

MISSOURI DEPARTMENT OF CONSERVATION

MEMORANDUM

Date: November 18, 1997

FROM: Kim Graham

TO: MICRA Paddlefish/Sturgeon Sub-Committee members and friends

SUBJECT: Minutes from November 12-14, 1997, MICRA meeting

Our sub-committee met in St. Louis, Missouri, on November 12-14, 1997, to discuss several important and controversial issues. In retrospect, we probably accomplished more at this meeting than at any other I have attended. Thirty-five folks attended, including sub-committee members from 16 states, personnel from FWS, Law Enforcement Branch; FWS, Office of Scientific Authority; and FWS, National Forensics Laboratory.

We met Wednesday evening to discuss the merits of prohibiting commercial harvest of shovelnose sturgeon in the Mississippi River Basin, particularly since pallid sturgeon are found in 13 of those states and lake sturgeon in nine. Bob Sheehan (SIU) mentioned that 4 pallid sturgeon and 6 hybrids were found in an Illinois fish market last spring and one of them contained an SIU sonic transmitter. Bob believes that there are few female pallids in the Middle Mississippi River, based upon his sampling. After visiting with commercial fishermen, he is convinced they are harvesting gravid sturgeon for eggs and flesh, regardless of species. Conversations that I have had with commercial fisherman indicates similar conclusions. FWS, Special Agent Dan Burleson stated that law enforcement is reluctant to make cases because of the problems distinguishing between pallids and hybrids.

Rosemarie Gnam (FWS, Office of Scientific Authority) discussed pending changes in CITES that will undoubtedly affect commercial harvest of sturgeon and paddlefish. Beginning April 1, 1998, all sturgeon and paddlefish species worldwide will be covered under CITES.

This means that after April 1, all shipments of caviar imported into the U.S. will require appropriate paperwork. Since the collapse of the Caspian Sea commercial fishery, U.S. Customs folks report that some European caviar is being mixed with domestic eggs and imported under false labeling. Steve Fain, FWS, Molecular Biologist from Ashland, Oregon, told us that he has developed tests for determining *Acipenser*, *Scaphirhynchus*, and *Polyodon* eggs in foreign shipments. He recently purchased Beluga sturgeon caviar from a store in Ashland and found the product to contain paddlefish eggs. Steve said his agency will sample approximately 10% of all imported caviar to check for domestic eggs. If any are

found, the entire shipment will be destroyed. It's an important issue, particularly to those of us in the Mississippi River Basin, when we consider the following facts:

- 90% of the world caviar comes from the Caspian Sea.
- U.S. is the largest importer of caviar in the world and demand is growing.
- Approximately 160,000 pounds of caviar are imported into the U.S. annually.
- Because of illegal European fishing markets, increasing spot checks of imported caviar will probably dry-up much of the imported caviar currently shipped into the U.S.

After discussing these issues and hearing from CITES experts about almost certain upcoming problems, our committee voted unanimously to take a proactive posture. After a unanimous vote of all 18 member states present, we will take the following message forward to the MICRA leadership in Milwaukee in December: **All commercial fishing for sturgeon should be banned throughout the Mississippi River Basin.**

We support the recommended closure because:

- Shovelnose sturgeon and pallid sturgeon are look-a-like species.
- The Pallid Sturgeon Recovery Plan (1993), under Section 1.2.4, recommends that states within the pallid sturgeon's range place a temporary moratorium on commercial fishing for all sturgeon species. This could avoid federal intervention.
- Sport fisheries can be more easily defended than can commercial fisheries when dealing with endangered species issues.
- It is best for the states and MICRA to become pro-active because of the probable increase in egg prices due to diminished imports of caviar. There is a real threat of increased harvest after April 1998.
- This action will help protect unsuspecting and unknowing commercial fishermen from violating Endangered Species Act.
- Shovelnose and pallid sturgeon eggs are similar in physical appearance, and so far are impossible to tell apart genetically.
- Lake sturgeon are currently being introduced into one state and endangered in 9 others. *Acipenser* eggs will certainly be included in illegal caviar shipments.
- Only three states have information available on commercial harvest of shovelnose sturgeon, and that information indicates that those harvests are small, resulting in little economic loss to fishermen or to local economies.
- The recommended closure parallels international concerns and on-going work on worldwide sturgeon populations.
- Compliance by all states in the recommended closure will prevent the "shell game" that might occur when fishermen move eggs from a state with a closure to another state allowing commercial harvest.
- Pallid sturgeon are currently being reintroduced (stocked) into three

states. Several other states will begin recovery efforts within three years.

- If the recommended closure is not adopted, commercial fishing activities for legal sturgeon species will cause harassment of other endangered sturgeon species, most certainly causing unwanted mortality.
- It is certainly not in the best interest of pallid sturgeon and lake sturgeon to maintain existing and potentially conflicting shovelnose sturgeon commercial fisheries.
- Under the current situation, law enforcement is extremely difficult because of the presence of pallid x shovelnose sturgeon hybrids. Consequently, there will likely be no enforcement without the recommended closure.
- Federal law enforcement will make more Lacy Act cases if all states have uniform regulations.

I found it extremely interesting during our discussions that those states with initial concerns regarding the difficulty in imposing the recommended closure were those who could make regulation changes through their respective Commissions. On the contrary, those states required to seek legislative approval were initially the most supportive. On another closely related subject: **Our sub-committee also addressed a similar commercial closure for paddlefish.**

- We agreed unanimously that when the CITES regulations become effective April 1, 1998, paddlefish populations in the Mississippi River Basin will undoubtedly become the target of caviar fishermen because of the expected increase in egg prices.
- Tennessee, probably the state with the highest commercial paddlefish harvest, reported that their commercial paddlefish harvest in 1990 was 600,000 pounds, then dropped to 65,000 pounds in 1995. Tennessee also reported that the average size of harvested paddlefish is decreasing and egg-bearing females are becoming less abundant. Because of these concerns, they are proposing a 2-year moratorium on paddlefish commercial harvest, or until such time as they can determine that the current commercial exploitation is not detrimental to their populations.
- All states agreed that there is a desperate need for paddlefish data, particularly population age structure and exploitation information.
- An alternative to closure is a "quota", however most sub-committee members felt this would be extremely difficult to regulate.
- After nearly a full day's discussion, 14 of 16 sub-committee members voted for complete closure. Because of two opposing votes, the committee felt that lack of consensus prevented us taking this issue to the MICRA leadership at this time. Instead, each state representative was polled again and given the following choices:
 - a) full closure
 - b) a moratorium with time limit
 - c) a ban on eggs only and allow a flesh market
 - d) send a letter to MICRA voicing concerns and asking MICRA leadership to support

a closure.

Results of the vote were as follows:

- a) complete closure- 7
- b) timed moratorium- 1
- c) egg ban only- 2
- d) letter to MICRA- 6.

At the sub-committee request, I will prepare a letter to MICRA's leadership indicating the sub-committee's concerns about probable impacts on paddlefish and request their guidance in the matter. We spent a considerable amount of time discussing how a closure or any alteration of existing commercial regulations would effect our on-going MICRA paddlefish tagging study. All felt that the study required several more years, before enough information could be obtained to make meaningful decisions. If regulations are changed, each state must increase their effort to tag and sample paddlefish in their respective portions of the big rivers. We also discussed the need to gather egg information from commercial fisherman. Only one state currently gathers this type of information. As expected, those figures are show minimal egg harvest.

Nate Brennan (Tenn Tech) discussed the database transfer to FWS. Training for Greg Conover and Jo Grady has taken place and the transition will become reality on January 1. Nate provided the sub-committee with copies of the 1996-1997 Interim Report.

We discussed prizes to be given to sport and commercial anglers in January 1998. Gerald Mestl (NE) will send me a photograph of the winner of the boat so that I can contact SeaArk and see if we can get another one. Mark Ambler (OK) is working with Zebco to get rod & reel combinations. Robb Todd (TN) will contact Miller Net & Twine about \$100 gift certificates and Butch Atwood (IL) will contact Nichols Net & Twine about similar donations. Gene Zuerlein (NE) will contract Cabela's, and Dennis Scarnecchia (U of Idaho) told us he would donate a box of paddlefish caps. Tom Mosher (KS) reported that Coleman is providing about 200 insulated water jugs (I already have them). I will contact Berkley about providing more fishing line. I would appreciate it if all sub-committee members would continue to obtain prizes for our next drawing.

Each state reported on their tagging efforts during the year. I am encouraged that most states are actively tagging wild paddlefish and collecting rostrums. I don't have good figures yet on numbers of hatchery reared paddlefish tagged and stocked in 1997, but total numbers are well over 800,000 fish. Once those fish reach harvestable size, tag recoveries should increase dramatically.

Fred Ryckman (ND) gave an informative talk about techniques for capturing y-o-y and yearling paddlefish in large reservoirs by using dipnets to capture them. It certainly

appears to be a method for assessing year-class strength. Craig Paukert (OK State U) discussed his attempts using the same techniques. Craig is having difficulty locating small paddlefish in Oklahoma reservoirs.

Nancy Bakewell (Williston, ND Chamber of Commerce and Gold Star Caviar) gave an interesting report on the caviar operation at Williston. This appears to be an excellent method of providing a legal product from an otherwise wasted resource. Nancy got everyone's attention by providing a sample of North Dakota caviar, and boots made from paddlefish skin.

Jeff Koppelman (MO) provided a draft copy of the MICRA Paddlefish Genetics Plan. I asked for a quick turn-around for comments because I would like to present the document to the MICRA leadership in December. We continue to have problems with paddlefish eggs and fry being shipped across the basin without considering genetic compatibility. Most paddlefish managers are aware of the issue and continue to fight the problem, but like everything else in life, not everyone gets the word.

Dennis Scarnecchia (U of Idaho) gave a very interesting talk about paddlefish management in the upper Missouri River. Dennis is on top of things and there is no doubt the populations will benefit from his leadership.

Mark Dryer (FWS, Pallid Sturgeon Recovery Team Leader) gave a report on the recent Recovery Team Meeting in McClusky, North Dakota. Mark reported that portions of the Recovery Plan are being re-written because so much has happened since 1993 that sections are not outdated.

Jim Milligan (FWS) reports that the MICRA Pallid Sturgeon Study is still being slowed because of high releases from Gavins Point Dam. A couple of states are working and more are expected to begin work this fall if water levels allow. We are in a wet cycle and field work is difficult.

I passed out copies of Missouri's Stocking Plan for Pallid Sturgeon for review. This document has been approved by FWS, but I would like committee approval. This document will guide our agency in recovering these endangered sturgeons.

Larry Hesse (Great Plains River Research & Consultants, NE) reports that he will have a final copy of the MICRA Paddlefish & Sturgeon Survey completed by the end of the year. Larry has been paid but hasn't had time to finish the document.

Rosemarie Gnam (FWS, Office of Scientific Authority) really opened eyes when she told us about the changes in CITES, beginning April 1, 1998. She did not paint a very rosy picture about the future of caviar operations in the U.S. After she explained the probable ramifications of the new regulations, one didn't have to be a brain surgeon to get the message. I think the storm cloud is coming over the hill and we'd better be ready. This is certainly an opportunity for us to be proactive for a change.

Steve Fain (FWS, National Forensics Laboratory) provided information about genetics tests that can be used to separate paddlefish and sturgeon eggs from those in caviar shipments being imported into the U.S. We encourage him to continue work on developing methods for separating pallids from shovelnose (I think you could get rich with an answer for that one).

Dennis Riecke (MS) wanted to generate discussion about standardizing paddlefish regulations between states, particularly their neighbors - Louisiana and Arkansas. These are important issues and need to be addressed.

As I mentioned early in this memo, this meeting was one of the best I have ever attended.

I thought attendance was excellent; I appreciated the excellent dialog during discussions; and you folks who could not attend missed one heck of a meeting. Thanks again to all of you who participated.

Attendance List

Jerry Rasmussen, FWS, MICRA Coordinator	Paul Chang, FWS
Kim Graham, MO	Rosemarie Gnam, FWS
Tom Mosher, KS	Craig Gurgens, UM-St Louis
Jim Milligan, FWS	Craig Paukert, OK State U
Robb Todd, TN	Brent Bristow, FWS
Mark Dryer, FWS	Nancy Bakewell, Gold Star Caviar
Dennis Scarnecchia, U of Idaho	Aaron DeLonay, USGS
Fred Ryckman, ND	Bob Clevenstine, FWS
Tom Gengerke, IA	Brian Wagner, AR
Clifton Stone, SD	Steve Fain, FWS
Tom Stefanavage, IN	Nate Brennan, Tenn Tech
Scott Hale, OH	Jo Grady, FWS
Dave Herzog, MO	Ronnie Pitman, TX
Sharon Whitmore, FWS	Doug Henley, KY
Gerald Mestl, NE	Dennis Riecke, MS
Greg Conover, FWS	Bobby Reed, LA
Mike Petersen, MO	Mike Helland, MO
Butch Atwood, IL	Gerry Bade, FWS
Bob Williamson, IL	Dan Burleson, FWS
