

White River Fish and Wildlife Mitigation: *Once Is Enough!*

When the Corps of Engineers constructed its multipurpose reservoirs on the White River and tributaries, provisions were made to mitigate impacts on fish and wildlife. These provisions were included in the planning and design of the reservoirs and were completed and implemented with the construction of the dams.

Apparently the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission (AGFC) and the Missouri Department of Conservation (MDC) have decided that *once is not enough*. They are in the process of drafting federal legislation to authorize sweeping new enhancements to fisheries, wildlife habitat and recreation in conjunction with the operation of the reservoirs. Among the items likely to be included in the legislation are requirements that nonfederal entities pay a major portion of the operating costs for fish hatcheries, minimum downstream flows be maintained by releases from the lakes at the expense of power production, and manipulation of the lake surface levels at various times of the year to benefit certain fish and wildlife.

No one would object to the concept of improving fish and wildlife habitat – if the beneficiaries of these enhancement projects were willing to pay for them. But AGFC and MDC plans to *shove these costs on the backs of 6 million electric consumers in six states!*

Southwestern Power Resources Association (SPRA), representing the rural electric cooperatives and municipally owned electric utilities that purchase the hydropower generated at these dams, objects to any proposal to require power customers to pay for enhancing fish and wildlife habitat in the White River Basin for these reasons:

- *AGFC and MDC are seeking recreation, fish and wildlife **enhancement**.* The impacts on fish and wildlife of constructing and operating the White River reservoirs were identified and mitigated when the projects were planned, designed and built. AGFC and MDC would like to improve the fish and wildlife habitat *beyond* that which existed prior to the construction of the reservoirs.
- *Continual improvements to fish and wildlife habitat are already being made.* Numerous changes have been made in reservoir operations, and thousands of dollars have been spent to modify turbines to benefit fish and wildlife conservation – all at the expense of power customers. The trout fisheries, originally planned to encompass only a few miles below the dams, have now been greatly extended – as much as 100 miles below Bull Shoals dam.
- *Fish, wildlife and recreation interests did not pay any of the mitigation costs of these projects, but now they want to power customers to foot the bill for enhancement.* Power customers are already paying for a major portion of the construction and operating costs of these reservoirs, including the original mitigation costs – 68 percent of Beaver, 65.4 percent of Bull Shoals, 64.6 percent of Greers Ferry, 23.5 percent of Norfolk, and 73.6 percent of

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Table Rock. Although power generation does not cause low levels of dissolved oxygen (DO), power customers are paying additional funds to modify the design and operation of the power plants to improve the DO levels of turbine discharges for the benefit of trout. If fish, wildlife and recreation interests want even more benefits, its up to them to pay for it.

- *No legislation is necessary for AGFC and MDC to obtain fish, wildlife and recreation enhancement – if they are willing to pay for it.* Section 1135 of the Water Resources Development Act of 1986 authorizes funding for projects including many of those sought by the two state agencies. In fact, AGFC is participating with the Corps in a project to improve the warm water fisheries habitat below Lake Greeson under this authority. The law requires the state to provide only 25 percent of the funding required for such projects, with the Corps providing the balance.
- *The situation on the White River is **not** analogous with the salmon fishery on the Columbia River.* AGFC and MDC are quick to point out that the Bonneville Power Administration is paying up to \$500 million annually in salmon recovery costs for the Columbia and Snake River Basins, including costs of fish hatchery operations. However, the comparison with the White River Basin is unfair and inaccurate. First, the Columbia River salmon are an endangered species; the White River trout are not. Second, the salmon thrived in the Columbia and Snake River basins before the dams were built. However, no trout were in the White River and its tributaries before the Corps dams were built. In fact, the trout fishery was made possible only by construction of the dams, which provide a source of cold water necessary for survival and propagation of trout. The Columbia River situation is a fish and wildlife issue; the White River concern is a tourism and recreation issue. Power revenues made construction of the White River dams feasible, which in turn made the trout fishery possible.
- *AGFC and MDC are trying to obtain through legislation what they failed to achieve through a public process involving **all** the stakeholders in the White River Basin.* The Corps organized a White River Ad Hoc Working Group for the purpose of developing an operating plan for the White River that balances the desires of the various stakeholders for competing resources in the basin. All stakeholders participated in the development of the plan, and many of the projects sought by AGFC and MDC were considered during that process. Much of what they now seek through special legislation was denied through the group process.

The power customers recognize the economic and conservation importance of fish, wildlife and recreation interests in the White River Basin. That is why we shouldered the majority of the costs of fish and wildlife mitigation and recreation facilities constructed as a part of the White River multipurpose projects. That is why we are modifying hydropower operations at the expense of energy production and spending additional funds to modify the designs of turbines to improve dissolved oxygen levels downstream of the dams.

Power customers have paid their share of the fish, wildlife and recreation costs in the White River Basin. If the fish, wildlife and recreation interests want even more benefits, they should pay for it themselves.

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