

THE PLIGHT OF THE PALLID STURGEON...WHY WE'VE GOT TO BE RIGHT, RIGHT NOW^{AFS}

Bob Snyder
Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks
P.O. Box 200701, Helena, MT 59620-0701
bsnyder@state.mt.us

The pallid sturgeon (*Scaphirhynchus albus*) is functionally extinct in Montana. Spawning is spurious with no recruitment to the two Montana populations in at least 50 years. The population consists entirely of all old-aged fish predicted to decline to extinction in 2017. Little is known about this species and recovery planning is occurring without an understanding of most of the requirements of the species. This environment of uncertainty is affecting the decisions about the restoration of the pallid sturgeon. Because of the imminent demise of the wild pallid sturgeon population, there isn't time to be wrong. The wild pallid populations in the upper and lower Missouri and Yellowstone rivers, the only sources of gametes available for augmentation stocking until the captive broodstock program at Gavins Point NFH is proven, are a tenuous and undependable sources of eggs. The wild populations will probably become extinct before the hatchery-based populations are established. Unless adequate numbers of hatchery fish are stocked, there will be insufficient, or no, fish that survive to sexual maturity, making recovery of the species impossible. Five recommendations are made including: sufficient numbers of hatchery fish need to be released; improvements are needed in capture, handling and fish culture techniques; habitat restoration needs to start immediately; decisions should use worst-case estimates; the decision-making process needs improvements; there needs to be a stronger commitment to the recovery of the pallid sturgeon by the USDA Fish and Wildlife Service and Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks.