

April 7, 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
Native Species Coordinator, Fisheries
Missoula Office

Montana State Library, Helena
MT Environmental Information Center
Montana Audubon Council
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
Tri State Water Quality Council, 4660 Spurgin Road, Missoula, MT 59804
Jan Miller, Brown Valley Ranch, 1715 Threemile Creek Road, Stevensville, MT 59870

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 on a degraded reach of Threemile Creek, a tributary to the Bitterroot River. This proposed project is located approximately eleven miles northeast of the town of Stevensville in Ravalli County.

Please submit any comments that you have by 5:00 P.M., May 9, 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
Threemile Creek Channel Stabilization and Riparian 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 Improvement Program is proposing to provide partial funding for a project calling for channel stabilization and riparian restoration within a 7,000-foot reach of Threemile Creek, a tributary to the Bitterroot River. The intent of this project is to improve channel stability, enhance aquatic habitat for native fish and wildlife, and reduce sediment loading into downstream waters. The project site is located on Threemile Creek approximately eleven miles northeast of the town of Stevensville in Ravalli County (Attachment 1).

I. Location of Project: This project will be conducted on Threemile Creek located approximately eleven miles northeast of the town of Stevensville within Township 10 North, Range 19 West, Section 24 in Ravalli County. The project site is located on property owned by the Brown Valley Ranch.

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 upper reaches of Threemile Creek support a genetically pure population of westslope cutthroat trout, a species of special concern in Montana because of their low numbers and shrinking distribution. Historic construction of a forest access road and associated road maintenance activities adjacent to a reach of Threemile Creek have resulted in a straightened, incised channel with accelerated bank erosion. Over-grazing by livestock and the removal of in-channel woody debris has further exacerbated channel incision and bank erosion, contributing to poor quality aquatic habitat for westslope cutthroat trout, other fish species and riparian dependent wildlife. Although the altered channel is now showing signs of recovery with the re-building of an active floodplain and the re-establishment of woody vegetation, a series of highly erosive stream banks continue to contribute significant sediment to the active channel. Additionally, livestock grazing continues to contribute to localized bank erosion and to the loss of woody riparian vegetation.

III. Scope of the Project:

The project proposes to restore a series of sub-reaches within a 7,000-foot altered reach of Threemile Creek (Attachment 2). Restoration work calls for re-constructing 112 feet of straightened channel, stabilizing an additional 891 feet of eroding stream bank, planting 95 shrubs and sprigging 500 live willow stakes in strategic locations, modifying an old irrigation structure to enhance upstream fish passage, and constructing one hardened water gap for livestock use. Eroding stream banks will be stabilized by moving

the existing channel 6 to 10 feet away from the bank into a newly constructed channel that has the proper dimensions and profile and then the bank will be sloped to a stable angle of repose and re-vegetated. The abandoned channel would be filled with stream cobble and re-vegetated by placing sod and planting native shrubs. Sites planted with shrubs or sprigged with live willow stakes would be excluded from livestock grazing for a minimum of two years. Mulch and browse protectors or debris piles would be placed around each planted shrub and plants would be irrigated during the growing season. To enhance fish passage, an old abandoned irrigation diversion would be removed from the channel. This project is expected to cost \$46,907.00. Of this total, the Future Fisheries Improvement Program would be contributing up to \$9,951.00 to complete the project. Westwater Consultants and Geum Environmental Consulting, Inc., two stream restoration companies, prepared the restoration plan for 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.

The aquatic and riparian habitat on a 7,000-foot reach of Threemile Creek would be improved by stabilizing a series of eroding stream banks, re-shaping some over-widened channel sections, restoring the riparian vegetative community and removing a partial fish passage barrier. This work is expected to create healthier habitat for aquatic life by reducing sediment loading, creating greater environmental complexity and restoring migratory connectivity. Expected improvements in the aquatic habitat should enhance westslope cutthroat trout and other resident species of fish. 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 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 existing channel 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 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 stream corridor 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 five to ten day period. In the long term, aesthetics would be enhanced by restoring a degraded reach of Threemile Creek to a healthier and more complex stream environment.

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

Threemile Creek supports resident westslope cutthroat trout, is a species of special concern in Montana. Proposed improvements made to Threemile Creek are expected to benefit this westslope cutthroat trout population.

7. 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.

1. Access to & quality of recreational activities.

This project intends to improve the diversity of fish habitat and riparian condition within an altered reach of Threemile Creek. Although this project is located on private property with restricted public access, the stream flows through the Bitterroot National Forest immediately upstream from the site. As a result, the recreational fishery on adjacent US Forest Service lands may benefit from this proposed work.

VII. Discussion and Evaluation of Reasonable Alternatives.

1. No Action Alternative

If no action is taken, this reach of Threemile Creek will remain degraded, fish habitat will be poor and fish passage will be hindered. Recreational opportunities associated with fish and wildlife resources on adjacent US Forest Service lands will remain reduced and aesthetics will continue to be impaired.

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 7,000-foot reach of degraded channel on Threemile Creek. This restoration work would remove a chronic source of sediment, provide for more diverse aquatic habitat and improve passage for westslope cutthroat trout and other species of fish. This alternative would improve fish and wildlife habitat, aesthetics and water quality within the project area and would be expected to enhance the westslope cutthroat trout population in the Threemile Creek 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 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 May 9, 2005.

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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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 Threemile Creek Channel Stabilization and Riparian 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 an altered 7,000-foot reach of Threemile Creek, a tributary to the Bitterroot River. This reach of stream was degraded historically as a result of road building, associated road maintenance and by livestock grazing. The intent of this project is to improve channel stability and enhance habitat conditions for westslope cutthroat trout and other species of resident fish. The project site is located approximately eleven 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		
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
 Individuals or groups contributing to this EA WestWater Consultants, Inc.; Geum Environmental Consulting, Inc.

Recommendation concerning preparation of EIS No EIS required.
EA prepared by: Mark Lere
Date: April 7, 2005
