



File Code: 1950
Date: February 19, 2019

Pecos Rio Grande Cutthroat Trout Restoration

Dear Interested Parties,

The U.S. Forest Service – Santa Fe National Forest, in cooperation with the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, proposes to restore native Rio Grande cutthroat trout *Oncorhynchus clarkii virginalis* (RGCT) to Willow Creek and Cow Creek located on the Pecos/Las Vegas Ranger District of the Santa Fe National Forest in San Miguel County, New Mexico. All non-native salmonids (other trout species) would be removed prior to restocking with RGCT.

We are seeking input on this proposal from local government, tribes, other federal and state agencies, interest groups, and the public. The purpose of this letter is to: provide you background information on the project; present our draft proposal; and to request your comments, to include any issues and concerns you may have on the proposed action.

Project Background and Purpose

The RGCT is a native sportfish that currently occupies approximately 11% of its historic distribution in New Mexico and Colorado. In 2014, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service decided that listing this subspecies as threatened or endangered under the Endangered Species Act was not warranted. Although significant restoration of RGCT populations has occurred in the Rio Grande Basin, there is a need to restore populations in the Pecos River Basin. Twelve RGCT conservation populations currently exist in Pecos River Basin, nearly all of which are in small headwater streams. The proposed project would meet the 10-year objective to restore 1 to 3 conservation populations in the Pecos River Basin as outlined in the RGCT Conservation Strategy. In addition, the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish Statewide Fisheries Management Plan identifies the upper Pecos River basin specifically as a priority for RGCT restoration. Increasing the number of secure RGCT populations and occupied stream miles in the Pecos River Basin would improve the conservation status of and provide additional angling opportunities for this unique native sportfish.

The purpose of this project is to restore RGCT populations to Willow Creek and upper Cow Creek; adding 9 miles of stream to their currently occupied distribution. Since the presence of non-native fish species is the largest threat to RGCT, non-native fish must be removed prior to the establishment of a self-sustaining RGCT population. The New Mexico Department of Game and Fish plans to manage these streams for recreational angling and will be subject to state-wide harvest regulations.



Project Location

Willow Creek is located on the Pecos/Las Vegas District of the Santa Fe National Forest, New Mexico Department of Game and Fish property, and one parcel of private land. The proposed treatment area in Willow Creek would be from its headwaters to the fish barrier near the confluence with the Pecos River and would include one tributary. Cow Creek is located on the Pecos/Las Vegas District of the Santa Fe National Forest. The proposed treatment area in Cow Creek would be from the headwaters to the fish barrier near the confluence with Elk Creek.

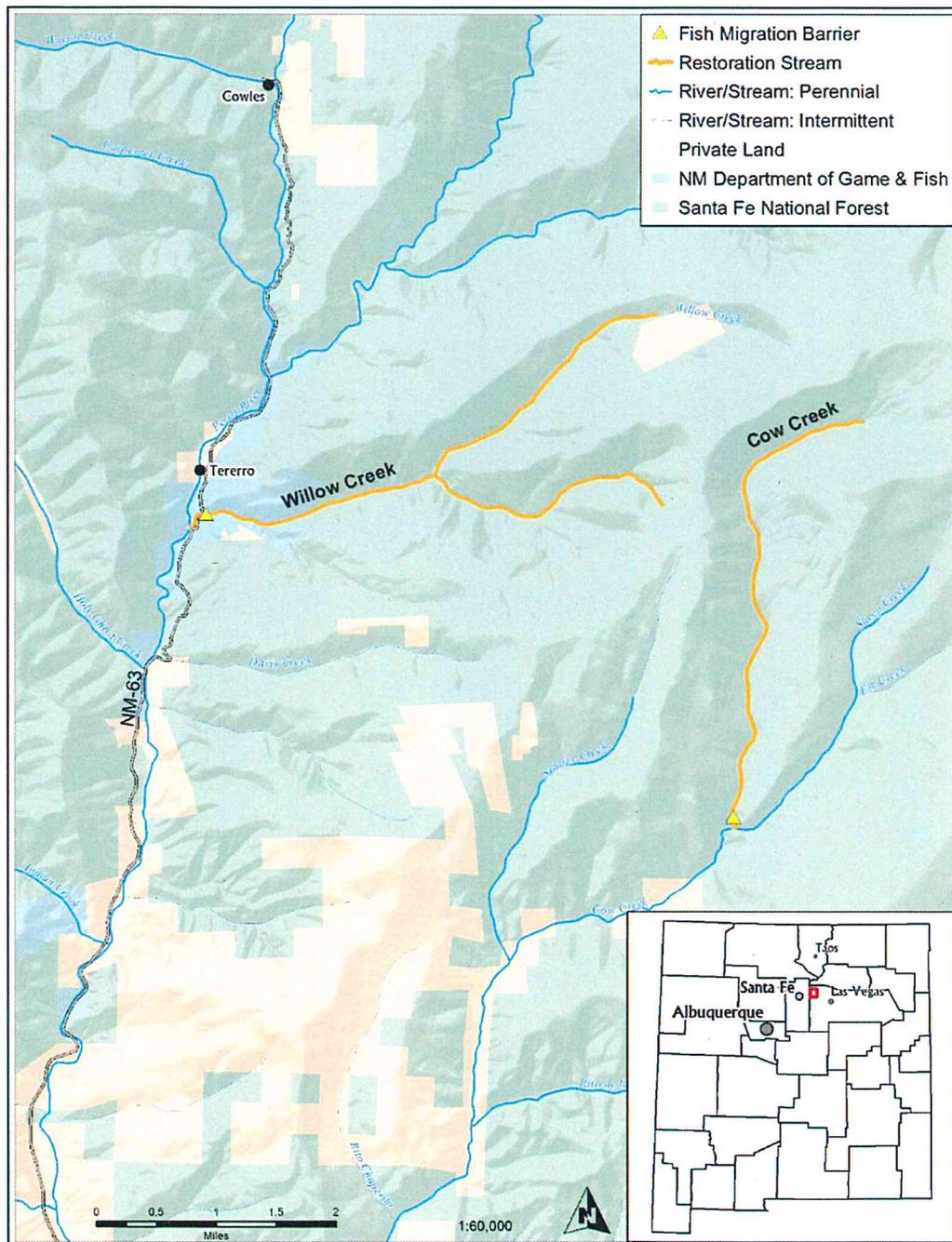


Figure 1. Location of Willow Creek and Cow Creek restoration streams in northwestern San Miguel County.

Draft Proposal

We propose to restore RGCT to Willow Creek, Cow Creek, and their tributaries after the successful removal of non-native fishes. To remove non-native fishes products containing the piscicide rotenone and registered by the Environment Protection Agency and New Mexico Department of Agriculture (CFT Legumine® and Rotenone Fish Toxicant Powder®) would be applied to the project area. Rotenone treatments would be conducted one to two times per year over a two- to five-year period until all non-native fish are removed. Treatments would occur from late spring to fall and recreation access to the project areas would be restricted for up to seven days for each treatment. Application of rotenone would follow the standard operating procedures for fisheries management similar to other successful projects in New Mexico and throughout the West.

Rio Grande cutthroat trout would be stocked into the streams once removal of non-native fish has been confirmed. Stocking of RGCT would be conducted multiple times to ensure that a viable population is established in a reasonable period of time. Live fish or fertilized eggs from genetically pure wild RGCT populations in the Pecos River Basin would be used to establish self-sustaining populations in Willow Creek and Cow Creek.

Public Involvement and Comment Process

The Santa Fe National Forest and our partner agencies seek your input during the scoping on our proposal to restore RGCT to Willow Creek and Cow Creek. We would like to know of any issues and concerns you have regarding this proposed action. A public scoping meeting will be held on March 4, 2019 at the municipal building in Pecos from 6:00 to 8:00 pm.

Comments are most useful when received early in the scoping period so that we have time to consider them in the preparation of the preliminary analysis.

The attached form may be used to provide your comments. Comments may be submitted by email, U.S. Mail, or Fax at any time during the scoping period. The preferred method to submit comments is by email to the email address provided below. Enter "Pecos Rio Grande Cutthroat Trout Restoration" in the subject line. Comments would be most helpful if received by March 20, 2019. Send comments to:

Ecosphere Environmental Services, Inc.
Attn: Jerusha Rawlings
1660 Old Pecos Trail, Suite H
Santa Fe, NM 87505
Fax: (505) 954-1822
Email: jrawlings@ecosphere-services.com

If you have specific questions, or would like to discuss the proposal further, you may contact:

Bryan Bakevich, New Mexico Department of Game and Fish
(505) 476-8058
bryan.bakevich@state.nm.us

Thank you for your interest in this project and for taking time to respond to this request for comments.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'SR' followed by a long horizontal flourish.

Steve Romero
Pecos/Las Vegas District Ranger

