

Enclosure 16

Memorandum for Record
Informal Consultation Telecon
12 March 2004

MEMORANDUM FOR RECORD

SUBJECT: Coordination of Fish Spawn Operations on the Apalachicola-Chattahoochee-Flint Rivers (ACF) system, and Measures Necessary for Protection of Gulf Sturgeon Critical Spawning Habitat on the Apalachicola River

1. On Tuesday, 9 March 2004, the US Army Corps of Engineers, Mobile District, Water Management Section cautioned that conditions within the ACF basin were becoming extremely dry and there were concerns about whether we would be able to river levels above 14,000 cfs, as requested by US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWCC) during our 12 February Annual Coordination Meeting, without impacting reservoir levels upstream. (The maintenance of a minimum 14,000 cfs flow was requested because this is the threshold flow to provide for inundation of floodplain areas adjacent to the Apalachicola River; at flows below 14,000 cfs fish spawn habitat is restricted to the river channel alone.) We had initiated fish spawn operations at Lake Seminole and were attempting to maintain reservoir levels above the critical elevation of 76.7 feet. We were also scheduled to begin fish spawn operation at Walter F. George (WFG) lake on 15 Mar, and there was concern that sustaining flows on the Apalachicola River above 14,000 cfs would require us to lower lake levels at WFG during fish spawn operations, which would also jeopardize the ability to refill the lake if dry conditions continued. No significant rainfall was projected for at least the 10-day outlook.

2. On Wednesday, 10 March, we (Joanne Brandt and Matt Lang (CESAM-PD-EI), Memphis Vaughan, Cheryl Hrabovsky and Rob Erhardt (CESAM-EN-H) conducted a telephone conference with Jerry Ziewitz (USFWS) and Ted Hoehn of (FWCC) to inform them of the pending conflict between maintaining lake levels during reservoir spawning and our ability to maintain river flows above 14,000 cfs. We were also concerned that if we were to reduce releases to the river in order to maintain steady lake levels during reservoir fish spawn, there could be impact to downstream Gulf sturgeon spawning habitat on the Apalachicola River below Jim Woodruff Dam (JWD). The Apalachicola River is also designated as critical habitat for the Gulf sturgeon, and suitable spawning habitat and suitable flow regime are primary constituents necessary to support critical habitat for the sturgeon. We are currently mapping areas of suitable spawning habitat on the river but this effort is not yet complete. Therefore, at this time we will have to assume that the rock outcrop area located immediately below JWD is what is minimally necessary to provide suitable spawning habitat for the sturgeon. We currently estimate that approximately 11,000 cfs is required to minimally inundate the rock outcrop spawning areas immediately below the dam and 14,000 cfs would provide minimal sufficient inundation to allow for spawning over the entire rock outcrop. As a result of this discussion, it was agreed to gather information on riverine temperature and the relative status of fish spawning on the river; and information on timing of migration of sturgeon up the river to spawning habitat in the upper river. We would have to make a decision on whether we would reduce flows on the river and to what river stage not later than Friday, 12 March. We agreed to schedule a follow-on telephone

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conference on Friday morning to determine the best course of action to conserve water within the basin and minimize impacts to both reservoir and river spawning activities.

3. On Friday, 12 March we (Joanne Brandt, Matt Lang, Memphis Vaughan, Rob Erhardt) re-convened the teleconference with Jerry Ziewitz and Ted Hoehn, and Russ Ober and David Partridge of Georgia Department of Natural Resources (GDNR). Rob gave a prospective forecast of continued dry conditions, and that no significant rainfall was predicted to occur in the basin through the end of March. Above normal warm temperatures are also forecast to begin next week. Memphis gave a status of our current water management actions and noted it would be necessary to reduce flows immediately if we are to maintain the critical flow at Lake Seminole and allow WFG to maintain steady or rising conditions. Spawning operations on WFG are scheduled to begin on Monday, 15 March and there is also a bass tournament scheduled for that week.

Ted noted that Crappie had already started to spawn on the river, and other species (e.g. large-mouth bass) were ready but had not yet begun.

Jerry reported that the sturgeon were staging near the mouth of the river, but few had yet migrated upriver to the spawning grounds. It was assumed that the warmer temperatures would initiate migration of the sturgeon upstream and that spawning would also likely begin "en masse" in the Apalachicola River. A minimum elevation of 11,200 cfs is required to just cover the rock outcrop below JWD. Higher flows are necessary to make the majority of the outcrop area suitable for spawning. Jerry advised that we should not draw down upstream reservoir to maintain flows on the river, unless it is to avoid a short-term dip in river stages. It was recommended that we maintain a minimum flow at or above 11,200 cfs as long as system inflows allow. He noted that if inflow into JWD falls to less than 11,200 cfs during peak sturgeon spawning periods (i.e., when water temperatures are in the 64 to 71 degree Fahrenheit range), that we operate the ACF system in a daily "run-of-river" mode in order to avoid causing the take of eggs and larvae spawned on the river at stages less than 11,200 cfs.

GDNR reported that crappie had begun to spawn last week and that bass had started and stopped spawning several times over the last few weeks due to fluctuating temperatures. GDNR noted that there was a lot of vegetation throughout Lake Seminole, so letting it drop to the lower elevations near the critical elevation would still allow fry to find protection from predators, etc. However, there is only a narrow band of vegetation in shallow areas at WFG. It would be preferable to be near elevation 189.0 feet at WFG during spawning operations in order to provide for inundation of the vegetated areas. We were currently at 187.8 feet at WFG. GDNR noted that if levels could not be maintained at near 189.0 feet during the entire spawning period, it would be preferable to be higher for at least a portion of the period and then gradually fall to an elevation below the critical elevation (greater than ½ foot fall over spawning period), if water continues to be scarce.

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Ted noted that there had been several precipitous drops in river stage over the last couple of weeks, and it would be preferable to draw down river stages gradually now prior to the onset of the warmer temperatures. We could then re-evaluate operations near 1 April when fish spawn operations are scheduled to begin on the Apalachicola River.

Jerry and Ted agreed to collect additional temperature data so we can determine the initiation of peak spawning activities to assist in our water management decisions. The Corps may want to assist in collecting water temperatures immediately below JWD near the sturgeon spawning habitat.

4. Based on the above discussions, it was agreed to immediately begin gradually reducing releases from JWD to the Apalachicola River from 14,000 cfs to 11,200 cfs over the next few days. Flows will be reduced at approximately 1000 cfs per day (approximately ½ foot per day), and should be in the approximate 11,200 cfs range early next week (around 15 March). We will maintain levels at Lake Seminole at or above the critical elevation of 76.7 feet. We will allow WFG to maintain steady elevation and increase slightly (currently at 187.8 feet and expected to be aqt 188.2 feet by end of next week). We will schedule a follow-on telephone call on Wednesday, 17 March, to report the current meteorological projections, status of sturgeon migration and fish spawn activities, and to discuss any additional modifications to our water management operations.

5. The above discussion also represents documentation of informal consultation under Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act of 1973, to provide for water management actions that will minimize adverse effects to the Gulf sturgeon during dry weather and resultant low flow conditions in the ACF basin.

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