

## Beet Farming Threatens Rare Dinosaur-Era Fish

A dam that supplies water to heavily subsidized farmers is driving the pallid sturgeon toward extinction.



(Photo: Ken Bouc/Nebraska Game and Parks Commission)

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“We should be grandfathered in.” That’s how the manager of the Lower Yellowstone Project irrigation district in Montana [put it](#). His farmers have been using a dam on the river to supply water to their fields since time immemorial—or for 112 years, anyway—and see no reason to change. But the pallid sturgeon would certainly say it should be grandfathered in too. The monster fish has depended on the river for 78 million years, roughly since *Tyrannosaurus rex* ruled this region.

The problem is that the farmers and their timber-and-rock dam are now killing off the sturgeon. Intake Dam is an

unimpressive structure, located near Glendive, Montana, just before the Yellowstone River joins up with the Missouri River. The dam—really just a weir—stretches for 700 feet across the Yellowstone but does not even rise above the water surface in some seasons. The irrigation district has to pile on new stones each year just to make it back up enough water for its purposes.

So the Intake is easy to overlook—and allows some people to celebrate the 692-mile-long Yellowstone as “the longest undammed river” in the Lower 48. But the [dam](#) blocks off 165 miles of upstream habitat that the sturgeon would otherwise use for spawning. Because of that, only about 125 pallid sturgeon survive in the entire Upper Missouri River region. They are magnificent fish, up to five feet long and 85 pounds, that can live for as long as a century. But these fish, the largest wild population of

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pallid sturgeon in the country, have not reproduced successfully in about 60 years.

Even if the sturgeon manage to get together in the absence of their old spawning grounds, their young now just drift downstream into the Missouri River, where they die in the oxygen-deprived waters of a lake backed up behind another dam, built in 1956. So the pallid sturgeon—one of eight sturgeon species in North America—has been on the endangered species list since 1990, with no sign of recovery.



## [Dams Are Being Blown Up All Over America, and That's a Good Thing](#)

The United States Army Corps of Engineers, which built the dams that are largely responsible for endangering the pallid sturgeon and many other species, is apparently determined to build yet another dam, replacing the wood-and-stone structure at Intake with concrete, at a cost of \$60 million. It has proposed moving the pallid sturgeon around the new dam with a two-mile bypass, though many fishery biologists have said that would never work. When Defenders of Wildlife and the Natural Resources Defense Council filed a suit to stop the project last year, even the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife, and Parks joined in with an amicus brief. A federal judge granted an injunction to delay the project, and the Army Corps is now scheduled to deliver a revised Environmental Impact Statement at the beginning of July, followed by a public comment period. Depending on that EIS and the outcome of the lawsuit, the dam project could move forward as early as next year. Or the dam could come down and give the sturgeon back their old breeding grounds before it's too late.

“We believed we had to step in to stop this terrible project,” said Jonathan Proctor, the Rockies and Plains program director at Defenders of Wildlife. The Bureau of Reclamation, which oversees the operation of dams and irrigation programs, should “open the river and deliver the water to the farmers by alternative means,” he said. Knocking down the dam and replacing it with pumping stations could do the job, he added, while also protecting the sturgeon. Adding wind power to run the stations would avoid hitting the farmers with a big electric bill. Conservation measures would also help, as the irrigation district now loses 66 percent of the water it pulls from the river through seepage, evaporation, spillage, or otherwise.

What Proctor did not mention is that the whole project serves the needs of a relative handful of farmers, mainly growing sugar beets on 56,000 acres of otherwise arid land. And sugar beet production is dependent on another, considerably larger federal handout, a subsidy program that [\*The Wall Street Journal\* recently characterized](#) as “an egregious business welfare scheme.” Both directly and by its indirect effects on the market, that program has cost the nation an estimated \$15 billion since 2008 and 120,000 jobs since 1997. Those estimates come from the Coalition for Sugar Reform, which largely represents business interests, so we should take them with a grain of salt, not sugar. Even so, the subsidies—\$300 million in 2013 alone—dwarf the pittance the federal government has spent defending the pallid sturgeon. And yet the sturgeon, not the sugar beet, is our true heritage as Americans.

But let's set that aside. Defenders of Wildlife would prefer to just say it's possible to have a “win-win” on the Yellowstone River, with both the farmers and the sturgeon getting the water they need. But for that to happen, our “longest undammed river” must actually be undammed. You'll have to wait till July to comment on the Army Corps' revised assessment, but there's no harm in making your voice heard about this issue now, loudly and often.

[Go here to send a note](#) to the Army Corps of Engineers (choose “Executive Office” and address your note to Lt. Gen. Thomas P. Bostick) or [here for the Bureau of Reclamation](#). Feel free to play the emotional angle: “Your children want you to let the pallid sturgeon live.” Or just get right to the point: “Intake Dam must come down.”