March 15, 2004

1420 East 6th Ave.
P.O. Box 200701
Helena, MT 59620-0701

Environmental Quality Council
Montana Department of Environmental Quality
Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks
    Fisheries Division
    Endangered Species Coordinator
    Bozeman Office
Montana State Library, Helena
MT Environmental Information Center
Montana Audubon Council
Deer Lodge Valley Conservation District, 1 Hollenback Road, Deer Lodge, MT 59722
U.S. Army Corp of Engineers, Helena
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Helena
State Historic Preservation Office, Helena
Big Hole Watershed Committee, 10281 Kelly Canyon Road, Bozeman, MT 59715
Jan and Lynn Katzoff, 57 Chamberlain Ave., Novato, CA 94947-4332

Ladies and Gentlemen:

Please find enclosed an Environmental Assessment prepared for the Future Fisheries Improvement Program. The Program tentatively plans to provide partial funding to a project calling for enhancing habitat complexity along an 800-foot reach of Fishtrap Creek, a tributary to the Big Hole River. The work would involve excavating a series of 6 pools and then using the excavated material to construct associated point bars. The intent of the project is to enhance habitat for fluvial Arctic grayling. The proposed project is located approximately 16 miles northwest of the community of Wise River in Deer Lodge County.

Please submit any comments that you have by 5:00 P.M., April 15, 2004 to the Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks in Helena at the address listed above. Completion of this project is contingent upon approval being granted by the Fish, Wildlife and Parks Commission. If you have any questions, feel free to contact me at (406) 444-2432.

Sincerely,

Mark Lere, Program Officer
Habitat Protection Bureau
Fisheries Division
e-mail: mlere@state.mt.us

ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT
Fisheries Division
Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks
Fishtrap Creek Instream Habitat Enhancement Project

General Purpose: The 1995 Montana Legislature enacted statute 87-1-272 through 273 that directs the Department to administer a Future Fisheries Improvement Program. The program involves physical projects to restore degraded fish habitat in rivers and lakes for the purpose of improving wild fisheries. The legislature established an earmarked funding account to help accomplish this goal.

The Future Fisheries Improvement Program is proposing to provide partial funding for a project calling for enhancing habitat complexity along an 800-foot reach of Fishtrap Creek, a tributary to the Big Hole River, by excavating a series of six pools and narrowing the channel with the construction of associated point bars. The intent of the project is to enhance pool habitat for fluvial Arctic grayling within a reach of Fishtrap Creek that had been straightened in the past due to highway construction. The project site is located on property owned by the Jan and Lynn Katzoff approximately 16 miles northwest of the community of Wise River in Deer Lodge County (Attachment 1).

I. Location of Project: This project will be conducted on Fishtrap Creek located approximately 16 miles northwest of the community of Wise River within Township 1 North, Range 13 West, Section 4 in Deer Lodge County.

II. Need for the Project: One goal within Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks six-year plan of operation for the fisheries program is to "restore and enhance degraded habitat" by implementing habitat restoration projects and administering the Future Fisheries Improvement Program to restore important habitats on public and private lands. This proposed project would help achieve this goal.

The upper Big Hole River Basin, with the exception of a few attempts at re-founding fluvial grayling in several southwestern Montana waters, supports the last river dwelling Arctic grayling in the lower 48 states. These fish are classified as a "species of special concern" in Montana because of their low numbers and shrinking distribution. Sampling efforts in tributary streams to the upper Big Hole River indicate that fluvial Arctic grayling heavily utilize pool habitat for thermal refugia during the summer months. As a result, enhancing pool habitat in these tributaries may benefit the grayling population in the upper Big Hole drainage. A reach of Fishtrap Creek along State Highway 43 was channelized in the mid-1940s as a result of highway construction. Presently, this straightened reach of stream is over-widened, lacks pool habitat and exhibits poor habitat complexity for fluvial grayling. Recent surveys indicate that the densities of all species of fish are lower within this straightened reach than within reaches above and below the proposed project site.

III. Scope of the Project:

This project calls for excavating a series of six pools within an 800-foot reach of Fishtrap Creek (Attachment 2). The location of these pools will be tied to existing mature willows along the stream margin to take advantage of overhanging cover. Excavated material will be used to narrow the channel by constructing point bars. These point bars will establish scour and depositional processes designed to maintain the pool features. A tracked excavator will be used for the construction and work is expected to

take approximately two days. The project is expected to cost $9,598.00. Of this total, the Future Fisheries Improvement Program would be contributing up to $2,850.00.

IV. Environmental Impact Checklist:

Please see attached checklist.

V. Explanation of Impacts to the Physical Environment

1. Terrestrial and aquatic life and habitats.

Fluvial Arctic grayling densities in the tributaries to the upper Big Hole River appear to be related to complex aquatic habitat, especially pool habitat. This pool habitat appears to provide a thermal refuge for grayling during the summer. The creation of pools in Fishtrap Creek is expected to increase the complexity of habitat found in the stream, leading to a greater carrying capacity for resident and fluvial fish. This project is expected to improve habitat for fluvial grayling, as well as for mountain whitefish, longnose suckers, brook trout, rainbow trout and brown trout.

2. Water quantity, quality and distribution.

Short-term increases in turbidity may occur during project construction. To minimize turbidity, construction will occur during a low flow period and operation of equipment in the stream channel will be minimized to the extent practicable. The Department of Environmental Quality will be contacted to determine narrative conditions required to meet short-term water quality standards and protect aquatic biota. A 124 permit (Stream Protection Act) will be obtained from Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks and the U.S. Army Corp of Engineers will be contacted for requirements needed to meet the federal Clean Water Act (404 permit).

3. Geology and soil quality, stability and moisture.

Soils along the stream margin would be disturbed during pool construction. Soils disturbed by construction will be re-seeded with native vegetation.

4. Vegetation cover, quantity and quality.

Riparian vegetation and cover would be minimally disturbed during the period of construction. The tracked excavator will actively avoid disturbance of woody shrubs within the construction site.

5. Aesthetics.

Aesthetics would be negatively affected during project construction because of ground disturbance and the presence of heavy equipment. These negative effects would be short term since the project is expected to be completed in approximately two days.

6. Unique, endangered, fragile, or limited environmental resources.

Fluvial Arctic grayling are native to Montana and are classified as a "species of special concern" because of their declining numbers and shrinking distribution. This project is expected to enhance habitat diversity in a straightened reach of Fishtrap Creek by constructing a series of pools. Grayling appear to select for pool habitat during the heat of the summer for thermal refuge. Although the scale of this project is relatively small, increases in pool habitat are expected to benefit the fluvial grayling population in the upper Big Hole drainage.

7. Historic and archaeological sites

This reach of Fishtrap Creek previously was disturbed by the construction of State Highway 43 in the mid-1940s. As a result, there is a very low likelihood that cultural properties will be impacted by the proposed project. Should cultural materials be inadvertently discovered during the project, the State Historic Preservation Office will be contacted and the site will be investigated.

VI. Explanation of Impacts on the Human Environment.

1. Access to & quality of recreational activities.

This proposed project is expected to enhance populations of fish residing within an 800-foot reach of Fishtrap Creek. The proposed project site is adjacent to a state fishing access site.

VII. Discussion and Evaluation of Reasonable Alternatives.

1. No Action Alternative

If no action is taken, this straightened reach of Fishtrap Creek will continue to lack habitat complexity and will continue to provide poor habitat for fluvial Arctic grayling.

2. The Proposed Alternative

The proposed alternative is designed to increase habitat complexity by excavating a series of pools within a previously straightened reach of Fishtrap Creek. An increase in pool habitat is expected to benefit fluvial Arctic grayling, as well as other species of fish residing in the stream.

VIII. Environmental Assessment Conclusion Section

1. Is an EIS required? No.

We conclude from this review that the proposed activities will have a positive impact on the physical and human environment.

2. Level of public involvement.

The proposed project was reviewed and supported by the public review panel of the Future

Fisheries Improvement Program. The proposed project also will be reviewed by the Fish, Wildlife and Parks Commission and will be contingent upon their approval. The Environmental Assessment (EA) is being distributed to all individuals and groups listed on the cover letter. The EA also will be published on Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks web page: fwp.state.mt.us.

3. Duration of comment period?

Public comment will be accepted through 5 PM on April 15, 2004.

4. Person responsible for preparing the EA.

Mark Lere, Program Officer
Habitat Protection Bureau
Fisheries Division
Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks
1420 East 6th Avenue, Helena, MT 59620
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MONTANA DEPARTMENT OF FISH, WILDLIFE AND PARKS
1420 E 6th Ave, PO BOX 200701, Helena, MT 59620-0701
(406) 444-2535

ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

Project Title Fishtrap Creek Instream Habitat Enhancement Project

Division/Bureau Fisheries Division-Future Fisheries Improvement
Description of Project This project is being proposed to provide partial funding to a project calling for enhancing habitat complexity along an 800-foot reach of Fishtrap Creek, a tributary to the Big Hole River. The work would involve excavating a series of six pools and narrowing the channel by constructing a series of point bars with the excavated material. The intent of the project is to enhance habitat for fluvial Arctic grayling. The project site is located approximately 16 miles northwest of the community of Wise River in Deer Lodge County.

POTENTIAL IMPACT ON PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

	MAJOR	MODERATE	MINOR	NONE	UNKNOWN	COMMENTS ON ATTACHED PAGES
1. Terrestrial & aquatic life and habitats			X			X
2. Water quality, quantity & distribution			X			X
3. Geology & soil quality, stability & moisture			X			X
4. Vegetation cover, quantity & quality			X			X
5. Aesthetics			X			X
6. Air quality				X		
7. Unique, endangered, fragile, or limited environmental resources			X			X
8. Demands on environmental resources of land, water, air & energy				X		
9. Historical & archaeological sites				X		X

POTENTIAL IMPACTS ON THE HUMAN ENVIRONMENT

	MAJOR	MODERATE	MINOR	NONE	UNKNOWN	COMMENTS ON ATTACHED PAGES
1. Social structures & mores				X		
2. Cultural uniqueness & diversity				X		
3. Local & state tax base & tax revenue				X		
4. Agricultural or industrial production				X		
5. Human health				X		
6. Quantity & distribution of community & personal income				X		
7. Access to & quality of recreational and wilderness activities			X			X
8. Quantity & distribution of employment				X		
9. Distribution & density of population & housing				X		
10. Demands for government services				X		
11. Industrial & commercial activity				X		
12. Demands for energy				X		
13. Locally adopted environmental plans & goals				X		
14. Transportation networks & traffic flows				X		

Other groups or agencies contacted or which may have overlapping jurisdiction Deer Lodge Valley Conservation District, US Fish and Wildlife Service, US Army Corp of Engineers, Montana Department of Environmental Quality, State Historic Preservation Office
Individuals or groups contributing to this EA Jim Magee, Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks; Confluence Consulting, Inc.

Recommendation concerning preparation of EIS No EIS required.
EA prepared by: Mark Lere
Date: February 17, 2004