

What is a Rip?

by Tamara Wiggins

In a world of abbreviations, acronyms, and alphabet soup, RIP is a funny one, conjuring up images of sharp rocks and old boat bottoms, of climbing over a barbed-wire fence, or the feeling I get when I pay taxes.

RIP stands for Recovery Implementation Program. RIP is related but separate to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's current efforts to designate critical habitat for endangered fish (see the 1994 Winter issue of The Confluence.)

There are two RIPs operating on the Colorado Plateau: one for the upper Colorado River basin and a separate one for the San Juan River. The goal of the programs is to protect and recover the endangered fish while allowing water development to proceed. These conflicting goals make RIPs open to criticism from both pro- and anti-fish interests.

The upper basin RIP group is composed of representatives from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), Bureau of Reclamation, Western Area Power Administration, the states of Wyoming, Utah, and Colorado, as well as the National Audubon Society, the Environmental Defense Fund, and the Colorado and Wyoming Wildlife Federations.

The upper basin RIP has recently released RAP (What's next, a FLIP?) RAP stands for Recovery Action Plan. RIP/RAP contains a set of specific measures with time frames for achieving their goals. Priorities are adequate in-stream flows, improved habitat, stocking native fish, studying competition from non-native fish, and on-going monitoring and research.

Some fish biologists privately concede that the RIP's RAP is flawed, that the competing agendas of RIP's participants have resulted in a RAP that drags its feet. Obviously research and flow comparisons do take time, but it's unclear if RIP/RAP will work in time to save the fish.

Meanwhile, on a separate front, FWS is required by law to designate critical habitat for the endangered fish for the Colorado River system. RIP/RAP and critical habitat designations are good initial steps: the first is a policy process, the second is law. It is doubtful whether the fish can tell the difference. The San Juan RIP is still in its infancy, and environmental groups are refusing to participate, calling it a sham.

The San Juan RIP was formed after the FWS issued a biological opinion in 1990 regarding the proposed Animas-La Plata project (A-LP) in southwestern Colorado. Colorado squawfish were found in the San Juan River, and construction of the project would deplete flows of the San Juan, jeopardizing survival of the endangered fish (see article on A-LP in this issue). After a year of negotiations, a so-called "reasonable and prudent alternative" emerged where the Bureau of Reclamation, who desperately wants to build A-LP, agreed to fund seven years of research and to develop a RIP for the San Juan.

The San Juan RIP consists of representatives from FWS, Bureau of Reclamation, Bureau of Indian Affairs, Bureau of

Land Management, the states of Colorado, New Mexico, and the Southern Ute, Ute Mountain Ute, and the Jicarilla Apache tribes.

Accused of focusing on politics instead of biology, the San Juan RIP is banking on "re-operation" of Navajo Dam on the San Juan upstream of Farmington, New Mexico. They're hoping that the increased water releases from Navajo will let the controversial A-LP off the hook when it comes to San Juan depletions.

So far, the Navajo Nation, whose water rights are most affected, are protesting the San Juan RIP and refusing to participate. The state of Utah is still unsure of what it wants to do. The Park Service, although it manages several miles of shoreline along the lower San Juan, has not been allowed to join the RIP. Environmentalists fighting A-LP say it is crazy to let more water out of an existing facility just so that another one can be built.

From The Southeastern Utah Wilderness Alliance

by Scott Groene

Green River Canyon Slated for Development

The Green River is currently threatened by two proposals. First, BLM will soon release a new proposal to allow a slew of natural gas wells to be drilled on either side of the Green River just north of the head of Desolation Canyon. The proposal would turn a pristine area, generally reached only by flat water float trips down the river from Ouray, into a mess of scattered roads and pipelines. Over twenty of the wells would be drilled within a proposed wilderness area. This threat appeared to be dead a year ago, when the BLM state director ruled in SUWA's favor on an appeal against an earlier proposal to drill 52 gas wells in the "Desert Springs Unit" in this same area. But the oil and gas industry is back. To get on the mailing list for the plan call the Vernal BLM office at (801) 781-4410.

Second, the BLM's Vernal District Office is proposing to open Nutter's Hole area, on the east side of the Green River near Sand Wash, to commercial collection of building stone, with permits granted for 150 tons of stone per year per permit (with apparently no limit on the number of permits issued). Trucks and hoists would be allowed cross-country travel to retrieve the stone, degrading the remote and rarely visited area which is now proposed for wilderness. Comments on the project, or requests for information, can be directed to:

Richard Wilson, BLM-Vernal District, 170 South, 500 East,
Vernal UT, 84078, (801) 781-4410.