

MRRIC

UNITES UPSTREAM, DOWNSTREAM, TRIBAL INTERESTS

By Angela Magstadt

David Shorr of Missouri is well aware of the tension that has been present between upstream and downstream Missouri River states for more than 60 years. He knows that upstream states like North Dakota don't often speak kindly when referring to downstream states like Missouri, and vice versa. But, for a few days each year, he can laugh about it. "My name is David Shorr," he says ominously, "and I am an evil downstreamer."

GETTING TO KNOW YOU

This comment was made at the most recent meeting of the Missouri River Recovery Implementation Committee (MRRIC), which was held in April at the United Tribes Technical College in Bismarck. The members of MRRIC who hear comments like Shorr's, simply take them as they are intended, in jest, because they have become comfortable enough with each other to joke about their differences.

"MRRIC gives us all an opportunity to meet and really get to know each other," says Shorr, who represents downstream dredging interests. "In my opinion, that has been the most fruitful part of this process. It helps us to really understand some of the concerns and demands of the upper basin states, and they can now understand ours."

MRRIC was established in 2008 as part of the Water Resources Development Act to be a forum for Missouri River stakeholders, federal and state agencies, and tribes to advise the Corps of Engineers (Corps) to develop a plan to recover endangered species, prevent the further decline of native species, and recover the Missouri River ecosystem.

A SHARED VISION

"Pick and Sloan had a vision for this river in the 1940s," says Assistant Secretary of the Army (Civil Works) Jo-Ellen Darcy, who spent three days in Bismarck for the

North Dakota Water ■ July 2010

MRRIC meeting. "Now, 70 years later, we are taking their vision and plan to make them work in the 21st century." Darcy says MRRIC's mission is an important one, and its involvement is critical to the restoration of the Missouri River ecosystem. "I have great hope for MRRIC and what it can accomplish," she says. "There are such diverse interests in this Basin, but the issue is the same. These people live and work in the Basin and they want what's best for it. And the Corps is an agency that, with the support of Congress, responds to what the people want."

Darcy commends the group for its decision to work by a charter of consensus, but committee members agree that this is no easy task. "Consensus is a real challenge, but there is wisdom in that, because we're taking the time to have discussions and disagreements before we make our decisions instead of going back after they have already been made," says Don Borgman of Olathe, Kan., who represents agricultural stakeholders. "We're doing things right the first time."

IN THE WORKING MODE

But, even with the extra time it takes to find common ground that all 70 members of the Committee can, as its charter states, "support or live with," MRRIC is still very much in the working mode, says John Thorson, MRRIC's executive director. "We're getting our hands into the real work of the process – getting our hands dirty." One major accomplishment made in the past year is the recommendation the committee





North Dakota Tourism/Otis and James

made on limiting the commercial fishing of the shovelnose sturgeon, urging the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to list it as a “similarity of appearance” species to the endangered pallid sturgeon.

MRRIC is focusing primarily on three areas of work. The first is to develop a recommendation to the Corps for an ongoing recovery program. The federal budget is typically between \$50-80 million per year, and this year, President Barack Obama has proposed \$75 million to the recovery program, which includes emergent sandbar habitat and land acquisition. MRRIC is also prioritizing funding so that if the budget is less than what is proposed, it will determine which projects have priority, and if it is more, which additional projects should be funded.

MRRIC’s second area of work is a long-term environmental restoration plan, which is referred to as MRERP (Missouri River Ecosystem Restoration Plan). MRERP will take between 30 and 50 years to complete, and includes an extensive, multi-phase Environmental Impact Statement. Members of MRRIC are trying to balance environmental factors with cultural and social issues such as family farms, navigation as an industry, recreation, tribal water development needs, tribal cultural resource issues, and our collective cultural heritage resources of the Missouri River in the development of MRERP.

Finally, MRRIC is working to find the best science available, what the best ways are to use the available funding to help recover the ecosystem, and identify the issues that need further study, and then test them. Thorson says the committee is currently looking at the effectiveness

of the Corps’ spring pulse, which releases water from the reservoirs during the spring of the year to mimic the rise of the river that occurred prior to the building of the mainstem dams. This is done to cue the reproduction of the pallid sturgeon and prevent the endangered least tern and piping plover from nesting in areas that are prone to flooding.

INCREASING PARTICIPATION

While MRRIC has extensive stakeholder representation, tribal participation is not as high as many feel it should be. There are 28 Indian tribes in the Missouri River Basin, but only 18 have selected representatives to the committee. **“There is more tribal participation than when MRRIC first started, but there still isn’t enough,” says Dr. Kate Vandemoer, a hydrologist representing the Northern Arapaho Tribe of the Wind River Reservation, Wyoming on the MRRIC. The Wind River is a headwaters tributary of the Missouri River. “The tribes can benefit greatly from this process by finding out what is going on with the river. And this is a great opportunity for Basin tribes to directly participate in the Corps’ activities.**

Through MRRIC, tribes can find information about funding opportunities they can use for projects such as cottonwood plantings, stream bank stabilization, water quality improvement, habitat creation, and cultural resource protection programs.”





Capitol Sand Company/Dannie Gipe

In an effort to increase tribal participation, MRRIC created a special subcommittee on tribal participation. Its first meeting was held in April, and included a considerable outreach to all the tribes in the Missouri River Basin. The Bismarck session invited interested parties to a special session explaining how the tribes can benefit by being a part of MRRIC. “I feel I’ve been afforded a great opportunity by being part of this process, so I feel it’s my responsibility to share this information with the other tribes as to the opportunities that exist,” Vandemoer says.

WORKING TOGETHER

“Two years ago when the process began, people were very suspicious of MRRIC, but since then, participants have gotten to know each other better, and have come to understand each other’s different views and work harder to solve the issues. There is a tremendous amount of good faith and commitment here,” Thorson says.

“Through the 60-plus years of bickering, we’ve all been led to believe that the upstream and downstream states have nothing in common, but that is not the case,” says Garrison Diversion District Engineer David Johnson, who also serves as North Dakota’s state representative on MRRIC. “We have more in common than we all thought.”

“I’ve come to realize that MRRIC is not just about fish and wildlife,” Shorr says. “It is a great opportunity for all the Missouri River stakeholders to come together and talk about the human side of things. It allows us to see that we can do things together that wouldn’t be possible as

individual states. I’ve also come to realize that we may be a dysfunctional family, but we are still family, and issues such as sedimentation, flood control, and bed degradation affect us all. Together, we can solve these problems. We have a much better chance of succeeding if we work together instead of against each other.”

“To be honest, it is a grueling process and a lot of hard work,” Vandemoer says. “And, reaching consensus is not easy, but even though there are differences, everyone has respect for everyone else’s issues. Local users have so much to say about every problem on the river, and MRRIC is an environment where politics can be set aside and all interests can work together in harmony to achieve a balance for all interests. I don’t know of any other forum where all sides are equally represented. I’m proud to be a member of the group.”

“I am more hopeful now than I’ve ever been,” Johnson says. “We’ve spent the past year-and-a-half learning an awful lot about the issues affecting the Missouri River Basin, and now we are finally starting to get into the meat of the process – the issues that really matter. Next year at this time we’ll be debating even bigger issues, and using the energy that, in the past, has been used to fight with each other, and using it to work together, compromise, and make a real difference in the Basin.”

