

Rio Grande Cutthroat trout (*Oncorhynchus clarkii virginalis*)

Data: Rio Grande Cutthroat trout-A technical Conservation Assessment -2006; Conservation Agreement for the Range-wide Preservation and Management of the Rio Grande Cutthroat Trout- 2003
Partners: CO, NM, FS, FWS, BLM, Jicarilla ApacheTribe

Species Status Review: The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service received a petition in 1998 to list the Rio Grande cutthroat trout under the Endangered Species Act. In a 90-day finding, the agency concluded that listing was not warranted. However, in 2001 a candidate status review was initiated in response to litigation appealing this decision and new information, particularly regarding the presence of whirling disease within the native range of the sub-species (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service 2002). The results of this review were published in 2002, and it was again determined that listing of this taxon was not warranted (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service 2002). In 2005, a petition for Review of Agency Action regarding the 'not warranted' decision was denied. That decision was appealed to the 10th Circuit Court. After briefs were filed, USFWS settled the case and agreed to conduct a new status review. The subspecies is recognized as a species of special concern in both Colorado and New Mexico, and as a sensitive species within USFS Regions 2 and 3 and by the Bureau of Land Management in Colorado. In 2006, the Rio Grande Cutthroat Trout Conservation Team adopted the Inland Cutthroat Trout Protocol as a tool for assessing the status of RGCT rangewide. The first draft of a *Rio Grande Cutthroat Trout Rangewide Database* was completed by the Rio Grande Cutthroat Trout Conservation Team in March, 2007. The RGCT Conservation Team has a Rangewide Status Report for RGCT scheduled for completion by June, 2008. There has been a recent Technical Conservation Assessment (2006) published, and there is a signed Conservation Agreement (2003) in place. Colorado and New Mexico have active conservation plans that outline strategies and implementation schedules.

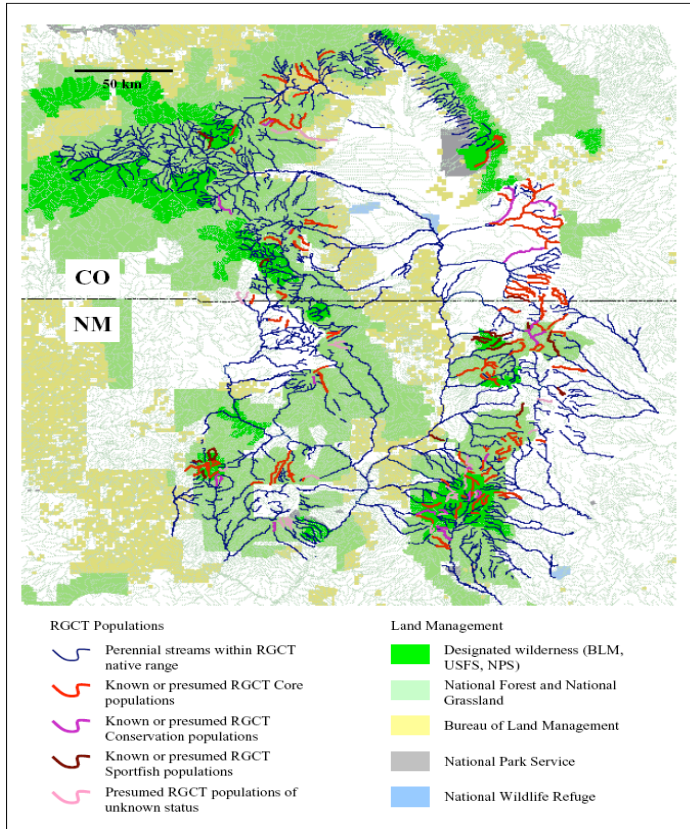
Sportfishing Status of the Rio Grande Cutthroat Trout: RGCT are considered a sport fish by all state, federal and tribal agencies that manage this subspecies. Harvest restrictions are in place for most conservation populations (usually catch and release, flies and lures only) but there are also many RGCT non-conservation populations managed for recreational fishing where standard regulations and bag limits apply. RGCT recreational fishing waters are frequently located in high-elevation lakes where cold water temperatures and lack of spawning habitat is expected to prevent natural trout reproduction. Some of these recreation populations have the potential to act as 'genetic refugia' for pure historic populations, but many also contain other *Oncorhynchus* taxa that are expected to hybridize with Rio Grande cutthroat trout where opportunities for natural reproduction occur. RGCT are considered to be easily captured by anglers that could be translated into vulnerability to excessive harvest. However, over-harvest is not considered a problem to RGCT at this time. Special regulations requiring catch-and-release, limited harvest, and terminal tackle restrictions have demonstrated effectiveness in maintaining trout populations in the face of a wide range of fishing pressure, and have been applied to native cutthroat trout waters in the two states. Core RGCT populations are protected by fishing closures in some instances. The tendency for these populations to be composed largely of small-sized fish may also reduce interest by anglers wishing to harvest fish.

Rio Grande Cutthroat Trout Distribution: Rio Grande cutthroat trout are known to be native to the Rio Grande and Pecos River drainages of Colorado and New Mexico. They are also believed to be native to the Canadian River drainage of Colorado and New Mexico, but no

Rio Grande Cutthroat trout (*Oncorhynchus clarkii virginalis*)

early historic specimens or written accounts are available to verify this.

Range and GMU's of the RGCT



(Map: Pritchard and Cowley, 2006)

Based on the draft *Rio Grande Cutthroat Trout Rangewide Database* prepared by the RGCT Conservation Team, Rio Grande cutthroat trout presently occupy 12.2% of their historic range in four of five Geographic Management Units (Canadian River, Lower Rio Grande, Pecos River and Rio Grande Headwaters). RGCT are most abundant in the Lower Rio Grande and Rio Grande Headwaters GMUs. Rangewide there are 121 RGCT conservation populations that currently occupy 698 miles of stream habitat and 28 acres of lake habitat. Core RGCT populations (pure, genetically unaltered) exist in 91 waters.

Rio Grande Cutthroat Habitat

Requirements: Rio Grande cutthroat trout habitat preference is probably consistent with typical cutthroat trout habitat. Cutthroat trout, in general, prefer clear, streams and lakes. Population densities are regulated mostly by stream size and morphology, over-wintering habitat, stream productivity, and summer cover for predator avoidance. Optimal cutthroat trout stream habitat is characterized by clear, cold water, a silt free rocky substrate in riffle-run areas; an approximately 1:1 pool-riffle ratio with areas of slow, deep water; well vegetated stream banks; abundant in-stream cover; and relatively stable water flow and temperature regimes. Optimal lacustrine habitat is characterized by clear, cold, deep lakes that are typically oligotrophic, but may vary in size and chemical quality, particularly in reservoir habitats. Cutthroat trout are stream spawners and require tributary streams with gravel substrate in riffle areas for reproduction to occur. Growth depends primarily on food availability, size of prey, competition, water temperatures, and the length of growing. Rio Grande cutthroat trout populations inhabiting small streams typically range in size from 2 inches at age 1 to 10 inches at age 7. However, cutthroat trout inhabiting productive lakes attain greater size.

Concerns and issues relative to the Conservation and Improvement of the status of RGCT:

Habitat degradation, hybridization and competition with non-native trout are the primary threats to the security of the Rio Grande cutthroat populations. Other concerns include lack of connectivity to maintain genetic diversity, potential for angler over-harvest, impacts of whirling disease, and catastrophic threats such as drought and forest fire.

Genetic considerations

Rio Grande Cutthroat trout (*Oncorhynchus clarkii virginalis*)

Extensive genetic testing of Rio Grande cutthroat trout has been conducted rangewide. Results of genetic analysis will be used to guide management decisions for the conservation of Rio Grande cutthroat trout, and where possible, the species will be managed on the basis of each geographic unit. Genetic evaluation has been conducted, and will continue to be conducted, in order to make genetic distinctions between populations from the various geographical units. Some isolated Rio Grande cutthroat trout populations currently exhibit population sizes smaller than those recommended for optimum population viability and occupy shorter stream lengths than those recommended. However, all of these populations remain important elements in the conservation of the subspecies. For some of these populations, there may be opportunities to increase carrying capacity and chance of long-term persistence by improving habitat quality, expanding available habitat downstream, and linking them with other isolated populations. Within Colorado, a blended brood stock of pure Rio Grande cutthroat trout has been developed at Haypress Lake, in addition to a back-up brood stock at the Pitkin Hatchery. New Mexico is also developing a brood stock at the Seven Springs Hatchery.

Habitat Concerns

A wide variety of land management practices have been suggested to threaten the continued existence of populations of Rio Grande cutthroat trout, including overgrazing, heavy metal pollution, and water depletion and diversion. Some of these practices have served to isolate upstream populations of Rio Grande cutthroat trout and protected them from invasion by nonnative salmonids, but they also serve to fragment streams, restricting movement between formerly connected populations and creating small, isolated populations that may be more likely to become

extirpated. In these cases, genetic rescue of isolated populations is a management option. In addition, natural climatic events such as drought, floods, and fires can threaten populations of RGCT, especially when stream populations remain fragmented, small and isolated. Fires also provide conservation opportunities for re-establishing Rio Grande cutthroat trout in areas previously inhabited by non-native trout. Temporary habitat loss due to drought and/or water extraction in certain years also appears to be a threat to Rio Grande cutthroat populations in Colorado. Habitat problems are viewed as site specific and not an overall threat throughout the range.

Disease Concerns

Rio Grande cutthroat trout are susceptible to common salmonid diseases, including whirling disease (WD) which is caused by the myxosporidian *Myxobolus cerebralis* (Mc). Native cutthroat trout, including Rio Grande cutthroat trout, exposed to MC in sentinel fish experiments suffered greater mortality from the infection than other non-native salmonid species like brown trout. Transmission of diseases to wild cutthroat populations from non-native trout is recognized as a significant potential disease threat. Physical barriers (both natural and man-made) that serve to isolate Rio Grande cutthroat trout populations also provide significant protection from transmission of fish diseases. Both Colorado and New Mexico have statewide policies and regulations that address fish health status, disease certification of stocked and imported fish, and stocking protocols, which are designed to reduce disease threats.

Introduced Species Threats

Stocking of non-native salmonids was widespread since before 1900, and has been considered a primary threat to inland native cutthroat subspecies. Brook trout are known to replace most subspecies of inland cutthroat trout

Rio Grande Cutthroat trout (*Oncorhynchus clarkii virginalis*)

when in sympatry. Rainbow trout and other nonnative cutthroat trout subspecies hybridize with Rio Grande cutthroat and produce fertile offspring. The competition from non-native trout means that pure Rio Grande cutthroat trout populations require protection by natural or artificial migration barriers. Construction, monitoring, and maintenance of such barriers is a stated management priority for all relevant agencies. Illegal stocking of non-native trout into Rio Grande cutthroat trout populations and movement of fish by anglers also are of concern.

Overutilization Concerns

Over-harvest is not considered a threat to this subspecies at this time. Special regulations requiring catch-and-release, very limited harvest, and terminal tackle restrictions have demonstrated effectiveness in maintaining trout populations in the face of a wide range of fishing pressure, and have been applied to native cutthroat waters throughout Colorado and New Mexico. Scientific collection of wildlife is regulated through permit systems in both Colorado and New Mexico requiring formal applications stating project objectives, sampling methodologies, sampling sites, and need for collecting.

Opportunities for Improvement of the Status of RGCT:

The goal of the Conservation Strategy for the RGCT is to assure the long-term persistence of the RGCT subspecies within its historic range by preserving its genetic integrity, reducing habitat fragmentation, and providing sufficient suitable habitat to support adequate numbers of viable, self-sustaining populations. The conservation, recovery and enhancement of RGCT will depend on an approach that reduces the threats to the RGCT. The specific approaches are described in both state and federal agency plans. Actions will need to be

prioritized and implemented within the five RGCT GMUs. Typically the actions fall within these categories:

- fish population inventory (surveys and analysis including genetic analysis)
- fish population manipulation (non-native removal, re-introduction, supplemental stocking, spawn-taking, maintaining broodstocks)
- habitat manipulation (barrier placement or removal, in-stream structure, flows, increasing connectivity, isolation of fragments, etc.)
- regulatory actions (fishing regulations, water use, land management)
- Developing educational and outreach efforts

RGCT Restoration potential:

In 2007, the RGCT Conservation Team completed the final part of the Inland Cutthroat Trout Protocol, which was to identify potential restoration and expansion opportunities for Rio Grande cutthroat trout. Increasing the number of pure populations in streams and lakes by restoring RGCT within their historic range is a key component of improving the status of RGCT. Sources of RGCT for restoration will include replication of currently identified pure populations, if possible, and development of appropriate genetically-mixed stocks from pure populations based on genetic information, and concepts of “nearest neighbor” and “similar ecological niche” for selecting genetic donors. Either of these approaches will be accomplished via transfers of fish from neighboring drainage basins or use of progeny from captive broodstocks of desired genetic heritage for restoration stocking of progeny. Promote and restore connectivity of existing and restored populations where feasible to enhance metapopulation function.

Rio Grande Cutthroat trout (*Oncorhynchus clarkii virginalis*)

Population Surveys, genetic analyses, and fish population manipulation

Key actions include:

Continue to locate and assess RGCT populations
Conduct standardized surveys and genetic analyses to measure introgression or purity
Expand RGCT populations through restoration, reintroductions, and non-native fish control in priority watersheds
The Agencies agree to summarize existing distribution, population, genetics, and habitat data; and to summarize conservation accomplishments in a common and consistent format to allow range-wide, integrated data analyses, summaries, and comparisons.
Identify potential, unoccupied habitat for restoration with RGCT

RGCT Habitat Manipulations:

Land use management considerations as part of this plan include: riparian buffer maintenance and protection, sedimentation abatement, mining and logging restrictions, proper placement of recreational trails, minimal impact grazing strategies, quantitative habitat monitoring, and development of in-stream and riparian habitat restoration projects. Coordination between the U.S. Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management and state wildlife agencies to develop best management practices in regard to habitat concerns for the Rio Grande cutthroat trout is an ongoing practice.

Key actions include:

Inventory, maintain, protect and improve existing aquatic and riparian habitats
Improve hydrologic and fluvial processes associated with RGCT populations at a watershed scale
Address public and private land management, forestry, mining, agriculture and O&G development practices to protect habitat

Monitor and evaluate natural catastrophe impacts like fire and drought; implement controlled burns and forest thinning to mitigate wildfire risks.
--

Regulatory Actions to enhance RGCT status:

Maintaining the sportfish status of the RGCT and utilizing regulations to manage angling pressure will be an important component of maintaining the health of RGCT populations. In addition, working with others to maintain appropriate regulations for prevention of disease, water quality impairment, and habitat disturbance are important considerations.

Key Actions to be addressed:

Maintain or enhance regulatory actions to prevent destruction of habitat
Enforce regulatory mechanisms that prevent impacts associated with recreational angling
Enhance and maintain regulatory mechanisms that prevent diseases or illegal introduction of nuisance species

Expand Education and Outreach programs to garner public support for CGT:

Key Actions to be addressed:

Expand public education efforts regarding Rio Grande Cutthroat trout restoration actions to increase public awareness of specific restoration actions as well as responsibilities in conserving RGCT habitat and fish populations

Highest Priority Objectives for the 5 GMU's for RGCT are:

1. Rio Grande Headwaters:

- Secure and protect existing populations. For example, construct fish movement barriers at Wolf Creek, Miners Creek, and Alamosito Creek.

Rio Grande Cutthroat trout (*Oncorhynchus clarkii virginalis*)

- Expand the distribution of RGCT populations through chemical reclamation projects, electrofishing removal projects and stocking of vacant waters. For example, complete chemical reclamation projects at Placer Creek and Sand Creek.

- Restore degraded habitat. For example, evaluate fish passage at culvert crossings on USFS and BLM roads, and install new diversion structures on Medano Creek that prevent emigration into irrigation ditches.

2. Lower Rio Grande GMU-

a) Secure and protect existing populations. Construct barriers on Alamitos Creek and Rio Hondo Tributaries.

a) Expand range of RGCT through chemical reclamation projects, electrofishing removal and stocking of vacant waters. Conduct chemical reclamation projects in the Rio Costilla watershed. Conduct electrofishing removals on streams as necessary.

b) Restore degraded habitat. For example, install riparian exclosures on Canones Creek and Polvadera Creek.

Pecos GMU

a) Expand range of RGCT through chemical reclamation projects, electrofishing removal and stocking of vacant waters. Site, design and construct barriers as needed. Evaluate subdrainages within the Pecos watershed for chemical restoration potential. Continue electrofishing removals where RGCT are sympatric with non-native trout. Replicate Pecos drainage populations into fishless waters.

Canadian GMU

a) Secure and protect existing populations. Construct barriers on streams where RGCT exist such as Luna Creek and the Vermejo River.

b) Expand range of RGCT through chemical reclamation projects, electrofishing removal and stocking of vacant waters. Site, design and construct barriers as needed. Evaluate subdrainages within the Canadian watershed for chemical restoration potential including Vermejo River, Ponil Creek, and Tolby Creek systems. Continue electrofishing removals where RGCT are sympatric with non-native trout including Luna Creek, Ricardo Creek and Little Vermejo Creek.

c) Restore degraded habitat. For example, implement post-fire recovery actions to expedite post-fire revegetation in Ponil Creek system.

Caballo GMU

a) Expand range of RGCT through chemical reclamation projects, electrofishing removal and stocking of vacant waters. Conduct chemical restoration project in the Animas Creek watershed.

Funding Needs-

1. Rio Grande cutthroat genetics analysis. \$10,000 per year is needed for genetic analysis of fish tissue specimens from known or suspected populations of Rio Grande cutthroat trout in New Mexico.

2. Purchase piscicides and supplies for stream/lake reclamation projects. \$25,000 per year is needed for RGCT restoration projects in New Mexico.

3. Construct fish migration barriers. \$30,000 per year is needed to construct at least one manmade barrier per year within RGCT historic range in Colorado.

Rio Grande Cutthroat trout (*Oncorhynchus clarkii virginalis*)

4. Habitat restoration and protect. \$30,000 per year is needed to implement riparian best management practices and construct grazing exclosures.
5. Electrofishing Removals. \$25,000 per year is needed to conduct electrofishing removals.

Likely Future RGCT Joint Ventures:

1. Rio Grande cutthroat GIS database management services. \$7,500 per year is needed to hire consultant services to complete annual updates to the rangewide Rio Grande cutthroat database. Database management will benefit RGCT rangewide, including but not limited to Colorado.
2. Rio Grande cutthroat genetics analysis to determine phylogenetic origins and inter-relatedness of Rio Grande, Colorado River, greenback, and Yellowfin cutthroat trout. \$10,000 for comparative genetic analyses.

Completed Projects

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

References:

1. Rio Grande Cutthroat trout-A Technical Conservation Assessment - 2006;
2. Conservation Agreement for the Range-wide Preservation and Management of the Rio Grande Cutthroat Trout- 2003
3. Conservation Plan for Rio Grande Cutthroat Trout in Colorado, 2004.
4. Long Range Plan for the Management of Rio Grande Cutthroat Trout in New Mexico, 2002.
5. Rio Grande Cutthroat Trout Rangewide Database (in preparation), Rio Grande Cutthroat Trout Conservation Team, 2007.



This publication was funded (or partially funded) by Federal Aid to Sportfish Restoration Funds through the Multistate Conservation Grant Program (Grant WY M-8-P), a program supported with funds from the Wildlife and Sport Fish Restoration Program of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and jointly managed with the Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies, 2006-9.

Rio Grande Cutthroat trout (*Oncorhynchus clarkii virginalis*)
