



Department of Energy

Bonneville Power Administration
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ENVIRONMENT, FISH AND WILDLIFE

March 29, 2004

In reply refer to: KEC-4

To: People Interested in the Project to Conduct Research on Avian Predation on Juvenile Salmonids in the Lower Columbia River

Background: Bonneville Power Administration (BPA) prepared an Environmental Assessment (EA) and Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) on this project in April of 2001. The project involves multi-year research begun in 1996 on Caspian terns, double-crested cormorants, and glaucous-winged gulls. The activities examined in the EA focused on measuring the salmonid smolt consumption rate of tern, cormorant, and gull populations in the lower Columbia River. Additionally, this project measured the impacts of this research on brown pelicans roosting in the area.

Action: In 2002 and 2003, BPA prepared modifications to the original proposal in a Supplement Analysis (SA). BPA is now proposing additional changes to the program for 2004 and has prepared a third SA. Thus the purpose of this SA is to determine if a supplemental EA is needed to analyze the environmental impacts of the changes proposed in 2004 as compared to the program analyzed in the Final EA and FONSI completed in 2001.

Findings: As documented in the SA, the potential impacts from the proposed changes to the Avian Predation on Juvenile Salmonids in the Lower Columbia River Research Project are of the kind described in the 2001 EA and FONSI. The proposed changes would not raise the level of the environmental impacts to a significant level. There are no new circumstances or analysis. Therefore, a supplemental EA is not needed.

Copies: If you would like copies of the SA and/or the original EA/FONSI, please call our toll-free document request line: 1-800-622-4520. Leave a request naming this project, the documents you wish, and giving your complete mailing address.

On the Web: These documents are also available on our website at www.efw.bpa.gov. Click on *environmental planning/analysis*, then *Completed Projects*, then *Avian Predation on Juvenile Salmonids in the Lower Columbia River Research Project (DOE/EA-1374)*.

For More Information: If you need more information or have any questions, please call me toll free at 1-800-282-3713, call me at my direct line at 503-230-5756, or e-mail me at caspiering@bpa.gov. Thank you for your interest in our work.

Sincerely,

/s/ Colleen A. Spiering
Colleen A. Spiering
Environmental Project Manager

**Avian Predation On Juvenile Salmonids in the Lower
Columbia River Research Project**

Supplement Analysis

DOE/EA-1374-SA-03

Prepared by the Bonneville Power Administration

March 2004

Avian Predation On Juvenile Salmonids in the Lower Columbia River Research Project

Supplement Analysis

March 25, 2004

1. Introduction

The Bonneville Power Administration (BPA) and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers are funding ongoing research on Caspian terns, double-crested cormorants, and several species of gulls (glaucous-winged, western, California, and ring-billed) begun in 1996. BPA analyzed environmental impacts of the research in an Environmental Assessment (EA) completed in 2001 (DOE/EA-1374). The purpose of this Supplement Analysis (SA) is to determine if a supplemental EA is needed to analyze additional research activities proposed as part of that project.

2. NEPA Analysis to Date

The Avian Predation on Juvenile Salmonids in the Lower Columbia River Research Project EA (DOE/EA-1374) analyzed impacts of undertaking research on the effects of piscivorous birds on survival of juvenile salmonids in the lower Columbia River to aid in potential future Federal Columbia River Power System (FCRPS) predator management. To determine their impact, the project involved the following activities: (1) survey the managed Caspian tern colonies in the Columbia River estuary and along the nearby Washington coast, (2) study the food habits, energy requirements, and smolt consumption rates of managed adult and pre-fledgling Caspian terns nesting in colonies in the Columbia River estuary, (3) determine foraging distribution, foraging range, and habitat use of managed Caspian terns in the Columbia River estuary and along the Washington coast, (4) survey unmanaged double-crested cormorants and glaucous-winged/western gull nesting colonies in the Columbia River estuary and unmanaged Caspian terns nesting on the lower Columbia River above John Day Dam, and (5) study the food habits, energy requirements, and smolt consumption rates of unmanaged double-crested cormorants and Caspian terns.

Based on the analysis in the EA, BPA determined that the proposed action is not a major Federal action significantly affecting the quality of the human environment, within the meaning of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) of 1969. Therefore, the preparation of an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) was not required, and BPA issued a Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) on April 5, 2001. An SA was also prepared for activities in 2002 and 2003.

3. Description of the Proposed Action

Ten specific actions were analyzed in the 2001 EA. They are listed below and described in more detail in sections 2.2.1 through 2.2.10 of the EA.

1. Survey the managed Caspian tern colonies in the Columbia River estuary and along the nearby Washington coast.
2. Study the food habits, energy requirements, and smolt consumption rates of managed adult and pre-fledging Caspian terns nesting in colonies in the Columbia River estuary.
3. Determine foraging distribution, foraging range, and habitat use of managed Caspian terns in the Columbia River estuary and along the nearby Washington coast.
4. Survey the unmanaged double-crested cormorant and glaucous-winged/western gull nesting colonies in the Columbia River estuary and unmanaged Caspian tern nesting colonies on the lower Columbia River above John Day Dam.
5. Study the food habits, energy requirements, and smolt consumption rates of unmanaged double-crested cormorants nesting in the Columbia River estuary and unmanaged Caspian terns nesting on the lower Columbia River above John Day Dam.
6. Determine foraging distribution, foraging range, and habitat use of unmanaged double-crested cormorants nesting in the Columbia River estuary and unmanaged Caspian terns nesting on the lower Columbia River above John Day Dam.
7. Study the food habits of double-crested cormorants nesting in Grays Harbor.
8. Monitor effects of this research on endangered California brown pelicans roosting on East Sand Island.
9. Under the direction of the Working Group, ensure tern colony restoration by removing predatory birds from East Sand Island Caspian tern colony.
10. Provide technical assistance to the Interagency Caspian Tern Working Group.

4. New Activities and Circumstances Since the Earlier NEPA Document

Techniques for collecting the required data in 2004 would not differ from those described in the 2001 EA. Breeding colonies surveyed, number of birds collected, and locations of bird collections would, however, differ slightly from 2001.

Changes in 2004 activities from 2001 would include:

Section 2.2.2 Collection of adult Caspian terns at East Sand Island for food habits analysis would be reduced from 160 to 150 birds. As in 2001, this activity will be accomplished during a 16-week period from April through July, encompassing the entire Caspian tern nesting season on East Sand Island.

Thirty breeding adult terns will be captured on the East Sand Island colony late in the incubation period or early in the chick-rearing period using noose-mat traps and force-fed fish containing PIT tags. Terns will be held for a short period to ensure that the fish has been ingested (i.e., not regurgitated after being force fed) and then released back onto the colony. Terns will also be marked to facilitate

post-release observations of behavior. Following the breeding season and after all the terns have left the colony, East Sand Island will be scanned for PIT tags by NOAA Fisheries and the proportion of force-fed tags that are detected on-colony will be determined. The detection rate of force-fed PIT tags will be used as an estimate of the on-colony deposition rate of ingested PIT tags. This information will be used to evaluate and adjust estimates of smolt predation based on PIT tags recovered from the East Sand Island tern colony.

Up to 50 Caspian tern chicks would be collected from the colony on East Sand Island. These chicks would be raised in captivity on known diets in order to validate and calibrate the use of fatty acid signatures for assessing the proportion of juvenile salmonids in the diet of Caspian terns and other piscivorous waterbirds nesting along the lower Columbia River.

Section 2.2.4 Unmanaged bird colonies surveyed would be expanded to include (1) a nesting colony of double-crested cormorants on Foundation Island in the up-river portion of the lower Columbia River study area, (2) an up-river colony of Caspian terns near Roosevelt, Washington (if active), and (3) an up-river colony of American white pelicans on Badger Island in order to monitor colony size and nesting success. Ground counts of breeding adults and their young would be carried out at each of these colonies to estimate breeding population size and productivity. These data will be used to determine population trends at each of these colonies by comparing colony censuses with earlier counts from censuses conducted previously.

Section 2.2.5 Studies of the food habits, energy requirements, and smolt consumption rates of unmanaged colonies of piscivorous waterbirds would not only include double-crested cormorant colonies in the Columbia River estuary and Caspian tern colonies on the lower Columbia River above John Day Dam, but would be expanded in 2004 to include any unmanaged Caspian tern or double-crested cormorant nesting colonies on the lower Columbia River above Bonneville Dam. In 2001, 2002, and 2003, hundreds of pairs of double-crested cormorants nested on Foundation Island above McNary Dam, and in 2003 evidence of a small colony of Caspian terns was found near Roosevelt, Washington, above John Day Dam.

Collection of adult double-crested cormorants at East Sand Island for food habits analysis would be expanded from 120 to 180 birds (10 each week for 18 weeks). As in 2001, adult cormorants would be collected as they transport fish in their stomach and esophagus back to the colony on East Sand Island. This activity would be accomplished throughout the 18-week nesting period from April to early August. The larger sample of adult cormorants that would be collected in 2004 is designed to compensate for the lack of collections of nestling regurgitations during the chick-rearing period. In 2001, all cormorant diet data from East Sand Island during the chick-rearing period (mid-June to late July) were obtained by collecting nestling regurgitations on the colony at night. This procedure involved some disturbance to endangered California brown pelicans

that roost on East Sand Island at night during the cormorant nestling-rearing period. In order to avoid this disturbance of a listed species in 2004, no collection of cormorant nestling regurgitations on East Sand Island would occur in 2004; instead collection of adult cormorants for diet studies would continue through the nestling-rearing period.

Food habits analysis at the up-river cormorant colony on Foundation Island would involve the collection of up to 200 regurgitations. These cormorant regurgitations would be collected by walking beneath trees where active nests are located and picking food samples up off the ground that are spontaneously regurgitated by adults and nestlings overhead. Diet sample collections would be evenly distributed across the 16-week nesting period.

Up to 15 adult double-crested cormorants that are nesting in the Columbia River estuary (not on East Sand Island) and have been injected with doubly labeled water would be collected using firearms. This activity was planned for East Sand Island in 2001, but was curtailed because endangered California brown pelicans were roosting close to the portion of the cormorant colony where the activity was planned and would have been disturbed. Consequently, this research activity would be completed with cormorants nesting on pilings or channel markers elsewhere in the estuary, or on Rice Island or Miller Sands Spit—locations where no brown pelicans roost.

Finally, 30 breeding adult terns will be captured on the Crescent Island colony late in the incubation period or early in the chick-rearing period using noose-mat traps and force-fed fish containing PIT tags. Terns will be held for a short period to ensure that the fish has been ingested (i.e., not regurgitated after being force fed) and then released back onto the colony. Terns will also be marked to facilitate post-release observations of behavior. Following the breeding season and after all the terns have left the colony, Crescent Island will be scanned for PIT tags by NOAA Fisheries and the proportion of force-fed tags that are detected on-colony will be determined. The detection rate of force-fed PIT tags will be used as an estimate of the on-colony deposition rate of ingested PIT tags. This information will be used to evaluate and adjust estimates of smolt predation based on PIT tags recovered from the Crescent Island tern colony.

5. Effects of Project Activities Not Previously Evaluated

Section 3.2.2 The EA for research in 2001 proposed collecting up to 160 adult Caspian terns for food habits studies, but only 112 adult terns were collected (0.6% of the breeding population). In 2004, the proposed research would collect up to 150 adult Caspian terns on East Sand Island (0.9% of the 2003 breeding population). Caspian tern nesting success on East Sand Island in 2001, 2002, and 2003 was high; approximately 31,000 young terns were successfully raised and fledged from the island in those three years. Even if post-fledging survival was poor, this level of nesting success would be expected to result in the recruitment of at least

15,000 terns into the breeding adult population in the next 4 years. Consequently, the proposed level of take of adult terns in 2004 would have no detectable effect on the population trajectory over the next few years.

To measure PIT tag deposition rates on East Sand Island, noose mats will be used to capture 30 breeding adult terns during the peak of incubation or early in the chick rearing period. These terns will be force fed fish containing PIT tags and released after a brief (<1 hour) holding period. Each PIT-tagged fish will be 5 to 15 centimeters long and weigh approximately 10 to 30 grams. All fish will be certified, disease-free triploid trout obtained from the Trout Lodge Hatchery, Washington. Noose mats have been used to capture hundreds of breeding adult Caspian terns on the lower Columbia River; this method has not resulted in any detectable injury to captured adults. Egg damage/loss and nest abandonment as a result of this activity are possible; however, we expect this to be uncommon.

In late May or early June, on two forays to the colony, up to 50 Caspian tern hatchlings would be collected as subjects for captive rearing experiments. Limiting the collection to two forays will minimize any impact on the colony due to human disturbance. One hatchling will be removed from each of 50 nests that contain two or three hatchlings. This procedure will minimize the impact of hatchling removal on the ultimate production of fledglings at the East Sand Island colony, as very few tern nesting pairs succeed in raising more than one chick per nesting attempt. Section 2.2.2 in the 2001 EA describes the measures taken to care for the hatchlings.

After the experiment, the now-fledging terns would be euthanized for fatty acid signature analysis. These 50 young terns represent 0.6% of the number of terns that were fledged from the East Sand Island tern colony last year. Normally, about 40% of tern chicks that hatch do not survive until they fledge, and sometimes this percentage is much higher. Thus these collection activities would represent a small fraction of the population increment.

Section 3.2.4 As in 2001, ground-based, boat, and fixed-wing aircraft surveys, and re-sightings of banded adults are not expected to disturb any birds in the area (see sections 3.2.1 and 3.2.3 of the 2001 EA). Fixed-wing aircraft fly at about 700 feet, high enough to not disturb birds in the area. Ground counts are conducted from blinds or from boats at a sufficient distance to not disturb the colony.

Section 3.2.5 The project proposes to collect up to 180 adult cormorants at East Sand Island for diet studies in 2004. Based on the colony size of 10,650 breeding pairs in 2003, if all 180 adult cormorants were collected, it would represent <0.9% of the breeding population at East Sand Island. Nesting success of double-crested cormorants on East Sand Island in 2003 was good, and about 20,000 young cormorants were successfully fledged. Thus, the collection of up to 180 adult cormorants from this population would not have a detectable effect on colony size. Collecting up to 60 more adult cormorants in 2004 compared to 2001 will

allow the proposed research objectives to be accomplished without entering the cormorant colony at night and potentially disturbing endangered California brown pelicans, which use the East Sand Island cormorant colony as a communal night roost.

Up to 200 double-crested cormorant regurgitations would be collected for diet analysis at the breeding colony on Foundation Island. This colony uses arboreal nest sites; nesting success has been good, and the colony size has increased over the last decade. Colony size was estimated at 250 to 300 nesting pairs in 2003, so collection of up to 100 regurgitations would not place significant stress on this breeding colony. Regurgitations would be collected from the ground, so no handling of birds would be necessary.

A maximum of 15 adult double-crested cormorants would be collected from nesting areas in the estuary other than the East Sand Island colony as part of proposed research on cormorant energy expenditure rates using the doubly labeled water technique. Resightings of marked adult cormorants in the Columbia River estuary indicate that breeding adults move among several nesting colony sites in the estuary, including East Sand Island, Rice Island, and the Miller Sands channel markers, and none of these nesting areas represents a distinct breeding population. Conducting the proposed research at nesting areas away from East Sand Island would avoid disturbing endangered California brown pelicans, which use the East Sand Island cormorant colony as a communal night roost.

To measure PIT tag deposition rates on Crescent Island, noose mats will be used to capture 30 breeding adult terns during the peak of incubation or early in the chick rearing period. These terns will be force fed fish containing PIT tags and released after a brief (<1 hour) holding period. Each PIT-tagged fish will be 5 to 15 centimeters long and weigh approximately 10 to 30 grams. All fish will be certified, disease-free triploid trout obtained from the Trout Lodge Hatchery, Washington. Noose mats have been used to capture hundreds of breeding adult Caspian terns on the lower Columbia River; this method has not resulted in any detectable injury to captured adults. Egg damage/loss and nest abandonment as a result of this activity are possible; however, we expect this to be uncommon.

6. Findings

As documented in this SA, impacts of proposed activities would not be significant to the long-term survival of the bird populations to be sampled. Potential impacts from the 2004 collecting, surveying, studying, or monitoring activities are similar to those described in the Avian Predation on Juvenile Salmonids in the Lower Columbia River Research Project EA (DOE/EA-1374). No additional impacts would occur in connection with these activities and, therefore, a supplement to the Avian Predation EA is not needed.