September 22, 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
Great Falls Office
Montana State Library, Helena
MT Environmental Information Center
Montana Audubon Council
Montana Wildlife Federation
Montana River Action, 304 N 18th Avenue, Bozeman, MT 59715
Meagher County Conservation District, P.O. Box 589, White Sulphur Springs, MT 59645
U.S. Army Corp of Engineers, Helena
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Helena
State Historic Preservation Office, Helena
Wayne Hadley, 1016 Eastside Road, Deer Lodge, MT 59722
Rose Holmstrom, P.O. Box 612, White Sulphur Springs, MT 59645
Zehntner Brothers, 4385 U.S. Highway 12 E, White Sulphur Springs, MT 59645
Thad Heriem, 503 Newlan Creek Road, White Sulphur Springs, MT 59645

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 for a riparian fencing and stream bank stabilization project located on an 11,200-foot reach of the North Fork Smith River. Bank treatment within this reach would occur along four sites that total approximately 240 feet. This proposed project is located on property owned by Gene Olsen approximately 1.5 miles northeast of the town of White Sulphur Springs in Meagher County.

Please submit any comments that you have by 5:00 P.M., October 23, 2008 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
North Fork Smith River Riparian Enhancement and Channel Stabilization 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 for a project calling for the installation of riparian fencing on both sides of an 11,200-foot reach of the North Fork Smith River, providing for off-stream livestock water, as well as further stabilizing actively eroding banks at four sites, totaling approximately 250 feet of the channel. The intent of the project is to enhance riparian vegetation and associated habitat and restore riverbank integrity along four short reaches of channel. The project site is located on property owned by Gene Olsen approximately 1.5 miles northeast of the town of White Sulphur Springs in Meagher County (Attachment 1).

I. Location of Project: This project will be conducted on a 11,200-foot reach of the North Fork Smith River, located 1.5 miles northeast of the town of White Sulphur Springs within Township 9 North, Range 7 East, Section 8 in Meagher 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 would help met this goal.

The North Fork Smith River supports a mixed fishery, including rainbow trout, brown trout, brook trout and mountain whitefish. In the past, livestock on this reach of river have tended to concentrate within the riparian corridor during the winter to obtain shelter from the cold and deep snow. This unrestricted livestock use has led to degradation of the riparian vegetative corridor and the associated stream channel. Controlling livestock use with fencing is expected to lead to recovery of the riparian and aquatic habitat along most the stream reach. The presence of short reaches of actively eroding riverbanks, lack of riparian shrubs and dominance of non-native pastureland grasses point toward the need for some active stabilization efforts to further facilitate recovery. Completion of this project would serve as a showcase in the Smith River drainage, providing an example of a cooperative effort between Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks and landowners to enhance aquatic habitat and, at the same time, maintain sustainable agriculture. This template may serve to encourage the development of other aquatic restoration projects in the drainage.

III. Scope of the Project:

The project proposes to install 11,200 feet of riparian fencing on both sides of a 1.14-mile reach of the North Fork Smith River to control livestock access within the riparian corridor (Attachment 2). To provide for livestock water, a well would be drilled and a well pump, flow regulating system and two 1,000-gallon stock water tanks would be installed (Attachment 3). Channel shaping and vegetative treatment would be used to stabilize four short reaches of actively eroding riverbank. Site 1 (Attachment 3) calls for willow sprigging to expedite natural recovery. Site 2 would involve the placement of a transplanted rooted willow mat at bank full elevation. Site 3 calls for the installation of an in-stream log structure, keyed into the bank

and set at an appropriate angle and slope, to direct water away from the toe of the actively eroding riverbank. The vertical bank would then be sloped to a stable angle of repose and sprigged with willow stems. Site 4 would involve relocating two small mid channel gravel bars (approximately 300 square feet in surface area) and using salvaged vegetated sod mats to construct a flood prone bench along the toe of the actively eroding riverbank. Willows would then be sprigged along the newly created bank. This project is expected to cost $59,123.00. Of this total, the Future Fisheries Improvement Program would be contributing up to $23,500.00.

IV. Environmental Impact Checklist:

Please see attached checklist.

V. Explanation of Impacts to the Physical Environment

1. Terrestrial and aquatic life and habitats.

Protecting the riparian corridor from livestock concentrations on a 1.14-mile reach of the North Fork Smith River is expected to enhance the riparian vegetative community, create a healthier habitat for aquatic life and locally reduce sediment input into the river. Habitat for riparian dependent wildlife also would be improved. Successful completion of this project would provide a demonstration example that is expected to lead toward additional cooperative habitat enhancement efforts between Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks and landowners within the Smith River drainage.

2. Water quantity, quality and distribution.

Short-term increases in turbidity will occur during proposed bank stabilization efforts. 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. A 124 permit (Stream Protection Act) will be obtained from Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks and the U.S. Army Corp of Engineers will be contacted to determine the requirements needed to meet the federal Clean Water Act. In the long term, riparian fencing and stabilizing short reaches of eroding stream banks on the North Fork Smith 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 short reaches of the stream margin would be disturbed during project construction, but would be stabilized following proposed re-vegetation efforts. Overall, the project is expected to reduce bank erosion by enhancing the riparian vegetative community and by stabilizing a series of eroding cut-banks.

4. Vegetation cover, quantity and quality.

Control of livestock grazing within the riparian corridor would protect the vegetative community and encourage the recovery of woody shrubs along the river margin. Riparian vegetation and cover would be disturbed bank stabilization efforts. However, disturbance primarily would be confined

to short reaches of actively eroding riverbank. Proposed re-vegetation efforts would act to mitigate these disturbances.

5. Aesthetics.

Aesthetics would be negatively impacted during project construction due to ground disturbance and the presence of heavy equipment during the short term. In the long term, improved livestock management and recovery of the riparian vegetative corridor would enhance aesthetics.

9. 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 project will not begin until a cultural clearance is granted.

VI. Explanation of Impacts on the Human Environment.

4. Agricultural or industrial productivity.

Fencing the riparian corridor along a 1.14-mile reach of the North Fork Smith River will remove between 5 to 10 acres from livestock grazing. This loss would be offset by the benefit of eliminating past loss of livestock as a result of falling through river ice or becoming stuck in muddy bogs along the river.

7. Access to and quality of recreational and wilderness opportunities.

Restoration of the riparian community through fencing is expected to enhance fish and wildlife habitat on this reach of the North Fork Smith River. Presently, the lessee, with permission, allows public access for fishing.

12. Demands for energy.

Installation of a well pump for off-stream livestock water will increase the demand for electrical energy. Electricity will be obtained from an existing transformer power pole.

VII. Discussion and Evaluation of Reasonable Alternatives.

1. No Action Alternative

If no action is taken, this reach of the North Fork Smith River, for the foreseeable future, will continue to be relatively unstable, sloughing banks will continue to add sediment into the river and habitat for fish and riparian dependent wildlife will remain in a degraded condition. Assuming grazing management remained the same, this alternative would not allow for the riparian vegetative corridor to recover. Unstable stream banks would be allowed to continue to erode. With fencing or improved grazing management, the riparian vegetation would recover and actively eroding stream banks would eventually come to a stable angle of repose. With a change in grazing management, the time period required for recovery under this alternative is unknown, but certainly would be significantly longer than for the preferred alternative.

2. Bank stabilization using rock rip-rap

Rock rip-rap on eroding riverbanks would provide greater resistance to the existing shear stresses created in the river. However, blanket rip-rap would both eliminate riparian vegetation on these sections of river and diminish the over-all natural function of the river channel.

3. The Proposed Alternative

The proposed alternative is designed to protect the riparian corridor with fencing and stabilize four short reaches of the river. Stabilization efforts would involve minimal bank contouring, installation of a single deflector log, willow sprigging and natural riparian and riverbank recovery. This proposed alternative allows for natural channel function and results in the least amount of ground disturbance while maintaining a high probability for success. This proposed effort is expected to decrease excessive sediment loading and improve overall aquatic and riparian habitat. Also, completion of this proposed alternative is expected to lead toward additional cooperative habitat enhancement efforts between Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks and landowners within the Smith River drainage

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 October 23, 2008.

4. Person responsible for preparing the EA.

Mark Lere, Program Officer
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Fisheries Division
Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks
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Helena, MT 59620
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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 North Fork Smith River Riparian Enhancement and Channel Stabilization 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 the installation of riparian fencing on both sides of an 11,200-foot reach of the North Fork Smith River, providing for off-stream livestock water and further stabilizing actively eroding stream banks at four sites. The intent of the project is to enhance riparian vegetation and associated habitat and restore riverbank integrity along four short reaches of the channel. The project site is located on property owned by Gene Olsen approximately 1.5 miles northeast of the town of White Sulphur Springs in Meagher 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		
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			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 Meagher County 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 Grant Grisak, Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks
Recommendation concerning preparation of EIS No EIS required.
EA prepared by: Mark Lere
Date: September 12, 2008