Focus Area

Environmental Resource Management

Problem

Threatened and endangered species (TES) have substantial impacts on the missions of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE), particularly through add-on project costs and reductions in operational flexibility. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) spends about $230 million annually on the conservation, management, and compliance of species protected by the Endangered Species Act (ESA). Despite these expenditures on species that often hinder operational missions, there often is minimal return on investment or significant increases in population baselines.

Study Description

The USACE Threatened and Endangered Species Team (TEST), sponsored by the Dredging Operations Environmental Research (DOER) Program, was initiated at the ERDC-EL for the purpose of accelerating the development of solutions to priority threatened, endangered, and at-risk species currently, or having high likelihood in the future to, affect USACE mission sustainability. The TEST coordinates Headquarters leadership, ERDC research scientists, and Division and District staff to: (1) Prioritize threatened and endangered species issues, (2) Strategize for productive collaboration and investments, (3) Measure progress towards agency goal, and (4) Guide with expert support to field teams.

One means for accomplishing the goals about is Section 7(a)(1) of the Endangered species Act. The purpose of Section 7(a)(1) conservation programs is to improve TES baselines (population and habitat) within the scope of Federal action-agency authorities, thereby contributing to the conservation of all species within that habitat. TEST is the platform for initiating and coordinating ESA Section 7(a)(1) efforts for USACE.

Products

To facilitate the coordination that is at the heart of the TEST mission and the strength of the ESA, many TEST products revolve around bringing information and people together as well as documenting success and transferring to other parts of the country. Some of these successes include:

- The Lower Mississippi Channel Improvement Program Conservation Plan formalized by MVD in consultation with the Service under Section 7(a)(1). This conservation plan was the culmination of 13 years of data collection demonstrating improvement in the habitat and population baselines of three endangered species (Interior Least Tern, Pallid Sturgeon, and Fat Pocketbook Mussel). The plan was also instrumental in the recommendation by the Service to delist the Interior Least Tern.
- Through 10 years of direct science funding support from DOER, collaborative work by ERDC, American Bird Conservancy, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) significantly contributed to tern recovery. DOER funding supported a range-wide survey, range-wide metapopulation model for ILT to evaluate population persistence across a range of scenarios, ESA 7(a)(1) Conservation Plans covering multiple Districts and 80% of the range, and a cost-effective post-listing monitoring plan. All of these were required elements for delisting as articulated by the USFWS in their 5-year review of the species status in 2013. In October 2019, the USFWS published a draft Rule to remove the interior population of least tern from ESA protection.
- SPD Workshop focused on interagency recovery of the Least Bell's Vireo via ESA Section 7(a)(1)

Summary

The Threatened and Endangered Species Team exists to streamline Section 7 consultations, reduce costs, and minimize TES impacts to USACE missions. The TEST accelerates development of solutions for priority TES issues that will improve budget planning capabilities and operational flexibility to reduce future costs and adverse impacts to USACE mission execution.

Balancing operational and environmental initiatives and meeting complex challenges of dredging and dredged material placement in support of the navigation mission.