



Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks

Decision Notice: Threemile Pond Rehabilitation

Proposal

This proposal is to chemically remove illegally introduced white suckers from the small (less than 5 acres) private pond on Threemile Creek owned by Bill and Sandy Hardie. This pond supports an indigenous population of pure westslope cutthroat trout (WCT) that was tested and found to be 100% genetically pure in 2003. As of 2004, there was an estimated 141 (95% C.I.= 85-405) pure WCT in the pond and approximately 200 WCT in 12,500 feet of stream above the pond. This population represents one of only two remnant genetically pure WCT populations in the Helena Valley and possibly the last pure population east of the continental divide to exist at an elevation lower than 5,000 feet (Hardie pond is approximately 4,400 feet). In the upper Missouri River Subbasin, an area encompassing the Missouri River drainage from Three Forks to Wolf Creek, MT, it is estimated that native WCT occupy less than 2% of their historic range (< 35 miles of stream).

White suckers were illegally introduced in Hardie Pond between 1999 and 2001. Since introduction, the suckers have successfully reproduced to a point of overpopulation. Trap netting operations in 2004 removed 25,000 suckers. In 2005, over 19,000 additional suckers have been removed. This overpopulation of illegally introduced suckers has reduced WCT growth and survival to the point that the long-term viability of this population is in question. Mechanical removal of suckers in other ponds has proven effective at temporarily enhancing trout growth, but ineffective at reducing long-term sucker numbers. Therefore, MFWP is proposing to renovate the reservoir by chemically removing all fish using rotenone. Prior to chemical removal, WCT will be trapped, seined or electrofished and relocated to either stream habitats above the pond where a downstream barrier will be placed to stop downstream movement and/or transferred to a small private pond (Fosket Pond) that is less than one mile from Hardie Pond and in the same drainage. WCT will be held during the rehabilitation project and returned to Threemile pond when the chemical has completely degraded. The MFWP Fish Health Committee on 5/20/2005 granted approval for the transfer of up to 50 WCT to Fosket pond.

Environmental Policy Act Process

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) is required to assess potential impacts of the proposal to the human and physical environment. In compliance with requirements of the Montana Environmental Policy Act (MEPA), an Environmental Assessment (EA) was completed by FWP and released for public comment on June 9, 2005. The public comment period extended from June 9 through July 5, 2005. The EA was posted on the FWP website and printed copies were mailed to 30 individuals/groups on the FWP local MEPA mailing list and to neighboring landowners in the vicinity of Threemile Pond.

Summary of Issues Addressed in the Environmental Assessment

The EA lists the issues in detail. These include:

- Threats to native species (Westslope cutthroat trout).
- Current distribution of WCT in the Upper Missouri Basin.
- Effects of rotenone on non-target species and humans.
- Effects of WCT restoration on invertebrates and amphibian species.

Summary of Public Comment

At the close of the comment period on 5 July 2005, FWP had received only one written comment. The State Historic Preservation office submitted this comment, which stated there would be a low likelihood the project would impact cultural resources and an inventory was not warranted.

Decision

Based on the Environmental Assessment, public comment, and the high risk of extinction of genetically pure WCT in the Upper Missouri Basin, it is my decision to proceed with the aforementioned restoration project to chemically remove illegally introduced white suckers and attempt to reestablish the historically robust population of indigenous WCT in Hardie Pond. This alternative provides the best opportunity to benefit the conservation and restoration of WCT in Montana, lessens the need to list WCT as a federally threatened or endangered species, and also serves to illustrate the State's commitment to perpetuating native fish species.

I find there to be no significant impact on the human or physical environment associated with this project, except to help ensure the long-term persistence of pure, locally adapted WCT in the Upper Missouri Basin. Therefore, I conclude that the Environmental Assessment is the appropriate level of analysis, and that an Environmental Impact Statement is not required. Based on the lack of adverse comments, there are no modifications to the Draft EA, and it, along with this Decision Notice, will serve as the final document.

Mike Aderhold

Mike Aderhold
Region 4 Supervisor
Great Falls, Montana

8/26/05

Date