

August 26, 2008
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
Missoula Office

Montana State Library, Helena
MT Environmental Information Center
Montana Audubon Council
Montana River Action, 304 North 18th Avenue, Bozeman, MT 59715
Bitterroot Conservation District, 1709 North First Street, Hamilton, MT 59840
U.S. Army Corp of Engineers, Helena
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Helena
State Historic Preservation Office, Helena
Will McDowell, 4660 Spurgin Road, Missoula, MT 59804
Wheelbarrow Creek Ranch, 1506 Wheelbarrow Creek Road, Stevensville, MT 50870

Ladies and Gentlemen:

Please find enclosed an Environmental Assessment prepared for the Future Fisheries Improvement Program. The Program tentatively plans to provide partial funding for a channel restoration project at the degraded confluence of Wheelbarrow Creek and Spring Gulch, tributaries located in the Threemile Creek watershed of the Bitterroot River drainage. The channel degradation is due to past concentrations of livestock lounging in the immediate vicinity of existing water gaps at the confluence of the two streams. The project is intended to stabilize about 100 feet of degraded stream channel and reduce sediment and nutrient loading into downstream waters. This proposed project is located approximately eight miles northeast of the town of Stevensville in Ravalli County.

Please submit any comments that you have by 5:00 P.M., September 26, 2008 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
Wheelbarrow Creek and Spring Gulch Channel Stabilization Project

General Purpose: The 1995 Montana Legislature enacted statute 87-1-272 through 273 which 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 channel stabilization and riparian restoration within a within a 100-foot reach of the confluence of Wheelbarrow Creek and Spring Gulch, tributaries located in the Threemile Creek watershed and ultimately the Bitterroot River. The proposed project site is located at the convergence of three separate livestock watering points where past trampling and loafing by livestock have eroded and severely over-widened the two channels, contributing to excessive sediment and nutrients entering the two streams. The intent of this project is to improve channel stability, enhance aquatic habitat for native fish and wildlife, and reduce sediment and nutrient loading into downstream waters. This project would complement several previous efforts successfully completed in the Threemile Creek drainage intended to reduce sediment and nutrient loading in the watershed. The project site is located approximately eight miles northeast of the town of Stevensville in Ravalli County (Attachment 1).

I. Location of Project: This project will be conducted at the confluence of Wheelbarrow Creek and Spring Gulch located approximately eight miles northeast of the town of Stevensville within Township 10 North, Range 19 West, Section 35 in Ravalli 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 Threemile Creek drainage has been identified as a major contributor of sediment and nutrients to the Bitterroot River. Nutrient levels in Threemile Creek are the highest of any tributary to the Bitterroot River and a watershed assessment completed in 2005 by the Tri-State Water Quality Council identified Wheelbarrow Creek as one of the primary sources of sediment and nutrients to the drainage. A number of recently completed restoration projects in the Threemile Creek drainage have begun to address many of the priority areas of excessive sediment and nutrient loading. The site proposed for this project currently contributes excessive sediment and nutrients to the system due to trampling and loafing by livestock at the confluence of Wheelbarrow Creek and Spring Gulch. Although fish populations have not been formally surveyed, Wheelbarrow Creek likely supports westslope cutthroat trout, longnose sucker, and slimy sculpin.

III. Scope of the Project:

The project proposes to re-contour approximately 90 feet of stream channel at the confluence of Wheelbarrow Creek and Spring Gulch to re-establish proper channel dimensions, patterns and profiles; stabilize 80 feet of eroding stream bank with the placement of coir logs; narrow existing livestock water gaps by installing three gravel hardened access points and 110 feet of new rail fencing; and re-vegetate

approximately 1,800 square feet of stream bank, floodplain and upland with native grasses and shrubs (Attachments 2, 3 and 4). The proposed narrowed livestock water gaps will discourage cattle from loafing in the stream corridor.

This project is expected to cost \$9,659.00. Of this total, the Future Fisheries Improvement Program would be contributing up to \$4,645.00 to complete the project.

IV. Environmental Impact Checklist:

Please see attached checklist.

V. Explanation of Impacts to the Physical Environment

1. Terrestrial and aquatic life and habitats.

Aquatic and riparian habitat on a 100-foot reach of the confluence Wheelbarrow Creek and Spring Gulch would be improved by stabilizing a series of eroding stream banks, re-shaping some over-widened channel sections, and restoring the riparian vegetative community. This work is expected to create healthier habitat for aquatic life by reducing sediment and nutrient loading and creating greater environmental complexity. Expected improvements in the aquatic habitat should enhance resident species of fish in the immediate project vicinity and in downstream waters. Habitat for riparian wildlife also would be improved by enhancing the riparian vegetative community.

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 requirements to meet the federal Clean Water Act (404 permit). In the long term, restoring the confluence of these two streams would reduce sediment and nutrient 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 construction, but would be stabilized with re-vegetation efforts. Overall, the project is expected to reduce bank erosion and improve channel stability.

4. Vegetation cover, quantity and quality.

Riparian vegetation would be disturbed during the period of construction. However, proposed re-vegetation efforts and improved management of livestock grazing within the confluence of the two streams would result in an overall improvement to the riparian vegetation.

5. Aesthetics.

During the period of construction, aesthetics would be adversely impacted due to on-site construction activities and the presence of heavy equipment. Construction is expected to occur over a one-week period. In the long term, restoring the degraded confluence of the two streams to a healthier and more complex stream environment would enhance aesthetics.

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

Wheelbarrow Creek likely supports resident westslope cutthroat trout, a species of special concern in Montana. Proposed improvements made to the confluence of Wheelbarrow Creek and Spring Gulch are expected to benefit westslope cutthroat trout within the immediate project vicinity and within downstream waters.

9. Historic and archaeological sites

The proposed project likely will 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 project will not begin until a cultural clearance is granted.

VI. Explanation of Impacts on the Human Environment.

7. Access to & quality of recreational activities.

This project intends to improve the diversity of fish habitat and riparian condition within the degraded confluence of Wheelbarrow Creek and Spring Gulch. Although not considered to be much of a recreational fishery, public use on downstream waters of Wheelbarrow Creek may benefit from this proposed work.

VII. Discussion and Evaluation of Reasonable Alternatives.

1. No Action Alternative

If no action is taken, the confluence of Wheelbarrow Creek and Spring Gulch will remain degraded, aquatic and riparian habitat will remain in poor condition and excessive sediment and nutrient loads will continue to be introduced into the watershed.

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 recovery of the riparian vegetation. Unstable stream banks would be allowed to continue to erode until such time they reached a stable angle of repose and re-vegetation occurred naturally. The time period required for recovery for 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 restore a 100-foot degraded reach at the confluence of Wheelbarrow Creek and Spring Gulch. This restoration work would remove a chronic source of sediment and nutrients, provide for more diverse aquatic habitat and improve the riparian vegetative community. This alternative would improve fish and wildlife habitat, aesthetics and water quality within the project area and would be expected to enhance fish populations in the Wheelbarrow/Threemile Creek drainage. This project would complement several previous efforts successfully completed in the Threemile Creek drainage intended to reduce sediment and nutrient loading in the watershed.

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 will be published on Montana Fish, Wildlife and Park's web page: fwp.mt.gov.

3. Duration of comment period?

Public comment will be accepted through 5:00 PM on September 26, 2008.

4. Person responsible for preparing the EA.

Mark Lere, Program Officer
Habitat Protection Bureau
Fisheries Division
Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks
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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 Wheelbarrow Creek and Spring Gulch Channel Stabilization 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 channel stabilization and riparian restoration within a 100-foot reach of the confluence of Wheelbarrow Creek and Spring Gulch. The intent of the project is to improve channel stability, enhance aquatic habitat and reduce sediment and nutrient loading into downstream waters. This project would compliment a number of recently completed projects in the Threemile watershed intended to reduce sediment and nutrient loading within the drainage. The project site is located approximately eight miles northeast of the town of Stevensville in Ravalli 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		

	MAJOR	MODERATE	MINOR	NONE	UNKNOWN	COMMENTS ON ATTACHED PAGES
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 Bitterroot Conservation District, US Fish and Wildlife Service, US Army Corp of Engineers, Montana Department of Environmental Quality, State Historic Preservation Office, Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation

Individuals or groups contributing to this EA: Will McDowell.

Recommendation concerning preparation of EIS No EIS required.

EA prepared by: Mark Lere

Date: August 7, 2008
