

September 4, 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
Fisheries Division
Endangered Species Coordinator
Native Species Coordinator, Fisheries Division
Missoula 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
North Powell Conservation District, 1 Hollenback Road, Deer Lodge, MT 59722
U.S. Army Corp of Engineers, Helena
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Helena
State Historic Preservation Office, Helena
Big Blackfoot Chapter Trout Unlimited, P.O. Box 1, Ovando, MT 59854

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 two unnamed tributaries and a segment of Cottonwood Creek, a tributary to the Blackfoot River. The project calls for retiring the stream banks and wetland areas west and south of Cottonwood Creek from concentrated livestock use, replacing some existing non-functional fence with electric fence, armoring an existing ford, installing a culvert and developing off-stream livestock water. The intent of the project is to enhance habitat for salmonids, including bull trout and westslope cutthroat trout. This proposed project is located on the Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks Clearwater Game Range approximately 8 miles northwest of the community of Ovando in Powell County.

Please submit any comments that you have by 5:00 P.M., October 5, 2007 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
Cottonwood Creek - Dreyer Ranch Riparian Enhancement 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. Additionally, the 1999 Montana Legislature amended statute sections 87-1-273, 15-38-202 and Section 5, Chapter 463, Laws of 1995 to create a bull trout and cutthroat trout enhancement program. The program calls for the enhancement of bull trout and cutthroat trout through habitat restoration, natural reproduction and reductions in species competition by way of the Future Fisheries Program.

The Future Fisheries Improvement Program is proposing to provide partial funding for a project calling for the restoration of two spring creek tributaries and a segment of Cottonwood Creek by removing livestock concentrations from the riparian areas. The proposed project will provide for passive improvement in habitat conditions in an area where past livestock use had degraded the streams and riparian vegetation. The intent of the project is to enhance salmonid habitat, including westslope cutthroat trout and bull trout. The project site is located approximately 8 miles northwest of the community of Ovando in Powell County (Attachment 1).

I. Location of Project: This project will be conducted on two spring creek tributaries and a segment of Cottonwood Creek located within Township 15 North, Range 13 West, Sections 4 and 5 in Powell 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 overgrazing and trampling by livestock have degraded a segment of Cottonwood Creek, as well as two spring creek tributaries. This past livestock use has led to unstable stream banks, excessive sediment loading and channel over-widening. This project would eliminate concentrated livestock use, allowing for the recovery of the riparian corridor and reducing sediment delivery to the channel. Cottonwood Creek and its tributaries supports bull trout and cutthroat trout. There has been an ongoing effort over the past 10 years to systematically improve habitat conditions within the watershed. This project would complement the previous habitat work that has been completed in the drainage.

III. Scope of the Project:

This proposed project would involve about two miles of two unnamed spring creek tributaries and 1.6 miles of Cottonwood Creek (Attachment 2). The project calls for eliminating concentrated livestock use within the riparian corridor, removing and replacing some existing non-functional fencing with removable electric fencing and permanent posts, armoring an existing ford with rock, installing a culvert for access and developing off-channel livestock water. These efforts will allow for the passive recovery of the riparian corridor and the damaged segments of stream channel. This project is expected to cost

\$48,800.00. Of this total, the Future Fisheries Improvement Program would be contributing up to \$12,800.00.

IV. Environmental Impact Checklist:

Please see attached checklist.

V. Explanation of Impacts to the Physical Environment

1. Terrestrial and aquatic life and habitats.

Restoring aquatic and riparian habitat on the two spring creek tributaries and a segment of Cottonwood Creek is expected to enhance resident and migratory salmonid populations, and has the potential to contribute to the recovery of bull trout, a species listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act. Habitat for riparian dependent wildlife also would be improved by providing better management of livestock grazing within the riparian corridor. This work would complement previous habitat work that has been systematically completed in the drainage.

2. Water quantity, quality and distribution.

Presently, degraded conditions on the two spring creek tributaries and on Cottonwood Creek contribute to excessive sediment accumulations and elevated thermal regimes due to the over-widened and shallow nature of the channels and due to the loss of overhead cover. This proposed restoration project is expected to reduce water temperatures and increase the sediment transport capability of the channel. 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 124 permit (Montana Stream Protection Act) will be obtained from Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks 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 the installation of the new culvert. Hardening of the existing ford would stabilize an existing degraded segment of stream channel. In the long term, soils would be stabilized with the installation of fencing, changes in grazing management and the improvements proposed for the stream crossings.

4. Vegetation cover, quantity and quality.

Riparian vegetation and cover would be disturbed during the period of construction. However, proposed changes to grazing management, in conjunction with fencing and off-channel livestock water development would result in a significant 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 restoring and protecting the riparian corridor.

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

The Cottonwood Creek drainage currently supports bull trout and westslope cutthroat trout. Bull trout are listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act and westslope cutthroat trout are considered a species of special concern in Montana. Because Cottonwood Creek supports bull trout, a species listed as threatened, the project will be included in Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks Section 6 plan with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The project is expected to benefit both bull trout and westslope cutthroat trout populations.

9. Historic and archaeological sites

Because the project would rely on primarily passive recovery, minimal ground disturbance is being proposed. 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.

7. Access to & quality of recreational activities.

Presently, this segment of Cottonwood Creek and the associated spring creek tributaries are degraded and provide only a marginal recreational fishery. The intent of this project is to enhance spawning, rearing and overall habitat for salmonids and, as a result, the recreational fishery is expected to improve.

VII. Discussion and Evaluation of Reasonable Alternatives.

1. No Action Alternative

If no action is taken, this reach of Cottonwood Creek and associated spring creek tributaries will continue to be degraded by concentrated livestock use. 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 and protect approximately two miles of unnamed spring creek tributaries and a 1.6-mile reach of Cottonwood Creek. The intent of the project is to improve overall habitat for salmonids and improve the vegetative community within the riparian corridor. This alternative would enhance fish and wildlife habitat and aesthetics within the project

area and has the potential to contribute toward the recovery of bull trout.

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 Fish, Wildlife and Parks Commission also will review the proposed project 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 5, 2007.

4. Person responsible for preparing the EA.

Mark Lere, Program Officer
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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 Cottonwood Creek - Dryer Ranch Riparian Enhancement 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 two spring creek tributaries and a segment of Cottonwood Creek primarily by removing livestock concentrations from the riparian areas. The intent of the project is to enhance salmonid habitat and restore the riparian vegetative community. The project site is located approximately 8 miles northwest of the community of Ovando in Powell 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		
14. Transportation networks & traffic flows				X		

Other groups or agencies contacted or which may have overlapping jurisdiction North Powell 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 Ryen Aasheim, Big Blackfoot Chapter of Trout Unlimited
Recommendation concerning preparation of EIS No EIS required.

EA prepared by: Mark Lere

Date: August 15, 2007

