



August 9, 2016

Mr. David Ponganis  
Director of Programs, Northwestern Division  
US Army Corps of Engineers

Subject: MRRIC Recommendations on the 2017 Recovery Program Work Plan

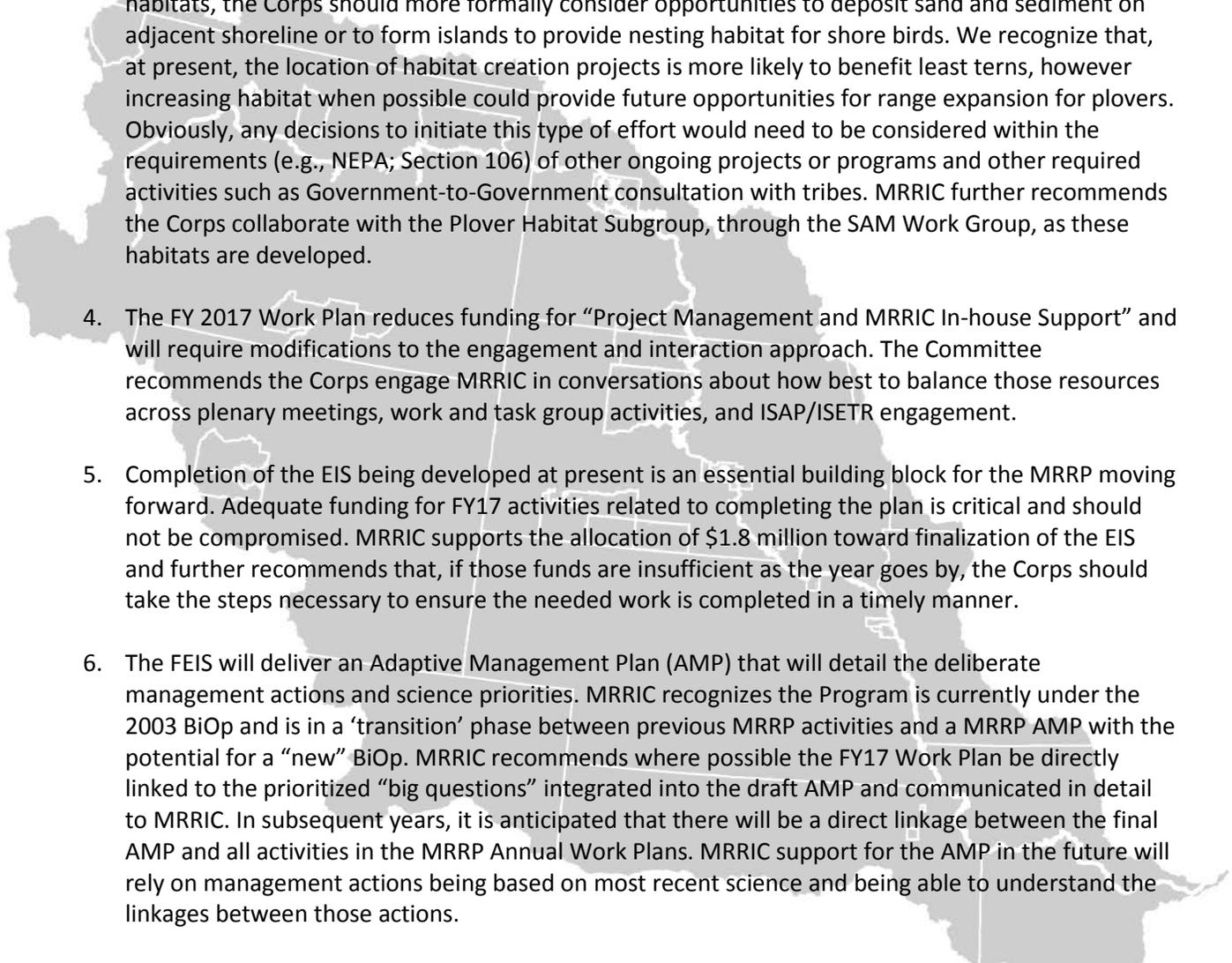
Dear Mr. Ponganis:

I am writing on behalf of the Missouri River Recovery Implementation Committee (MRRIC or the Committee). The MRRIC has nearly 70 members comprised of States, Tribes, Federal Agencies, and Stakeholders associated with Missouri River. It was authorized by Congress in Section 5018 of the Water Resources Development Act of 2007 and established in 2008 by the Assistant Secretary of the Army for Civil Works (Secretary). The duties of the Committee include providing guidance to the Secretary regarding the existing Missouri River recovery and mitigation plans, including recommendations on the annual work plan and budget.

Members of the Science and Adaptive Management (SAM) Work Group met with U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (Corps) staff and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) to consider the draft Corps Fiscal Year 2017 (FY 2017) Missouri River Recovery Program (MRRP) Work Plan based on the President's budget. MRRIC has reviewed the current information and offer the following guidance and recommendations. Should the President's budget not be enacted, the Committee expects the Corps to collaborate on subsequent revisions to the FY 2017 MRRP Work Plan. This letter does not constitute an endorsement of a specific level of spending, rather it is intended to provide guidance for prioritization of the projects within the work plan and offer other input. MRRIC's recommendations on the draft Corps FY 2017 MRRP Work Plan include:

1. The piping plover metapopulation study is evaluating the movement of piping plovers among four breeding areas within the Northern Great Plains population: Lake Sakakawea, Garrison Reach of the Missouri River, Lake Oahe, and the alkali lakes. Understanding the degree to which breeding areas are connected is critical to the recovery of piping plovers as abundance in a breeding area may be substantially affected by this movement. Funding for the metapopulation study is expected to end in FY 2018. MRRIC recognizes the study helps to address uncertainties identified in the effects analysis, however whether funding for further years of study is necessary is unclear at this point.

As such, MRRIC recommends the Corps arrange for a presentation on the results of the metapopulation study as soon as possible after completion of the FY 2016 field season to assess the results and possible value of ongoing efforts.

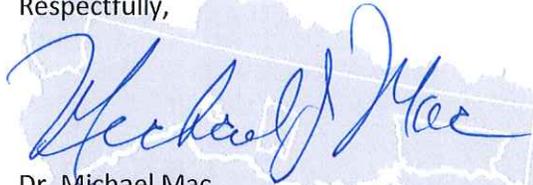
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2. Given the costs of developing new plover habitat and the efficiencies associated with working on existing sandbars, MRRIC supports the inclusion of funds necessary for ESH maintenance in the FY 2017 Work Plan. Further, MRRIC recommends the Corps expend as much effort as possible on increasing the habitat value of the existing sandbars (through maintenance and reshaping to increase the wet edge as needed) for this and future years.
  3. MRRIC recommends that, when engaged in pallid habitat creation upstream of the Platte River to Gavins Point Dam (e.g., chutes, IRC, top widening, etc.) or maintenance activities involving these habitats, the Corps should more formally consider opportunities to deposit sand and sediment on adjacent shoreline or to form islands to provide nesting habitat for shore birds. We recognize that, at present, the location of habitat creation projects is more likely to benefit least terns, however increasing habitat when possible could provide future opportunities for range expansion for plovers. Obviously, any decisions to initiate this type of effort would need to be considered within the requirements (e.g., NEPA; Section 106) of other ongoing projects or programs and other required activities such as Government-to-Government consultation with tribes. MRRIC further recommends the Corps collaborate with the Plover Habitat Subgroup, through the SAM Work Group, as these habitats are developed.
  4. The FY 2017 Work Plan reduces funding for “Project Management and MRRIC In-house Support” and will require modifications to the engagement and interaction approach. The Committee recommends the Corps engage MRRIC in conversations about how best to balance those resources across plenary meetings, work and task group activities, and ISAP/ISETR engagement.
  5. Completion of the EIS being developed at present is an essential building block for the MRRP moving forward. Adequate funding for FY17 activities related to completing the plan is critical and should not be compromised. MRRIC supports the allocation of \$1.8 million toward finalization of the EIS and further recommends that, if those funds are insufficient as the year goes by, the Corps should take the steps necessary to ensure the needed work is completed in a timely manner.
  6. The FEIS will deliver an Adaptive Management Plan (AMP) that will detail the deliberate management actions and science priorities. MRRIC recognizes the Program is currently under the 2003 BiOp and is in a ‘transition’ phase between previous MRRP activities and a MRRP AMP with the potential for a “new” BiOp. MRRIC recommends where possible the FY17 Work Plan be directly linked to the prioritized “big questions” integrated into the draft AMP and communicated in detail to MRRIC. In subsequent years, it is anticipated that there will be a direct linkage between the final AMP and all activities in the MRRP Annual Work Plans. MRRIC support for the AMP in the future will rely on management actions being based on most recent science and being able to understand the linkages between those actions.
  7. MRRIC commends the Corps’ enhanced efforts to find naturally produced age 0 pallid in the river over the last few years. The necessary steps were taken to fund the efforts, and the efforts of the Integrated Science Program and partner agencies were highly productive. We support continuing efforts in FY 2017 because of the ongoing benefits related to addressing the critical uncertainties identified in the effects analysis.

In several of these recommendations, MRRIC has identified actions that may require additional funding to successfully complete. While we strongly support the draft Corps FY 2017 MRRP Work Plan, and are

not recommending taking money out of other activities, we have written a letter to Ms. Jo-Ellen Darcy, Assistant Secretary of the Army (Civil Works), regarding items MRRIC identified as important to continuing efforts to develop a scientifically defensible management plan. In the letter we request she prioritize these items if the Corps is able to secure additional funds for the MRRP in FY 2017.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide input on the FY 2017 MRRP Work Plan. We hope you give careful consideration to our thoughts and recommendations on future Work Plan development efforts.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Michael Mac". The signature is fluid and cursive, written over a light blue map of the Missouri River basin.

Dr. Michael Mac  
Chair  
Missouri River Recovery Implementation Committee

Cc: Noreen Walsh, Regional Director, Mountain Prairie Region, US Fish and Wildlife Service; Mike Thabault, Assistant Regional Director – Ecological Services, Mountain Prairie Region, US Fish and Wildlife Service