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ENDANGERED SPECIES: Possible fish listing adds unexpected twist to major N.M. forest restoration project *(Thursday, April 18, 2013)*

April Reese, E&E reporter

ALBUQUERQUE, N.M. -- Federal agencies tackling a massive forest restoration in New Mexico's Zuni Mountains face a double-barreled problem: There are too many trees and too few fish.

The Zuni Mountains Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program -- one of two dozen such initiatives nationwide -- aims to detangle overgrown ponderosa pine forests on about 56,000 acres of Cibola National Forest using a combination of thinning and prescribed burning. Last year, the Department of Agriculture announced the project would receive \$7.6 million over 10 years.

But the dire straits of a fish that inhabits streams in that area could complicate the project. In January, the Fish and Wildlife Service proposed protection of the Zuni bluehead sucker under the Endangered Species Act. The fish survives in three small stream segments in the Zuni Mountains in New Mexico and in the Little Colorado River system and Canyon de Chelly in Arizona.

If the species is listed, the Forest Service will have to consult with FWS on how thinning could affect the fish. The next phase of the project, which will target the Rio Puerco area, is scheduled to begin in 2015, which is about the same time FWS's decision on whether to list the fish will be due.

FWS has identified stream sedimentation as one of the threats to the fish, and removing trees with machinery can increase soil erosion.

"When they initially proposed the project, I was -- not fearful, but just, 'Make sure whatever thinning you do does not increase sedimentation to these systems,'" Eliza Gilbert, a fisheries biologist with the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish, said in an interview during a public meeting here yesterday. The state has already added the fish to its own endangered species list and is trying to recover the species.

But when the project is finished, the fish should benefit, she added.

"Right now, if there was a forest fire like there was in the Gila [National Forest], or there was in the Jemez [National Forest], that species would be gone, because there are so few fish, and they're in such a small area," Gilbert said, referring to the 2011 Wallow and Las Conchas fires, respectively. "Any ash flow into those areas would cause a die-off. So to reduce the risk of catastrophic fire is very important."

Only one of the three Zuni bluehead sucker populations lives in the national forest, which is part of a patchwork of federal, private and tribal land in west-central New Mexico. Another small population is on private land, and the largest straddles Nature Conservancy and Zuni Pueblo lands. But given that the fish has disappeared from 90 percent of its historic range, every population is crucial, Gilbert said.

Data from the U.S. Geological Survey suggest flows have decreased in streams where the fish lives in the Zuni Mountains. No one knows why, Gilbert said, but possible explanations include drought, climate change, a new housing development in the

area and grazing upstream.

"We're seeing some semi-isolated pools, and then some areas that are just dry," she said.

Some research suggests forest thinning can slightly increase stream flows. A 2008 paper by Bob Parmenter, chief scientist at the Valles Caldera National Preserve in northern New Mexico, found that open, shaded areas in ponderosa pine forests on the preserve held more snow than either deep forest or unshaded open areas. Snowmelt is a key water resource, particularly in the West.

Project participants are hoping the Cibola National Forest could see similar increases in on-the-ground snow accumulation after the thinning projects are done, which could boost stream flows.

Critical habitat proposal

The sucker is one of 252 candidate species that FWS must issue listing determinations for by 2016 under a 2011 settlement agreement with environmental groups.

In addition to the listing proposal, the agency has also proposed designating 293 stream miles of critical habitat for the fish in Arizona and New Mexico and on Navajo Nation land.

The 60-day comment period on the listing proposal closed March 26 but will be reopened in June.

Under the Zuni Mountains Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program, 80 percent of the acreage to be treated will be thinned and the rest will be burned using prescribed fire.

In 2012, the project removed about 107,388 board feet of wood at a cost of about \$591 an acre for thinning and about \$235 an acre for prescribed fire, according to the Forest Guild, which is coordinating the project with the Forest Service. Most of the small-diameter wood goes to Mount Taylor Manufacturing in Milan, N.M., a mill that has been retrofitted to turn the material into wood pellets for stoves, mulch, horse bedding and other products.

So far, the Zuni Mountains restoration effort has focused on the Bluewater area of the national forest, but scientists have begun collecting data to prepare for phase two of the project in the Rio Puerco area of the forest. The National Wild Turkey Foundation is undertaking that assessment using a \$335,000 grant from the Forest Service.

The landscape-scale restoration initiative involves several partners, including the turkey federation, the Forest Guild, the New Mexico Forest and Watershed Restoration Institute and the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish.

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