

March 13, 2006
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
 Great Falls Office
Montana State Library, Helena
Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation, P.O. Box 201601, Helena, MT 59620-1601
MT Environmental Information Center
Montana Audubon Council
Montana Wildlife Federation, P.O. Box 1175, Helena, MT 59624
Teton Conservation District, Route 2, Box 240, Choteau, MT 59422
U.S. Army Corp of Engineers, Helena
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Helena
State Historic Preservation Office, Helena
George Higgins, 80 Higgins Road, Choteau, MT 59422

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 for a bank stabilization project on approximately 900 feet of the Teton River. This proposed project is located on property owned by the State of Montana approximately 1/4 mile south of the town of Choteau in Teton County.

Please submit any comments that you have by 5:00 P.M., April 13, 2006 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
Teton River Bank Stabilization 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 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 stabilization of approximately 900 feet of actively eroding stream bank within a 0.40 mile reach of the Teton River to reduce sediment input from ongoing erosion and to create additional pool habitat for the resident fisheries. The project site is located on property owned by the State of Montana (leased state lands section) approximately 1/4 mile south of the town of Choteau in Teton County (Attachment 1).

I. Location of Project: This project will be conducted on a 0.4 mile reach of the Teton River located approximately 1/4 mile south of the town of Choteau within Township 24 North, Range 5 West, Section 36 in Teton 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 met this goal.

Unlike most of the chronically dewatered Teton River, this reach of river receives groundwater returns just upstream of the proposed project site and maintains adequate year-round flow. This groundwater inflow creates productive spring creek like conditions and recent surveys have revealed a healthy resident brown trout population. Because of the close proximity to Choteau, this reach of the river provides a popular local recreational fishery. However, long term over-grazing allowed by a previous lessee has resulted in the loss of riparian vegetation and a resultant propensity for bank erosion. This active bank erosion has degraded aquatic habitat within a localized area.

III. Scope of the Project: The project proposes to stabilize approximately 900 feet of actively eroding riverbank within a 0.4-mile reach of the Teton River. The project calls for treating four separate sites (Attachment 2). The proposed treatment includes sloping the vertical banks to a stable angle of repose, transplanting willow clumps and installing willow sprigs at the toe of the slope as needed, seeding all disturbed areas with native grasses and staking geo-textile fabric on most of the re-shaped banks. Additionally, at site 4 where erosion appears to be most severe, approximately 30 feet of tree revetment would be anchored on the toe of the slope and the point bar on the opposite bank would be slightly lowered and re-shaped. The project would be protected from livestock grazing with temporary fencing until significant vegetation re-growth occurred. This project is expected to cost \$14,933.00. Of this total, the Future Fisheries Improvement Program would be contributing up to \$11,000.00.

IV. Environmental Impact Checklist:

Please see attached checklist.

V. Explanation of Impacts to the Physical Environment

1. Terrestrial and aquatic life and habitats.

Stabilizing 900 feet of actively eroding stream bank on this reach of the Teton River is expected to locally reduce sediment input into the stream and create some holding water for adult fish. Habitat for riparian dependent wildlife also would be improved by restoring the riparian vegetative community through planting riparian shrubs and through protecting the corridor from over-grazing by livestock.

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 (Natural Streambed and Land Preservation Act) will be obtained from the local conservation district and the U.S. Army Corp of Engineers will be contacted to determine the requirements needed to meet the federal Clean Water Act. In the long term, stabilizing eroding stream banks within this reach of Teton River 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 quickly stabilize following proposed re-vegetation efforts. Overall, the project is expected to reduce bank erosion by stabilizing actively eroding stream banks and restoring the riparian vegetative community.

4. Vegetation cover, quantity and quality.

Riparian vegetation and cover would be disturbed during the period of construction. However, proposed re-vegetation efforts would act to mitigate these disturbances. Improved land management practices within the riparian corridor would encourage the recovery of woody shrubs along the stream margin.

5. Aesthetics.

Aesthetics would be negatively impacted during project construction due to ground disturbance and the presence of heavy equipment. Project construction is expected to occur over a one-week period. In the long term, stabilizing eroding stream banks and improving vegetation within the riparian corridor would enhance aesthetics on this reach of the Teton River.

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.

7. Access to & quality of recreational activities.

Stabilizing 900 feet of eroding stream bank is expected to improve overall aquatic habitat, and consequently, would be expected to attract fish and improve fishing opportunities in a localized area.

VII. Discussion and Evaluation of Reasonable Alternatives.

1. No Action Alternative

If no action is taken, this reach of the Teton River will continue to be relatively unstable, sloughing banks will continue to add sediment into the stream and habitat for fish and riparian dependent wildlife will remain in a degraded condition.

2. Bank stabilization using blanket rock rip-rap

Rock rip-rap would provide greater resistance to the existing shear stresses. However, blanket rip-rap would eliminate riparian vegetation on this section of stream and diminish the over-all natural function of the stream channel.

3. The Proposed Alternative

The proposed alternative is designed to stabilize approximately 900 feet of actively eroding stream bank on the Teton River by back-sloping, placement of erosion control fabric, transplanting willow clumps and installing tree revetment. While stabilization of this relatively short reach of stream likely will have little impact on overall fish populations, enhancement efforts are expected to attract fish and reduce sediment input in a localized area. Additionally, improved land management practices within the riparian corridor associated with this alternative would encourage the recovery of woody shrubs along the stream margin.

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 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 April 13, 2006.

4. Person responsible for preparing the EA.

Mark Lere, Program Officer
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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 Teton River Bank Stabilization 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 stabilization of approximately 900 feet of actively eroding stream bank on the Teton River. The project site is located on property owned by the State of Montana approximately 1/4 mile south of the town of Choteau in Teton 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 Teton County 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 Dave Yerk, MFWP
 Recommendation concerning preparation of EIS No EIS required.

EA prepared by: Mark Lere
Date: March 9, 2006
