Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks

ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT AND DECISION NOTICE
FOR THE
SOUTH FORK OF COAL CREEK RESTORATION PROJECT

May 15, 2008

Project Proposal and Justification:

Coal Creek is an important bull trout spawning and rearing tributary to the North Fork Flathead River. Recent redd count surveys indicate declines in the Coal Creek bull trout population while other neighboring populations have experienced stable or increasing trends in population abundance. Stream surveys have shown that land management activities in past years have resulted in habitat degradation through the loss of woody debris and the loss of future potential for debris recruitment.

The South Fork of Coal Creek passes through a series of old timber harvest units downstream from its confluence with Mathias Creek. During logging operations, heavy equipment was used in the riparian zone to consolidate and straighten portions of this reach. At the present time, large woody debris (LWD) is generally limited or nonexistent, and the potential for future debris recruitment is poor. This section of creek has become a high-energy boulder/cobble run, with little sediment storage capacity and no habitat complexity for holding spawning gravel and rearing fish.

The proposed restoration project would include reestablishing large woody debris aggregates/jams, channel spanning logs, and single log veins. A recent burn area (2006) adjacent to the creek could provide an excellent and nearby donor source for LWD.

Location of Project:

This project will be constructed on the South Fork of Coal Creek, located approximately 40 miles north of the city of Columbia Falls, Montana. Specifically the project is located within Flathead County in Township 34 North, Range 22 West, Sections 25 and 26. The project will occur entirely on USFS land.

Environmental and Social Impacts:

Several measures will be implemented to reduce construction-related turbidity. Construction will take place during low flows and excavation will be limited to precise locations, which will require minimal channel or stream bank disturbance. The proposed project is on undeveloped Forest Service land, so threats to people or property related to water hazards are not applicable. The proposed project is intended to improve habitat for bull trout and other fish species in the South Fork of Coal Creek. In-stream work will be done between July 15 and September 1 to protect bull trout eggs and fry and will be completed prior to bull trout spawning. Turbidity effects are expected to be short term and will not affect aquatic habitat. The project will be designed to restore LWD

assemblages that emulate natural habitat arrays found upstream and in other North Fork tributary drainages. No meaningful effect on local aesthetics or recreation is anticipated.

Public Involvement:

In compliance with the Montana Environmental Policy Act, a draft environmental assessment was prepared and released for a 30-day public comment period from March 24 through April 23, 2008. Notices were placed in two newspapers (the Daily Inter Lake and the Helena Independent), a news release was done, and notices were mailed to selected persons, legislators, and local conservation groups. Copies of the EA were made available at the local library in Kalispell, the FWP Region One headquarters in Kalispell, the state library, and the FWP web site.

Public Comments/Responses:

FWP received 3 comments in favor of the proposed restoration project.

Comment: As long as you're not doing anything stupid like killing fish to protect fish (never has made sense) I say go for it as long as the impact to the streambed is minimized for breeding, etc.

Comment: I am fully in favor of the EA for Coal Creek.

Comment: FWS obviously supports this project and we would anticipate covering the necessary "Take" permit through the standard Section 6 agreement that Travis submits annually.

Decision Notice:

In time, this project will provide long-term benefits for bull trout and westslope cutthroat trout. The LWD arrays are expected to increase pool habitat frequency, increase distribution of spawning substrate, create sediment storage, and aid in energy dissipation.

Based on the public comments received during the public comment period for the draft EA, I recommend that the proposed project be implemented.

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