

February 20, 2009
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 Division
 Missoula Office
Montana State Library, Helena
MT Environmental Information Center
Montana Audubon Council
Montana Wildlife Federation, P.O. Box 1175, Helena, MT 59624
Wayne Hadley, 1016 Eastside Road, Deer Lodge, MT 59722
Montana River Action, 304 N 18th Ave., Bozeman, MT 59715
Lewis and Clark Conservation District, 790 Colleen Street, Helena, MT 59601
U.S. Army Corp of Engineers, Helena
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Helena
State Historic Preservation Office, Helena
Big Blackfoot Chapter Trout Unlimited, P.O. Box 1, Ovando, MT 59854
Stew and Dolores Schwartz, 597 Upper Millegan Road, Great Falls, MT 59405

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 restoration project on a one-mile reach of Sauerkraut Creek that historically had been placer mined. Sauerkraut Creek is a tributary to the Blackfoot River. The intent of the project is to enhance spawning, rearing and over-winter habitat for salmonids, including westslope cutthroat trout and bull trout. This proposed project is located approximately 4.5 miles southwest of the town of Lincoln in Lewis and Clark County.

Please submit any comments that you have by 5:00 P.M., March 23, 2009 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
Sauerkraut Creek Channel 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 for the restoration of approximately one mile of Sauerkraut Creek, a tributary to the Blackfoot River. This reach of stream historically had been placer mined, resulting in a reach that is channelized, bermed and lacking in habitat complexity. Restoration would involve reconstructing the channel with a proper dimension, pattern and profile and with habitat features comprised of large woody debris and rock step-pool structures. The intent of the project is to enhance spawning, rearing and over-wintering habitat for salmonids, including genetically pure westslope cutthroat trout and bull trout. The project site is located approximately 4.5 miles southwest of the town of Lincoln in Lewis and Clark County (Attachment 1).

I. Location of Project: This project will be conducted on a reach of Sauerkraut Creek located approximately 4.5 miles southwest of the town of Lincoln within Township 13 North, Range 9 West, Section 5 in Lewis and Clark 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.

Sauerkraut Creek supports genetically pure westslope cutthroat trout and rearing juvenile bull trout. The reach of Sauerkraut Creek proposed for restoration has a history of placer mining and is a stream segment where westslope cutthroat trout densities have significantly decreased. Past mining activities have resulted in a ditched stream channel that has been bermed and isolated from a functioning floodplain. This loss of floodplain connectivity has significantly reduced habitat complexity and caused the channel to incise. Stream channel incision has exacerbated intermittency of flow in portions of the altered stream. Historic overgrazing by livestock also has contributed to the degraded channel conditions. This project calls for re-connecting the altered stream to the floodplain and reconstructing the channel with a proper dimension, pattern and profile.

III. Scope of the Project:

This proposed project calls for restoring approximately 1 mile of Sauerkraut Creek that historically had been altered by placer mining. The proposed project calls for converting the existing Rosgen classified F3 stream type to a B3 type channel based on surveys of an upstream reference reach (Attachment 2). In-stream habitat complexity would be enhanced with the placement of large woody debris structures and

rock step-pool structures (Attachment 3). Large woody debris also would be incorporated on the reactivated floodplain to create sheltered and moisture gathering micro-sites to encourage plant growth. Road crossings identified as causing channel instability and creating barriers to upstream fish migration would be replaced with appropriate crossing structures based on stream simulation methodologies. All disturbed areas due to construction activities would be re-vegetated with a native stream bank seed mix. Soil amendments and erosion control measures would be added as deemed necessary. A grazing management plan developed by a range management specialist; including stocking rates, pasture rotation schemes, fence layout, off-channel water development and on-channel water gaps, would be implemented following channel restoration. This project is expected to cost \$282,120.00. Of this total, the Future Fisheries Improvement Program would be contributing up to \$115,185.00.

IV. Environmental Impact Checklist:

Please see attached checklist.

V. Explanation of Impacts to the Physical Environment

1. Terrestrial and aquatic life and habitats.

Restoring spawning, rearing, and over-winter habitat conditions within a reach of Sauerkraut Creek that historically was degraded by placer mining would enhance habitat for a mixed salmonid assemblage, including westslope cutthroat trout and bull trout. Habitat for riparian dependent wildlife also would be improved by re-activating the historic floodplain and by providing better management of livestock grazing within the riparian corridor.

2. Water quantity, quality and distribution.

Presently, this degraded reach of stream displays elevated water temperatures and sediment accumulations due to the lack of a functioning floodplain and to past channel straightening activities. The proposed restoration project is expected to reduce water temperatures and increase the sediment transport capability of the channel. 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.

3. Geology and soil quality, stability and moisture.

Soils along the stream margin would be disturbed during construction of the new channel, but would be stabilized following proposed re-vegetation efforts. Re-vegetation efforts would involve seeding with a native streambed grass mixture, soil amendments and the development of floodplain micro-sites to encourage plant growth. Soils would be further stabilized with the implementation of a grazing management plan following completion of the restoration.

4. Vegetation cover, quantity and quality.

Riparian vegetation and cover would be disturbed during the period of construction. However, proposed re-vegetation efforts, in conjunction with implementation of a grazing plan, would result in an overall improvement to the riparian vegetative community.

5. Aesthetics.

In the short term, aesthetics would be adversely impacted due to ground disturbance and the presence of heavy construction equipment. In the long term, aesthetics would be enhanced by returning a reach of stream degraded by past placer mining back to a more natural configuration. In addition, the riparian vegetative community would be enhanced by riparian plantings and by improved grazing management.

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

Sauerkraut Creek currently supports genetically pure westslope cutthroat trout and juvenile bull trout. Westslope cutthroat trout are classified as a species of special concern in Montana and bull trout are listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act. The reach of stream proposed for restoration has a history of placer mining where westslope cutthroat trout densities have significantly declined. This project is expected to enhance westslope cutthroat trout populations and bull trout by restoring suitable habitat conditions. Because Sauerkraut Creek supports 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. Funding 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.

Enhancing habitat in this degraded reach of Sauerkraut Creek is expected to enhance angling opportunities on the stream.

2. Locally adopted environmental plans & goals.

This proposed project would compliment a larger Native Fish Habitat Conservation Plan that includes a perpetual conservation easement on 8,000 acres of land, with the objective of enhancing the recovery of westslope cutthroat trout and bull trout.

VII. Discussion and Evaluation of Reasonable Alternatives.

1. No Action Alternative

If no action is taken, a one-mile reach of Sauerkraut Creek would continue to be degraded and the westslope cutthroat trout population would continue to be suppressed. 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. The Proposed Alternative

The proposed alternative is designed to restore a one-mile reach of Sauerkraut Creek degraded by past placer mining activities. Sauerkraut Creek supports both westslope cutthroat trout and bull trout. The intent of the proposed restoration is to improve spawning, rearing and over-wintering habitat for salmonids and to improve the vegetative community within the riparian corridor. This alternative would improve fish and wildlife habitat and aesthetics within the project area and is expected to increase angling opportunities on the stream.

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.

3. Duration of comment period?

Public comment will be accepted through 5:00 PM on March 23, 2009.

4. Person responsible for preparing the EA.

Mark Lere, Program Officer
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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 Sauerkraut Creek Channel Restoration 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 the restoration of a one-mile reach of Sauerkraut Creek, a tributary to the Blackfoot River, that was degraded by past placer mining. The intent of the project is to improve spawning, rearing and over-winter habitat for salmonids, including westslope cutthroat trout and bull trout. The project site is located approximately 4.5 miles southwest of the town of Lincoln in Lewis and Clark 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			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			X
14. Transportation networks & traffic flows				X		

Other groups or agencies contacted or which may have overlapping jurisdiction Lewis and Clark 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 Ryen Aasheim, Big Blackfoot Chapter of Trout Unlimited; River Design Group, Inc.

Recommendation concerning preparation of EIS No EIS required.

EA prepared by: Mark Lere

Date: February 5, 2009