



Mississippi Unit students Jared Porter and Patrick Kroboth conducting research on pallid and shovelnose sturgeon.

## Program Update

# Cooperative Research Units

## March 2014

### RESEARCH EDUCATION AND TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE

**State of the Program:** Your Cooperative Research Unit (CRU) Program remains unchanged in its mission of research, technical assistance and education. While the mission remains unchanged, considerable change is occurring within the national program office and in individual units. At the national level, CRU is undergoing a substantial change in leadership. Ken Williams retired from his position as Chief in March 2013 and Kevin Whalen (Deputy Chief) moved to the position of Unit Supervisor in September 2013. CRU's leadership has been covered by a succession of Acting Chiefs (Kevin Whalen, Mike Tome and Jim Fleming) and Acting Deputy Chiefs (John Thompson and Don Dennerline). Jim Fleming announced his retirement as Unit Supervisor, effective March 2014. Jim has served in leadership roles in CRU since 1995, serving 12 years as Deputy Chief and 6 years as a Unit Supervisor. Jim Fleming will be coming back in a limited capacity to work with the transition leadership until a new Chief is selected.

The vacancy announcement for Chief closed February 19, 2014, with candidate review being conducted presently. Prior to the vacancy announcement being posted, the National Cooperator's Coalition provided input to the Associate Director of Ecosystems, USGS, regarding qualifications and job description for the Chief's position. It is hoped that the selection of the Chief will occur within the

next couple of months, with a report date ASAP, but realistically, expectations are for a June-August time frame. The position of Deputy Chief, a position that has daily operational responsibility for the program, is to be advertised in late March so a candidate list can be made immediately available to the new Chief when he/she reports for duty.

For the past decade, the program has been anticipating considerable turnover within our scientific ranks due to the program's aging demographics. Retirements are now a significant factor with 18 scientists currently eligible for retirement, and 25 additional candidates being offered an early out retirement option by USGS. Attrition from our scientist ranks is having substantial impact on individual units as budgets are not sufficient to refill vacated positions and future budgets remain uncertain. Reduced capability in the teaching/mentoring and research arena is now impacting cooperator services in 17 states. As noted in the next section, program budgets have been reduced through appropriations and the sequestration processes. Without budgetary relief and future budget certainty, the program will likely continue its cannibalism of existing positions lost through attrition, to support remaining positions within the program. Rebuilding capacity to address information needs of state and federal partners and to assist in the training of the next generation of

natural resource professionals, will be a significant challenge for the new Chief. State and University Cooperators will need to strategically engage the new Chief on this issue.



*"Pursuing my doctorate degree with the Montana Cooperative Wildlife Research Unit has provided me with invaluable hands-on experience in a real-world context" - Dave Ausband (Doctoral student)*

**Staffing & Budget:** Currently, there are 119 Unit scientist positions assigned to CRU. Budgets allowed the program to fill more than 20 vacant positions since 2010, including 11 in FY 2012. At the start FY 2013, 104 science positions were staffed and serving cooperator needs. Budgets and hiring restrictions in FY 2013 impacted hiring actions and resulted in only one new hire. Four new program vacancies were created through attrition in FY 2013 beginning a decline in the number of scientists that is continuing in FY 2014. Five Unit scientists have retired since the beginning of this FY, with more expected by January, 2015

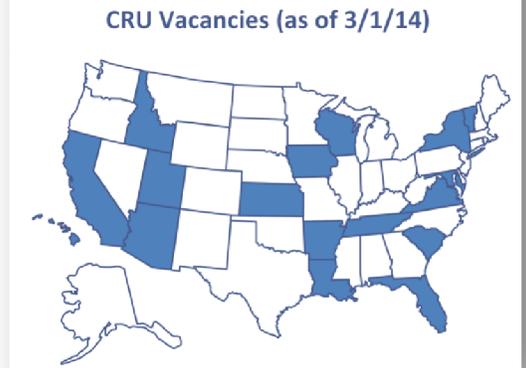
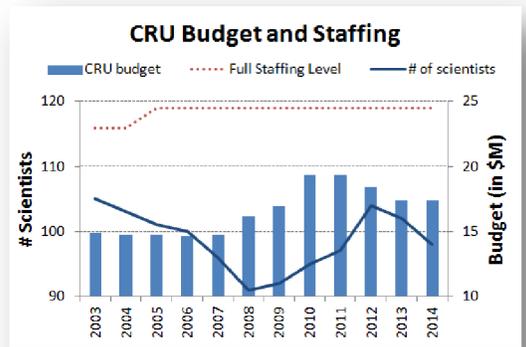
The inability to hire new Unit scientists is tied directly to our appropriated Federal budget. The program has lost approximately \$1.8M in funding since FY 2011. This reduced level of funding has had an effect on all of USGS as it has most Federal agencies. Budget reductions coupled with future budget uncertainty, are severely limiting our ability to fill existing or newly occurring vacancies. Salary savings created by attrition are being directed to maintain existing staff. As of March 1, 2014, we have a total of 21 Unit scientist vacancies which are spread across 17 units.

**New CRU Partnership:** The Doris Duke Conservation Scholars Program (<http://programs.ifas.ufl.edu/ddcsp>) is a new partnership among the University of Florida, Cornell University, University of Arizona, University of Idaho, and North Carolina State University, and is linked closely to the Cooperative Research Unit at each university. The program will provide undergraduate students from under-represented groups in the conservation workforce with hands-on experience. During their first year, students attend a leadership training program and then work for eight weeks with faculty and graduate student mentors. In their second year, students complete paid internships with local, state, federal, tribal agencies or NGO's. During summer 2014, students selected at Florida will work with CRU scientist Ray Carthy and his graduate student Kristin Morris (left) on the ecology of nesting sea turtles.



**Research Highlight - Wind Energy:** Research related to wind energy development is a priority need of the Department of the Interior (DOI) and many of our state and federal partners. Consequently, nine Cooperative Research Units are conducting 13 different research projects related to wind energy development across the United States. Collectively, the projects are designed to facilitate "smart" development and placement of wind energy projects to minimize potential impacts and conflicts by: identifying important species and habitats; establishing methods for monitoring and assessing impacts; developing siting criteria and prioritizing research needs. In the northeast, the Maine and Massachusetts Units are conducting research along the North Atlantic coast to understand potential impacts of off-shore wind energy development on a variety of marine species. Similarly, the South Carolina Unit is working to develop an atlas of seabird nesting sites along the southeastern U.S. to subsequently be used for spatial planning issues including siting of wind energy projects. In the Central Plains, the Wyoming Colorado, and Nebraska Units are all working on wind energy related projects across a wide variety of taxa ranging from birds and bats to large ungulates and even soil invertebrates. Lastly, in the southwest, the Texas Unit is conducting research to identify the seasonal distribution and habitat use of golden eagles throughout their range to evaluate their potential vulnerability to wind energy development and to identify areas where potential conflicts are minimized.

Information on all research projects at each unit can be found at [www.coopunits.org](http://www.coopunits.org).



**Productivity:** Despite the challenges in FY 2013, Unit scientists, working with their cooperators, continued to provide a high level of research, education, technical assistance, and science support, as evidenced by:

- Peer reviewed publications ..... 369
- Invited seminars ..... 51
- Workshops and short-courses ..... 25
- Papers presented ..... 684
- Academic courses taught ..... 73
- Active students ..... 563
- Degrees awarded ..... 71



*"The opportunity to work as a graduate student at the South Dakota Unit contributed significantly to my scientific and professional development" -- Stephanie Shaw (Master's student).*