

System Configuration Team (SCT)

Meeting Notes
March 15, 2001

Greetings and Introductions.

The March 15 meeting of the System Configuration Team was held at NMFS' Portland offices. The meeting was chaired by Bill Hevlin of NMFS and facilitated by Donna Silverberg. The agenda and a list of attendees for the March 15 meeting are attached as Enclosures A and B.

The following is a distillation (not a verbatim transcript) of items discussed at the meeting, together with actions taken on those items. Please note that some enclosures referenced may be too lengthy to routinely include with the meeting notes; copies of all enclosures referred to in the minutes are available upon request from Kathy Ceballos of NMFS at 503/230-5420.

1. Review of January and February SCT Notes.

Hevlin distributed copies of the February meeting minutes; no comments were provided on the January minutes, so they were designated as final at this time.

2. Lower Monumental Stilling Basin Apron Erosion.

Mike Mason said that, as most of the SCT is aware, there is a worsening erosion problem at the Lower Monumental Dam stilling basin. The Corps is now estimating that just to repair the existing damage will cost \$10 million, he said, every year the repairs aren't made, that cost will go up.

There probably won't be any spill at Lower Monumental this year, said Mason, but if we don't address the problem, it could cause serious trouble for next year's spill program. A crew will be heading out to do a survey next week, to assess whether a different spill pattern, curtailed spill or no spill at all would be the most appropriate option for Lower Monumental in 2002.

Mason said the Corps does not consider this situation to be an emergency, because there is no threat to the project's structural integrity at this time. Some of the funding options available include the normal process, called Corps major rehab. Under this process, we would have to produce a report, then go through the Corps and Congress to obtain the necessary funds,

Mason explained. It would obviously be a fairly lengthy process; it would probably be at least 2006 before we could fix the problem if that is the route we choose, Mason said.

We could also pursue a Congressional add-on, he continued; under a best-case scenario, we would be to get the funds to start work in FY'03. That would allow us to do Phase I, fill the holes, by FY'04, Mason explained.

The other option the Corps is considering is CRFM funding, Mason said; it could be argued that the effects of the BiOp spill program are aggravating this condition. There may also be some fish injury occurring as a result of this problem, Mason added. We discussed that possibility with Division Headquarters last Friday, he said, at this point, they're not quite ready to make that quantum leap and seek CRFM funding.

If we can convince Division HQ to take that leap, said Mason, it may be possible to get this problem fixed by FY'02, if we take \$5 million from the FY'01 CRFM budget and \$5 million from the FY'02 CRFM budget. We will be modeling this situation at WES next week, he said; that exercise could provide some additional guidance. Have you considered doing this as an add-on to the deflector improvement program? Tom Lorz asked. We've talked about that, but if we go that route, we likely couldn't get the work done before FY'03, Mason replied. It's an option worth considering, however, he added.

The question we have to answer, with respect to using CRFM funds for these repairs, is whether they have to do with improving fish passage, Hevlin said. Frankly, you could argue either way; it is both a fish passage problem and an O&M problem. It will get fixed eventually under O&M, said John Kranda – the question is, when. Obviously, the sooner the better, he said – the longer we wait, the more expensive it will be. At the current rate of erosion, Mason said the Corps has estimated that, if the Corps waits until 2006 to fix the problem, the repairs alone could cost \$18 million.

If this isn't a dam safety issue, why would this situation curtail the BiOp spill program in 2002? Rod Woodin asked. It could get us closer to a dam safety concern, Mason replied; in addition, there is concern about the exponentially-increasing costs for these repairs. Still, said Steve Pettit, what if we get 130% snowpack next year? That kind of uncontrolled spill could really exacerbate this problem. Good point, replied Mason, but there is also concern about the effects of the BiOp spill program, which continues 24 hours a day for three months, on that structure.

The group discussed what the Corps hopes to learn from the WES modeling next week. Hevlin then noted that the BiOp instructs the Corps and BPA to initiate timely corrective measures to ensure that BiOp spill is not curtailed or limited due to the concern of further erosion. We are aware that the 2001 spill program has likely been canceled due to low flow conditions, so Mother Nature has bailed you out this year, he said. However, if this situation persists in 2002 and the spill program is canceled at Lower Monumental, that's going to be a poor grade on the action agencies' 3-year evaluation, Hevlin said.

That would make it a fish passage problem, said Kranda, which, to me, means this project ought to be put into the mix with other CRFM projects to see where it falls out in terms of regional priority. Hevlin replied that, when the BiOp was written, it didn't envision a specific source of funds – it was hoped that BPA might be able to step up in certain cases. If the Corps feels CRFM is the appropriate route to go, Hevlin said, by all means bring in a proposal.

In response to a question from Hevlin, Mason said there is no way these repairs can be done in time for the 2002 passage season. We have missed the critical path, because we have to wait on the modeling and make some critical decisions, he said; we have also missed the permitting deadlines necessary to make the in-water work window this July. That's a shame, said Hevlin – we do have an opportunity this year, when it is extremely unlikely that any Lower Monumental spill will occur from now until at least December. Mason replied that the Corps would likely not start work on this project until July, after the spill season is over.

Kim Fodrea said she will check again on the possibility of BPA funds for this project; it has been discussed before, she said, and the answer was an absolute no. Frankly, she said, this is a very difficult year to be asking for any additional funding from BPA, but I will check again. We will plan on discussing this topic again at the April SCT meeting, said Silverberg.

3. Installation Plan for Adult PIT-Tag Detection.

Fodrea distributed a memo updating the SCT on the schedule for adult PIT-tag detection at all eight mainstem federal projects; this document is Enclosure C. There is some desire on the part of the Adult Pit Tag Oversight Committee (APTOC) to hear whether the SCT supports this installation schedule, Fodrea said, noting that this schedule does include the installation of adult PIT-tag detection at McNary in time for the 2002 migration season. They would also like to know whether the SCT considers funding for this work to be a high priority for the next several fiscal years, she added. Fodrea spent a few minutes going through this schedule; please refer to Enclosure C for details of her presentation.

The group discussed some of the technical caveats attached to this schedule, as well as the details of the system to be installed. Fodrea observed that this is a very aggressive schedule, although there are some check-points at which we can back out if need be. Ultimately, she reiterated the question of whether or not the SCT supports this schedule. Hevlin observed that the SCT has consistently assigned a high priority to the installation of adult PIT-tag detectors; Kranda noted, however, that the funding landscape has changed somewhat with the finalization of the 2000 FCRPS BiOp. There are now 198 BiOp projects that have to be included in our prioritization discussions, Kranda said, so it's possible that the adult PIT work will receive a lower priority in future CRFM budgets.

So everyone is OK with moving forward on this very aggressive schedule, and taking the risk on Bonneville and McNary this year? Fodrea asked. Woodin and Christine Mallette both expressed discomfort with the aggressiveness of this proposed schedule; this effort needs to go

forward, said Woodin, but methodically – we need to be sure we have a good, reliable system that functions the way we hope it will. The schedule does include various check-in points, Fodrea reiterated, at which progress and performance will be assessed. She then spent a few minutes going through these “off-ramps.”

Do we have agreement that we should proceed regardless of whether or not the McNary transportation study goes forward this year? Fodrea asked. Mallette said this list of “off-ramps” satisfies her concern; Woodin said the list of checkpoints makes him more comfortable, but that he is still concerned about Item D on Page 1 of Enclosure C. He suggested that this issue be worked through FFDRWG. We can make best efforts to place this on a FFDRWG agenda, Fodrea replied, but I would hate for this issue to be the one that causes this entire schedule fall apart.

Ultimately, it was agreed that the Corps will send out an email detailing the fall chinook data to the SCT as soon as that information is available. Woodin asked that the results from the Mid-June checkpoint, as well as the results from the mathematical model, be brought to SCT for review at its June meeting. Fodrea agreed that this would be possible. With those caveats, said Silverberg, is the SCT comfortable with supporting this schedule? Mallette and Woodin said they are now comfortable; no other SCT objections were raised. We’ll have another check-in in September, before the contracts are let, Hevlin observed.

4. Progress Update on the Five-Year Implementation Plan.

Kranda reported that as of today, the action agencies are still on-track to have a draft implementation plan to NMFS by the end of this month. BPA has taken the lead on drafting the plan, he said; they are working with the outline that was developed a few months ago. We in the Corps are working to finish drafting the workplans that will be included in the overall implementation plan; we will furnish copies of those workplans to the SCT at the group’s April meeting, Kranda said. Again, we are on schedule to have a draft to NMFS by the end of this month, Kranda said; it may be a very rough draft, but it will be a draft.

What about the one-year implementation plan? Tom Lorz asked. I’m not sure how that’s going to play out, Kranda replied – it’s basically business as usual to get the FY’02 workplans and spreadsheet put together for at least the CRFM portion of this exercise. They’re still struggling with how to put all of the parts of the implementation plan together, Kranda said; we’ll just have to see whether the draft is what NMFS is looking for once it has been submitted.

Hevlin said he is somewhat concerned about the timing of the delivery of the five-year implementation plan relative to the SCT’s FY’02 CRFM prioritization process. Again, I’m not sure how the two processes are going to mesh, Kranda replied – there are a lot of implications, of the decisions we make this year, for the decisions we will need to make in the out-years. Sounds like we need to punt this to next meeting, said Hevlin. In the meantime, he added, Bruce Suzumoto and I have discussed the possibility of holding a two-day retreat to go through the

SCT prioritization process this year. Which month that would occur is still up for discussion, he said, but I would at least like people to start thinking about that possibility.

5. Update on the Development of the B1 Decision Document.

Kranda said that, as most SCT participants are aware, the decision has been made to defer contracts on the Bonneville I JBS improvements. Corps management concurred with that decision, he said, and so the advertisement of those contracts has now been deferred. The team still has plenty to do, in working through the risk analysis discussed at the last meeting, Kranda said; there is also a need to get more ideas about partial surface collection, the “Rainey alternative” and other options. How does this affect the Environmental Assessment you just issued? Woodin asked. I assume it will be shelved, but I will check on that and send out an email to everyone here, Kranda replied.

With respect to the ISRP briefing at Bonneville, said Kranda, we have thrown the ISRP a curve. The briefing went well; the ISRP learned a lot about what the committee is working on; they toured the project and generally found it very informative. However, the ISRP seemed a bit confused because while they had received a lot of the same information the team had, they didn’t have the benefit of understanding what much of that information meant. They were somewhat confused, in other words, about how they could be helpful, Kranda said. Bruce Suzumoto and I need to have some additional discussion about what the actual assignment to the ISRP will be, said Kranda, given the fact that we will not have a report for them to review because we have deferred the decision about what the recommended alternative will be.

Suzumoto agreed that it was a bit of a surprise not to have a Bonneville decision document for the ISRP to review; the good part, however, is that it may be possible for them to play an alternative role – to review the decision process itself or some of the studies that have been done. We do still have some commitments to Congress, so there probably will be something put out by the ISRP, Suzumoto said, adding that Chuck Coutant is drafting a memo outlining the specific information the ISRP will be needing from the Corps. He noted that the ISRP will also be reviewing the Bonneville portions of the one- and five-year implementation plans once they are available.

Does the ISRP need another presentation from the Bonneville decision committee? Hevlin asked. It might be helpful to schedule a joint ISRP/Bonneville decision committee meeting, to clarify what, exactly, the ISRP will be doing in connection with this assignment, Suzumoto replied.

Kranda spent a few minutes discussing the current CRFM budgetary situation and the restoration of savings and slippage to the FY’01 budget; he noted that, despite the decision to defer decision on B1 JBS improvements, the Corps is actively pursuing the restoration of the full amount withheld for savings and slippage this year. In response to a request from Hevlin, Kranda said he will bring an updated FY’01 accounting to the April SCT meeting.

6. Drought Conditions System Operations Update.

Jim Ruff reported that, as all of the SCT participants are certainly aware by now, this is a very poor water year; in fact, it now appears to be the second-lowest in the 60-year record. The current forecast is for a runoff volume of 58 MAF January-July at The Dalles. That, coupled, with the dysfunctional power market BPA is seeing, with prices ten times higher than normal, mean BPA is unlikely to be able to purchase power to the extent they have done in recent years to help provide BiOp operations, Ruff said.

With that in mind, the TMT and IT have been meeting to discuss potential contingency operations for this spring and summer, Ruff said. We have been attempting to develop a matrix of operational priorities for this year, involving all of the IT and TMT's participating entities. Ruff distributed a draft of the TMT/IT decision matrix, emphasizing that this is a draft document and still very much a work in progress. This matrix is Enclosure D.

The main purpose of this matrix is to see where we are, in terms of areas of agreement and disagreement on the recommended operating priorities for all of the TMT and IT participants, Ruff explained; he spent a few minutes going through the contents of the matrix. Ruff noted that, in particular, there will likely be changes to the Montana/Idaho proposal, given the reductions in the water supply forecast since the Montana/Idaho plan was submitted several weeks ago.

The intent of yesterday's TMT/IT meeting was to try to finish this matrix, or at least flesh it out, and to see whether we could agree on a common set of operating priorities given water conditions this year, Ruff said. We were unable to get there, he said, but we did give it a shot. It is possible that the Executives will develop a list of operating priorities at tomorrow's meeting, Ruff said, and hand it back to the IT for discussion at that group's April meeting – we'll just have to see how far the Federal Executives and the state and tribal sovereigns can get, in providing guidance for the development of the 2001 Water Management Plan and policy guidance to the IT.

The bottom line is that we're less than a month from the start of the 2001 migration, said Ruff; there are some decisions that are going to have to be made, and if we can't achieve regional consensus on what our operational priorities should be, then, in all likelihood, the Federal Executives will make those decisions.

What's the spill situation likely to be this spring and summer? Hevlin asked. BPA has done some financial studies, Ruff replied; the bottom line, from those studies, is that, given the flow year, power prices and BPA's financial situation is that it will not be possible to provide BiOp spill levels this year without ruining BPA financially. Bonneville has proposed a reduced spill program, Alternative 3e, under which BPA would likely be in a negative cash reserve situation by September. BPA also ran a "meet load" study which, with a runoff volume of 59 MAF, will meet BPA's financial criteria, keeps BPA solvent and retains at least some water in the storage reservoirs for next year.

Ruff said there will be a full transportation program at the Snake River projects this summer, which means no spill at the Snake River collector projects. The federal parties are recommending a reduced spill program at the Columbia River projects, and have developed a draft prioritized list of the projects at which spill would occur -- Bonneville, then The Dalles, John Day and Ice Harbor, in that order.

In response to a question from Suzumoto, Ruff said the Federal Principals document recommends refill to greatly-reduced elevations by June 30 – 20 feet from full at Libby and Hungry Horse, five feet from full at Grand Coulee and as full as possible at Dworshak. Those are the targets, he said; if precipitation increases, we may have some additional water to use for fish over and above those minimal refill targets. Unless the precipitation forecast improves considerably, however, it is unlikely that we will be able to achieve even these minimal refill targets this year, Ruff said. But there would still be some spill at the Lower Columbia projects? Suzumoto asked. That's still unclear, Ruff replied – we're still talking about where spill might occur, as well as what volume and duration may be possible.

Basically, the approach we're taking is, expect the worst, but develop operational priorities in case we get more water than expected, said Ruff; it's safe to say that none of our species of concern are going to fare well this year. My concern is that you may be trading off next year for this year, said Suzumoto. NMFS shares that concern, Ruff replied.

In response to another question, Ruff said the likely operating strategy this year will be to use RM&E to see where the fish are hanging up and using whatever limited operational flexibility may exist to move the fish through these bottlenecks – basically, the intent will be to put the water on the fish, when and where they need it, to the greatest extent possible, Ruff said. What we're trying to craft is a share-the-pain operation; again, none of the listed stocks is likely to fair well this year. Yesterday we were forced to end the Lower Columbia chum protection operation, a very difficult and painful decision because we know fish are still emerging from those redds, said Ruff.

It is helpful for us to know the recommended priorities for the 2001 spill program, said Hevlin – that will help us focus our study resources on projects where spill actually has a chance of occurring.

7. Update on Modifications to Research Due to Low Flows, Reduced/Curtailed Spill and Elevated River Temperatures.

Hevlin said that, given the context provided in the previous agenda item, it is important to discuss the impacts of the 2001 flow, spill, economic and environmental conditions on planned research projects. Peters led a discussion of the list of planned research activities by project, beginning with Bonneville Dam; the group offered a variety of suggestions and modifications to these planned activities. Rock Peters noted that all of these studies will be discussed in more detail at tomorrow's SRWG meeting.

What about contentious studies, such as the salt-water challenge at Bonneville? Lorz asked. We have provided responses to the comments on the transport study and the saltwater challenge, Hevlin replied. He noted that the delayed mortality study has been scaled back to a pilot study only, with no upstream tagging. The NMFS Science Center has provided a response to the SRWG, said Peters; if more discussion on those more contentious studies is needed, we can try to schedule a meeting. I will also make sure copies of the Science Center responses are sent out to all appropriate parties, Peters said. Steve Pettit said he wanted to go on record as saying that the salmon managers have a great deal of concern about the delayed mortality study.

Peters added that the Corps is now starting to initiate discussion of research priorities for FY'02; this is just a heads-up, to get people thinking along those lines, he said. Suzumoto observed that, regrettable though 2001 may be from a flow standpoint, it does offer an important opportunity to gather information about fish behavior and survival under extreme low-flow conditions.

In response to a question from Woodin, Ruff said there is still some consideration being given to the possibility of PIT-tagging some Mid-Columbia fish for a transport survival study this year; whether or not that study will go forward is undetermined, at this point.

Given the fact that there is an SRWG meeting tomorrow, does this group need to have additional discussion on this topic at this time? Silverberg asked. Woodin said it is important for this group to discuss ways to streamline the 2001 research program, given the fact that the CRFM budget is overprogrammed and, given 2001 system conditions, some of the planned studies may no longer be possible, or may not tell us much if they do go forward. Silverberg asked whether a mid-month SCT conference call to discuss changes to the research program might be appropriate. After a brief discussion, there was general agreement that the SCT will accept the SRWG's study prioritization recommendations, unless there are significant new studies put on the table at tomorrow's meeting, or significant issues on which the SRWG cannot reach consensus. In the latter case, it may be necessary to convene an SCT conference call.

Chris Ross then went briefly through NMFS' proposed discharge "pulse" fish passage study at Lower Granite, observing that this study would only be possible in an extreme low-flow year such as 2001. There are two possible ways to go, he said – increase Lower Granite discharge during nighttime hours using either pool storage alone or flow augmentation from Dworshak plus pool storage, to minimize the refill period. The intent would be to increase Lower Granite outflow to about 90 Kcfs for up to six hours at night, then evaluate PIT-tag detection, collections and radio-tag observations for increased passage using a block design, Ross said. The test would run anywhere from 18 to 48 days, he added.

Pettit said that, in his view, rather than a research item, this operation should more appropriately be considered as a means to increase passage at Lower Granite. That is certainly a direction we could consider, Ross replied. In response to a question from Christine Mallette,

Ross said NMFS is only considering the spring period for conducting this test; it may be possible to do it during the summer as well, but that has not yet been discussed.

8. Next SCT Meeting Date.

The next meeting of the System Configuration Team was set for Thursday, April 19; Silverberg went briefly through some of the agenda items to be discussed at that meeting. Lorz asked the SCT to consider moving its meetings back to the second Thursday of each month so that Heinith can attend; Hevlin said that is possible as long as Bob shows a commitment to attend. The group also discussed the possibility of holding its May 17 meeting at either McNary or Lower Granite Dams, possibly in conjunction with the May 16 TMT meeting and May 15 FPAC meeting. It was agreed to resolve that question at the group's April meeting. Meeting notes prepared by Jeff Kuechle, BPA contractor.