

## **DRAFT – DRAFT -- DRAFT**

### **Arizona:**

#### **Flying Fish Get New Chance**

A faint rumble in the distance quickly becomes a rhythmic roar, drowning out the trickling stream in Redfield Canyon. All eyes look up to the narrow blue patch of sky, and suddenly there it is: the helicopter. Suspended below it via a long cable is its payload, a 50-gallon barrel full of tiny imperiled fish.

The fate of these fish is in the hands of this helicopter pilot. His job is to set the barrel on a large flat rock in Redfield Creek between canyon walls less than 100 feet apart and several hundred feet high with large cottonwoods and other trees all around.

#### **He delivers.**

Despite a strong wind, he lands the barrel right on target. The six-person ground crew cheers.

“It’s really something to see, to think what he is risking for a barrel load of minnows,” says Bob Rogers, the manager of the Conservancy’s Muleshoe Ranch Cooperative Management Area. Redfield Canyon is in a remote northern corner of this 57,000-acre preserve in southeastern Arizona.

The minnows he refers to are federally threatened loach minnows and spikedace, tiny native fish that are in trouble because of habitat loss elsewhere in Arizona. They’re being airlifted to streams and springs at the Muleshoe, because it provides some of the healthiest habitat in the state, thanks to 15 years of restoration and cooperative management by the Conservancy and the Bureau of Land Management.

#### **This day is a long one.**

The helicopter, supplied by the Bureau of Reclamation, makes four deliveries of fish: Almost 700 endangered desert pupfish from ponds at the Conservancy’s Lower San Pedro River Preserve go to springs near the Muleshoe headquarters. A similar number of spikedace and loach minnows, originally from the Conservancy’s Aravaipa Canyon Preserve, go to Hot Springs and Redfield canyons.

Ground crews – representing the Conservancy, Arizona Game and Fish, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Bureau of Land Management – are waiting at four locations. They divide the wriggling mass of fish into five-gallon buckets and carry them to the streams for release.

At the release sites, the crews take spring and stream water temperature readings and gradually add small amounts of that water to the buckets as a way to acclimate the fish. The fish are counted and gently released into the water.

The day is longest for the Redfield Canyon crew. To get to the site, they drove ATV’s one hour into the rugged backcountry and hiked another two hours into the canyon to receive the fish. At the drop site, the crew divvied up the fish into five-gallon buckets, strapped them onto frame packs and hiked with

their 45-pound burdens upstream, clamoring over 50-foot rock falls in search of an optimum release site.

The Redfield crew returned to the Muleshoe headquarters well after dark.

### **Will the Fish Survive?**

Biologists are optimistic about the survival of these fish.

This is the fourth relocation of imperiled fish in five years. Previous re-locations of topminnow into Muleshoe streams have successfully established a sustaining population of that species. The Muleshoe's seven perennial streams have always had populations of the Sonora sucker, speckled dace, longfin dace and the endangered Gila chub

The stream habitats in the Muleshoe are healthy and free of the non-native species that outcompete these natives elsewhere.

"There are very few perennial water ways within Arizona that are free of non-natives," says Clayton Crowder, a conservation biologist at Arizona Game and Fish.

### **Why Tiny Imperiled Fish Matter**

What's good for these tiny imperiled fish is ultimately good for people. Their protection helps provide a measure of how well we are caring for our lands and waters.

"To save the fish, we have to save the streams and preserve the watershed. That means big-time conservation," says the Conservancy's Ken Wiley, Director of Stewardship in Arizona. "That's what we've demonstrated here."

"If we are willing to save the fish, we will also save the water and the wildlife dependent on that water and, more importantly, that water will continue to run downhill to where most of us live."

###