

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
 Fisheries Division
 Endangered Species Coordinator
 Native Species Coordinator, Fisheries Office
 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
Lewis and Clark Conservation District, 790 Colleen Street, Helena, MT 59601
U.S. Army Corp of Engineers, Helena
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Helena
State Historic Preservation Office, Helena
Big Blackfoot Chapter of Trout Unlimited, P.O. Box 1, Ovando, MT 59854
Lincoln Ranger District, 1569 Highway 200, Lincoln, MT 59639

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 modification of a recreational fishery water diversion structure on Snowbank Creek to provide for fish passage, improve water management and eliminate entrainment of fish into the diversion. This existing diversion was established over 40 years ago to provide supplemental water into Snowbank Lake. Snowbank Lake supports a very popular recreational fishery. This proposed project would continue to allow for supplemental water to be diverted into the lake and, at the same time, provide for an improved water balance between the lake and the stream. The intent of the project is to benefit westslope cutthroat trout and bull trout in Snowbank Creek. The project site is on the Helena National Forest located approximately 8 miles northeast of the town of Lincoln in Lewis and Clark 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. If you have any questions, feel free to contact me at (406) 444-2432. Funding for this project through the Future Fisheries Improvement Program is contingent upon approval being granted by the Fish, Wildlife and Parks Commission. 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

Email: mlere@mt.gov

ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT
Fisheries Division
Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks
Snowbank Creek Diversion Modification Project

General Purpose: The 1995 Montana Legislature enacted statute 87-1-272 through 273 which 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 modification of an existing diversion structure located on Snowbank Creek to enhance fish passage, eliminate entrainment of fish into the diversion and improve water management to insure adequate in-stream flow. The intent of this project is to enhance westslope cutthroat trout and bull trout populations in Snowbank Creek and, at the same time, continue to allow supplemental water to be diverted into Snowbank Lake. The project site is located on the Helena National Forest approximately 8 miles northeast of the town of Lincoln (Attachment 1).

- I. Location of Project: This project will be conducted at an existing diversion on Snowbank Creek located approximately 8 miles northeast of the town of Lincoln within Township 15 North, Range 8 West, Section 9 in Lewis and Clark 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 meet this goal.

Currently, an unregulated and unscreened diversion structure located on Snowbank Creek diverts supplemental water into Snowbank Lake to maintain a very popular recreational fishery. The existing structure dewateres Snowbank Creek downstream of the diversion, impedes upstream fish passage, and entrains fish from the creek into the lake. Snowbank Creek is a first order tributary to Copper Creek and ultimately the Blackfoot River that supports westslope cutthroat trout and bull trout. The stream has been designated as a bull trout core area and has been identified as a high priority tributary in the watershed by Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks and the local watershed group. The intent of the project is to enhance habitat for westslope cutthroat trout and bull trout residing in Snowbank Creek.

III. Scope of the Project:

The project proposes to remove the existing concrete diversion structure and replace it with a series of boulder/rock cross-vanes. A series of three cross-vanes will provide for maintenance of channel grade

differences associated with the existing diversion and, at the same time, allow for upstream fish passage (Attachment 2 and 3). The proposal calls for relocating the diversion slightly upstream where the uppermost rock cross vane would be installed at the head of an existing side channel. Water would be diverted into the side channel and then into a pipe associated with a turbulent fountain style fish screen. Fish and debris screened by the turbulent fountain would be returned to the stream via a by-pass pipe. In addition to modification of the existing diversion and installation of a fish screen, the project calls for restoring altered channel dimensions and removing adjacent earthen levees associated with the existing concrete diversion. All disturbed areas would be re-vegetated upon project completion. Also, the project calls for the development of a water management plan that would provide for a more proper water balance between the stream and the lake. This project is expected to cost \$60,300.00. Of this total, the Future Fisheries Improvement Program would be contributing up to \$28,045.00.

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 and removing a main source of fish entrainment from Snowbank Creek are expected to enhance westslope cutthroat trout and bull trout populations in the stream.

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). A water management plan will be developed to more equitably distribute water to Snowbank Lake and, at the same time, maintain adequate flows in Snowbank Creek.

3. Geology and soil quality, stability and moisture.

Soils along the project site would be disturbed during the construction, but would quickly stabilize following proposed re-vegetation efforts. Re-vegetation efforts call for re-seeding disturbed areas with native grasses and planting riparian shrubs.

4. Vegetation cover, quantity and quality.

Vegetation cover would be disturbed along the project site during the period of construction. Proposed re-vegetation efforts would act to mitigate these disturbances.

5. Aesthetics.

Aesthetics would be adversely impacted during construction due to ground disturbance and the presence of heavy equipment. In the long term, aesthetics would not be adversely affected.

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

Snowbank Creek supports westslope cutthroat trout and bull trout. The stream has been identified as a bull trout core area. Westslope cutthroat trout are classified as a species of special concern in Montana and bull trout are listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act. Because Snowbank Creek has been identified as part of a bull trout core area, the project will be included in Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks Section 6 conservation plan with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The proposed diversion modification, fish screen and water management plan are expected to benefit both westslope cutthroat trout and bull trout residing in Snowbank Creek.

9. Historic and archaeological sites

Because of previous channel disturbance associated with construction and maintenance of the existing diversion and because a majority of the proposed work would be confined to the active channel and existing ditch, there is a very low likelihood that cultural properties could be impacted. 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.

This fish screen is expected to enhance fish populations in Snowbank Creek and, at the same time, allow for the continued diversion of supplemental water into Snowbank Lake to maintain the very popular recreational fishery found there. Snowbank Creek is a tributary to Copper Creek, which also supports a popular recreational fishery.

VII. Discussion and Evaluation of Reasonable Alternatives.

1. No Action Alternative

If no action is taken, the existing diversion will continue to impede upstream fish passage, entrain downstream migrating fish and dewater a downstream reach of Snowbank Creek. The potential for more abundant westslope cutthroat trout and bull trout populations residing in the stream will remain unrealized.

2. The Proposed Alternative

The proposed alternative calls for modifying the existing diversion to enhance fish passage;

installing a self-cleaning fish screen to eliminate entrainment of fish into Snowbank Lake and development of a water management plan to provide an improved water balance between Snowbank Creek and the lake. This project is expected to enhance the recreational fishery in Snowbank Creek and Copper Creek and, at the same time, maintain the popular recreational fishery found in Snowbank Lake.

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 webpage: 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
Habitat Protection Bureau
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 Snowbank Creek Diversion Modification 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 modification of an existing diversion structure located on Snowbank Creek. Modifying the existing diversion would enhance fish passage, eliminate entrainment of fish and improve water management to insure adequate in-stream flows. The intent of the project is to enhance habitat for westslope cutthroat trout and bull trout. The project site is located on the Helena National Forest approximately 8 miles northeast of the town of Lincoln.

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 Lewis and Clark 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 Trout Unlimited.

Recommendation concerning preparation of EIS No EIS required.

EA prepared by: Mark Lere
Date: August 6, 2008