

March 18, 2005
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
Bozeman Office
Montana State Library, Helena
MT Environmental Information Center
Montana Audubon Council
Jefferson Valley Conservation District
Lewis and Clark Chapter Trout Unlimited, P.O. Box 475, Twin Bridges, MT 59754
U.S. Army Corp of Engineers, Helena
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Helena
State Historic Preservation Office, Helena
Bruce Rehwinkel, 101 Manor Drive, Townsend, MT 59644

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 project calling for the enhancement of salmonid spawning habitat in lower Parson's Slough, a tributary to the Jefferson River. The intent of the project is to enhance the recruitment of primarily brown trout to the Jefferson River. The project site is located approximately 10 miles south of the town of Whitehall in Madison County.

Please submit any comments that you have by 5:00 P.M., April 18, 2005 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
Parson's Slough 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.

The Future Fisheries Program is proposing to provide partial funding for a project designed to restore aquatic habitat in approximately 2,300 feet of lower Parson's Slough, a tributary to the Jefferson River. The intent of this project is to enhance recruitment of salmonids into the Jefferson River by providing spawning and rearing habitat for primarily brown trout. The project site is located approximately 10 miles south of the town of Whitehall in Madison County (Attachment 1).

I. Location of Project: This project will be conducted on lower Parson's Slough, a tributary to the Jefferson River, located approximately 10 miles south of the town of Whitehall within Township 1 South, Range 5 West, Section 14 in Madison 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 meet this goal.

The restoration of Parson's Slough has been identified by Montana Trout Unlimited as a potential project that would enhance the recruitment of salmonids into the Jefferson River. The fishery in the Jefferson River currently is limited, in part, by inadequate recruitment of young fish from the tributaries. The present channel of lower Parson's Slough is an irrigation delivery canal located on the right bench of the old stream channel. The slough extends about 4,000 feet to convey irrigation water to the Willow Springs Ranch. When water in the slough is not being used for irrigation, it is wasted through a narrow and steepened channel into the Jefferson River. This waste-way provides little or no spawning and rearing habitat for fish. To convert lower Parson's Slough into a productive spawning channel, a new channel would be constructed within what appears to be the historic channel and a diversion structure would be installed to pass water down the new channel between the time brown trout spawn (October) to the time brown trout fry emerge from the gravel (April).

III. Scope of the Project:

This project calls for enhancing aquatic habitat on a 2,300-foot reach of lower Parson's Slough to enhance spawning and rearing habitat for salmonids (Attachment 2). The project calls for rebuilding a channel with a proper dimension, pattern and profile within the apparent footprint of the original stream. Created spawning riffles would cover approximately 35% of the length of the new stream. A jack-leg style diversion structure would be placed just downstream of Loomont Lane to allow water to be diverted to the Willow Spring Ranch during the irrigation season, thus maintaining their water right. During the non-irrigation season, this diversion would allow water to flow down the newly constructed channel to provide

water for brown trout spawning habitat. The diversion also would act as an upstream migration barrier to prevent migratory spawners and their progeny from being entrained into the irrigation system. Should a project designed to make the irrigation system more efficient be completed in the future, the diversion would enable stream flow in the slough to be properly divided between the spawning channel and the irrigation system. This project is expected to cost \$80,904.00. Of this total, the Future Fisheries Improvement Program would be contributing up to \$47,904.00.

IV. Environmental Impact Checklist:

Please see attached checklist.

V. Explanation of Impacts to the Physical Environment

1. Terrestrial and aquatic life and habitats.

Restoring the lower reach of this degraded slough is expected to create spawning and incubation habitat for migratory brown trout that reside in the Jefferson River. This newly created spawning habitat should enhance recruitment of fish into the Jefferson River.

2. Water quantity, quality and distribution.

Short-term increases in turbidity may occur during project construction. To minimize turbidity, construction of the new channel will be conducted "in the dry". This new channel will be fully constructed prior to activating with diverted water. Additionally, 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 will be obtained from the local Conservation District and the U.S. Army Corp of Engineers will be contacted to determine the requirements to meet the federal Clean Water Act (404 permit). This project would result in re-watering the historic channel of lower Parson's Slough during the non-irrigation season.

3. Geology, soil quality and moisture.

Soils within the footprint of the new channel would be disturbed during construction, but would be stabilized with re-vegetation efforts and the placement of salvaged sod.

4. Vegetation cover, quantity and quality.

Vegetation within the footprint of the new channel would be disturbed during construction. Re-vegetation efforts associated with the new channel construction should mitigate for this disturbance.

5. Aesthetics.

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

degraded reach of stream to a healthier and more natural stream environment.

6. 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.

1. Access to & quality of recreational activities.

The intent of the project is to improve recruitment of salmonids, primarily brown trout, to the Jefferson River. As a result, the recreational fishery on the Jefferson River is expected to improve. The project does not intend to provide a recreational fishery on Parson's Slough proper.

VII. Discussion and Evaluation of Reasonable Alternatives.

1. No Action Alternative

If no action is taken, lower Parson's Slough will remain degraded, providing poor habitat for the reproduction of salmonids. As a result, this degraded reach of stream will continue to provide only minimal recruitment of salmonids to the Jefferson River. 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 spawning habitat within a degraded tributary to the Jefferson River. This alternative would improve brown trout spawning habitat and would be expected to increase trout populations both in the slough and in the Jefferson River.

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 Parks webpage: fwp.state.mt.us.

3. Duration of comment period?

Public comment will be accepted through 5:00 PM on April 18, 2005.

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

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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 Parson's Slough Channel 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 designed to restore salmonid spawning habitat in approximately 2,300 feet of lower Parson's Slough, a tributary to the Jefferson River. The intent of the project is to enhance recruitment of brown trout to the Jefferson River. The project site is located approximately 10 miles south of the town of Whitehall in Madison 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 Jefferson 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 Bruce Rehwinkel, Montana Trout Unlimited.

Recommendation concerning preparation of EIS No EIS required.

EA prepared by: Mark Lere
Date: March 18, 2005