

March 13, 2006
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
 Native Species Coordinator, Fisheries
 Billings Office
Montana State Library, Helena
MT Environmental Information Center
Montana Audubon Council
Montana Wildlife Federation
Carbon Conservation District, P.O. Box 510, Joliet, MT 59041
U.S. Army Corp of Engineers, Helena
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Helena
State Historic Preservation Office, Helena
Les Schwend, 10 Teesdale Lane, Bridger, MT 59014

Ladies and Gentlemen:

Please find enclosed an Environmental Assessment (EA) prepared for the Future Fisheries Improvement Program. In association with the construction of a series of recreational ponds scheduled by a private landowner, an opportunity exists to re-found Yellowstone cutthroat trout in upper Sage Creek. The Program tentatively plans to provide partial funding to a project calling for the installation of passage barriers to prevent non-native fishes from moving into these new waters. These barriers, in addition to extending the length of an existing culvert one mile downstream of the pond sites, would create a future opportunity to restore Yellowstone cutthroat trout into upper Sage Creek. This EA is providing analysis only for the proposed installation of passage barriers. The potential for a future project calling for the removal of nonnative fish and the re-founding of Yellowstone cutthroat trout in upper Sage Creek will be evaluated in a separate analysis. This proposed project is located approximately fifteen miles south of the town of Pryor in Carbon County.

Please submit any comments that you have by 5:00 P.M., April 13, 2006 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. Please note that this draft EA will be considered as final if no substantive comments are received by the deadline listed above.

Sincerely,

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

ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT
Fisheries Division
Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks
Sage Creek Native Fish Restoration 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 partial funding for a project calling to install barrier structures that will prevent encroachment of non-native brook trout into private recreational ponds planned for construction on the headwater springs of Sage Creek. Additionally, the project calls for lengthening an existing culvert on Sage Creek to create a future passage barrier to brook trout and rainbow trout in preparation for a proposed future Yellowstone cutthroat trout restoration effort. This Environmental Assessment (EA) is intended to only address the proposed barrier construction and culvert extension. The landowner plans to construct these ponds regardless of this proposed barrier project. As a result, the pond construction falls outside the scope of this analysis. A future EA will address the proposed Yellowstone cutthroat trout restoration effort. The project site is located on property owned by Mr. Les Schwend approximately fifteen miles south of the town of Pryor in Carbon County (Attachment 1).

- I. Location of Project: This project will be conducted on Sage Creek located approximately fifteen miles south of the town of Pryor within Township 7 South, Range 26 East, Section 25 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.

In association with a series of recreational ponds to be constructed in the headwater springs of Sage Creek by a private landowner, an opportunity exists to install passage barriers to prevent resident nonnative brook trout and rainbow trout from invading these new waters. An additional opportunity exists to create a passage barrier further downstream in Sage Creek by extending an existing culvert. Installation of these barriers would lead to, and facilitate, the re-founding of Yellowstone cutthroat trout in one mile of the upper Sage Creek drainage. This re-founding effort has not been scheduled, but is planned for the future. Potential environmental consequences associated with restoring Yellowstone cutthroat trout to upper Sage Creek will be evaluated in a separate EA. The Yellowstone cutthroat trout is classified as a species of special concern in Montana because of limited numbers and shrinking distribution.

III. Scope of the Project:

This project proposes to install screened outlet structures into a series of new ponds as a private landowner is constructing them (Attachment 2). The structures are intended to prevent brook trout currently residing in Sage Creek from pioneering into these newly created waters. Additionally, these in-line structures will be used to regulate the water levels of the constructed ponds. Approximately one mile downstream of the proposed pond sites, an existing culvert on Sage Creek also will be lengthened to create an upstream passage barrier to resident brook trout. These proposed actions would act to secure approximately one mile of Sage Creek for a future planned effort to restore Yellowstone cutthroat trout into upper Sage Creek.

The landowner is planning to construct ponds within the Sage creek headwaters regardless of the proposed installation of these outlet barriers. This barrier project, excluding the expense associated with pond construction, is expected to cost approximately \$14,000.00. Of this total, the Future Fisheries Improvement Program would be contributing up to \$8,000.00.

IV. Environmental Impact Checklist:

Please see attached checklist.

V. Explanation of Impacts to the Physical Environment

1. Terrestrial and aquatic life and habitats.

The installation of the proposed passage barriers would provide an opportunity to ultimately re-found Yellowstone cutthroat trout into the upper Sage Creek drainage.

2. Water quantity, quality and distribution.

Short-term increases in turbidity may occur during project construction. To minimize turbidity, the operation of equipment in the active 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 310 permit will be obtained from the local conservation district and the U.S. Army Corp of Engineers will be contacted to determine the need to meet 404 provisions of the Clean Water Act.

3. Geology and soil quality, stability and moisture.

Soils would be disturbed during installation of the outlet structures and the associated pond construction.

4. Vegetation cover, quantity and quality.

Riparian vegetation and cover, primarily non-native grasses, would be disturbed during the period of construction.

5. Aesthetics.

In the short term, aesthetics would be adversely impacted due to ground disturbance and the presence of heavy construction equipment.

6. 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. In the long term, this project is expected to provide an opportunity to re-found Yellowstone cutthroat trout into upper Sage Creek. However, the proposed future conversion to Yellowstone cutthroat trout is outside the scope of this environmental analysis and will require a future separate analysis.

7. Historic and archaeological sites

The proposed project will occur on private land and will not involve a federal undertaking.

Explanation of Impacts on the Human Environment.

None

VII. Discussion and Evaluation of Reasonable Alternatives.

1. No Action Alternative

If no action is taken, a series of private ponds will be constructed in the headwaters of Sage Creek that will be vulnerable to invasion by resident nonnative brook trout. The opportunity to potentially re-found a Yellowstone cutthroat trout population in upper Sage Creek will remain very low.

2. The Proposed Alternative

The proposed alternative is designed to create an opportunity to ultimately re-found a Yellowstone cutthroat trout population in the upper Sage Creek drainage. The project would create a potential to ultimately restore Yellowstone cutthroat trout to approximately seven miles of their native range.

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 webpage: fwp.mt.gov.

3. Duration of comment period?

Public comment will be accepted through 5:00 PM on April 13, 2006.

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

Telephone: (406) 444-2432
e-mail: mlere@mt.gov

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 Sage Creek Native Fish Restoration Project

Division/Bureau Fisheries Division -Future Fisheries Improvement
 Description of Project In association with a series of recreational ponds to be constructed in the headwater springs of Sage Creek, an opportunity exists to install passage barriers to prevent nonnative fish from invading these new water, thereby creating a future opportunity to restore Yellowstone cutthroat trout to their native range. The Future Fisheries Improvement Program is proposing to provide partial funding for a project calling to install these passage barriers. The project site is located approximately fifteen miles south of the town of Pryor 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			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		
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 Carbon 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 Pat Byorth, MFWP
 Recommendation concerning preparation of EIS No EIS required.
 EA prepared by: Mark Lere
 Date: March 9, 2006
