

MONTANA

Governor fights federal plan to release water for fish

Published: Friday, May 28, 2021

Montana Gov. Greg Gianforte (R) is objecting to a U.S. government proposal to alter water releases from a huge reservoir in northeastern Montana to help an ancient and endangered fish species: the dinosaur-like pallid sturgeon.

With two-thirds of the state in drought, the governor said the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers proposal risks damaging croplands and irrigation systems downstream of Fort Peck Dam on the Missouri River.

The plan to manipulate river levels "could flood water users in late spring and deprive water users during the hot summer months when moisture is most critical," Gianforte told Army Corps officials in a Tuesday letter provided to the Associated Press.

The proposal would alter the Missouri's flows on a test basis between Fort Peck and North Dakota's Lake Sakakawea. More water would be released in the spring to attract fish to move upstream and spawn, with reduced releases later in the year after new sturgeon hatch.

The idea is to mimic natural conditions present before the earthen dam was completed in 1940. Sturgeon larvae would have a better chance to grow into free-swimming fish and avoid drifting down to Lake Sakakawea, where they currently settle to the bottom and die.

Army Corps officials said yesterday they were working on a detailed response to Gianforte's concerns but had no plans to allow additional public comment as the governor had requested.

A final decision is expected in November, said Army Corps project manager Aaron Quinn. The agency last year delayed the process to do ground surveys on irrigation intakes that could be affected, Quinn said in a statement provided by officials.

Pallid sturgeon live in the Missouri and Mississippi river basins and can grow up to 6 feet long. They've been around for tens of millions of years but saw dramatic population declines after Fort Peck and other dams were built along the Missouri.

They were designated as endangered by extinction in 1990. The proposal to alter Fort Peck's releases is part of a broader effort by numerous state and federal agencies to revive the species.

The opposition from Gianforte, who took office in January, marks an abrupt shift from previous efforts by state officials to persuade water users to get behind the proposal, said Bruce Farling, a consultant for Trout Unlimited and former state director for the fish advocacy group.

Biologists from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks have broadly supported flow tests at Fort Peck, saying in 2019 comments to the Army Corps that more naturalized flows would benefit sturgeon and other animals along the river.

"Local biologists with Fish, Wildlife and Parks have been working with irrigators for years to address their concerns," Farling said. "They ought to feel pretty abandoned after all the work they've put in."

Gianforte said the Army Corps lacks authority to conduct the test flows from Fort Peck Dam because it has no legal right to the Missouri River's water. — *Matthew Brown, Associated Press*

