

March 20, 2007
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
 Endangered Species Coordinator
 Fisheries Division
 Native Species Coordinator, Fisheries
 Bozeman Office
Montana State Library, Helena
MT Environmental Information Center
Montana Audubon Council
Montana Wildlife Federation
Beaverhead Conservation District, 420 Barrett Street, Dillon, MT 59725
Big Hole Watershed Committee, P.O. Box 931, Butte, MT 59703
Arctic Grayling Recovery Program, P.O. Box 4089, Bozeman, MT 59772
U.S. Army Corp of Engineers, Helena
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Helena
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 420 Barrett Street, Dillon, MT 59725
State Historic Preservation Office, Helena
Beaverhead County, 2 South Pacific Street, Dillon, MT 59725

Ladies and Gentlemen:

Please find enclosed an Environmental Assessment prepared for the Future Fisheries Improvement Program. The Program tentatively plans to provide partial funding to a project calling for the replacement of two deteriorating twin culverts under Skinner Meadows Road on Governor Creek with a 64-foot bridge. The intent of the project is to improve upstream fish passage for Arctic grayling and other species of fish. This proposed project is located approximately 1 mile south of the community of Jackson in Beaverhead County.

Please submit any comments that you have by 5:00 P.M., April 20, 2007 to the Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks in Helena at the address listed above. Project funding 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
Governor Creek Culvert Replacement 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 replacement of two existing, deteriorating twin culverts, located underneath Skinner Meadows Road on Governor Creek, with a 64-foot span bridge. The intent of the project is to improve upstream fish passage for Arctic grayling and other species of fish. This proposed project is part of a larger watershed-wide effort, under the Candidate Conservation Agreement with Assurances (CCAA), to improve habitat for fluvial Arctic grayling, a candidate species under the Endangered Species Act. This stream crossing is located on a county owned road approximately 1 mile south of the community of Jackson in Beaverhead County (Attachment 1).

- I. Location of Project: This project will be conducted at the Skinner Meadows Road crossing on Governor Creek located approximately 1 mile south of the community of Jackson within Township 5 South, Range 15 West, Sections 35 and 36 in Beaverhead 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 achieve this goal.

Historically, Governor Creek was an important grayling stream used by both juvenile and adult grayling. The existing, deteriorating double culvert underneath the Skinner Meadows Road hinders upstream fish movement during high flows and spring run-off when Arctic grayling are spawning. The undersized culverts also have caused upstream channel aggradation and downstream bank erosion. Replacing the culverts with a bridge would enhance upstream fish passage and eliminate the ongoing channel changes associated with the crossing.

III. Scope of the Project:

The project proposes to replace the existing two, deteriorating and undersized squash culverts (75 inches by 112 inches) with a 64-foot span, pre-cast concrete bridge that meets highway standards. Installation of this bridge would be undertaken by Beaverhead County using an engineered stamped design. The span of the new bridge would easily pass the 100-year run-off event, estimated to be between 1,100 and 1,300 cubic feet per second. This project is expected to cost approximately \$415,000.00. Of this total, the Future Fisheries Improvement Program would be contributing up to \$150,000.00.

IV. Environmental Impact Checklist:

Please see attached checklist.

V. Explanation of Impacts to the Physical Environment

1. Terrestrial and aquatic life and habitats.

Enhancing fish passage in Governor Creek by replacing under-sized culverts with a free-span bridge is expected to increase recruitment of fluvial Arctic grayling and other species of fish to the creek and to the upper Big Hole River.

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 124 permit (Stream Protection Act) will be obtained from Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks and the U.S. Army Corp of Engineers will be contacted for requirements needed to meet the federal Clean Water Act (404 permit).

3. Geology and soil quality, stability and moisture.

Soils within the immediate project area would be disturbed during construction, but would be stabilized with re-vegetation efforts (sowing seed).

4. Vegetation cover, quantity and quality.

Riparian vegetation and cover would be disturbed within the immediate project area during the period of construction. However, proposed re-vegetation efforts would act to mitigate these disturbances.

5. Aesthetics

Aesthetics of the site would be degraded during the time frame of construction due to ground disturbance and the presence of heavy equipment. Long-term impacts to aesthetics would be negligible.

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

Governor Creek historically supported fluvial arctic grayling. Fluvial grayling are listed as a species of special concern in Montana because of their declining numbers and shrinking distribution. Replacing undersized twin culverts with a free-span bridge will eliminate the existing fish passage issue and restore the natural function of the channel through the crossing. The project is expected to enhance the fluvial Arctic grayling population in the upper Big Hole River drainage.

This proposed project is part of a larger watershed-wide effort intended to improve the fluvial arctic grayling population

7. Historic and archaeological sites

This site has been previously disturbed by the construction and maintenance of Skinner Meadows Road. As a result, there is a very low likelihood that cultural properties will be impacted by the completion of the proposed project. Should cultural materials 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.

Governor Creek is a perennial tributary to the upper Big Hole River that has the potential to provide important spawning and rearing habitat for Arctic grayling and other species of fish. Enhancing fish passage at the Skinner Meadows Road crossing is expected to increase recruitment of fish to both Governor Creek and the upper Big Hole drainage.

2. Locally adopted environmental plans & goals.

This proposed project would advance the objectives of the CCAA, a 20-year plan between the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks and cooperating landowners to implement measures for the benefit of Arctic grayling habitat. Additionally, an adjacent landowner upstream of the proposed bridge has enrolled in the CCAA and is in the process of developing a site-specific restoration plan that will further enhance habitat in Governor Creek.

3. Transportation networks and traffic flows.

Traffic in this portion of Skinner Meadows Road likely would be delayed or interrupted during the period of construction. Madison County may deem it necessary to re-route traffic or install a temporary crossing during the period of construction.

VII. Discussion and Evaluation of Reasonable Alternatives.

1. No Action Alternative

If no action is taken, the crossing at Skinner Meadows Road will continue to impede upstream fish passage and will continue to cause channel instability problems both upstream and downstream from the existing culverts. As such, the potential for recruitment of fluvial Arctic grayling and other species of fish in Governor Creek will remain reduced.

2. The Proposed Alternative

The proposed alternative is designed to enhance fish passage and restore natural channel function at the stream crossing underneath Skinner Meadows Road on Governor Creek. Governor Creek has

the potential of providing important spawning and rearing habitat for fluvial Arctic grayling. The project is expected to increase recruitment of Arctic grayling and other species of fish to the stream and to upper Big Hole River drainage. Additionally, the project is expected to enhance the objectives of the CCAA.

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 future Fisheries 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 Parks web page: fwp.mt.gov.

3. Duration of comment period?

Public comment will be accepted through 5:00 PM on April 20, 2007.

4. Person responsible for preparing the EA.

Mark Lere, Program Officer
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Fisheries Division
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 Governor Creek Culvert Replacement Project

Division/Bureau Fisheries Division -Future Fisheries Improvement

Description of Project The Future Fisheries Improvement Program is proposing to provide partial funding to a project calling for the replacement of two existing, deteriorating twin culverts, located underneath Skinner Meadows Road on Governor Creek, with a 64-foot pre-cast concrete bridge. The intent of the project is to enhance upstream passage for Arctic grayling and other species of fish. The stream crossing is located approximately 1 mile south of the community of Jackson in Beaverhead 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		
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			X
14. Transportation networks & traffic flows			X			X

Other groups or agencies contacted or which may have overlapping jurisdiction Beaverhead County, Beaverhead 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 Jeffrey Everett, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

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

_____ Date: February 26, 2007