



Conservation Agreement and Strategy for the Alabama Sturgeon

The Issue

In March 1999, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service proposed to list the Alabama sturgeon as an endangered species primarily due to its low population numbers and subsequent lack of ability to sustain itself through natural reproduction. The proposed listing generated substantial interest and resulted in the development of a conservation agreement and strategy for the Alabama sturgeon.

The Agreement and Strategy

A *Conservation Agreement for the Alabama Sturgeon* (*Scaphirhynchus suttkusi*) and a *Conservation Strategy for the Alabama Sturgeon* (*Scaphirhynchus suttkusi*) were prepared by the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, Alabama-Tombigbee Rivers Coalition, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the Service and were signed on February 9, 2000.

The Agreement and Strategy were developed as a collaborative and cooperative effort among state and federal resource agencies and private sector partners to expedite the implementation of conservation measures needed to ensure the continued existence and recovery of the Alabama sturgeon.

The goal of the Agreement is to eliminate or significantly reduce current threats to the Alabama sturgeon and its habitat by:

- restoring and maintaining sufficient numbers of Alabama sturgeon through hatchery propagation and augmentation;
- identifying and protecting existing occupied Alabama sturgeon habitat; and
- developing information on the fish's life history and habitat needs, and using this information in implementation of conservation measures and management strategies.

The Agreement will be accomplished through implementation of the Strategy. The Strategy describes specific actions required to expedite implementation of conservation measures for the Alabama sturgeon and to establish benchmarks to measure the success of the program.

Benefits Realized

The Agreement and Strategy identify and set into motion, early on, the best actions that can be taken to conserve and recover the Alabama sturgeon. They are one of several factors that were considered in the decision to list the Alabama sturgeon as endangered under the Endangered Species Act, which was announced on May 2, 2000.

The Agreement and Strategy represent an important step in conserving and restoring the Alabama sturgeon. They will serve as the blueprint for the recovery plan required under the Endangered Species Act.

Tracking Results

Implementation of this 10-year *Conservation Agreement and Strategy for the Alabama Sturgeon* is underway and will be measured by annual reviews.

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Questions and Answers

Why did the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service craft such a comprehensive plan and then list the fish anyway?

The Agreement and Strategy and the decision to list the Alabama sturgeon as endangered are two related, but independent actions. While the Agreement and Strategy identify and set into motion the best actions that can be taken to conserve and recover the Alabama sturgeon, they have not yet been effective in removing the threats identified in the final rule.

Conservation actions for the Alabama sturgeon conducted over the past years by the State, the Service and other concerned parties under a draft conservation plan have increased our knowledge of methods to capture the fish and maintain it in captivity. Nevertheless, the species remains vulnerable to extinction because of its small population size and restricted range.

Early this year, we were requested by the State of Alabama to develop a formal Conservation Agreement and Strategy with the State and others to continue and to increase conservation efforts for the Alabama sturgeon. We worked with them to develop a conservation strategy that is technologically and economically feasible and that, if successfully implemented, would address the threats to the continued existence of the Alabama sturgeon.

We believe that the Strategy is the best approach for conservation of the Alabama sturgeon; however, the certainty and effectiveness of these efforts in removing existing threats remains unproven and dependent upon many factors beyond human control. For example, the Strategy can only be effective if sufficient mature fish of both sexes can be captured. In the past 4 years we have only captured five fish. Three of these fish died and the two remaining fish are both males. While the Strategy calls for a dramatic increase in capture efforts over the next decade, the capture of sufficient number of fish cannot be guaranteed.

Therefore, based on our analysis, the signing of the Conservation Strategy and its initial implementation do not remove existing threats to the Alabama sturgeon to a degree that the fish no longer warrants listing under the Act.

What will listing accomplish that the Conservation Agreement and Strategy couldn't have accomplished just as well? What other benefit will listing confer?

Listing the Alabama sturgeon as endangered will add emphasis to the population and habitat protection and recovery efforts identified in the Agreement and Strategy. The Endangered Species Act requires Federal agencies to use their resources to conserve the Alabama sturgeon and to assure that existing habitats are not further degraded. For more information, see Q&A Nos. 2 and 4.*

Are the Conservation Agreement and Strategy still in effect now that the Alabama sturgeon is listed? Are they still of value?

Yes. The Service's involvement in the development of the Conservation Agreement and Strategy was not contingent upon the species' status under the Act. We worked to help draft the best strategy for the Alabama sturgeon whether or not it was listed. We stand firmly behind our commitments outlined in the Agreement and Strategy. The Conservation Strategy provides the best available actions for the conservation of the Alabama sturgeon, and may lead to its eventual recovery. The Strategy has outlined what the species needs for recovery, and it will make an excellent recovery plan.

In addition, successful implementation of the Strategy as a recovery plan provides many other benefits. For example, implementing the Strategy under our recovery program and continued cooperation among the signatory parties will ensure and facilitate compliance with the Act, thereby reducing the potential of frivolous lawsuits.

The Alabama sturgeon Conservation Strategy and Agreement are vitally important documents. We are way ahead in the recovery process by having developed these documents. Their implementation under the ESA's recovery process will benefit the Alabama sturgeon as well as all of the parties to the Agreement. We are counting on the State, Corps, and Rivers Coalition to continue to work with us to draft and implement a recovery plan based on the Strategy. For more information, see Q&A Nos. 5 and 6.

* See the more extensive Questions and Answers on the decision to list the Alabama sturgeon that appear in a separate document.