

MRRIC Tours Missouri River, Gavins Point

By Jamie Danesi

At a typical meeting of the Missouri River Recovery Implementation Committee (MRRIC), members and visitors generally see a standard conference room complete with name placards, PowerPoint presentations, coffee pots and microphones. On May 22, however, MRRIC traded those in for a day in the field learning about the workings of a hydroelectric plant and about three threatened and endangered species – the pallid sturgeon, least tern and piping plover – by visiting a fish hatchery and taking a boat trip down the Missouri River from Yankton to Myron Grove boat ramp in South Dakota.

The first stop of the field trip was the Gavins Point National Fish Hatchery near Yankton, South Dakota, which is run by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The hatchery provides pallid sturgeon to stock the Missouri River and to study the sturgeon's spawning behavior and migration patterns.

The second stop was the Gavins Point dam where members learned about the dam's recreational opportunities and its role in flood risk management, and toured its hydropower plant. MRRIC member Bill Drummond, who represents the committee's hydropower stakeholder interest group, was excited to see the project for the first time, and for his fellow

committee members to learn more about that aspect of the dam's operation.

“It is not only renewable itself, but it helps to integrate other renewable resources into the grid – things like wind and solar. It helps to do that because those other resources are intermittent resources; they always have to have some sort of back up and resources that have to ramp up and down to fit the wind and solar intermittency,” Drummond said. “So you can think of in the morning when the sun comes up and solar starts to generate...somewhere you have to back off other resources to accommodate that rise in solar. Later in the day when solar falls off, you have to have other resources to fill in. In this case you have the federal hydroelectric system supporting other resources. I hope people appreciate what an incredibly valuable resource this federal hydroelectric system is.”

For the last portion of the trip, members boarded several small boats and headed down the river to learn more about habitat for all three species and to view sandbars which provide habitat for the two bird species.

The field trip brought to life the importance of MRRIC's work for the committee members.

“I don't think there's any replacement for seeing things firsthand, and I think it was just helpful for everyone involved – helpful for everyone to get a more common understanding of

a different part of the river than maybe they're used to seeing," said Dan Engemann, MRRIC vice chair and representative of the agriculture stakeholder interest group.

MRRIC was established by Congress as part of the Water Resources Development Act of 2007 to provide guidance and recommendations to federal, Tribal, state, local, and private entities regarding implementation of the Missouri River Recovery Program (MRRP); MRRP focuses on supporting three threatened and endangered species in the Missouri River: the interior least tern, piping plover, and pallid sturgeon.

MRRIC members represent a diverse range of organizations and interests from federal and state agencies, Tribal governments, and various stakeholder interest groups. The field trip provided a unique opportunity for more than 60 of them to see the work they do from a new perspective.

"It will...benefit them because they'll be seeing things at the same time; they'll have a shared experience they can refer back to in their discussions," said MRRIC Chair Gail Bingham.

Having a common understanding of the other stakeholder and agency positions on issues impacting the MRRP is one of the key aspects of having a committee like MRRIC, Bingham said.

Drummond added that the group’s diversity and the complex nature of the program make that common understanding crucial as the committee goes about its work.

“It’s the immensity of this project – that there are so many different moving parts when you’re trying to figure out a recovery plan for the three listed species, that I have a much better appreciation for that immensity, he said. “We’ve talked about it here in MRRIC the three years that I’ve been involved but to now...actually see it and get a sense of just how challenging it really is.”



Members and support staff of the Missouri River Implementation Committee tour the Gavins Point Dam. The dam is a source of hydropower, one of the committee's various stakeholder interest groups. (Photo by Capt. Ryan Hignight)



Staff at the Gavins Point National Fish Hatchery collect eggs from a female pallid sturgeon as members and support staff of the Missouri River Recovery Implementation Committee look on. (Photo by Capt. Ryan Hignight)



Members of the Missouri River Recovery Implementation Committee watch pallid sturgeon swimming in a tank at the Gavins Point National Fish Hatchery. (Photo by Capt. Ryan Hignight)



Newly-hatched pallid sturgeon in a tank at the Gavins Point National Fish Hatchery. (Photo by Capt. Ryan Hignight)



Members and support staff of the Missouri River Recovery Implementation Committee view young pallid sturgeon at the Gavins Point National Fish Hatchery. (Photo by Capt. Ryan Hignight)



Members and support staff of the Missouri River Recovery Implementation Committee spent part of the day on May 22 on the Missouri River viewing habitat for three endangered and threatened species - the interior least tern, piping plover, and pallid sturgeon. (Photo by Capt. Ryan Hignight)



Members and support staff of the Missouri River Recovery Implementation Committee view sandbar habitat for the interior least turn and piping plover on the Missouri River. Signs are posted during nesting season to alert people on the river to the presence of nesting birds in order to protect the nests from accidental damage. (Photo by Capt. Ryan Hignight)



Members and support staff of the Missouri River Recovery Implementation Committee visited the Gavins Point Dam to learn more about the dam's operations and facilities as part of their May 22 field trip. (Photo by Capt. Ryan Hignight)