



Dam construction rolls on, despite concerns about frogs

By JUDY FAHYS

Herald Washington Bureau
WASHINGTON — Last summer, Payson Junior High School teacher Tom Willis led two federal officials and two frog experts to an oasis of cottonwoods and willows, where they saw some of the few spotted frogs left in Utah.

Bulldozers were scraping up dam fill near the lush cluster of spring-fed pools, just above the Jordanelle Dam construction site. So, the officials asked the drivers to steer around the area to give them time to catch the frogs.

In two visits, they nabbed 69 frogs, jotted down vital statistics like snout-to-vent length and belly color, and threw them into an ice chest.

Then they drove to a spring in Provo Canyon, where 46 frogs were set free. But by summer's end, the frogs were gone, and no one knew why.

Last summer's hasty salvage effort has raised questions about how government officials have carried out their responsibility to protect rare wildlife in the area around the massive Central Utah Project.

Although undertaken with good intentions, critics say it points to clumsy management, since wildlife officials knew spotted frogs were disappearing mysteriously and rapidly across the West.

"Knowing that these frogs were in the area, they should have dealt with this problem years ago — before the Cats (construction equipment) and the bulldozers moved into the area," said Willis, who is concerned about the frogs' survival.

Officials also knew that spotted frogs are under consideration for the federal list of threatened and endangered species, and their own studies had shown that frogs were abundant in the basin above the dam site.

But they didn't look hard enough to see the spotted frogs just upstream from the dam and didn't have any thoughtful options for protecting them once the frogs were discovered, according to a review of government documents and interviews with federal and state officials.

A simple side-by-side comparison may explain why the palm-sized amphibian did not receive more attention: It is tiny compared to CUP.

The days the scientists were slogging

through the frog pond last summer, a coalition of CUP activists had its sights trained on convincing Congress to complete the \$2 billion project, a massive enterprise to haul Colorado River Basin water over the Uinta Mountains for use in Utah's populated areas.

The Utah congressional delegation was leading environmentalists, the Central Utah Water Conservancy District and the federal Bureau of Reclamation, the agency building CUP, in pitching for nearly \$1 billion to build the final portion, an irrigation and drainage system.

The goal of finishing the project appears to have overshadowed the spotted frog situation.

Some critics go so far as to ask whether the frog was overlooked deliberately. That way, it would be unlikely scientists would turn up any information that could sour support in Congress for the water project or slow its construction timetable, the critics say.

Willis, who did some of the original spotted frog surveys for the state in the early 1970s, explained the thinking this way: "If you think you're going to find a problem, you don't look, and you go full speed ahead."

Another close to the project put it more strongly. "There's too many politics in this."

Whatever the reason, questions about the frogs in Utah appear to have been dwarfed by the concerns CUP proponents had about completing the project.

"The spotted frog will be dealt with," said Don Christiansen, general manager of the water district. "And it will be dealt with in a successful way."

Fears the frog would be ignored have worried Peter Hovingh, a biochemist and spare-time amphibian buff, for years.

In the past two decades, Hovingh has seen an alarming decline in frog numbers, and he shared the concern of biologists worldwide that water projects like CUP may mean the frog's demise. And frogs, they say, serve as bellwethers for foretelling the fates of other plants and animals that share their habitats.

After the Bureau of Reclamation and wildlife agencies rebuffed his requests for frog counts over and over, Hovingh, on behalf of the Utah Nature Study Society, filed a petition in 1989 under the Endangered Species Act to force officials to look at the question.

Hovingh's petition triggered a year-long review that was supposed to be concluded last May. Wildlife officials across the West agreed the spotted frog was in trouble, so regional officials in Denver gave the spotted frog paperwork high priority at first.

Then, the Jordanelle frogs were discovered. By December, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service decided to take more time to study the situation.

That decision threw the spotted frog's case into a red tape purgatory by moving it onto a federal list of 900 other pressing endangered species cases, and 3,000 awaiting more information. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service processes between 40 and 50 a year.

Ironically, early results from new spotted frog studies, including tests on 23 frogs taken from Jordanelle, raise the question of whether spotted frogs in Utah deserve special protection. So far, they show that each pocket of frogs found in Utah is genetically distinct from the those found in Wyoming and Montana, the two places spotted frogs still appear to be abundant.

During the time Hovingh's petition has been under review, CUP proponents have downplayed the impact of water projects on the spotted frog. In fact, a press release issued in December specifically says it is premature to link the frog's decline to Jordanelle construction.

Instead, they have stressed the spotted frog's decline can be blamed mostly on predatory leopard frogs or bull frogs.

As that debate heated up, dam construction moved ahead in Utah, and lobbying for the CUP bill continued on Capitol Hill.

If the spotted frog paperwork had moved on time, the Bureau of Reclamation would have been forced to stop work on Jordanelle until the frogs' safety was assured. But without being formally on the list of threatened or endangered species, the frog had no legal protection.

That makes last summer's salvage effort an act of goodwill — not a legal requirement.

Randy Radant, chief of non-game management for the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources, defended the decision to transplant the frogs by pointing out that wildlife officials did buy a little time for them.

"The construction activities and schedules really forced the issue," he said.

Nonetheless, some wonder if it was the right thing to do, since the frog salvage crew did not take time to study the best way to handle the frogs.

"Whether it's threatened or endangered or a candidate species, one should not be up and moving them around without more information about what habitats are suitable for them and what their population levels are," said Doug Inkley, a habitat specialist with the National Wildlife Federation.

"A lot of these relocation efforts fail," because biologists do not understand the needs of the species, agreed Micheal Bean, an attorney for the Environmental Defense Fund and one of the country's leading Endangered Species Act experts.

Even Willis and Hovingh agree that the relocation project would have been better if they had had more time to search for a suitable site.

Hovingh said he "felt like (he) was sticking them in a casket" because no other frogs lived at the Provo Canyon relocation site. But he added optimistically, "It's too early to say they died. If we go back in the spring and find egg masses, then we'll know they've taken."

Hovingh also is beginning to ask questions about other rare and dwindling species that have been found in the CUP area. The Fish and Wildlife Service has identified 22 other plants and animals of special concern.

While federal documents suggest some of those species could be in trouble, no efforts are underway now to find them around the project. And a handful of the species are snails thought to be unique to Utah.

For now, though, the attention is on spotted frogs and what can be done to save them.

In the next few weeks, biologists plan to search for egg masses at the frogs' old habitat and the new site. Wildlife officials hope to undertake a \$30,000 to \$35,000 effort this year to understand the frog and its habitat better.

Willis said he does not believe it would be worthwhile to stop building Jordanelle to protect the spotted frog — regardless of what the new studies turn up. However, he does express regrets that the federal agencies found themselves in this situation.