



# Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks

February 25, 2000

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  
Nongame Coordinator  
Billings Office

Montana State Library, Helena  
MT Environmental Information Center  
Montana Audubon Council  
Stillwater Conservation District, P.O. Box 415, Columbus, MT 59019  
Mr. Phillip Sandoval, NRCS, P.O. Box 415, Columbus, MT 59019  
U.S. Army Corp of Engineers, Helena  
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Helena  
Ms. Jane Sullivan, Montana Land Reliance, P.O. Box 171, Billings, MT 59103-0171  
Mr. Dale White, Inter-Fluve, Inc., 25 North Willson Ave., Suite 5, Bozeman, MT 59715  
Mr. William Hart, 2128 Thiel Road, Laurel, MT 59044

Ladies and Gentlemen:

Please find enclosed an Environmental Assessment prepared for a Future Fisheries Project tentatively planned to re-activate a side channel on the Stillwater River. This proposed project is on property owned by the Mr. William Hart located approximately 2.5 miles west of the town of Absarokee in Stillwater County.

Please submit any comments that you have by 5 P.M., March 27, 2000 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.

Sincerely,

Mark Lere, Program Officer  
Habitat Protection Bureau  
Fisheries Division

ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT  
Fisheries Division  
Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks  
Stillwater River Side Channel Restoration 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. This project is being proposed to restore flow into a 775 foot long side channel of the Stillwater River. This side channel was blocked-off from the mainstem river in the early 1940's to prevent bank erosion near some out-buildings and a corral. The proposal calls for re-connecting the side channel utilizing a series of gated culverts to control stream flow. Additionally, the proposed project calls for excavating the blocked-off side channel to establish an appropriate dimension, pattern and profile and for placing imported gravel on riffle areas to enhance spawning substrate. The intent of this project is to re-activate a blocked-off side channel to provide spawning and recruitment habitat for fish residing in the Stillwater River. The proposed project, involving construction oversight by the landowner and design oversight by a consultant, is on property owned by the Hart Ranch located approximately 2.5 miles west of the town of Absarokee in Stillwater County (Figure 1).

I. Location of Project: This project will be conducted on a side channel to the Stillwater River. The project site is located approximately 2.5 miles west of the town of Absarokee within Township 3 South, Range 18 East, Section 34 in Stillwater County.

II. Need for the Project: Department Goal C indicates that a Fisheries Division objective is to "provide and support programs to conserve and enhance high quality aquatic habitat and protect native aquatic species." The Future Fisheries Improvement Program is a tool to help achieve that objective. The middle reach of the Stillwater River contains limited spawning habitat and is characterized by a relatively steep gradient and a substrate dominated by large cobbles and boulders. Due to this limited spawning habitat, migrant rainbow spawners commonly move through this section to spawn in reaches of the river located nearly 20 miles further upstream (Stillwater River Fisheries Management Plan, 1990). Re-activation and restoration of a 775 foot side channel is expected to create spawning and rearing habitat for both rainbow trout and brown trout. Presently, this side channel is dry and is blocked-off by a channel plug constructed in the early 1940's.

III. Scope of the Project:

The project proposes to re-activate a 775 foot side channel located within the middle reach of the Stillwater River. This side channel historically was blocked-off to eliminate stream bank erosion on a high terrace adjacent to a corral and some out-buildings. The proposal calls for re-activating this side channel by installing a series of gated culverts at the inlet (Figure 2). The gated culverts are intended to control inflow in order to minimize the potential for accelerated bank erosion during runoff. The proposed project also calls for excavation of the historic side channel to

establish a proper dimension, pattern and profile; the placement of spawning gravel on riffles and the tail-outs of the pools; and the re-vegetation of the riparian corridor (Figure 3). To protect the riparian vegetative community, the project includes installation of additional fencing along the riparian corridor and the creation of off-channel stock water by installing a well and tank. This project is expected to cost \$26,120.00. Of this total, the Future Fisheries Improvement Program would be contributing up to \$10,400.00. The remainder of the required funding would come from the landowner and from the Natural Resources and Conservation Service's Environmental Quality Incentives Program.

IV. Environmental Impact Checklist:

Please see attached checklist.

V. Explanation of Impacts to the Physical Environment

1. Terrestrial and aquatic life and habitats.

Re-activating a blocked-off side channel within the middle reach of the Stillwater River is expected to provide spawning and rearing habitat for rainbow trout and brown trout. This reach of the Stillwater River presently is characterized by limited spawning and rearing habitat due to the relatively steep gradient and to a substrate dominated by large cobbles and boulders. The creation of additional spawning and rearing habitat is expected to enhance trout populations in the river. Game fish found in the Stillwater River include rainbow trout, brown trout and mountain whitefish. Habitat for riparian dependent wildlife also would be improved by re-establishing a healthy riparian vegetative community through the development of off-site water for livestock and the installation of additional riparian fencing.

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. A 310 permit will be obtained from the local Conservation District and the U.S. Army Corp of Engineers will be contacted for requirements needed to meet the federal Clean Water Act (404 permit). As part of the project, a corral would be moved further back from the side channel and the riparian vegetation would be restored, thereby substantially reducing runoff of livestock waste into the river.

3. Geology and soil quality, stability and moisture.

Soils in the project area would be disturbed during construction. However, disturbed soils would quickly stabilize following proposed re-vegetation efforts and the

implementation of a grazing enclosure.

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 implementing a livestock grazing enclosure, would result in an overall improvement to the riparian vegetation.

5. Aesthetics.

Aesthetics would be enhanced by re-activating a blocked-off side channel to the Stillwater River. Approximately 775 feet of abandoned channel would be re-watered. Aesthetics would be further enhanced by proposed re-vegetation efforts and the protection of the riparian corridor from livestock grazing with the development of off-channel water, the installation of additional riparian fencing, and the relocation of a corral away from the active channel.

9. Historic and archaeological sites

The proposed project may require an individual Army Corp of Engineers 404 permit. Therefore, the State Historic Preservation Office has been 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.

The Stillwater River contains populations of rainbow trout, brown trout and mountain whitefish. The creation of 775 feet of spawning and rearing habitat within the middle reach of the Stillwater River is expected to enhance salmonid populations residing in the river. As a result, the recreational fishery is expected to improve. The landowner, with prior permission, currently allows public access for fishing.

VII. Discussion and Evaluation of Reasonable Alternatives.

1. No Action Alternative

If no action is taken, this side channel of the Stillwater River will remain blocked-off and dry. The potential for creating additional spawning and rearing habitat within a reach of river presently characterized by limited spawning and rearing habitat would be lost. Recreational opportunities associated with fish and wildlife resources will remain reduced and aesthetics will continue to be impaired.

2. Restoration of the side channel without the ability to control flow.

This alternative was rejected due to the potential for accelerated bank erosion on a high terrace adjacent to some out-buildings and a corral. Additionally, the alternative was rejected because uncontrolled high flows potentially could flush the side channel of spawning substrate, eliminating one of the intended benefits of the project.

3. The Proposed Alternative

The proposed alternative is designed to re-activate a 775 foot long side channel within the middle reach of the Stillwater River by installing a series of gated culverts at the inlet to control flow. The historic side channel also would require excavation to establish a proper dimension, pattern and profile. Proposed re-vegetation efforts, riparian fencing and off-channel water development would act to protect the riparian vegetative community. The intent of this proposal is to restore spawning and rearing habitat in the middle reach of the Stillwater River. This habitat was lost due to the blocking off the side channel in the early 1940's.

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 will be published on the Montana Electronic Bulletin Board.

3. Duration of comment period?

Public comment will be accepted through 5 P.M. on March 27, 2000.

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

## LITERATURE CITED

Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks. 1990. Stillwater River Fisheries Management Plan (1990 through 1994). Prepared for Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks by ECON, Inc., 130 Neill Avenue, Helena, MT 5960. 19 pp.

**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 Stillwater River Side Channel Restoration Project

Division/Bureau Fisheries Division -Future Fisheries Improvement

Description of Project The project is being proposed to restore flow into a 775 foot long side channel of the Stillwater River. This side channel was blocked-off from the mainstem river in the early 1940's. The intent of the project is to restore spawning and rearing habitat for salmonids residing in the Stillwater River. The project site, involving one landowner, is located approximately 2.5 miles west of the town of Absarokee in Stillwater 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		
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 Stillwater 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 Mr. William Hart; Mr.  
Phil Sandoval, NRCS; Mr. Dale White, Inter-fluve, Inc.

Recommendation concerning preparation of EIS No EIS required.

EA prepared by : Mark Lere

Date: February 14, 2000



PROJECT: PROPOSED CHANNEL RECONSTRUCTION  
HART RANCH

DATE: 12-6-99

BY: W.F. HART, PE LOC. NW<sup>4</sup>SE<sup>4</sup>S34T35R18E

SCALE: ≈ 1.0" = 100' SHEET 4 OF 9

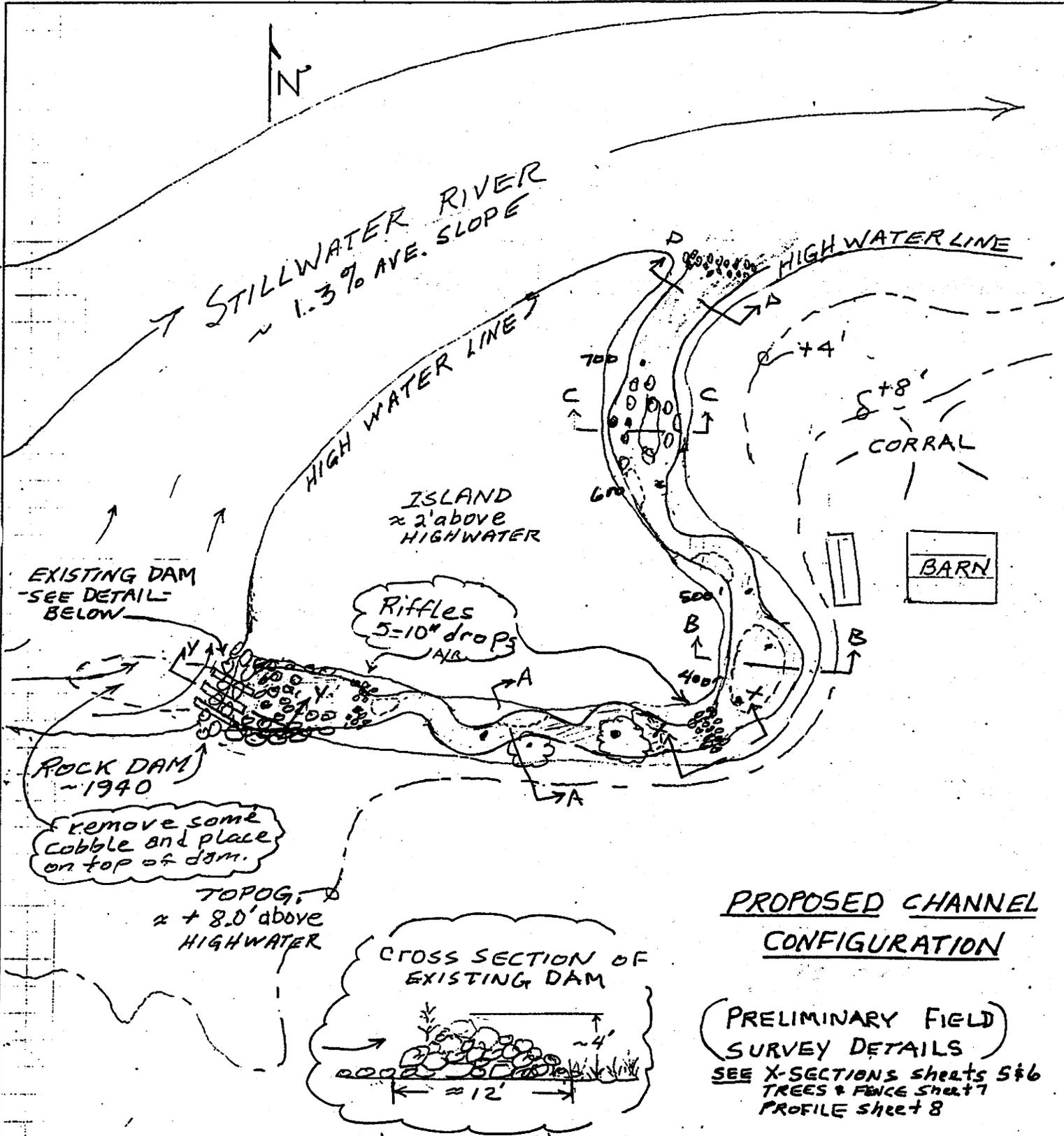


Figure 2. Plan View of Proposed Channel Configuration on the Stillwater River.

# HART RANCH

DATE: 12-6-99

BY: W.F. HART, PE LOC. NWSE<sup>4</sup>S34T3SR18

SCALE:  $\approx 1.0'' = 100'$  SHEET 7 OF 9

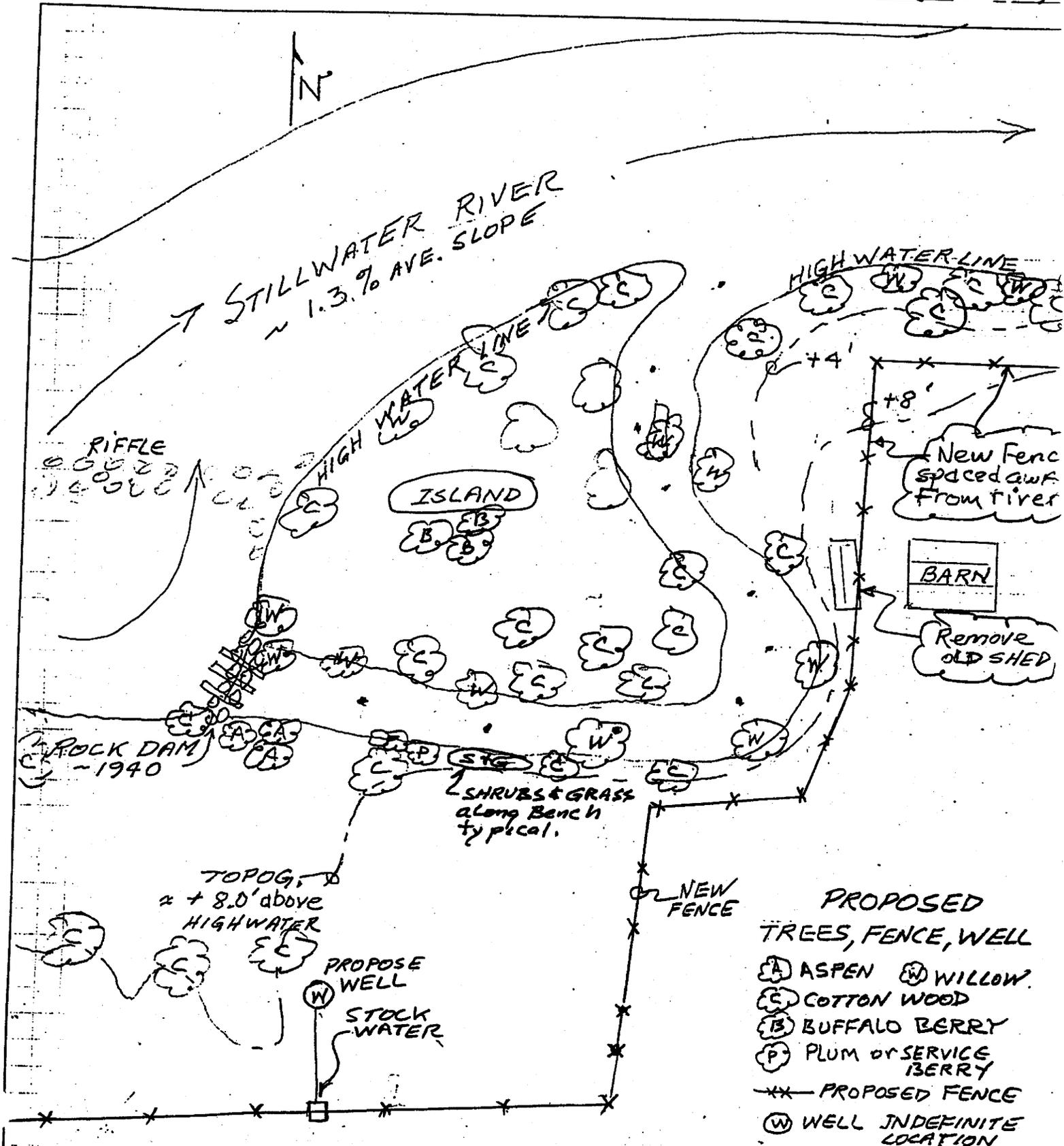


Figure 3. Plan View of Proposed Fencing, Stockwater and Revegetation Work on the Stillwater River.