

## Work Task E21: Planet Ranch

FY16 Estimate	FY16 Actual Obligations	Cumulative Expenditures Through FY16	FY17 Approved Estimate	FY18 Proposed Estimate	FY19 Proposed Estimate	FY20 Proposed Estimate
\$10,340,000*	\$10,548,669.63	\$9,716,678.45	\$2,000,000	\$3,000,000	\$4,000,000	\$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:** BEVI1, BONY2, BONY3, CLRA1, CRCR2, ELOW1, GIFL1, GIWO1, LEB1, MNSW2, RASU2, RASU3, SUTA1, VEFL1, WIFL1, WIFL2, WRBA2, WYBA3, YBCU1, YBCU2, and YWAR1

**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 (*Medicago sativa*). In 2008, the 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 from the Freeport Minerals Corporation (FMC). Legislation directing the Secretary of the Interior to enter in an agreement for the acquisition of Planet Ranch was signed in December 2014. Program Decision Document 15-002, which allowed Reclamation to enter into a lease for the land and water, was approved by the Steering Committee on April 22, 2015. The sum of \$8,300,000 to secure this land and water was determined through the Federal appraisal process.

The Arizona Game and Fish Commission received title for the land and water rights through a donation from the FMC in December 2015. The lease between Reclamation and the FMC was transferred as part of the donation agreement.

The intent of the acquisition 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 where feasible, (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 grow-out ponds and disconnected backwaters. These areas will be integrated into a mosaic with cottonwood-willow (*Populus fremontii-Salix gooddingii*) and honey mesquite (*Prosopis glandulosa*). An additional 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 conservation area includes the entire 3,418 acres of land. However, the ranch west of the main north/south access road (approximately 660 acres) and some acreage east of the main north/south access road, defined as reserved under the lease amendment, would be managed for LCR MSCP covered species.

The ranch east of the main north/south access road (approximately 2,758 acres) would not be managed for LCR MSCP covered species. These lands would be managed by the Arizona Game and Fish Department, with the exception of any lands shown as reserved for LCR MSCP purposes in the lease amendment.

A tentative schedule of activities 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) infrastructure improvements, pond construction, ground stabilization on farmed areas, and restoration of cottonwood-willow between FY18 and FY21. A Land Use Agreement will be developed to further define roles and responsibilities, including public access.

**Previous Activities:** 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.

**FY16 Accomplishments:** On December 15, 2015, escrow closed, landownership, 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.

The acquisition of Planet Ranch involved multiple partners and included both the sever and transfer of some water rights from Planet Ranch to secure water rights for existing uses in other areas as well as leaving a portion of existing water rights in Planet Valley. As a result, 396 acres of cottonwood-willow habitat downstream from Planet Ranch on the Bill Williams River NWR were protected and credited toward completion of conservation measures because groundwater that could have been consumed for other purposes will now remain in the basin to support this downstream habitat. In return, the program made the commitment to promote recruitment of cottonwood-willow during releases from Alamo Dam for this section of the refuge.

To ensure the viability of water rights associated with the property, approximately 1,200 acres were aerially and ground seeded with alfalfa, which was grown as pasture from December 16, 2015, through December 15, 2016. Water use was tracked through totalizing flow meters and, when combined with acreage being farmed, documents the beneficial use of water on the property. Water use and crop acreage were updated every 2 weeks. A contract farmer provided 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 (USFWS) to help manage the conservation area began in FY16. The USFWS is supportive of the project and, barring any unforeseen circumstances, intends to provide onsite staffing.

Significant repairs to the irrigation system were required due to the age of the irrigation infrastructure and its limited use in the past decades. A backhoe and a skidsteer loader with auger attachments were purchased.

Utilities were transferred to Reclamation. Groundwater well ownership was transferred to the Arizona Game and Fish Commission. National Environmental Policy Act compliance for development and restoration of the ranch was initiated.

A workshop to develop a conceptual plan for development and restoration was held in August 2016. The conceptual design included the creation of 71 acres of disconnected backwaters that would be developed for razorback suckers (*Xyrauchen texanus*) and bonytail (*Gila elegans*). These ponds would be approximately 5–20 acres in size and 4–12 feet deep. The design and construction of these ponds will depend on the depth to water and will likely also be lined with geotextile material. Excavated material will be placed on the edges of the refugia, creating a natural border for the pond and used to return topographic diversity to the agricultural fields. The border may be planted with

riparian species to allow habitat connectivity with the riparian corridor of the Bill Williams River, to provide shade over the water's edge for native fishes, and to prevent erosion.

Ten shallow groundwater monitoring wells were permitted, drilled, and developed to track groundwater elevations in and around the proposed location of the ponds.

**Monitoring:** Pre-development monitoring was conducted in June and July 2016. No breeding southwestern willow flycatchers (*Empidonax traillii extimus*) were detected, although migrants were present during the survey. No yellow-billed cuckoos (*Coccyzus americanus occidentalis*) were detected during two passive listening surveys. Both species were present prior to the purchase of Planet Ranch by the FMC. Several other LCR MSCP avian species were present during informal, exploratory surveys, including the summer tanager (*Piranga rubra*), Gila woodpecker (*Melanerpes uropygialis*), vermilion flycatcher (*Pyrocephalus rubin*), Arizona Bell's vireo (*Vireo bellii arizonae*), Sonoran yellow warbler (*Dendroica petechia sonorana* = *Setophaga petechia sonorana*), and California black rail (*Laterallus jamaicensis coturniculus*). California leaf-nosed bats (*Macrotus californicus*) and the pale Townsend's big eared bat (*Corynorhinus townsendii pallescens* = *Plecotus townsendii pallescens* = *C. townsendii townsendii*) were captured.

**FY17 Activities:** To ensure the viability of water rights associated with the property, alfalfa will continue to be grown as pasture from December 16, 2016, 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. Water use and crop acreage are updated every 2 weeks. A contract farmer is providing irrigation, site maintenance, as well as an onsite presence.

Environmental compliance for the construction of the ponds and other habitat features will be prepared in FY17. Upon completion of environmental compliance, minor construction and infrastructure improvements will begin and will likely include drilling of additional production groundwater wells to supply the ponds.

Releases out of Alamo Dam are the responsibility of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. Bill Williams River hydrologic models will be updated with new topographic and hydrologic information to provide a tool to assist future management decisions by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the Bill Williams River Corridor Steering Committee regarding releases out of Alamo Dam. The model will allow for the assessment of both the current conditions as well as conditions after development and the benefits those releases may provide to the habitat in the conservation area.

A Land Use Agreement between Reclamation and the Arizona Game and Fish Department will be drafted. A Restoration Development and Monitoring Plan, which would inform development of the conservation area, will be completed.

The entrance gates along the main north-south access road through Planet Ranch were reopened to the public after 32 years of closure in January 2017; they provide a travel corridor between La Paz and Mohave Counties. Law enforcement activities will be required to limit use to this main access road.

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 as long as releases are coordinated with activities associated with the construction of Planet Ranch. Coordination with both the USFWS and U.S. Army Corps of Engineers will continue.

**Monitoring:** Pre-development general bird surveys will be conducted from mid-April through June and funded under post-development work tasks (Section F) to provide migratory bird species information for environmental compliance activities associated with construction of the habitat at Planet Ranch.

**Proposed FY18 Activities:** It is anticipated that irrigation of the alfalfa pasture will be discontinued in December 2017. The LCR MSCP will begin habitat creation activities in FY18. The restoration will be guided by the Restoration Development and Monitoring Plan. Improvements during FY18 will focus on infrastructure improvements and preparation for pond construction.

Infrastructure improvements may include (1) realignment and extension of electrical power lines, (2) procurement and placement of modular homes for onsite staff and travel trailer hookups for construction crews, (3) construction of an equipment storage shed, and (4) installation of utilities for all improvements, including water, power, and septic.

Due to the size and complexity of Planet Ranch, several years of construction will be required for full development, with completion scheduled for late 2020 or 2021.

**Monitoring:** Construction compliance monitoring will be conducted as needed to minimize impacts to listed and covered species. Post-development monitoring will begin after construction is completed and appropriate habitat is present.

**Pertinent Reports:** N/A