

Work Task E21: Planet Ranch

FY15 Estimate	FY15 Actual Obligations	Cumulative Expenditures Through FY15	FY16 Approved Estimate	FY17 Proposed Estimate	FY18 Proposed Estimate	FY19 Proposed Estimate
\$40,000	\$78,302.48	\$344,212.22	\$10,340,000*	\$2,000,000	\$3,000,000	\$4,000,000

* Includes an \$8,300,000 land and water acquisition approved by the Steering Committee.

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Start Date: FY05 (closed in FY05; reopened in FY09)

Expected Duration: FY55

Long-Term Goal: Habitat creation and management

Conservation Measures: CLRA1, WIFL1, WIFL2, WRBA2, WYBA3, CRCR2, LEB1, YBCU1, YBCU2, ELOW1, GIFL1, GIWO1, VEFL1, BEVI1, YWAR1, SUTA1, and MNSW2

Location: Reach 3, Bill Williams River, 11 miles east of River Mile 190, Arizona

Purpose: To create and manage a mosaic of native land cover types for LCR MSCP covered species

Connections with Other Work Tasks (Past and Future): Costs associated with a Federal land and water appraisal conducted in FY08 were captured under Work Task E16. Work Task E21 was closed at the end of FY05 but was reopened in FY09 to track expenditures during negotiations.

Project Description: Planet Ranch encompasses approximately 8,400 acres, of which approximately 2,400 acres had previously been farmed for alfalfa. In 2008, the LCR MSCP Steering Committee approved a land and water resolution, which authorized the Bureau of Reclamation (Reclamation) to enter into negotiations to secure approximately 3,418 acres of land and 5,549 acre-feet of water per year. The sum of \$8,300,000 to secure this land and water was determined through the Federal appraisal process.

The intent of the acquisition from Freeport McMoran is to secure the river corridor and develop the property as a conservation area. Creditable acreage includes: (1) active restoration of all four land cover types within the property boundary, (2) passive restoration within the active Bill Williams River channel on the property, and (3) downstream credit on the Bill Williams River National

Wildlife Refuge (Bill Williams River NWR). The current restoration concept for active restoration includes isolated backwaters for native fishes, including active rearing ponds and disconnected backwaters. The areas will be integrated into a mosaic with cottonwood-willow and honey mesquite. An estimated 550 acres of cottonwood-willow trees are anticipated to be developed on Planet Ranch (both active and passive restoration); another 396 acres of cottonwood-willow trees downstream on the Bill Williams River NWR will also be afforded protection by securing the Planet Ranch property and are also creditable to the LCR MSCP.

The entire ranch west of the river crossing (approximately 1,000 acres) and some acreage east of the river crossing defined as reserved under the Land Use Agreement, would be managed for LCR MSCP covered species. This area, which includes two residences, would be open to pedestrian traffic by 2021.

The entire ranch east of the river crossing road (approximately 2,400 acres) is not scheduled for restoration and would not be managed for LCR MSCP covered species. These lands would be managed by the Arizona Game and Fish Department (AGFD), with the exception of any lands shown as reserved for LCR MSCP purposes in the Land Use Agreement, and would be open to the public by 2021 for uses compatible with the purpose of the LCR MSCP.

A tentative schedule of activities has been presented to the AGFD and includes: (1) farming approximately 1,100 acres to secure water rights in FY16 and FY17, (2) planning for restoration and ground stabilization, including a workshop to incorporate information from native fish experts in FY16, (3) drafting of a Restoration, Development, and Monitoring Plan, permitting, and design in FY17, and (4) pond construction, ground stabilization on farmed areas, and restoration of cottonwood-willow between FY18 and FY20. A formal plan for public access would be agreed to during this period in a signed Land Use Agreement between Reclamation and the AGFD.

Previous Activities: Planet Ranch was evaluated, and a conceptual design was developed, assuming the ranch and water entitlement was secured for the LCR MSCP. This information is posted on the LCR MSCP Web site as *Planet Ranch: Potential Restoration Site, Preliminary Site Analysis and Conceptual Design*.

Regulatory compliance activities required under the National Environmental Policy Act, the Endangered Species Act, and the National Historic Preservation Act were completed for the acquisition of Planet Ranch. Native American consultation and a Class I Cultural Survey as prescribed in Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act were completed in FY11.

The Arizona Game and Fish Commission approved the acquisition of Planet Ranch in August 2014.

FY15 Accomplishments: Legislation directing the Secretary of the Interior to enter in an agreement for the acquisition of Planet Ranch was signed in December 2014. The land and water resolution for the acquisition of Planet Ranch was approved by the LCR MSCP Steering Committee on April 22, 2015.

FY16 Activities: On December 15, 2015, escrow closed, land ownership and associated water rights were deeded to the Arizona Game and Fish Commission, and Planet Ranch officially became a conservation area. The purchase price for the lease was \$8,300,000 for 3,418 acres of land and 5,549 acre-feet of water per year.

To ensure the viability of water rights associated with the property, approximately 1,200 acres of alfalfa are being grown as pasture from December 16, 2015, through December 15, 2016. Water usage is tracked through totalizing flow meters and, when combined with acreage being farmed, documents the beneficial use of water on the property. Water usage and crop acreage are updated monthly. A contract farmer is providing irrigation, site maintenance, as well as an onsite presence. Significant vandalism has occurred on other ranches within the watershed when no onsite presence has been maintained.

Discussions with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to maintain an onsite presence are underway. The intent is to have a permanent, Federal presence onsite by the close of FY16. Procurement of vehicles, heavy equipment, and supplies would begin.

Planning will be initiated for a Restoration, Development, and Monitoring Plan, which would guide development of the conservation area and likely include a workshop focused on isolated backwater construction and management. The created backwaters would likely be a mix of smaller ponds to support fish augmentation in combination with larger ponds used as long-term refugia.

Reclamation continues to be an active member of the Bill Williams River Corridor Steering Committee. Converting lands from private ownership to a resource agency has provided additional flexibility in the release of water from Alamo Dam. Lands secured within the active flood plain, as well as lands downstream on the Bill Williams River NWR, benefit from both normal and high flow releases from the dam. These releases can be conducted without affecting these former privately owned lands. However, during the period of time when water rights are being secured, December 2016 – December 2017, it was requested that high flow events be held to a minimum. Coordination with both the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers will continue.

Monitoring: Pre-development monitoring will be conducted in FY16.

Proposed FY17 Activities: The alfalfa pasture would be irrigated through December 15, 2017. Water use is tracked through totalizing flow meters and, when combined with acreage being farmed, documents the beneficial use of water on the property. A farmer would provide irrigation, site maintenance, as well as an onsite presence.

Permitting and refinement of the Restoration, Development, and Monitoring Plan, including design work on specific areas of development, would be initiated. Minor construction or upgrading of facilities, such as the maintenance shop, to support development and long-term management are anticipated.

A permanent, Federal onsite presence, using existing housing, is anticipated in FY17. Reclamation participation on the Bill Williams River Corridor Steering Committee would continue.

Monitoring: Pre-development monitoring will continue in FY17.

Pertinent Reports: N/A