframe (5 year) between population surveys in Hells Canyon reach if 2024-2025 survey documents decline in abundance
- Added language documenting the presence of two genetic populations (lower Snake River and middle Snake River) within Idaho
- Added reference to IDFG survey in 2017 which did not detect sturgeon in main Salmon River and identified Future Work need to continue to monitor for sturgeon presence in main Salmon River above Vinegar Creek