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Cc: Jerry\_Rasmussen@mail.fws.gov  
Subject: MICRA Meeting in Chattanooga, TN, etc.

Sorry this is a little late, but have been quite busy with meetings, etc. I thought our MICRA Paddlefish/Sturgeon Committee meeting at the IMAX Theatre in Chattanooga was a good one, except we were really pressed for time by having a half-day meeting. Our attendance was really good and was represented by Committee members from the states of IN, LA, IL, OH, KS, IA, KY, AR, OK, TN, NE, GA, MS, MO, and FWS. So far this year, we have tagged about 1,500 wild fish and collected nearly 2,500 rostrums. That's pretty good, and there are still the hatchery reared fish to come.

We spent the major portion of the afternoon (Greg Conover and Jo Grady, presiding) discussing data sheets and modifying some columns for additional data entry. Greg and Jo will be sending a mailing shortly explaining the changes and instructing you about using the new field sheets. I think most of the changes were badly needed and it's probably a good idea to revisit these issues every year or so.

You've undoubtedly heard by now (hope my message got to everyone) about the untimely death of Mike Pitman (Ronnie's husband). Ronnie called last week and thanked everyone for the cards and thoughts. I told her we had collected nearly \$100 from Committee members and that I was going to send a check to Agape Outreach in a couple of weeks in honor of Mike. She said to make sure all of you folks were thanked. I will not be sending our contribution for a week or so if any who forgot still want to contribute, you can. On another Ronnie Pitman issue, our Committee had a plaque prepared for her for her meritorius service to the MICRA Paddlefish/Sturgeon Committee since 1992 and sent it to Bob Betsill in Texas. He will present it to her at her official retirement party in a few weeks.

I thought the Symposium on the Harvest, Trade and Conservation of North American Paddlefish and Sturgeon was excellent. It may have been the best paddlefish/sturgeon meeting that I have ever attended. The caviar industry was well represented, as well as a few commercial

fishermen. There was considerable interest in Rosemarie Gnam's and other's comments about the CITES regulations and what it might mean later down the line. There is no doubt the new CITES regulations are going to tighten up imports considerably and has full attention of the caviar folks. Since there is a shortage of Caspian Sea caviar, there is little doubt that the caviar industry will look harder to our Mississippi River Basin for paddlefish and sturgeon eggs. Aquaculture, which was also represented, can help fill the void, but they are few in number, and most deal with flesh rather than eggs because paddlefish and sturgeon are late maturing species. Their impacts will not be significant in the near future.

Last week, I attended the MICRA Executive Board meeting to learn the Board's feelings about the proposed paddlefish and sturgeon commercial fisheries closure. Not surprisingly, the Executive Board did not buy into supporting commercial closure. Although there is lots of concern about the CITES impacts to our fisheries, Marion Conover asked Jerry and I to prepare a letter for his signature for all 28 Basin Fishery Chiefs. That letter will discuss the recent CITES legislation, and how reduced imports might affect our domestic paddlefish and sturgeon populations. The letter will ask them to be proactive about the issues, and to take action if necessary in order to maintain the viability and sustainability of the paddlefish and sturgeon populations. MICRA leadership will support whatever actions individual states take. The letter will also ask states to keep their eyes open and MICRA will continue to collect needed information through the tagging study as fast as it can.

In retrospect, I feel pretty good about the entire MICRA issue. I would be kidding myself if I thought all states would recommend closure. We as a committee have done all we can do. We have planted a seed. MICRA is aware of our concerns and if all hell breaks loose (it may not), at least our bosses should not have forgotten the issues and should be able to recommend corrective measures without much delay. That's realistically about all we can ask.

During the Executive Board meeting, it was agreed that \$50,000 would be committed to our tagging project from MICRA's unobligated funds. These funds would be divided between the tagging project itself (\$30,000) and the FWS tag reading project (\$20,000). I told the Executive Board that besides the tagging project, we still had tremendous voids in understanding paddlefish and sturgeon age and growth in Basin waters and realistically, we needed additional monies to allow us better determine the health of our local populations. All agreed these were worthy requests, however money is the big hang-up. It's difficult to obtain funding for a species that considered a sport fish in one state and a commercial species in another. Commercial fisheries money

is nearly impossible to get right now. We discussed the possibility of approaching Dept. of Commerce for funding and Ron Pasch (TVA) agreed to make the initial contact. Will keep you posted on that issue.

Have a good summer and remember, it's not too late to be thinking about a fall meeting. We can always hold it in St. Louis which is pretty easy for everyone to get to, or if you have something special going on, we might consider that. Maybe we should think about Marion, IL and finding out how our data is manipulated by Greg and Jo. Just some thoughts.

I hope to see many of you at Catfish 2000. Suppose we will have to listen to Mosher brag about the pending world record flathead (121 pounds).