

September 23, 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
Montana Wildlife Federation, P.O. Box 1175, Helena, MT 59624, Attn: Larry Copenhaver
Madison Conservation District, P.O. Box 606, Ennis, MT 59729
U.S. Army Corp of Engineers, Helena
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Helena
State Historic Preservation Office, Helena
Beaverhead Watershed Committee, 870 Fox Ridge Drive, Dillon, MT 59725
Lewis and Clark Chapter Trout Unlimited, P.O. Box 475, Twin Bridges, MT 59754
Harriet Garth and Jay Cowan, 144 Haystack Lane, Snowmass, CO 81654
John Osborne, 767 East Bench Road, Twin Bridges, MT 59754

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 Darnutzer Slough, a tributary to the Beaverhead River. The intent of the project is to enhance over-all habitat for salmonids and increase recruitment of juvenile fish to the Beaverhead River. Channel shaping, riparian plantings and installation of riparian fencing would be used to restore a 13,200-foot reach of the upper slough. The project would expand past successful efforts that were completed in the lower reaches of the stream during 2001 and 2004. This proposed project is located approximately eleven miles south of the town of Twin Bridges in Madison County.

Please submit any comments that you have by 5:00 P.M., October 25, 2005 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. 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
Darnutzer Slough Channel and Riparian 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.

The Future Fisheries Improvement Program is proposing to provide partial funding for a project calling for the restoration of approximately 13,200 feet of Darnutzer Slough, a tributary to the lower Beaverhead River. Restoration would involve channel shaping, riparian fencing and re-vegetation and the development of a grazing management plan. This work would expand restoration efforts that were completed on lower reaches of the creek during 2001 and 2004. Past work on this slough successfully enhanced spawning and rearing habitat for brown trout migrants residing in the lower Beaverhead River. The intent of this proposed project is to expand on past restoration efforts to improve spawning and rearing habitat and enhance recruitment of fish to the lower Beaverhead River. The project site is located approximately eleven miles south of the town of Twin Bridges in Madison County (Attachment 1).

I. Location of Project: This project will be conducted on upper Darnutzer Slough located approximately eleven miles south of the town of Twin Bridges within Township 5 South, Range 6 West, Section 6 and Township 5 South, Range 7 West, Sections 1 and 12 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 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.

Past restoration efforts on lower Darnutzer Slough have significantly enhanced brown trout spawning and rearing habitat. This current project proposes to expand these past successful efforts to the upper reaches of the creek, where aquatic and riparian habitat have been degraded by overgrazing and stream bank trampling. Presently, the stream reach proposed for restoration is over-widened with a silt covered channel bottom and displays poor riparian diversity.

III. Scope of the Project:

This proposed project calls for restoring the habitat condition of approximately 13,200 feet of upper Darnutzer Slough. The project calls for narrowing and deepening the channel with the use of heavy equipment, placement of woody debris habitat structures, planting of woody riparian shrubs and installation of approximately 27,000 feet of riparian fencing with water gaps. This project is expected to cost \$112,965.00. Of this total, the Future Fisheries Improvement Program would be contributing up to \$67,779.00.

IV. Environmental Impact Checklist:

Please see attached checklist.

V. Explanation of Impacts to the Physical Environment

1. Terrestrial and aquatic life and habitats.

Restoring over-all habitat conditions within the upper reaches of Darnutzer Slough is expected to enhance the recruitment of brown trout to the lower Beaverhead River. Trout populations in the lower Beaverhead River appear to be recruitment limited and restoration of spring creek tributaries, such as Darnutzer Slough, is the most readily available and cost effective action to enhance suppressed trout populations. This proposed project would act to expand past efforts conducted on the lower portions of the creek that successfully enhanced brown trout spawning and rearing habitat. Habitat for riparian dependent wildlife also would be improved by providing better management of livestock grazing within the riparian corridor through fencing and by enhancing the riparian vegetative community along the stream margin.

2. Water quantity, quality and distribution.

Presently, the upper reach of Darnutzer Slough displays the degrading effects of over-grazing and bank trampling by livestock. The intent of this proposed project is to enhance over-all aquatic habitat by converting the existing over-widened channel to a more appropriate dimension, pattern and profile and by enhancing and protecting the riparian vegetative community with riparian plantings and the installation of riparian fencing. The project is expected to result in cooler water temperatures, providing thermal conditions more conducive for trout. The project will expand past restoration efforts conducted on lower reaches of the stream.

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 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, but would quickly stabilize following proposed fencing and re-vegetation efforts. Soils would be further stabilized with the development of a over-all grazing management plan designed, in part, to protect streamside vegetation from livestock over-grazing.

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 fencing the riparian corridor and

implementation of a grazing management 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 degraded spring creek back to a more natural configuration. In addition, the riparian vegetative community would be enhanced by riparian fencing and by the implementation of a grazing management plan.

6. Historic and archaeological sites

The proposed project, located on private property, will not adversely affect any properties listed, or eligible for listing, in the National Register of Historic Places and there is a low likelihood that cultural properties will be adversely impacted as a result of the work. Should cultural material be inadvertently discovered during the project, the State Historic Preservation Office will be contacted and the site will be investigated.

VI. Explanation of Impacts on the Human Environment.

1. Access to & quality of recreational activities.

Presently, the upper reaches of Darnutzer Slough contribute no appreciable recruitment of salmonids to the stream or to the lower Beaverhead River. The Beaverhead River supports a popular recreational fishery. The intent of this project is to enhance over-all habitat for salmonids, especially brown trout, and increase recruitment of juvenile fish to the recreational fisheries found in downstream waters.

VII. Discussion and Evaluation of Reasonable Alternatives.

1. No Action Alternative

If no action is taken, the upper reaches of Darnutzer Slough will continue to be nearly devoid of aquatic habitat and will provide little or no recruitment of juvenile fish to the Beaverhead River. 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 13,200-foot degraded reach of Darnutzer Slough. The intent of the project is to improve over-all habitat for salmonids and to improve the vegetative community within the riparian corridor. The project would expand past successful restoration efforts conducted on the lower reaches of the stream. This alternative would improve fish and wildlife habitat and aesthetics within the project area and has the potential to enhance the recreational fisheries in the Beaverhead 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 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 October 25, 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
Telephone: (406) 444-2432
e-mail: mlere@mt.gov

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 Darnutzer Slough Channel 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 approximately 13,200 feet of Darnutzer Slough, a tributary to the lower Beaverhead River. The intent of the project is to improve over-all habitat for salmonids and enhance the recruitment of juvenile fish to the Beaverhead River. The project site is located approximately eleven miles south of the town of Twin Bridges 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 Madison 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 John Osborne; Dick Oswald, Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks

Recommendation concerning preparation of EIS No EIS required. EA prepared by: Mark Lere

Date: September 12, 2005