

Niangua Darter Endangered Species Act Success Story

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The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) routinely consults the services under Section 7(a)(2) of the Endangered Species Act (ESA). This requires Federal agencies to avoid jeopardizing continued existence of threatened or endangered species. However, many of us bypass Section 7(a)(1) ESA, which requires Federal agencies to use their program for conservation measures. Conservation of a species involves more than just avoiding jeopardy.

Starting with a disaster in 2002, FEMA-1412-DR-MO, the Service approached FEMA Region VII with a partnership opportunity to enhance fish passage in Niangua darter critical habitat. Low water crossings provide a barrier to Niangua darter and result in habitat segmentation. In 2008, the Service identified 32 priority low water crossings in Niangua darter habitat; these priority crossings provide the most formidable barriers for the Niangua darter and gauge the magnitude of the benefit that would be realized by improving fish passage based on both proximity and the linear stream miles that would be reopened to unobstructed passage. Over many years, in a very fragmented disaster recovery approach, FEMA has contributed to replacing several of these priority low water crossings. Other agencies have also participated, including the United States Army Corps of Engineers (USACE), Missouri Department of Transportation, Missouri Department of Conservation, the Service, among others.

While FEMA Region VII contribution has been fragmented, and limited to disaster recovery of destroyed low water crossings, it is significant enough that FEMA was provided credit in the latest 5-year review for recovery of the Niangua darter. Material contribution to recovery of the Niangua darter is a significantly higher outcome than simply avoiding jeopardy of the species and FEMA Region VII Environmental and Historic Preservation (EHP) deserves recognition for these individual but cumulatively significant efforts.

Low water crossings that allow for fish passage of Niangua darter also allow for better sediment transport, reduced maintenance, and also contribute to reduce or eliminate disaster damages and better community resilience. Ultimately, while the initial capital cost is higher, the life cycle costs are lower.