Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks

September 12, 2005
111 ½ N 3rd Street
Livingston, MT 59047

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
Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation, Trust Lands Division,
Airport Business Park, Billings, MT 59105
Carbon Conservation District , 606 West Front Ave., P.O. Box 510, Joliet, Montana 59041
Natural Resource and Conservation Service, 606 W Front Ave., Joliet, MT 59041
Custer National Forest, 1310 Main Street, Billings, MT 59105
U.S. Bureau of Land Management, Montana State Office, 5001 Southgate Drive, Billings, MT 59101
U.S. Army Corp of Engineers, Helena
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Helena
State Historic Preservation Office, Helena
Paul and Jeanne Loyning, PO Box 78, Frannie, WY

Ladies and Gentlemen:

Please find enclosed an Environmental Assessment (EA) prepared for the Future Fisheries Improvement Program. The Program tentatively plans to provide funding to a fish habitat enhancement project to hand excavate pools to improve over-winter habitat for Yellowstone cutthroat trout. This proposed project is located on the Piney Creek, on mixed federal, state, and private lands near Warren in Carbon County.

Please submit any comments that you have by 5:00 P.M., September 26, 2005 to the Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks in Livingston at the address listed above. If you have any questions, feel free to contact me at (406) 222-3710. Please note that this draft EA will be considered as final if no substantive comments are received by the deadline listed above.

Sincerely,

Patrick Byorth, Fisheries Biologist
Yellowstone Cutthroat Restoration Project
Landowner Incentive Program
e-mail: pbyorth@mt.gov

ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT
Fisheries Division
Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks
Piney Creek Pool 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 providing funding for 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. Additionally, the 1999 Montana Legislature amended statute sections 87-1-273, 15-38-202 and Section 5, Chapter 463, Laws of 1995 to create a bull trout and cutthroat trout enhancement program. The program calls for the enhancement of bull trout and cutthroat trout through habitat restoration, natural reproduction and reductions in species competition by way of the Future Fisheries Program.

The Future Fisheries Improvement Program is proposing to provide funding for a project to enhance pool quality in Piney Creek to improve over-winter survival of Yellowstone cutthroat trout. Piney Creek emerges from the foothills of the Pryor Mountains near Warren, MT, just north of the Wyoming border (Attachment 1) The spring supports a population of Yellowstone cutthroat trout (a species of special concern in Montana) in approximately 1.5 miles of channel. Although the population is surviving, it may be limited by the availability of high quality pools, especially for winter habitat. This project is intended to secure the population by increasing available habitat by hand excavating pools and runs.

I. Location of Project: This project will be conducted on mixed public and private landownership in Township 8 S Range 25 E Section 36 and T 8 S R 26 E Section 31. The project site lies approximately 4 miles northeast of the town of Warren, MT in Carbon County.

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

III. Scope of the Project:

The spring at the head of Piney Creek provides consistent flows during winters for up to a mile, before the channel is diverted across gradient for irrigation. At this point, the habitat quality decreases significantly and the channel froze solid during the winter of 2004-2005. However, we saw YCT in isolated pools under the ice. The Yellowstone cutthroat trout population in Piney Creek was tested as unhybridized in 1994. Because the population is limited by habitat availability, we believe we can increase abundance and overwinter survival by improving the amount of deep pool habitat. However, the size of the stream does not warrant heavy equipment. After a survey of a suitable reference reach, we identified 26 sites where pools will be hand excavated to narrow and deepen the channel. Pool dimensions will closely match existing pools and all work will be completed within the active channel. Reference pools averaged 18 feet long, 8 feet wide and 0.9 feet deep. Maximum pool depth was 1.9 feet. Minor amounts of gravels excavated to deepen pools will simply be contoured to create natural point bars, also within dimensions that reflect reference conditions. Native materials such as large cobble and woody debris will be incorporated where necessary for cover. We have contracted to hire a crew from the Montana

Conservation Corps for one week to assist FWP in excavating pools and narrowing the channel. The total project cost is expected to be $4,400 of which $3,200 will be provided by the Future Fisheries Improvement Program, with the remainder provided as match by the Montana Conservation Corps.

IV. Environmental Impact Checklist:

Please see attached checklist.

V. Explanation of Impacts to the Physical Environment

1. Terrestrial and aquatic life and habitats.

Improving pool habitats within dimensions natural to this stream is expected to enhance overwinter survival and increase Yellowstone cutthroat trout numbers in Piney Creek. The density of this population is critically low and expanding suitable habitat will allow it to increase and persist long-term.

2. Water quantity, quality and distribution.

Short-term increases in turbidity will occur during hand excavation of pools. Hand excavation will minimize turbidity. A 124 permit has been be obtained along with a 318 exemption. The US Army Corp of Engineers was contacted to meet 404 provisions of the Clean Water Act.

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

The Yellowstone cutthroat trout is classified as a "Species of Special Concern" in Montana due to their limited numbers and shrinking distribution. This project is expected to enhance pool habitats for Yellowstone cutthroat trout, leading to greater overwinter survival and long-term persistence of this population.

VII. Discussion and Evaluation of Reasonable Alternatives.

1. No Action Alternative

If no action is taken, the Yellowstone cutthroat trout population will continue to be limited by winter conditions. Recent electrofishing surveys indicate that this isolated population has been reduced to critically low numbers and is in danger of extinction.

2. The Proposed Alternative

The proposed alternative is designed to expand suitable winter habitat by approximately one third. Hand excavating pools within natural dimensions will have very limited negative consequences, while drastically improving available habitat. This alternative would enhance 26 sites where the channel is wide, shallow and prone to freezing. This Yellowstone cutthroat trout population is expected to expand and the probability of long-term persistence should improve.

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 was also reviewed by the Fish, Wildlife and Parks Commission. 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 webpage: fwp.mt.gov.

3. Duration of comment period?

   Public comment will be accepted through 5:00 PM on September 26, 2005.

4. Person responsible for preparing the EA.

   Patrick Byorth, Fisheries Biologist
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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 Piney Creek Pool Enhancement Project

Division/Bureau Fisheries Division -Future Fisheries Improvement

Description of Project The Future Fisheries Improvement Program is proposing to provide funding for a project enhancing pool fish habitat by hand excavating a series of pools within natural stream dimensions. The intent of the project is to improve the quality of pool habitats, especially to improve over-winter survival. The project site is located approximately four miles northeast of the town of Warren in Carbon 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		
4. Vegetation cover, quantity & quality				X		
5. Aesthetics				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

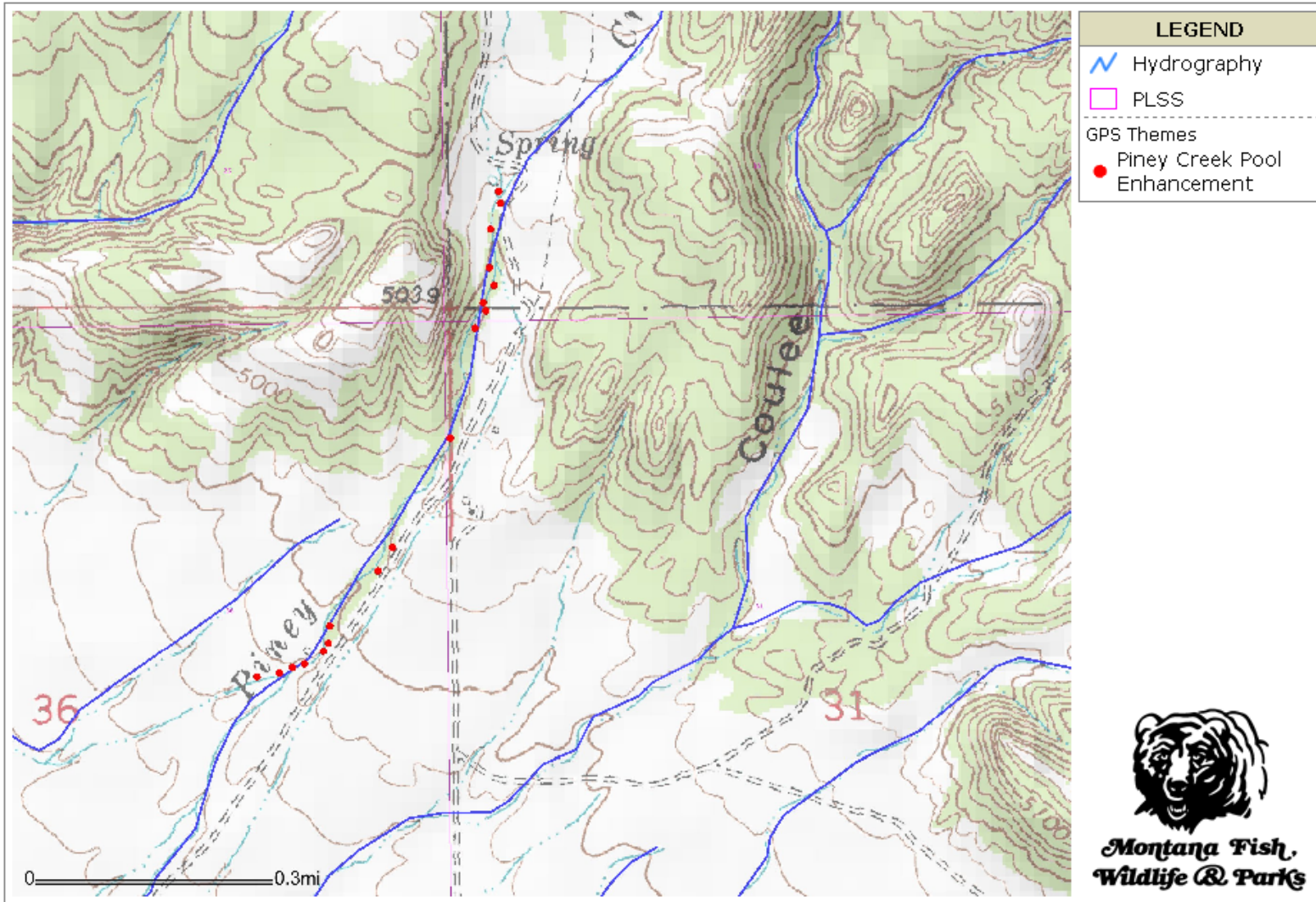
	MAJOR	MODERATE	MINOR	NONE	UNKNOWN	COMMENTS ON ATTACHED PAGES
1. Social structures & mores				X		
2. Cultural uniqueness & diversity				X		
3. Local & state tax base & tax revenue				X		
4. Agricultural or industrial production				X		
5. Human health				X		
6. Quantity & distribution of community & personal income				X		
7. Access to & quality of recreational and wilderness activities				X		
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		

Others contacted or which may have overlapping jurisdiction Carbon Conservation District, US Forest Service, US Bureau of Land Management, Natural Resource and Conservation Service,US Army Corps of Engineers, Paul Loyning, Landowner, Department of Natural Resources and Conservation, Trust lands Division

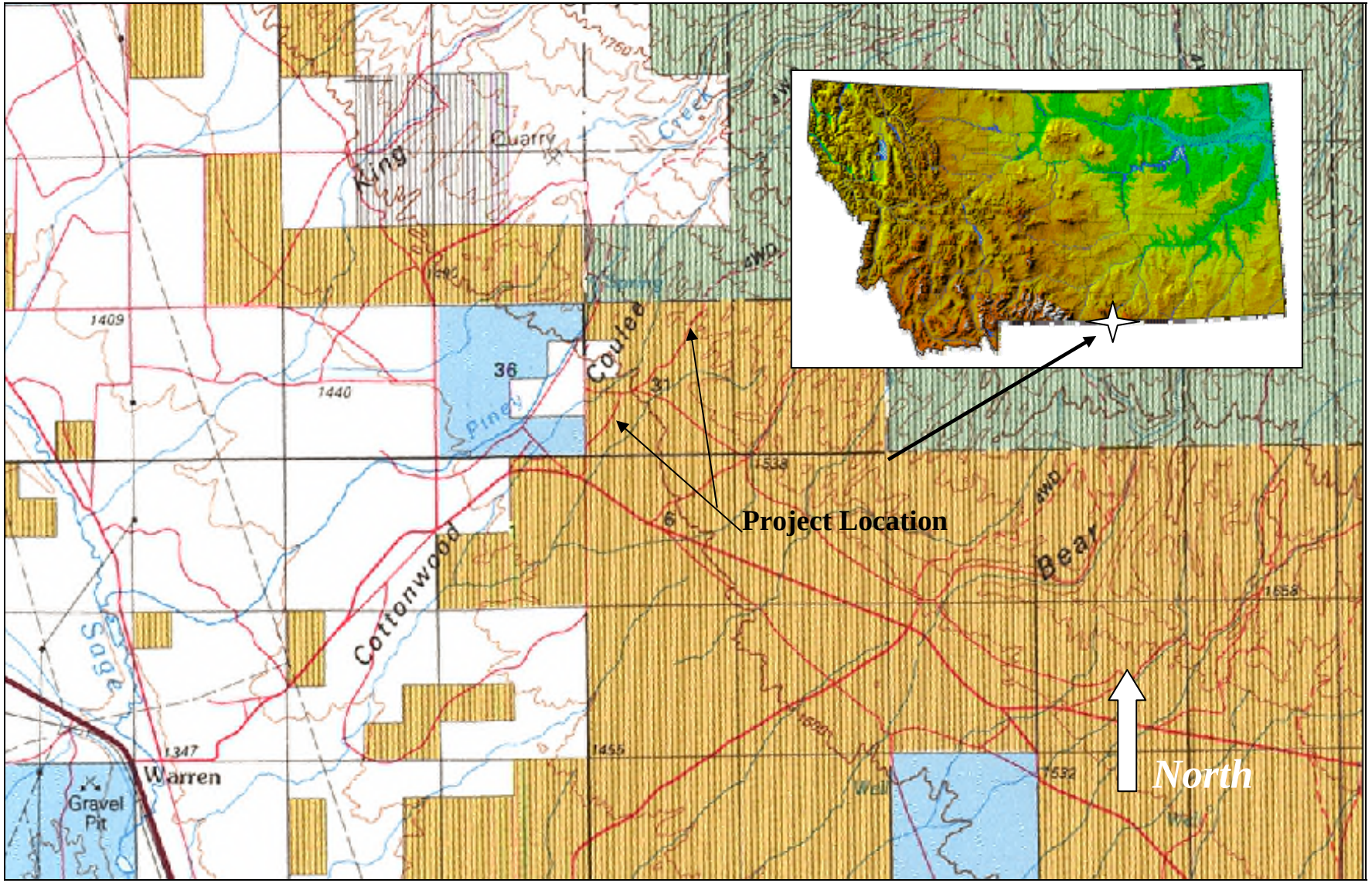
Individuals contributing to this EA. NONE

Recommendation concerning preparation of EIS No EIS required.

EA prepared by: Patrick Byorth___Date: September 9, 2005_____



Piney Creek Pool Enhancements



Map of Piney Creek Vicinity