



Conference Call Minutes

Aquatic Settlement Work Group

To: Aquatic SWG Parties

Date: September 13, 2023

From: John Ferguson, Chair, Anchor QEA, LLC

Re: Final Minutes of the August 9, 2023, Aquatic SWG Conference Call

The Aquatic Settlement Work Group (SWG) met by conference call on Wednesday, August 9, 2023, from 10:00 a.m. to 10:45 a.m. Attendees are listed in Attachment A of these conference call minutes.

Summary of Action Items

1. Douglas PUD will develop a draft work plan for addressing Section 4.4 of the White Sturgeon Management Plan (WSMP), "Evaluation and Implementation of Adult Passage Measures (Objective 5)," including actions and a timeline for completion, for Aquatic SWG review and consideration (Item II-C).
2. The Aquatic SWG meeting on September 13, 2023, will be held by conference call (Item III-A).

Summary of Decisions

1. There were no decision items approved during today's conference call.

Agreements

1. There were no agreements discussed during today's conference call.

Review Items

1. There are no items that are currently available for review.

Documents Finalized

1. There are no documents that have been recently finalized.

I. Welcome

A. Review Agenda (John Ferguson)

John Ferguson welcomed the Aquatic SWG members (Attachment A) and reviewed the agenda. Ferguson asked for any additions or changes to the agenda. No additions or changes were requested.

B. Meeting Minutes Approval (John Ferguson)

The revised draft July 12, 2023, conference call minutes were reviewed. Kristi Geris said that all edits received from Aquatic SWG members were minor clarifying edits and were incorporated into the revised minutes. Geris noted that Ralph Lampman provided Yakama Nation approval of the revised minutes via email on August 8, 2023. The Aquatic SWG members present approved the July 12, 2023, conference call minutes, as revised.

C. Review of Action Items (John Ferguson)

Action items from the Aquatic SWG conference call on July 12, 2023, are as follows (*Note: The following italicized item numbers correspond to agenda items from the July 12, 2023, meeting*):

1. *Douglas PUD will provide weekly updates throughout the 2023 adult Pacific Lamprey translocation effort (Item II-B).*

Douglas PUD has been providing weekly updates since July 14, 2023.

II. Summary of Discussions

A. Adult Pacific Lamprey Translocation Update (Mariah Mayfield)

Mariah Mayfield said that Douglas PUD has completed the 4-week period of transporting adult Pacific Lamprey from Priest Rapids Dam to Wells Dam for tagging and release into the Wells Reservoir. This effort resulted in 605 individuals tagged and released into the Wells Reservoir. Tomorrow will be the fifth week of releases, or first week of collecting fish from Grant PUD at Kirby Billingsley Hydro Park. A total of 96 individuals were collected yesterday, so Douglas PUD anticipates another 200-fish release tomorrow. There was one mortality during transit last week, but other than this, fish have been handling transport and tagging very well.

RD Nelle asked whether the plan is to continue translocating fish above Wells Dam for the next 4 weeks (including this week). Mayfield said yes, unless release numbers reach 1,000 individuals, whichever occurs first. Including expected totals from tomorrow, numbers translocated to date this year will likely reach 800 individuals, but there is no telling what the run may do.

B. Brood Year 2023 Wells White Sturgeon Rearing Update (Chas Kyger)

A brood year (BY) 2023 White Sturgeon Rearing Update (Attachment B) was distributed to the Aquatic SWG by Kristi Geris on August 8, 2023. Chas Kyger said that there are more than 5,500 BY 2023 White Sturgeon on station at Wells Fish Hatchery. Fish are already averaging approximately 3 grams each and are growing quickly. There is an every-other-day grading operation to keep fish separated by size and to keep fish healthy. Fish have not yet been split by program and are doing well for this stage. Hopefully, there will be no issues meeting targets for both the Chelan PUD and Douglas PUD programs.

C. Section 4.4: White Sturgeon Adult Passage (Andrew Gingerich)

Andrew Gingerich shared Section 4.4 of the WSMP on WebEx. He recalled that he introduced this topic last February 2023, while reviewing the 2023 Aquatic Settlement Agreement Action Plan. He has also reached out to Aquatic SWG members over the past 4 weeks in preparation for these initial discussions, which must take place in Year 11 of the Federal Energy Regulatory Committee license. In Douglas PUD's view, having something in the next several months culminate with a statement of agreement (SOA) or work plan, or something to codify these efforts, seems like a reasonable outcome—something that shows this effort and path forward for the next several years.

Gingerich read the requirement, as stated in Section 4.4 of the WSMP, "Evaluation and Implementation of Adult Passage Measures (Objective 5)":

In Year Eleven of the new license and every 10 years thereafter for the duration of the new license unless otherwise determined by the Aquatic SWG, the Aquatic SWG shall evaluate the biological merit to providing upstream passage for adult white sturgeon. The assessment of biological merit shall be determined by: (i) evaluating information gathered from monitoring and evaluation activities and determining whether there is significant biological benefit and need for upstream passage; (ii) the availability of reasonable and appropriate means to provide upstream passage; and (iii) consensus from all other operators of the mid-Columbia projects to implement adult upstream passage measures¹. If all three criteria above are met, Douglas, in consultation with the Aquatic SWG shall develop adult passage measures that are consistent with measures being implemented by other mid-Columbia project operators.

Gingerich said that he thinks Criterion "i" is the least data deficient, Criterion "ii" has more information but may still be light, and Criterion "iii" may be the toughest uphill climb. When the WSMP was written and the Aquatic Settlement Agreement was signed, the intent was not to have passage only at Wells Dam, but rather to have connectivity with the Hanford Reach population and provide genetic

¹ The intent is to provide connectivity to the Hanford Reach White Sturgeon population.

connectivity with a stronger population (that being the Hanford Reach population) should it be determined that passage was necessary. Gingerich asked Aquatic SWG members for comments or questions about the requirement or thoughts on a path forward.

Laura Heironimus said that she spoke with Douglas PUD on this topic and shared ideas on how to research these questions in a reasonable way. She suggested evaluating the existing data, such as reviewing passive integrated transponder (PIT) detections and conducting a literature review. For Criterion i, she thinks this is well-documented in the literature for sturgeon. For Criterion ii, she suggested reviewing the existing data to identify what is already known about fish passage. She thinks that addressing these criteria can be captured in an SOA for the Aquatic SWG to work towards. The challenging piece for these is defining what upstream passage in the mainstem Columbia River mean. She thinks that it would be helpful to include this in the SOA. She thinks Criterion iii will be challenging, but addressing Criteria i and ii are a good starting point. For process, it seems having this discussion about what can be done now and what will be addressed in the next couple of years captured in an SOA is a reasonable approach for Douglas PUD.

Gingerich agreed with these suggestions and approach. Heironimus said that this is an important objective, but it comes with challenges. She thinks that it makes sense to take the time to be thorough and thoughtful about how to address the objective.

John Ferguson asked whether this SOA should focus on what to accomplish this year or whether it lays out a multiyear plan. Also, what does biological merit mean? The meaning might be different for different people, which might warrant a discussion on how to define it.

Heironimus said that conducting a literature review and a review of existing data can be outlined in the SOA. She suggested taking time on these items. The review would address what is known about White Sturgeon passage in this system but also look at sturgeon outside this system; evaluate existing data that Douglas PUD has collected but also look at data collected by other PUDs; evaluate passage, PIT recovery, and acoustic data; and evaluate what data are in-hand and what is known about how sturgeon use these structures and their ability to pass Wells Dam. Regarding biological benefit, she views this as not the economic and social benefit but as just the biological benefit. This means the genetic component, connecting populations, spawning recruitment, and feeding. What benefits does this species need to be able to pass upstream, and what is their need to pass upstream? She thinks these questions can be addressed with the literature review, which can then identify data gaps.

Ferguson said that this makes sense. The literature review and review of data are much more than what can be accomplished this year, so the SOA would layout a multiyear process.

Ferguson recalled that Washington State Department of Fish and Wildlife is working on a statewide WSMP, and he asked whether components to the statewide plan might help address the Section 4.4 objective. Heironimus said that this plan is still in the first phase of development, including collecting data on White Sturgeon status across all regions. The data collection due date is November 30, 2023, and by spring 2024, she hopes to have a draft document and data gaps identified. She noted that this plan is not specific to the Mid-Columbia River, but there is information pertaining to the Mid-Columbia River. It also may be a while before she has anything final to share.

Gingerich suggested that Douglas PUD develop a draft work plan, based on what was discussed today, for Aquatic SWG review in the next month or two. Ferguson, Patrick Verhey, and RD Nelle agreed that this is a good approach. Douglas PUD will develop a draft work plan for addressing Section 4.4 of the WSMP, "Evaluation and Implementation of Adult Passage Measures (Objective 5)," including actions and a timeline for completion, for Aquatic SWG review and consideration.

Gingerich noted that he expects the need to do a literature review and provide some information within the Aquatic SWG to have very little debate, but the biological merit piece or definition that Ferguson asked about would perhaps be more of a lengthy conversation. He understands the point and would not debate that before hydroelectric development, White Sturgeon had the ability to move freely throughout the Columbia River basin. However, the biological merit and need today may be different than it was when the WSMP was written. For example, when the WSMP was agreed to by the signatories, there were no tools like larvae repatriation, and as such, things like genetic diversity needs may be being met through the program. This hypothesis has not been tested, but it could be, showing that allelic diversity of White Sturgeon now in the Wells Project is strong and perhaps makes up most of the diversity found in Lake Roosevelt, for example. He also understands that passage could be beneficial not simply for reproductive reasons but for rearing and foraging reasons too. However, while biological merit alone would suggest passage is good, it is difficult to separate the biology alone from other economic and cultural pieces, like interests to have harvest fisheries from state and Tribal agencies. The program, for example, is not exclusively a conservation program. As such, this makes the biological merit and need component, perhaps, less clear and is where some debate could occur. Heironimus agreed that these are good points.

Ferguson noted that Gingerich suggested that it would up to 60 days before a draft SOA is ready, and he asked if this may be too late, considering that the Aquatic SWG may need some time to discuss the SOA. Gingerich said that he will do what he can to get the SOA out early.

III. Administration

A. Upcoming Meetings (John Ferguson)

John Ferguson reminded the Aquatic SWG that on Monday, August 21, 2023, Aquatic SWG representatives are invited to join a virtual meeting, hosted by the Priest Rapids Fish Forum, to discuss models and assumptions of models used to estimate juvenile survival and behavior. This will also include a discussion about juvenile studies to be conducted in the lower Columbia River. Kristi Geris said that Tracy Hillman has not yet distributed the WebEx meeting or call-in information.

The Aquatic SWG meeting on September 13, 2023, will be held by conference call.

Other upcoming meetings include October 11 and November 8, 2023 (conference call).

List of Attachments

Attachment A List of Attendees

Attachment B BY 2023 White Sturgeon Rearing Update

Attachment A – Attendees

Name	Role	Organization
John Ferguson	Aquatic SWG Chairman	Anchor QEA, LLC
Kristi Geris	Administration/Technical Support	Anchor QEA, LLC
Andrew Gingerich	Aquatic SWG Technical Representative	Douglas PUD
Chas Kyger	Aquatic SWG Technical Alternate	Douglas PUD
Mariah Mayfield	Aquatic SWG Technical Support	Douglas PUD
RD Nelle	Aquatic SWG Technical Representative	U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Breean Zimmerman	Aquatic SWG Technical Representative	Washington State Department of Ecology
Patrick Verhey	Aquatic SWG Technical Representative	Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife
Laura Heironimus	Aquatic SWG Technical Alternate	Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife