



Finding Of No Significant Impact
for
Santa Cruz River Watershed Dam #1 Rehabilitation Project
Rio Arriba County, New Mexico

Introduction

The Santa Cruz River Watershed Dam #1 is a federally assisted action authorized for planning under Public Law 83–566, the Watershed Protection and Flood Prevention Act. This act authorizes the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) to provide technical and financial assistance to local project sponsors. Local sponsors of the Santa Cruz River Watershed Rehabilitation Project are the Santa Fe-Pojoaque Soil and Water Conservation District.

An environmental assessment was undertaken in conjunction with the development of the watershed plan. This assessment was conducted in consultation with local, State, and Tribal Governments; Federal agencies; and interested organizations and individuals. Data developed during the assessment are available for public review at the following location:

<https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detail/nm/programs/planning/wfpf/?cid=stelprdb1186534>

in lieu of in-person visits at:

U.S. Department of Agriculture
Natural Resources Conservation Service
100 Sun Ave NE, Suite 602
Albuquerque, New Mexico 87109

Recommended Action

The “Dam Raise 71-Year Sediment Life” Alternative is the Preferred Alternative as well as the National Economic Development (NED) Alternative. This Alternative would require the following modifications: raise the dam and widen the dam crest; raise and reconstruct a concrete auxiliary spillway with riprap toe; replace the existing two principal spillway risers with one riser and raise the crest elevation; slip line the principal spillway conduit; reconstruct the plunge pool at the principal spillway conduit outlet; restore connectivity from the principal spillway conduit outlet to the natural drainage channel; reconstruct the retaining dike; and install a stabilized access road to the dam.

Effect of Recommended Action

The recommended action is the Structural Rehabilitation Alternative/Preferred Alternative and would consist of measures to continue to protect the watershed hydrology which supports enhanced use of the land, meet current NRCS and New Mexico engineering safety standards and extend the life of the structure 71 years. Stream flow will be stabilized to the extent that peak flood flow rates will be slightly reduced, and flow will be attenuated.

Erosion may occur on disturbed and cleared areas within the project boundary during precipitation events. Proper BMPs would be installed during and after construction to prevent and control soil erosion. Sediment would continue to accumulate in the basin at an approximate rate of 7.51 ac-ft per year, but the basin would have enough capacity for 71 years of sediment deposition. The 8.34 square-mile drainage area upstream of the structure is 96% BLM managed lands. BLM could implement rangeland management plans to better preserve land in the contributing watershed, but there is no such plan at this time

Project design elements, including BMPs, would be required to be implemented to reduce the quantity of sediment (1) entering drainages; and (2) flowing downstream and violating any federal or state water quality rules and regulations. This alternative would also meet New Mexico antidegradation requirements. Construction BMPs would include, but are not limited to, the following: Stormwater Pollution Prevention Plan; appropriate sediment control BMPs would be implemented to prevent the entry of sediment and other contaminants into adjacent waterbodies; to ensure that accidental spills do not enter waters, a Pollution Control Plan, Safety Plan and Quality Assurance Plan will be implemented; and no construction materials would be stockpiled or deposited in or near any water bodies. With the implementation of the BMPs listed above, there would only be minimal temporary impacts on water quality. The project improvements would not remove any waters of the U.S., but would modify the existing channels and features to provide erosion protection, allow for stabilized access over the acequia, and also reestablish connectivity of flow from the principal spillway outlet channel to the natural downstream drainage.

Impacts to wetlands would be minor based on the size and quality of the wetlands in the project area, and compensatory mitigation is not anticipated since impacts are anticipated to be temporary and mostly related to construction activities, not the operation of the structure after construction.

Establishment of a stabilized access is anticipated to decrease the disturbance and associated sediment and contaminants that may enter the acequia from ATV and vehicles crossing the feature. Modification of potential habitat and temporary construction disturbance would occur in the acequia from project actions. These impacts would be minor since habitat is low quality, limited, and is only available when the acequia is flowing. The acequia is operated to flow generally from March through September, but operation is dependent on the precipitation amount and availability of water from year to year. If construction activities occur when the acequia is flowing, fish salvage would be performed in any areas dewatered to facilitate construction. The acequia would be piped around the construction area to maintain flows downstream and avoid any temporary impacts to fish or fish habitat downstream.

A cultural resources inventory of the area of potential effects (APE) was undertaken. Subsequently an archaeological survey report was completed, and that report recommends that no adverse effects will occur to historic properties in the watershed should the plan be implemented. The NRCS has consulted with the State historic preservation officer and has reached concurrence that no historic property will be adversely affected. If cultural resources are inadvertently discovered during implementation, NRCS will follow procedures as detailed in the State-level agreement between the State Historic Preservation Division and NRCS-New Mexico.

Approximately 32.6 acres of wildlife habitat would be impacted by construction activities. Approximately 3.8 acres of the 32.6 acres would be permanently impacted from removal of habitat for placement of concrete on the auxiliary spillway and construction of the new access road. The remaining 28.5 acres would be temporarily impacted through modifications of surface materials from excavation, fill, and grading activities. The temporarily disturbed areas' vegetative wildlife would be restored to preconstruction conditions within one growing season. Animal wildlife species may be temporarily disturbed and displaced to adjacent habitats. Once construction is completed, they could return to the area. Impacts would be minor because abundant habitat is available in the surrounding area, there are no specially designated wildlife habitat management areas present, and temporarily disturbed areas would be restored upon construction completion.

There would be no impact to ESA-listed plant species since there are none listed for Rio Arriba County. Suitable habitat for state-listed plant species is not located within the project area and there would be no impacts to state-listed plant species. There is potential for BLM sensitive species Santa Fe cholla (*Cylindropuntia viridiflora*) and the gramma grass cactus (*Sclerocactus papyracanthus*) to be present in the project area. Any affects to the BLM sensitive species identified would be temporary, during initial construction and the disturbed area will be vegetated or otherwise stabilized. BLM will be consulted again during the design phase as the BMPs are finalized to determine the best methods of protection of their sensitive species.

BLM recreation areas are in the watershed. Scenic values will be maintained with the rehabilitation of the dam, a feature that is somewhat similar in shape, if not size, to the surrounding mountain ranges. During installation of the proposed measures, scenic values will be temporarily decreased at specific locations in the watershed and parts of the current BLM recreation area will become inaccessible for public access.

Alternatives

No significant adverse environmental impacts will result from installations except for minor inconveniences to local residents and traffic during construction.

The planned action is the most practical means of continuing to provide a reasonable level of flood protection in the watershed, which allows downstream lands to be more stable and productive. Since no significant adverse environmental impacts will result from installation of the measures described in the Preferred Alternative, the only other alternative considered in detailed study was the no [federal] action alternative.

Consultation—Public Participation

Formal agency consultation began with the initiation of the Public Participation Plan in September 2014. The Governor was also notified of the application for Federal assistance when it was initially accepted in June 2004. Agencies were again notified when the first formal Public Scoping Meeting was held in March 2015.

Scoping meetings were held in March 2015 and January 2020, and interdisciplinary efforts were used in all cases. Four Federal agencies (BLM, FS, F&WS, and EPA), three State agencies (Department of Game and Fish, State Historic Preservation Division, Department of Agriculture and Office of the State Engineer – Dam Safety Bureau), Santa Fe County Government and Rio Arriba County Government, and several local groups were involved in part or all of the scoping and planning processes.

Specific consultation was conducted with the State historic preservation officer and the 23 Federally Recognized Tribal Nations listed with SHPO as having involvement and/or claim to the lands of this watershed, concerning cultural resources and historic properties. Comments from the State historic preservation officer and the findings from the Cultural Resources were used in the development of this plan. No comments were received from any of the Tribal Governments to which correspondence was sent.

The environmental assessment was transmitted to all participating and interested agencies, groups, and individuals for review and comment in December 2019. Meetings were held throughout the planning process to keep all interested parties informed of the study progress and to obtain public input to the plan and environmental evaluation.

Agency consultation and public participation to date have shown no unresolved conflicts with the implementation of the selected alternative.

Conclusion

Based on the watershed plan–environmental assessment summarized above, I find that the proposed action is not a major Federal action significantly affecting the quality of the human environment, and I have determined that an environmental impact statement for the Supplemental Watershed Plan and Environmental Assessment for the Santa Cruz River Watershed Dam#1 is not required.

J. XAVIER MONTOYA
State Conservationist

03/30/2021

Date