

## QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

### BIOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT

Question: We are hearing two different numbers for a decrease in flows under the proposed Exception Drought Operations - 4,150 cubic feet per second and 4,200 cubic feet per second, which is the correct figure?

Answer: They both are. When releasing water from a dam, it isn't akin to turning on the tap at your kitchen sink. There are large turbines and gates that actually control the flow of water. To achieve a target of 4,150 cfs we would actually release a little more to insure the proper amount is getting through the system – we have estimated that would result in approximately 4,200 cfs on the river. This is the number we have run through our models to assess impacts of the proposed operations.

Question: How did you develop this number?

Answer: We conducted surveys for endangered and threatened mussels on the river to determine how many mussels occur at various depths in the river. In our mussel study, we estimated that approximately 20 percent of the mussels would be exposed by an approximate 1-foot drop in river stage. A 1-foot drop in river stage is equivalent to approximately 4,150 cfs in flow. A 2-foot drop in river stage would result in exposure of approximately 65 percent of the mussels, which would be an unacceptable impact to the mussels. In our analysis we also looked at several flow conditions to determine what flow could provide the greatest benefit to the system during this extreme drought while having the least effect on the threatened and endangered species in the system. US Fish and Wildlife Service is continuing to gather information on the depth distribution of the mussels, but based on the information we have at this time, the model runs using the 4,150 cfs flow provided the most benefit with least effect.

Question: What is the effect on the species?

Answer: The 4,150 cfs flow will drop the river level approximately 12 inches. Based on the mussel population/location survey data collected in the river that could expose approximately 20% of the mussel population. We are continuing to consult with the US Fish and Wildlife Service on ways to minimize harm to the endangered and threatened mussels. As a result of consultation, additional reasonable and prudent measures may be identified through the consultation process, such as decreasing the flow from the current 5,000 cfs to the proposed 4,150 cfs, gradually enough to allow as many mussels as possible to migrate to deeper water.

Question: Is this a done deal?

Answer: No. Under Section 7 consultation as required under the Endangered Species Act, the agency proposing an action must develop a Biological Assessment of the effect on the species in question based on the best available scientific and technical data. This biological assessment is then presented to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service who reviews the data provided in the Biological Assessment and any other available information, makes their own analysis and then issues a Biological Opinion. The Biological Opinion may identify additional reasonable and prudent measures to minimize harm to the species, or reasonable and prudent alternatives in order to avoid jeopardy to the continued existence of the species.

Question: When do you expect the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to make a decision?

Answer: The Section 7 formal consultation process typically would take 135 to 145 days to complete. However, due to the urgency of the current drought conditions, the US Fish and Wildlife Service committed to having their Biological Opinion prepared by 15 November. We will work closely with them to share additional information and modeling support to assist them in reaching this expedited date for completion of consultation.

Question: Will this new proposal, if approved, become the norm?

Answer: No. The Corps Biological Assessment proposal is a temporary Exceptional Drought Operation Plan and has specific triggers to return flows to the original 5,000 cfs level when conditions improve in the basin.

Question: What is the bottom line?

Answer; The Corps proposed Exceptional Drought Operation Plan is designed to provide as much recovery capability in the three storage lakes – Lake Lanier, West Point Lake and Walter F. George Lake – as possible while providing the least effect on the species population during this extreme drought situation.

Question: Why is recovery capability important?

Answer: The ACF river basin, and many others in the Southeast, are in the worst drought ever recorded. Weather experts believe the La Nina condition currently in the Pacific Ocean will lead to a drier than normal winter in the Southeast. If this is the case, conditions will become even more strained next year if you don't get the lakes back to as close to normal levels as possible. The only way to do this is to capture as much rainfall as possible rather than releasing it downstream. Recovery of composite storage within the basin will mean there will be more water available to continue support for the multiple project purposes of the Corps reservoirs, including continued flows in support of the endangered and threatened species on the Apalachicola River.