

U.S. Senate passes Platte River recovery bill

DENVER - The U.S. Senate has approved \$157 million to help carry out a three-state agreement to manage the Platte River to accommodate endangered species and the growing number of cities and farmers using the river.

The bill's passage Thursday follows approval of the agreement in 2006 by the governors of Wyoming, Colorado and Nebraska. The U.S. House previously passed the measure.

Sen. Wayne Allard, R-Colo., said the bill aims to ensure that compliance with the federal Endangered Species Act doesn't stop the water from flowing.

The threatened and endangered species dependent on the river are three birds _ interior least tern, whooping crane and piping plover _ and a fish _ the pallid sturgeon.

"When a program is developed that protects water users' rights and creates wildlife habitat protection, it is a win-win for everyone involved," Sen. Ken Salazar, D-Colo.

The legislation authorizes the Interior secretary to proceed with the program. The federal and state governments will split the \$317 million cost.

Negotiations on use of the Platte started in the early 1990s. Colorado, Wyoming and Nebraska signed an agreement in 1997 after the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service said water projects on the river threatened the vulnerable wildlife.

"This program has been in the making for some time now and I am pleased that it was included in the natural resources bill and approved by the Senate," said Sen. Ben Nelson, D-Neb.

The Platte's two branches start in the Colorado mountains, flow through Wyoming and Colorado, and merge in Nebraska. With its 15 major dams and reservoirs, the river supplies water to about 3.5 million people, irrigates farms, generates electricity through hydropower plants, and provides recreation and wildlife habitat.