

Montana dam, passage to save fish lacks funding

3 May 2017, by Matt Volz



In this Oct. 24, 2003 file photo a pallid sturgeon is held by David Hendrix, manager of the Neosho National Fish Hatchery, at Franklin Island, Mo. A federal agency targeted by President Donald Trump for budget cuts next year has only about half the money needed to build a new Yellowstone River dam and bypass channel meant to save an endangered fish, but it plans to begin construction, anyway. (AP Photo/L.G. Patterson, File)

A federal agency targeted by President Donald Trump for budget cuts next year has only about half the money needed to build a new Yellowstone River dam and a bypass channel meant to save an endangered fish, but it plans to begin construction anyway.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers inked a \$36 million contract in 2015 with Ames Construction of Burnsville, Minnesota, to build the concrete dam and a [channel](#) in Montana for about 125 wild pallid sturgeon to swim to their spawning grounds that are now blocked by an existing rock dam.

The dinosaur-like pallid sturgeon can grow up to 6 feet (1.83 meters) long.

The Corps has secured only \$19 million for the project under what's known as a continuing

contract clause, according to project manager Tiffany Vanosdall. The Corps uses the clauses for large civil engineering projects like the dam, with the expectation that Congress will fund the balance in subsequent years to complete the work.

Trump has targeted the Corps for a \$1 billion spending reduction in his 2018 budget plan, though the plan does not specify which projects would be cut. No money for the Yellowstone River project was allocated in a spending bill released by Congress on Monday.

Despite uncertainty of future funding, Vanosdall said the funding request has been made to Congress and "we expect seamless appropriations."



In this Feb. 26, 2015, file photo, the Yellowstone River flows over the Intake Diversion Dam, a rock structure that captures water for agriculture, northeast of Glendive, Mont., near the North Dakota border. A federal agency targeted by President Donald Trump for budget cuts next year has only about half the money needed to build a new Yellowstone River dam and bypass channel meant to save an endangered fish, but it plans to begin construction, anyway. (AP Photo/Matthew Brown, File)

Defenders of Wildlife, an advocacy organization, opposes the dam. It said Tuesday that the pallid sturgeon's chances for survival could be even worse if the dam is built and then the money runs out before the [fish](#) passage is constructed.

"Then we're stuck without a fish passage for pallid sturgeon to swim and spawn," said the group's Rockies and Plains representative Aaron Hall.

The entire project, including planning, will cost an estimated \$59 million and last two to three years. Construction is expected to begin after July 1.

The pallid [sturgeon](#) is in jeopardy because they can't reach their spawning ground to reproduce. An existing rock weir that diverts river water to an irrigation system for about 400 eastern Montana farms blocks their passage.

Defenders of Wildlife and Natural Resources Defense Council sued the federal agencies in 2015 to remove the weir, leading the agencies to propose building a new dam and a bypass channel for the fish. A federal judge initially blocked the project then last month allowed it to proceed after the Corps completed a new environmental analysis.

The advocacy groups say the environmental analysis is insufficient and asked the judge Tuesday to block the project again. They are skeptical that the fish would use the new bypass channel, and they are seeking the removal of the original rock weir so the [pallid sturgeon](#) can swim unhindered through the Yellowstone River.

Another Corps [project](#) manager, Christopher Fassero, said the bypass should work because it will be designed to mimic a natural river channel.

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