

August 30, 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
Glasgow Office
Montana State Library, Helena
MT Environmental Information Center
Montana Audubon Council
Phillips Conservation District, HC72, Box 7615, Malta, MT 59538
U.S. Army Corp of Engineers, Helena
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Helena
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, CMR, P.O. Box 110, Lewistown, MT 59457
State Historic Preservation Office, Helena
WWF Northern Great Plains, 104 East Main, Suite 215, Bozeman, MT 59715
American Prairie Foundation, P.O. Box 908, Bozeman, MT 59771
Martha Kauffman, Oxbow Inc., 807 Cobb Hill Road, Bozeman, MT 59718

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 re-establishing an abandoned channel on Box Elder Creek, a tributary to Telegraph Creek and ultimately Fort Peck Lake. This proposed project is located approximately 7 miles south of the community of Sun Prairie in Phillips County.

Please submit any comments that you have by 5:00 P.M., October 2, 2006 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
Box Elder Creek Channel Re-establishment 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 re-establishing an abandoned channel on Box Elder Creek and enhancing the associated riparian vegetative community. Historically, the lower reach of this stream was diverted and the channel was graded and incorporated into an alfalfa field. Currently, a 2,600-foot reach of the lower stream simply spreads out over an alfalfa field when flowing. The intent of this project is to re-establish a channel and restore the hydrologic function of the stream. The project site is located on Box Elder Creek, a tributary to Telegraph Creek and ultimately Fort Peck Lake, near the UL Bend National Wildlife Refuge in Phillips County (Attachment 1).

I. Location of Project: This project will be conducted on Box Elder Creek approximately 7 miles south of the community of Sun Prairie within Township 23 North, Range 31 East, Sections 20 and 29 in Phillips County. The project site is located on property owned by the American Prairie Foundation.

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.

Box Elder Creek, near its confluence with Telegraph Creek, historically was diverted and the channel was graded over and incorporated into an alfalfa field. Currently, at the downstream end of the field, the channel appears to be head-cutting. Over time, it is likely that the active channel would eventually be re-connected with Telegraph Creek. The intent of this proposed project is to accelerate this re-connection process by excavating a new channel. The project is intended to restore the hydrologic function of lower Box Elder Creek and re-connect the stream to Telegraph Creek and the greater Missouri River fishery. Box Elder Creek has been disconnected from the greater watershed since at least 1939. Restoring migratory connectivity between Box Elder Creek and the Threemile Creek/Missouri River watershed should benefit a variety of prairie species of fish. A fishery inventory conducted on Box Elder Creek in the spring 2006 only found small numbers of fathead minnows in residual pools located upstream of the stream reach proposed for restoration. In comparison, a fishery inventory in lower Telegraph Creek found fathead minnow, western silvery minnow, brook stickleback, white sucker, carp and black bullhead. Prairie fish species rely on residual pool habitat within ephemeral streams, such as Box Elder Creek, for survival.

III. Scope of the Project:

The project proposes to re-construct 2,625 feet of Box Elder Creek and reconnect it with Telegraph Creek (attachment 2). The construction would involve excavating a channel and floodplain based on dimensions of upstream intact reaches. The top width of the channel will vary between 8 and 16 feet, with an average of 12 feet. The new channel will incorporate remnant pools that are still visible in the field. Excavated material would be graded onto higher adjacent ground and contoured into the existing landscape. Disturbed areas will be seeded with a temporary cover crop and then seeded with native grasses and planted with scattered clumps of woody shrubs the following spring. One third of the newly planted shrubs would be fenced to prevent browsing from bison and other ungulates, one third would be protected with browse control sleeves and one third would remain unprotected.

Flow re-introduction into the newly constructed channel would be controlled the following spring to insure recovery of stream bank vegetation prior to a high water run-off event. To maintain access to the existing alfalfa field, one appropriately sized culvert would be installed into the new channel. This project is expected to cost \$47,835.00. Of this total, the Future Fisheries Improvement Program would be contributing up to \$23,865.00 to complete 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 hydrologic function of Box Elder Creek would be restored and the stream would be reconnected to Telegraph Creek and the greater Missouri River watershed. Aquatic and riparian habitat within a 2,625-foot reach of stream would be improved by re-constructing an abandoned reach of stream and by enhancing the riparian vegetative community. This work is expected to create healthier habitat for aquatic life by creating greater environmental complexity and by beginning to restore the natural hydrologic regime. Expected improvements in the aquatic habitat should enhance native prairie fish populations, including fathead minnow, western silvery minnow, and brook stickleback. Habitat for riparian wildlife also would be improved by enhancing the riparian vegetative community.

2. Water quantity, quality and distribution.

To minimize turbidity, construction will occur when the channels are dry and operation of equipment in the stream channel will be minimized to the extent practicable. Short-term increases in turbidity may occur once the new channel is activated by run-off. 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 potential requirements to meet the federal Clean Water Act (404 permit).

3. Geology and soil quality, stability and moisture.

Soils along the stream margin will be disturbed during construction, but would be stabilized with re-vegetation efforts.

4. Vegetation cover, quantity and quality.

Riparian vegetation, primarily alfalfa and non-native grasses will be disturbed during the period of construction. However, proposed re-vegetation efforts and the restoration of the natural hydrologic regime 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. Construction is expected to occur over a three to four week period. In the long term, aesthetics would be enhanced by restoring the channel of Box Elder Creek to a healthier and more complex stream environment.

6. Historic and archaeological sites

Work associated with this project would result in minimal ground disturbance in a field that has been cultivated since at least 1939. As a result, there is a very low likelihood that cultural properties would be adversely impacted. Should cultural materials be inadvertently discovered during the project, the State Historic Preservation Office will be contacted and the site will be investigated.

VII. Discussion and Evaluation of Reasonable Alternatives.

1. No Action Alternative

If no action is taken, the slow head-cutting process will continue, leading to the likelihood that the Box Elder Creek eventually would reconnect with Telegraph Creek. The time required to complete this head-cutting process and reconnect the channel to the greater watershed remains unknown, but likely would be relatively long. Until this process was completed, the aquatic and riparian habitat will remain in a degraded condition and prairie fish populations in the drainage will continue to be impaired.

2. The Proposed Alternative

Under this alternative, the Box Elder Creek channel would be actively reconnected to Telegraph Creek and the greater watershed and the riparian vegetative community would be enhanced. This alternative would improve aquatic and riparian habitat and would be expected to enhance populations of native prairie fish.

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 October 2, 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 Box Elder Creek Channel Re-Establishment 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 re-
establishing an abandoned channel on Box Elder Creek and enhancing the
associated riparian vegetative community. The intent of the project is
to restore the hydrologic function of the stream and enhance
populations of prairie fish. Box Elder Creek is a tributary to
Telegraph Creek and ultimately Fort Peck Lake. The project site is
located approximately 9 miles south of the community of Sun Prairie in
Phillips County. The property is owned by the American Prairie
Foundation.

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		
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 Phillips 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: Oxbow, Inc.

Recommendation concerning preparation of EIS No EIS required.
EA prepared by: Mark Lere
Date: August 17, 2006
