



**ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT AND DECISION NOTICE
FOR THE
YOUNG CREEK FISH SCREEN PROJECT**

November 1, 2007

Project Proposal and Justification:

Young Creek is a 17-km-long tributary to Koocanusa Reservoir, 5 km south of the Montana-British Columbia border that drains a 119-km² basin of the Purcell Mountains, with median annual low and high flows typically ranging from 5 to 100 cubic feet per second, respectively. Young Creek is one of the most important westslope cutthroat trout (*Oncorhynchus clarki lewisi*) spawning tributaries to Libby Reservoir (named Koocanusa) because it represents one of the last known genetically pure populations of westslope cutthroat trout in the US portion of the reservoir and is one of the most potentially productive tributary streams upstream of Libby Dam. Westslope cutthroat thrived in the reservoir from the early 1970s through the early 1980s, and adfluvial runs of cutthroat trout in Young Creek were also abundant during this period. However, since then, the abundance of adfluvial cutthroat trout in the reservoir and Young Creek has declined. Several factors are responsible for these declines, including land management practices within the Young Creek drainage and changes in the species composition and population dynamics within the reservoir. The existing irrigation diversion on Young Creek was constructed in the 1970s and currently has a partially functioning fish screen located at the downstream end of the 480-foot-long open ditch. This diversion is the largest diversion on Young Creek and represents the largest single loss of fish due to entrainment within the drainage. The existing screen consists of approximately ¾-inch screen mesh and excludes only the largest fish from entrainment. The proposed fish screen system would improve the headgate, install a fish screen that would eliminate entrainment of all age classes, and replace the open ditch with buried pipe.

Location of Project:

This project will be constructed on Young Creek, located approximately 11 miles northwest of the city of Eureka, Montana. Specifically, the project is located within Township 37 North, Range 28 West, Sections 14 and 15, Lincoln County, Montana. The project will occur entirely on privately owned land.

Environmental and Social Impacts of Project:

There may be short-term increases in turbidity during the project construction phase, but these impacts are expected to be minor and not impact aquatic life in Young Creek. During project construction, all reasonable and applicable Best Management Practices

will be employed to minimize sedimentation to Young Creek. For example, we will minimize turbidity by 1) scheduling construction to occur during a low flow period, 2) installing the fish screen in the dry to every practicable extent, and 3) filtering water across the vegetated floodplain areas that drain away from the active channel during construction. Riparian vegetation disturbance during project implementation is expected to be minimal to non-existent and will not impact the overall health of the riparian community. This project is expected to improve the productivity of all resident fish populations within Young Creek by reducing mortality caused by entrainment into the irrigation system.

Public Involvement:

In compliance with the Montana Environmental Policy Act, Montana FWP conducted public scoping and held a public meeting at the West Kootenai Store on April 11, 2007. Montana FWP also prepared and circulated an environmental assessment for public comment from September 14 through October 15, 2007. Notices were placed in two local newspapers, and notification was mailed to local landowners affected by the project, local conservation groups, local timber companies, selected businesses, and natural resource agencies. Copies of the EA were made available at three local libraries and the Montana FWP Region 1 headquarters in Kalispell, and the Montana FWP internet web site. We received one collective comment from five landowners using this irrigation system on Young Creek. This comment and Montana FWP's response is summarized below.

Collective Water Users Comment:

Regarding the EA for reducing fish loss at the Young Creek irrigation diversion, we the undersigned are all for it. We agree reducing fish loss.

Response:

Montana FWP appreciates the willingness and financial commitment of the landowners to support efforts to reduce fish entrainment into this irrigation system.

Decision Notice:

Based on the comment we received during the public comment period for the draft environmental assessment for the Young Creek Fish Screen Project, we have prepared the final environmental assessment for this project. Due to the urgent need to reduce native salmonid entrainment and mortality associated with the inadequately screened irrigation diversion, I recommend that the proposed project be implemented as needed.

James R. Satterfield, Jr., Ph.D.
Regional Supervisor

Date