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High flows from Flaming Gorge may help fish

By [Joe Bauman](#)

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Flaming Gorge Dam will be releasing high flows of water into the Green River in the next few weeks, in an experiment that may help endangered fish species.

The federal government's Upper Colorado River Endangered Fish Recovery Program has been working to save native fish in the region, as explained in the program's Web site, coloradoriverrecovery.fws.gov.

Fish like the Colorado pike-minnow, razorback sucker, humpback chub and bonytail chub are under heavy stress because of the construction of dams, diversions and barriers, the project says. Also contributing to their decline are the introduction of non-native competitors, plus fishing, parasites and pollutants, it adds.

According to the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, a series of short-term experimental high flows will check whether increased water roaring into the Green River will help. The endangered species program asked for a series of differing flows: 14,000 cubic feet per second, 16,000 cfs and 18,000 cfs, as measured at Jensen, Uintah County.

"In order to reach this level, Reclamation will likely have to release water at the full capacity of the Flaming Gorge power plant and river outlet works," says a press release sent from the bureau's Salt Lake City office. "Releases from the dam could reach approximately 8,500 cfs."

Combined with flows from the Yampa River, the releases should achieve requested levels, the bureau adds. The bureau is waiting for the Yampa's peak spring runoff levels, which could come in the next week or two, to start the experiments. Normally the Yampa peaks around May 23.

Recreational uses of the river should not be impacted, and the boat launch facilities below the dam at Little Hole and Indian Crossing will remain open, adds the release.

Scientists are hoping the high flows will scour out some of the sediment below Flaming Gorge Dam. The material flowed into the river because of erosion after the Mustang Fire, several years ago, according to the bureau.

Fish larvae and beads that simulate larvae will be released into the Green River at specific flow levels. They will be checked downstream.

"They want to see what the distribution will be" of fish larvae during high water, said Barry Wirth, spokesman for the bureau.

Mark Vinson, research assistant professor in the Aquatic, Watershed and Earth Resources Department at Utah State University, Logan, said it's possible but not certain the releases

could affect the New Zealand mud snail, an invasive species that has been damaging the fishery.

The tiny, overabundant mud snails are filling up an ecological niche that otherwise would be occupied by creatures that are good food sources for fish. The snail is hard to digest, offering a poor substitute.

Meanwhile, scientists hope the higher flows improve chances both for endangered species and trout. Faster, more abundant water should flood some spots to increase fish habitat.

"It tends to roll rocks in the upper habitat," cleaning out fine sediments that damage habitat, Vinson said.

"It floods backwaters, and that's what the endangered fish need," he added in a telephone interview. "If you don't flood those flood plains, then those fish have nowhere to live."

Periodically following the high releases, scientists including Vinson and his students will check stretches below the dam for fish, snails and insects. With luck, they may find that the flows helped the survival of some unique native species.

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