

March 20, 2007  
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 Department of Natural Resources and Conservation  
Montana State Library, Helena  
MT Environmental Information Center  
Montana Audubon Council  
Montana Wildlife Federation  
Gallatin Conservation District, 3710 Fallon Street, #B, Bozeman, MT 59718  
Natural Resource and Conservation Service, 3710 Fallon Street, #B, Bozeman, MT 59718  
U.S. Army Corp of Engineers, Helena  
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Helena  
State Historic Preservation Office, Helena  
Ben Stanley, P.O. Box 6696, Bozeman, MT 59771  
Watershed Professionals, LLP, P.O. Box 4200, Bozeman, MT 59772

Ladies and Gentlemen:

Please find enclosed an Environmental Assessment (EA) prepared for the Future Fisheries Improvement Program. The Program tentatively plans to provide partial funding to a stream habitat enhancement project calling for consolidating flow into the main channel of the South Fork Ross Creek, re-grading approximately 1,430 feet of channel to create a series of pools and riffles, and expanding existing wetland areas by about 0.7 acres. Additionally, the project calls for re-grading about 1,000 feet of an existing spring creek tributary to the South Fork Ross Creek to create additional pool-riffle habitat. The intent of this proposed project is to enhance aquatic habitat for resident fish populations, including rainbow trout and brown trout. This project is located approximately three miles north of the town of Belgrade in Gallatin County.

Please submit any comments that you have by 5:00 P.M., April 20, 2007 to the Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks in Helena at the address listed above. Funding for this project through the Future Fisheries Improvement Program 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](mailto:mlere@mt.gov)

ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT  
Fisheries Division  
Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks  
South Fork Ross Creek 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 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.

The Future Fisheries Improvement Program is proposing to provide partial funding for a stream habitat enhancement project calling for consolidating flow into the main channel of the South Fork Ross Creek, re-grading approximately 1,430 feet of channel to create a series of pools and riffles, and expanding existing wetland areas by about 0.7 acres. Additionally, the project calls for re-grading about 1,000 feet of an existing spring creek tributary to the South Fork Ross Creek to create additional pool-riffle habitat. The intent of this proposed project is to enhance aquatic habitat for resident fish populations, including rainbow trout and brown trout. This project is located approximately three miles north of the town of Belgrade in Gallatin County (Attachment 1). South Fork Ross Creek is a tributary to Ross Creek, then Smith Creek and ultimately to the East Gallatin River.

I. Location of Project: This project will be conducted on a reach of South Fork Ross Creek located approximately three miles north of the town of Belgrade within Township 1 North, Range 5 East, Section 29 in Gallatin 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.

As a result of past land use activities, this reach of the South Fork Ross Creek currently is inundated with one to three feet of fine sediment with short reaches of exposed cobble and gravel. Past and present beaver activity has contributed to the aggradation of the channel, causing channel braiding and the associated loss of sediment transport capacity. Sediment deposition has filled in pools and smothered spawning gravel, resulting in poor aquatic habitat for residing brown trout and rainbow trout. This proposed project is expected to increase densities of brown trout and rainbow trout within the localized area by creating additional pool habitat and exposing gravel in the constructed riffles for spawning habitat.

III. Scope of the Project:

The project calls for consolidating flow into a single channel of South Fork Ross Creek by removing remnant beaver dams and re-grading the existing channel to create a pool-riffle sequence (Attachment 2). Approximately 1,430 feet of channel would be re-graded to an average slope of 0.5%. The re-grading effort is expected to create about 520 linear feet of viable riffles with exposed gravel and would create deep pool habitat. An existing spring fed ditch that joins with South Fork Ross Creek also would be restored to form a riffle-pool sequence within a 1,000-foot reach. Approximately 400 linear feet of

additional pools and riffles would be restored within this spring. The project also calls for enlarging and deepening the open water portions of three existing wetland areas. This project is expected to cost \$119,817.00. Of this total, the Future Fisheries Improvement Program would be contributing up to \$20,000.00.

IV. Environmental Impact Checklist:

Please see attached checklist.

V. Explanation of Impacts to the Physical Environment

1. Terrestrial and aquatic life and habitats.

Enhancing pool-riffle habitat in a 1,430-foot reach of the South Fork Ross Creek and a 1,000-foot reach of an unnamed spring creek is expected to enhance brown trout and rainbow trout populations in a localized area. Enlarging the open water component in the three existing wetland areas is expected to enhance habitat for a variety of waterfowl species.

2. Water quantity, quality and distribution.

Short-term increases in turbidity will 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 (318 Authorization). A 310 permit (Montana Streambed and Land Preservation Act) 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. Enlarging the existing wetland ponds may increase evaporation-transpiration losses, resulting in the potential for reduced surface flow in the two streams.

3. Geology and soil quality, stability and moisture.

Soils along the stream margin would be disturbed during construction, but would stabilize following proposed re-vegetation efforts. Re-vegetation efforts would involve placement of salvaged sod and seeding with native sedges and grasses, as well as planting riparian shrubs.

4. Vegetation cover, quantity and quality.

Riparian vegetation and cover, primarily sedges and grasses, would be disturbed during the period of construction. However, proposed re-vegetation efforts would mitigate for these disturbances.

5. Aesthetics.

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

6. Demands on environmental resources of land, water, air and energy.

Enlarging open water at the existing wetland pond areas may be considered a consumptive use. As a result, funding through the Future Fisheries Improvement Program would not be released until project managers document consultation with Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation's Water Rights Bureau to address potential water rights issues.

7. Historic and archaeological sites

This project may require an individual Army Corp of Engineers 404 permit. Therefore, the State Historic Preservation Office will be contacted to determine the need for compliance with the federal historic preservation regulations. Funding for the project will not be released until a cultural clearance is granted.

## VI. Explanation of Impacts on the Human Environment.

1. Access to & quality of recreational activities.

South Fork Ross Creek is a tributary to Ross Creek, then Smith Creek and ultimately the East Gallatin River. This project may enhance recruitment of rainbow trout and brown trout into these downstream waters where access to the public is more readily available.

## VII. Discussion and Evaluation of Reasonable Alternatives.

1. No Action Alternative

If no action is taken, a reach of the South Fork Ross Creek will continue to be devoid of a pool-riffle bed form and habitat for resident rainbow trout and brown trout will remain below its potential.

2. The Proposed Alternative

The proposed alternative is designed to enhance pool-riffle habitat in South Fork Ross Creek and in an associated spring creek tributary. This alternative also calls for enlarging three existing wetland ponds. This alternative is expected to increase the diversity of aquatic habitat within a short reach of the South Fork Ross Creek and enhance rainbow trout and brown trout populations in a localized area. The project also is expected to enhance waterfowl habitat on the three existing wetland ponds.

## 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 funding 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](http://fwp.mt.gov).

3. Duration of comment period?

Public comment will be accepted through 5:00 PM on April 20, 2007.

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](mailto: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 South Fork Ross Creek Habitat Enhancement Project

Division/Bureau Fisheries Division - Future Fisheries Improvement

Description of Project The Future Fisheries Improvement Program is proposing to provide partial funding for a project calling for consolidating flow into the main channel of the South Fork Ross Creek, re-grading approximately 1,430 feet of channel to create a series of pools and riffles, and expanding existing wetland areas by about 0.7 acres. The intent of the project is to enhance habitat for resident populations of rainbow trout and brown trout. This project is located approximately three miles north of the town of Belgrade in Gallatin 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		
8. Demands on environmental resources of land, water, air & energy					X	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 Gallatin Conservation District, Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation, US Fish and Wildlife Service, US Army Corp of Engineers, Montana Department of Environmental Quality, Natural Resource and Conservation Service, State Historic Preservation Office

Individuals or groups contributing to this EA Watershed Professionals, LLP.

Recommendation concerning preparation of EIS No EIS required. EA prepared by: Mark Lere

Date: March 7, 2007