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Pact may help silvery minnow

By [John Fleck / Journal Staff Writer](#) on Fri, Jul 19, 2013

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A coalition of state and federal agencies and pueblos reached a tentative deal Thursday to try a new approach to helping the endangered Rio Grande silvery minnow.

After nearly two years of sometimes difficult negotiations, the agencies' representatives endorsed the creation of a "Recovery Implementation Program," creating a new governance structure for the complex inter-agency effort to balance water management with the Endangered Species Act.

"This is a huge step for us, and it's not been easy getting it done," said Estevan López, director of the New Mexico Interstate Stream Commission and one of the lead negotiators on the deal.

The program's purpose is to develop more flexible water management tools in the future to balance the needs of the river's agricultural, municipal and flood control agencies while at the same time protecting and enhancing habitat for the minnow.

It is modeled after successful collaborations on the South Platte in Colorado and Nebraska and the San Juan in northwestern New Mexico. The goal, López said, is to move beyond the current approach of merely preventing the minnow's extinction and toward helping the fish's population recover to levels that might allow it to be removed from the federal endangered species list.

Among the parties endorsing the deal Thursday were the Interstate Stream Commission, the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Army Corps of Engineers, the Middle Rio Grande Conservancy District, the Albuquerque Bernalillo County Water Utility Authority, Isleta Pueblo and Santa Ana Pueblo.

The action comes as the fish itself is in dire straits. Population surveys done this year show no baby fish, indicating that the minnow did not spawn in the river as a result of the low drought flows, according to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Most of the minnows found in the river this year have come from hatcheries, rather than having been bred in the wild, according to the service.

Jen Pelz of WildEarth Guardians, an environmental group that recently threatened to sue federal water managers over their handling of the minnow issue, expressed disappointment, calling the nascent Recovery Implementation Program "a recipe for disaster" because the activities being contemplated are not broad enough to protect the fish.

Pelz said the effort does not span a large enough stretch of the Rio Grande, leaving water managers to the north in Colorado, whose actions affect the minnow, off the hook in terms of responsibility for helping prevent harm to the fish.