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10/4/06

Dear Northwest Power Planning Council Members & The Bonneville Power Administration,

We have been informed that the Maturation Study of Dr. Molly Webb (Principal Investigator) has been recommended for termination. This study has been an integral part of the White Sturgeon Mitigation and Restoration Project in the Columbia and Snake Rivers Upstream from Bonneville Dam since 2000. We respectfully submit this letter to express our strong support for continued funding of this unique project, which will fill the critical gap in knowledge of the reproductive potential of white sturgeon.

The years between successive spawnings, as well as the age at maturity and individual fecundity, are the life history traits determining the viability of sturgeon stocks and their sensitivity to fishing mortality. The onset of puberty, stages of maturation, and fecundity of white sturgeon have been described in the literature, based on both wild populations and cultured stocks, but the endogenous reproductive cycles (annual in male and biennial in female) observed in aquaculture are not necessarily equal to the breeding intervals in wild fish. The wild fish may postpone starting a new maturation cycle and remain in a refractory stage for a year or longer, depending on their energy state (loss of nutrients associated with spawning and food availability). Dr. Webb's study also indicates the possibility that some individuals in a population might have longer endogenous cycles, which is not uncommon in fish. Heretofore, there is no reliable information on breeding intervals in wild sturgeon and the accumulation of a representative data set by continuing this study, using individually marked fish, is the only way to clarify this uncertainty and use this information to establish the best stock management policies.

This study by Dr. Webb and her colleagues is the first concentrated attempt to determine the actual spawning interval of wild sturgeon, by the capture, tagging and recapture of individual adult sturgeon in the Columbia River. If population management models are used that incorporate spawning frequency then it is critical to have accurate data. We urge the NMPPC and BPA to reconsider funding of this project based on its scientific merit and the valuable information it can provide regarding the spawning frequency of white sturgeon. The opportunity to obtain such data should not be lost, as the time and effort to reach this stage in a "sturgeon maturation" project would undoubtedly never be replicated. As sturgeon reproductive physiologists we are well aware of the monetary and time commitments any sturgeon project entails. These long lived and slow maturing fish create unique challenges not only for aquaculture but more so for the development of population management programs. We urge you to continue funding this project and not miss the opportunity to obtain reliable information on breeding intervals in the Columbia River white sturgeon.

Sincerely,

Serge Doroshov, Professor & Joel Van Eenennaam, Research Associate