August 26, 2008
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
    Missoula Office
Montana State Library, Helena
MT Environmental Information Center
Montana Audubon Council
Montana Wildlife Federation
Montana River Action, 304 N 18th Avenue, Bozeman, MT 59715
Missoula Conservation District, 3550 Mullan Road, Suite 106, Missoula, MT 59808
U.S. Army Corp of Engineers, Helena
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Helena
State Historic Preservation Office, Helena
June Harris, P.O. Box 186, Milltown, MT 59851

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 an undersized culvert under a private road on Deer Creek, a tributary to the Clark Fork River. The intent of the project is to improve upstream fish passage for fluvial westslope cutthroat trout. This proposed project is located approximately 1.5 miles southwest of the town of Bonner in Missoula County.

Please submit any comments that you have by 5:00 P.M., September 26, 2008 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
Deer 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. 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 replacement of an undersized culvert, located underneath a private road on Deer Creek, a tributary to the Clark Fork River, with an 83-inch by 128-inch squash pipe. The intent of the project is to improve upstream fish passage for fluvial westslope cutthroat trout residing in the Clark Fork River. This stream crossing is located on a private road approximately 1.5 miles southwest of the town of Bonner in Missoula County (Attachment 1).

I. Location of Project: This project will be conducted at a private road crossing on Deer Creek, a tributary to the Clark Fork River, located within Township 13 North, Range 18 West, Section 28 in Missoula 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.

Deer Creek is a second order tributary to the middle Clark Fork River that enters the river within the former Milltown reservoir pool area. Deer Creek is unique in that it supports an abundant population of genetically non-introgressed westslope cutthroat trout and supports one of the largest fluvial westslope cutthroat trout runs identified in the regional area. The existing stream crossing, located near the mouth, is currently comprised of a 48-inch arch culvert with a steep slope of about 2%. Existing bank full width of the channel near the existing crossing is approximately 8 to 9 feet. The culvert crossing is located just outside of the Milltown restoration project area and acts as a partial barrier to upstream fish passage. Replacing the culvert with a larger sized squash pipe would enhance upstream fish passage and benefit the westslope cutthroat trout population.

III. Scope of the Project:

The project proposes to replace an existing undersized culvert with an 83-inch by 128-inch squash pipe that would be installed in a manner to simulate natural channel conditions. The existing culvert is located on a private road crossing that is used for ranch access and private use. This project is expected to cost

approximately $48,320.00. Of this total, the Future Fisheries Improvement Program would be contributing up to $24,885.00.

IV. Environmental Impact Checklist:

Please see attached checklist.

V. Explanation of Impacts to the Physical Environment

1. Terrestrial and aquatic life and habitats.

Enhancing upstream fish passage in Deer Creek by replacing an under-sized culvert with a large squash pipe is expected to increase recruitment of westslope cutthroat trout to the stream and to the Clark Fork 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.

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

Westslope cutthroat trout are classified as a species of special concern in Montana due to their declining numbers and shrinking distribution. Fluvial westslope cutthroat trout are a major

component of the Clark Fork River fishery near the city of Missoula and Deer Creek is one of the major sources of westslope cutthroat trout recruitment to this reach of river. Deer Creek also supports an abundant resident population of westslope cutthroat trout. This proposed project would enhance migratory connectivity to a productive spawning and rearing stream within a reach of the Clark Fork River scheduled for restoration as part of the Milltown Dam removal project. Westslope cutthroat trout in Deer Creek have remained non-introgressed despite the fact that the existing culvert crossing acts only as a partial migration barrier. As such, the westslope cutthroat population has been exposed to the presence of rainbow trout for more than 50 years. Replacement of the existing culvert may increase the risk of hybridization but, based on a history of exposure, the level of increased risk is likely low. Deer Creek currently is being managed as an open system emphasizing migratory life history and recruitment of fish to the river rather than securing genetic purity.

9. Historic and archaeological sites

This site has been previously disturbed by the construction and maintenance of this private 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.

7. Access to & quality of recreational activities.

Deer Creek is an important spawning and rearing tributary to the Clark Fork River for westslope cutthroat trout. Currently, an undersized culvert acts as a partial migration barrier to fluvial westslope cutthroat trout. Replacing this undersized culvert with one of adequate size to simulate existing stream channel conditions is expected to enhance recruitment of westslope cutthroat trout to the Clark Fork River.

14. Transportation networks and traffic flows.

Traffic on this private road may be delayed or interrupted for a short period of time during the period of construction.

VII. Discussion and Evaluation of Reasonable Alternatives.

1. No Action Alternative

If no action is taken, the road crossing on Deer Creek will continue to impede upstream fish passage. As such, the potential for recruitment of westslope cutthroat trout to the Clark Fork River from Deer Creek will remain reduced.

2. The Proposed Alternative

The proposed alternative is designed to enhance fish passage and restore natural channel function at a stream crossing on Deer Creek, a tributary to the Clark Fork River. Deer Creek supports an important fluvial population of westslope cutthroat trout, but an existing undersized culvert currently delays migration of some fish. Replacement of this culvert with one of adequate size would improve upstream fish passage and allow the stream to meet its full recruitment potential for westslope cutthroat trout into the Clark Fork River.

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 Parks web page: fwp.mt.gov.

3. Duration of comment period?

Public comment will be accepted through 5:00 PM on September 26, 2008.

4. Person responsible for preparing the EA.

Mark Lere, Program Officer
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Fisheries Division
Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks
1420 East 6th Avenue
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 Deer 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 an undersized culvert, located underneath a private road on Deer Creek, with an adequately sized squash pipe. The intent of the project is to enhance upstream passage for fluvial westslope cutthroat trout. Deer Creek is a tributary to the Clark Fork River. The stream crossing is located approximately 1.5 miles southwest of the town of Bonner in Missoula 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			X

Other groups or agencies contacted or which may have overlapping jurisdiction Missoula 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 Ladd Knotek, MFWP.

Recommendation concerning preparation of EIS No EIS required.

EA prepared by: Mark Lere

Date: August 6, 2008