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NORTHERN CALIFORNIA'S LARGEST NEWSPAPER

## Endangered fish salvaged along drying Rio Grande

By SUSAN MONTOYA BRYAN, Associated Press  
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In this June 19, 2013 photo, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service biologist Angela James holds a dead Rio Grande silvery minnow that was found in the riverbed during a salvage trip near Socorro, N.M. The federal government has spent more than \$150 million over the last decade trying to save the minnow, but the fish's numbers have dropped to the lowest level in 20 years and there are few signs of them reproducing in the wild. Biologists point to a combination of persistent drought and demands on the river. Photo: Susan Montoya Bryan

SOCORRO, N.M. (AP) — "No fish!"

The words are shouted over and over again as [U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service](#) biologists [Tristan Austring](#) and [Angela James](#) drag their net through the isolated pools of brown water that are left where the Rio Grande once flowed.

They're searching for endangered Rio Grande silvery minnows as part of an effort to salvage as many of the tiny fish as possible as the drought makes its ferocious and unprecedented march across New Mexico.

The problem is the river is going dry, thousands of farmers in the Middle Rio Grande Valley don't have enough water for their crops and what water is left is dedicated to the minnow, which is doing worse than when efforts first began over a decade ago to recover the species.

More than \$150 million has been spent on trying to keep the fish alive. Billions of gallons of water have been leased to keep the river flowing for the fish, high-tech breeding and rearing facilities have been built and tons of dirt have been moved in an effort to return the river to a more natural state. Yet, the minnow's foothold in the valley is no stronger today.

The population is at its lowest level since surveys began in 1993, and the fish have shown few signs of reproducing in the wild. And now, the drought is pushing human intervention to its limits, leaving many to ask how much longer the effort can continue and at what cost.

"The biology of the minnow is so tied to the spring runoff ... and certainly summer drying isn't helping at all," said [Thomas Archdeacon](#), a fish biologist with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. "Really unless somebody finds a way or the climate changes and we get more water in the spring, it's not looking very good for silvery minnows."

Archdeacon and his team have been salvaging minnows for the past several seasons. This year marks the first in which the Rio Grande has dried so quickly, leaving minnows and other fish dead on moist sandbars in the riverbed.

In years past, the salvage missions have netted as many as 5,000 minnows. After a few weeks of combing the pools below Isleta and San Acacia dams, the team found just 1,176 minnows and one-fifth of those were dead. More than 90 percent of those found were tagged with tiny markers, indicating that they were hatchery-raised fish that were released last fall.

Critics see the rescue missions as futile, and there are farmers in the valley who despise the fish and the lengths the government has gone to save it. Others have resigned themselves to the demands of the Endangered Species Act.

"A lot of the farmers understand that it's there, and once it's in place, there's not a lot you can do. It's law, so we have to take care of it," said [Tom Thorpe](#), a spokesman for the Middle Rio Grande Conservancy District, which supplies about 11,000 farmers with irrigation water.

This year, the Fish and Wildlife Service agreed to an emergency plan developed by water managers that allows for controlled drying of the river south of Albuquerque so water can be saved for the fish later in the season. The river began to drop in the Albuquerque area last weekend, and federal water managers said they have only half of the water needed to meet required flows for the fish.

"They're beating the bushes for every drop that they possibly can, but if you look at where we are, the reservoirs were down this year. We're starting from a difficult position," said [Benjamin Tuggle](#), director of the Fish and Wildlife Service's Southwest region.

Environmentalists say the situation on the Middle Rio Grande is an "ecological crisis." Santa Fe-based WildEarth Guardians argues in court documents that water managers have failed to live up to 2003 requirements that were aimed at keeping the fish alive. Those include building fish passages to allow minnows to swim upriver to avoid some of the drying.

The group is also pushing for the creation of a program in which farmers could lease their water to keep the river flowing through the summer.

[John Horning](#), the group's director, said the fight is not about saving the minnow, but rather the health of the river.

"If we can't have a living silvery minnow, we're not going to have a living Rio Grande. That might be hard for people to get that linkage, but it's as plain as it can be," he said. "The bottom line is we're dealing with a system that we've completely overexploited."

Tuggle said the issue is about water management, and to say the silvery minnow is not important would be incredulous. He said the fish has survived droughts before, and his agency is not in a position "to make the God call" on whether the fish-saving efforts continue.

"This is just indicative of the struggle that we're going to have to continue to face when it comes to trying to balance people demands over resources and wildlife needs for a resource," Tuggle said.

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