

# *Saving the Platte River for Wildlife and People*

The Platte River plays a crucial role in providing water for Wyoming residents. Its waters also provide important habitat downstream for sandhill cranes, whooping cranes, millions of ducks, geese and other species. A strong recovery program under the Platte River Cooperative Agreement could be a good first step toward protecting the Platte's wildlife habitat while meeting people's water needs.

## Wyoming and the Platte River Cooperative Agreement

### The Quest for Water

Wyoming residents have long depended on the North Platte River, its tributaries and hydrologically connected wells for water. By the 1880s, thousands of irrigation canals had been built to divert water from the river to farms, ranches and growing towns. In the 1900s, people built large dams throughout the Platte Basin to fully capture and control flows.

Today, the quest for water in this dry region continues. Casper, Cheyenne, Laramie and other Wyoming communities rely on the Platte for drinking water. Over 550,000 acres of farm land in Wyoming are irrigated with water from the North Platte, South Platte, or nearby groundwater. Industry and electrical generation consume still more water.

Upstream water use has had downstream consequences. Today, the Platte's flows are a trickle of their historic volume. In Nebraska, flows have dwindled by more than half. An 80-mile stretch of the river that serves as a critical stopover point for most of North America's sandhill cranes and millions of ducks and geese is in serious jeopardy. The drying of the Platte has destroyed 90% of the habitat needed by three threatened or endangered species along that stretch of river - the whooping crane, the piping plover and the interior least tern.



Platte River Trust

The Platte River (above) not only serves the water needs of people in Wyoming, but also provides important habitat for millions of migratory birds as well as threatened or endangered species, including the whooping crane (right).



Bob Gress

### The Platte River Cooperative Agreement

The Platte River Cooperative Agreement, signed in 1997, is an effort by Colorado, Wyoming, Nebraska, the U.S. Department of the Interior, water users and conservation groups to protect what's left of the Platte's crucial wildlife habitat, while providing regulatory certainty for water users in the basin.

Under the agreement, the parties are developing an innovative, basin-wide program that would address the needs of rare species in the central Platte by restoring habitat and protecting river flows.



For More Information, visit [www.nwf.org/platte](http://www.nwf.org/platte)



Green-winged teal

### Pathfinder: Water for People and Wildlife

Pathfinder Reservoir in central Wyoming was designed to hold just over 1 million acre-feet - about 333 billion gallons -- of water. But over the decades, sediment has accumulated behind the dam, reducing the reservoir's capacity. As part of the Cooperative Agreement, Wyoming officials are considering a plan to restore Pathfinder's original capacity by elevating its spillway.

The plan calls for 20,000 acre-feet of the additional water capacity to be used in Wyoming, mostly to satisfy growing municipal needs. The remainder, about 34,000 acre-feet, would be used for fish and wildlife, released into the river when it would benefit habitat downstream.

Also under consideration are plans to lease water rights from the Panhandle Eastern Pipeline and to negotiate voluntary water leases with farmers on about 5,000 acres of land. Wyoming is also negotiating for the right to use some of the water behind Glendo Dam to offset the impact of growing water use on downstream habitat.

### Protecting National Forests and Trout Streams

Medicine Bow National Forest guards the North Platte River and its tributaries in Wyoming. The forest protects native trout streams that boast some of the best fishing in the world and provide habitat for elk, deer and other high-country wildlife, as well as recreational opportunities.

Early in the process of negotiating the proposed program, some suggested obtaining water for the Platte by clear-cutting tens of thousands of acres of the forest, allowing more rain and snowmelt to run off into the stream. Fortunately, after opposition by conservation groups, the proposal was withdrawn.

As written, the proposed program would conserve habitat downstream without clearcutting our national forests.



Seminole Reservoir

### Impacts on Other Fish and Wildlife

The changes at Pathfinder Reservoir should improve wetland habitat at Pathfinder National Wildlife Refuge by inundating the wetlands about one year in every four. Wetland acreage and biodiversity should increase as a result.

Under the proposed program, Pathfinder and Seminole Reservoirs would operate at lower water levels more frequently. This is likely to reduce fish production potential in

these two reservoirs modestly, by about two to five percent. There should be no effect on the fisheries in Alcova, Glendo, and Guernsey reservoirs, or on fisheries in Wyoming rivers.

### A Smart Choice for Wyoming

A strong recovery program under the Platte River Cooperative Agreement would offer Wyoming a balanced, intelligent way to meet its water needs while protecting wildlife. Without a basin-wide approach

to managing the Platte River's waters, Wyoming water projects could face lengthy and expensive environmental reviews. A basin-wide approach represents a better alternative.



Platte River Trust

The Platte River needs water to function as a healthy ecosystem for birds, fish, other wildlife and people. This picture shows one of the results of a dry river.

**You Can Help**  
[www.nwf.org/platte](http://www.nwf.org/platte)

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