September 15, 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
    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
Friends of Lee Metcalf National Wildlife Refuge, 4567 Wildfowl Lane, Stevensville, MT 59870
James Rokosch, 463 Ridge Road, Stevensville, MT 59870
Ralph Scheffler, P.O. Box 4, Florence, MT 59833
Mat Pendergast, 1153 Hanlan Lane, 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 six miles southeast of the town of Florence in Ravalli County.

Please submit any comments that you have by 5:00 P.M., October 16, 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
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 1,369-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, lower stream temperatures and reduce sediment loading into downstream waters. The project site is located on Threemile Creek approximately seven miles east of the town of Florence in Ravalli County (Attachment 1).

I. Location of Project: This project will be conducted on Threemile Creek located approximately seven miles east of the town of Florence within Township 10 North, Range 19 West, Section 34 in Ravalli County. The project site is located on property owned by Ralph Scheffler.

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. The proposed project reach, identified as a priority segment for restoration in a comprehensive watershed assessment conducted in 2005, historically has been overgrazed. Currently, approximately 84% of the stream reach is devoid of woody vegetation and the shrubs that are present exhibit virtually no regeneration. As a result, portions of the stream display accelerated bank erosion. The landowner has expressed a desire to enhance the woody vegetation within the riparian corridor. The project would act as a downstream extension of the channel restoration project that was completed on the Brown Valley Ranch in 2005.

III. Scope of the Project:

The project proposes to restore approximately 1,370 feet of Threemile Creek by fencing the riparian corridor with 2-strand electric fence, constructing a hardened water crossing for livestock water, re-constructing 120 feet of over-widened channel, installing a cobble patch upstream of the crossing for grade control, constructing a vegetated soil lift on the newly constructed meander bend and re-vegetating the riparian corridor with native grasses, forbs, sedges and shrubs. Channel dimensions proposed for reconstruction of the over-widened channel would be 6 to 7 feet for bankfull width and 1 to 2 feet for bankfull depth. Approximately 150 containerized native shrubs would be planted within the riparian

corridor and 500 willow cuttings would be sprigged in the segment of stream bank proposed for installing a vegetated soil lift. This project is expected to cost $14,447.00. Of this total, the Future Fisheries Improvement Program would be contributing up to $11,188.00 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 1,369-foot reach of Threemile Creek would be improved by installing riparian fencing, constructing a hardened water gap, re-shaping an over-widened channel section, and re-planting the riparian vegetative community with native grasses and shrubs. This work is expected to create healthier habitat for aquatic life by reducing sediment loading, creating greater environmental complexity and restoring the riparian vegetative community. 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 and protected with riparian fencing. 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 and riparian environment.

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

The upper reaches of Threemile Creek support resident westslope cutthroat trout, a species of special concern in Montana. Proposed improvements made to this middle reach of Threemile Creek may 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. Agricultural or industrial production.

Fencing the riparian corridor to protect the vegetative community is expected to temporarily remove approximately 2 acres from livestock grazing. Following approximately 5 years of complete rest, this riparian pasture would be managed with short-term, high intensity grazing under a grazing management plan.

VII. Discussion and Evaluation of Reasonable Alternatives.

1. No Action Alternative

If no action is taken, this reach of Threemile Creek will remain degraded, the riparian vegetative community will continue to be devoid of the stabilizing effects of riparian shrubs, and overall aquatic habitat will continue to be poor.

2. The Proposed Alternative

The proposed alternative is designed to restore a 1,369-foot reach of degraded channel on Threemile Creek. This restoration work would protect the streamside corridor with riparian fencing, provide for more diverse aquatic habitat, and reduce localized bank erosion. This alternative would improve fish and wildlife habitat, aesthetics and water quality within the project area and may 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 October 16, 2006.

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 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 a degraded 1,369-foot reach of Threemile Creek, a tributary to the Bitterroot River. This reach of stream was degraded historically as a result livestock overgrazing. The intent of this project is to improve both riparian conditions and channel stability and enhance overall aquatic habitat for westslope cutthroat trout and other species of resident fish. The project site is located approximately six miles southeast of the town of Florence 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			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 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: August 28, 2006