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tions. It doesn't decrease public hunting and fishing opportunities. If anything, the goal is to increase those opportunities.'

During the next segment, USFWS coordinator Wayne Nelson-Stastny noted the Missouri River basin covers 530,000 square miles, or about one-sixth of the contiguous United States. He spoke of the vast opportunities for further developing habitat and recreation.

"We have two unique reaches right out our back door," he said. "People come to the river to enjoy the recreation and habitat.'

Since 2002, the river has seen major changes with the altering of nearly 3 million acres of natural habitat, Nelson-Stastny said.

"We have non-native fish that dominate many river reaches," he said. "Currently, 51 of 67 native fish species are listed as rare or declining. And many parts of the food chain are decreasing.'

During his segment, Mietz noted the opportunities offered by the MNRR as a wild and scenic river.

Tourism already plays a major role in the region, benefiting both South Dakota and Nebraska, Mietz said. The two MNRR stretches contribute \$4 million annually to the economy and directly create 171 jobs, he said. In addition, Ponca State Park attracted 746,000 visitors in 2010.

'We hope to make (tourism) an even bigger boon to the economy," he said.

The next segment was provided by Lake Andes National Wildlife Refuge manager Mike Bryant. He called the proposal "America's great outdoors initiative.'

"The MNRR reaches look and function similar to pre-dam conditions. We also have the Karl Mundt refuge near Lake Andes," he said. "We want to build on those foundations."

The land-protection program's funding would come from three sources: the Land and Water Conservation Fund, which requires congressional support; migratory bird funding; and North American Wetlands Conservation Act grants.

If landowners choose a conservation easement, the property would stay under private ownership and remain on the propertytax rolls, Bryant said.

"Conservation easements are popular in South Dakota. We have waiting lists of more than 800 landowners," he said. "We have \$10 million annually that comes into South Dakota communities (from these easements).

The land-protection project seeks to draw up one type of easement agreement, Bryant said. The program doesn't have a set number of acres, he said.

"When it comes to easements, we want to craft language that can be used up and down the river," he said. "It's difficult if we try to craft something different for each piece of property.'

Bryant spoke of the perceived economic benefits of the program.

"We believe, if the project goes forward, it will increase tourism and bring additional dollars to rural areas and improve the quality of life," he said.

The public comment period runs until March 16, Kaczor said. The final proposal requires

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has also drawn a sharp response from congressional Republicans.

Obama administration officials have said they don't want to abridge anyone's religious freedom, but want to give women access to important preventive care. Supporters of the rule, including the ACLU and women's advocacy groups, say the measure is about female health.

Republican lawmakers in a handful of states have seized on the contentious issue, presenting bills that would allow insurance companies to ignore the federal rules. Measures in Idaho, Missouri and Arizona would expand the exemptions to secular insurers or businesses that object to covering contraception, abortion or sterilization.

Officials have said the Obama administration's ruling was carefully considered, after reviewing more than 200,000 comments from interested parties and the public. The one-year extension, they said, responds to concerns raised by religious employers about making adjustments.

Administration officials stress that individual decisions about whether to use birth control, and what kind, remain in the hands of women and their doctors.

approval from both the NPS and USFWS regional directors, he said. That could be 1 1/2 years away, and action on easements and purchases could be 3 to 4 years away, he said.

ANSWERING QUESTIONS

When the floor was opened to the audience, questions arose over river levels, the spring pulse and sandbar projects.

Those areas fall under control of the Corps of Engineers, Mietz said, attempting to clear up the confusion.

"This proposed plan doesn't address any of those issues," he said. "We had an (environmental impact statement) for this program. We are concerned with

habitat. There is no construction involved with any of this.

Questions arose over the program's jurisdiction, particularly if the property falls within Yankton city limits. Both Kaczor and Mietz said the USFWS and NPS would work with the affected local governments.

One man asked whether more trees could be planted along the river stretches. Kaczor responded that tree-planting options already exist outside the proposed land-protection plan, as the USFWS provides a private lands program.

After the meeting, Jim Holy of Yankton said he owns land near Running Water. He's not interested in participating in the landprotection plan, but he did

attend Thursday's meeting to draw attention to another issue.

He held up a picture of property downstream from Chief Standing Bear Memorial Bridge. The river bank showed a huge undercut, presumably from last year's historic flooding.

"We've got tremendous bank erosion," Holy said.

Holy showed the photo to Casey Kruse, the USFWS' Missouri River coordinator. Kruse acknowledged the bank erosion and other problems facing the Missouri River. However, he told the Press & Dakotan that he believes the land-protection plan offers a real opportunity for the river and those who use it.

"So far, it's all about planning and visioning. Now, we are finding the tools to put those concepts into action," he said. "We want the preservation of the wild and scenic river. We want to increase accessibility to the river, and we want to get youth into the great outdoors.

The program could increase tourism through greater boat and natural trail access, Kruse said. But it also takes into account Native American religious and cultural values as well as the river's historical significance, he

"It preserves the legacy of things that people are interested in," he said. "People feel a real connection, an intensive relationship with the river."

The 2011 flooding and its aftermath provide an opportunity

to reflect on the river's development from a national, regional and individual basis, Kruse said.

'We need to listen to the messages of the epic flood and what lessons it teaches us," he said. "If we go back to the way things were, at some point we will see a repeat of 2011 with the same catastrophic results. What will we do differently with this opportunity presented to us?"

Those who couldn't attend this week's regional meetings can still comment on the land protection plan until March 16. The public can visit online at http://parkplanning.nps.gov/niob -ponca or email niobrara_ponca@fws.gov.



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