

Cooperation ensures spinedace success

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The petition by the Center for Biological Diversity to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to list Virgin spinedace as threatened or endangered is incorrect in its representation of current fish populations and the results of the Virgin Spinedace Conservation Agreement and Strategy (VSCAS). The petition suggests that listing is warranted because actions identified in the VSCAS have not reversed population declines or enhanced populations to meet a goal of spinedace presence in 80 percent of historic habitat.

Until 2002, when the Virgin River Resource Management and Recovery Program began, there was limited funding for implementation of the VSCAS outside of its signatory partners' existing budgets. The program brought state, local and federal funding for vigorous efforts to achieve two goals: 1) to enhance, conserve, recover and protect native species in the Virgin River basin and 2) to enhance the ability to provide water to meet human needs.

Some of the projects and results specific to spinedace include:

- » Santa Clara Pipeline — constructed in 2004 to provide irrigation water and a perennial water source (3 cfs) for the Santa Clara River. This project ensured water would be present for spinedace year round, not just when reservoirs were full, resulting in 17.5 miles of occupied habitat.

- » Removal of Schroeder Reservoir on Beaver Dam Wash in 2005 — spinedace were stocked into historic habitat. Following non-native fish reduction, a reproducing population of spinedace was present, garnering 7.3 miles of historic habitat. This effort reduced non-native fish numbers, increased habitat for the spinedace, and expanded populations.

- » La Verkin Creek — water right purchases and fish passage structures continue to provide fish habitat and aid reproducing spinedace populations.

When the VSCAS began, spinedace were estimated to have historically occupied 143.7 miles of streams in southwestern Utah. Occupied habitat represented 91.6 miles (63.7 percent) in 1995. Currently, spinedace are present in 127.6 miles (88.7 percent) of historically occupied habitat plus in an additional 6.7 miles of stream not identified in the VSCAS. The petitioners have suggested that the lack of an Endangered Species Act listing of spinedace in 1995 has resulted in further loss of historic range. In fact, monitoring by Utah Division of Wildlife Resources indicates an increase of 25 percent in occupied historic habitat since 1995.

This existing information confirms that the VSCAS and the Virgin River Program is an unrivaled example of cooperation to protect Virgin spinedace without the burden of a federal listing. The ability of partnerships to significantly benefit declining species is evident. We do not suggest that efforts to protect and enhance spinedace populations are complete. We coexist in this area with these species. Floods and droughts affect all of us, but by working cooperatively, we can benefit natives, species and area communities.

Steve Meismer is the local coordinator for the Virgin River Program, a biologist with a master's of science degree in fishery biology with more than 15 years of experience and a resident of Washington County since 2001.