

March 29, 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  
    Native Species Coordinator, Fisheries  
    Endangered Species Coordinator  
    Missoula Office  
Montana State Library, Helena  
MT Environmental Information Center  
Montana Audubon Council  
Montana Wildlife Federation  
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  
Montana Natural Resource Damage Program, Helena  
Tri-State Water Quality Council, 4660 Spurgin Road, Missoula, MT 59804  
Montana Water Trust, 218 South 6<sup>th</sup> Street East, Missoula, MT 59801  
Upper Clark Fork Basin Steering Committee, 440 Evans, Missoula, MT 59801  
Jim O'Connell, P.O. Box 1700, Helena, MT 59624  
Joe Enger, RV Ranch, 6531 Hwy 12 West, Helena, MT 59601

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 project planned to enhance and protect the aquatic and riparian resources within a 2.6-mile reach of the Little Blackfoot River located between the confluence of Telegraph Creek and State Highway 12. This proposed project is located approximately one mile south of the community of Elliston in Powell County.

Please submit any comments that you have by 5:00 P.M., April 30, 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

ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT  
Fisheries Division  
Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks  
Little Blackfoot River Channel and Riparian 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 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 to a project calling for restoring fish habitat, stream channel geometry and riparian health to a 2.6-mile reach of the Little Blackfoot River. The intent of the project is to increase the diversity of fish habitat and enhance overall riparian health within this reach of river. The proposed project would decrease overall channel width, increase pool frequency, increase the amount of overhead cover and reduce noxious weed infestations. The project site is located on the Little Blackfoot River approximately one mile south of the community of Elliston in Powell County (Attachment 1).

I. Location of Project: This project will be conducted on the Little Blackfoot River located within Township 9 North, Range 6 West, Sections 7 and 18 in Powell 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 habitats” by implementing habitat restoration projects and administering the Future Fisheries Improvement Program to restore important habitats on public and private lands. This proposed project may help met this goal.

A watershed assessment performed in 2001 on 32 miles of the Little Blackfoot River ranked this 2.6-mile reach as the second highest priority for restoration needs based on the severity of problems, restoration feasibility and potential for recovery. The project area is in need of restoration due to degraded fish habitat, unstable channel geometry, eroding stream banks, degraded riparian vegetation and infestations of noxious weeds. These degraded conditions have been created by a combination of historical stream channel/stream bank alterations and over grazing by livestock.

III. Scope of the Project:

The project proposes to install of 4,300 feet of riparian fencing to exclude livestock, install approximately 50 fish habitat improvement structures, stabilize approximately 2,300 feet of eroding stream bank, adjust channel geometry in specified areas, extensively replant riparian vegetation and undertake pre and post weed control. Fish habitat structures would include root wads, woody debris jams, log vanes, rock clusters and associated pool development. Approximately 5,000 willow cuttings would be sprigged on selected stream banks and about 120 containerized willow, dogwood and cottonwood would be planted. Livestock would be excluded from the restored reach for a minimum period of five years, followed by riparian management through a pre-approved grazing management plan. This project is expected to cost \$292,543.00. Of this total, the Future Fisheries Improvement Program would be contributing up to \$24,450.00.

IV. Environmental Impact Checklist:

Please see attached checklist.

V. Explanation of Impacts to the Physical Environment

1. Terrestrial and aquatic life and habitats.

Increasing the diversity of fish habitat and enhancing riparian health on a 2.6-mile reach of the Little Blackfoot River is expected to locally reduce sediment input into the stream and increase spawning and holding water for adult fish, as well as increasing rearing habitat for juvenile fish. Habitat for riparian dependent wildlife also would be improved by enhancing the vegetative community within the riparian corridor.

2. Water quantity, quality and distribution.

Short-term increases in turbidity will 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 (318 authorization). A 310 permit (Natural 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 requirements needed to meet the federal Clean Water Act (404 permit). In the long term, stabilizing this reach of river would reduce sediment contributions to downstream areas, thereby improving the overall quality of downstream waters.

3. Geology and soil quality, stability and moisture.

Soils along the stream margin would be disturbed during channel construction, but would quickly stabilize following proposed re-vegetation efforts. Installation of riparian fencing and the development of a riparian grazing management plan would protect the restored reach from future overgrazing by livestock. Overall, the project is expected to reduce bank erosion by stabilizing and re-vegetating a 2.6-mile reach of the river.

4. Vegetation cover, quantity and quality.

Riparian vegetation and cover would be disturbed during the period of construction. However, proposed re-vegetation efforts, coupled with changes in livestock management within the riparian corridor would act to mitigate these disturbances. Additionally, the project calls for reducing the existing noxious weed problem, thus creating improved conditions for recovery of native vegetation.

5. Aesthetics.

Aesthetics would be negatively impacted during the period of project construction due to ground disturbance and the presence of heavy equipment. In the long term, aesthetics would be improved

by efforts proposed to improve channel stability and restore the riparian vegetative community.

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

The Little Blackfoot River drainage has been identified as a core area for bull trout, a species listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act. Because the Little Blackfoot River has the potential to support bull trout, a species listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act, the project will be included in Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks Section 6 plan with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

7. Historic and archaeological sites

The proposed 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. The funding will not be released until a cultural clearance is granted.

VI. Explanation of Impacts on the Human Environment.

1. Agricultural or industrial production.

Approximately 190 acres of the project area would be excluded from livestock grazing for a minimum period of five years to allow for the recovery of the riparian vegetation.

2. Access to & quality of recreational activities.

The proposed improvement in the overall aquatic habitat within this reach of the Little Blackfoot River would be expected to enhance fishing opportunities. Currently, the landowner allows public access with permission.

VII. Discussion and Evaluation of Reasonable Alternatives.

1. No Action Alternative

If no action is taken, this reach of the Little Blackfoot River will remain degraded and fish habitat and will continue to be below potential. The riparian habitat also will remain degraded. Recreational opportunities associated with fish and wildlife resources will remain reduced and aesthetics will continue to be impaired.

2. Riparian Protection Alternative

Under this alternative, the stream corridor would be protected from livestock grazing for a sufficient period of time to allow for the recovery of the riparian vegetation. Unstable stream banks would be allowed to continue to erode until such time they reach a stable angle of repose and re-vegetation occurred naturally. The time period required for recovery under this alternative is unknown but certainly would be significantly longer than for the preferred alternative.

3. The Proposed Alternative

The proposed alternative is designed to address the ongoing declining quality of fish and riparian habitat within this 2.6-mile reach of the Little Blackfoot River. The proposed work would enhance pool frequency, increase over-hanging cover, stabilize actively eroding stream banks, improve the riparian vegetative community and control noxious weeds. This alternative is expected to enhance existing fish populations, the associated recreational fishery and populations of riparian dependent wildlife within the project area. This alternative also is expected to improve water quality and site aesthetics. Over time, the recovery of the riparian vegetative community along the stream margin would significantly contribute to the erosion resistance of the stream channel.

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 reviewed and supported 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](http://fwp.mt.gov).

3. Duration of comment period?

Public comment will be accepted through 5:00 PM on April 30, 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

Email: [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 Little Blackfoot River Channel and Riparian Restoration Project

Division/Bureau Fisheries Division - Future Fisheries Improvement

Description of Project The Future Fisheries Improvement Program is proposing to provide partial funding to a project calling for restoring fish habitat, stream channel geometry and riparian health to a 2.6- mile reach of the Little Blackfoot River. The project site is located approximately one mile south of the community of Elliston in Powell 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     |      |         | 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 Deer Lodge Valley Conservation District; Montana Natural Resource Damage Program

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

Date: March 26, 2007