January 11, 2013
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 Bureau
Endangered Species Coordinator
Bozeman Office
Montana State Library, Helena
MT Environmental Information Center
Montana Audubon Council
Montana Wildlife Federation
Wayne Hadley, 1016 Eastside Road, Deer Lodge, MT 59722
Montana River Action Network, 304 N 18th Ave., Bozeman, MT 59715
Beaverhead Conservation District, 420 Barrett Street, Dillon, MT 59725
U.S. Army Corp of Engineers, Helena
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Helena
State Historic Preservation Office, Helena
Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation, 730 North Montana, Butte, MT 59725
Loren Giem, Crane Ranches, 203 Silverbow Lane, Twin Bridges, MT 59754

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 project calling to install approximately 2,800 feet of riparian fencing along a reach of McVey Creek, a tributary to the Big Hole River. Additionally, the project calls for installing a hardened water gap for livestock use and replacing an existing road ford with a bridge. McVey Creek is the site of a recently successful effort at restoring a genetically pure population of westslope cutthroat trout. The intent of this project is to improve habitat and water quality for this westslope cutthroat trout population. This project is located on property owned by the state of Montana (school trust) approximately 6 miles north of the town of Wisdom in Beaverhead County.

Please submit any comments that you have by 5:00 P.M., February 15, 2013 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 Section
Fisheries Bureau
e-mail: mlere@mt.gov

ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT
Fisheries Division
Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks
McVey Creek Riparian Fencing and Bridge 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 to a project calling for the installation of about 2,800 feet of riparian fencing and an associated livestock water gap on a reach of McVey Creek located with a section of school trust land. Additionally, the project calls for installing a bridge at the site of an existing, overused, road ford. McVey Creek is the site of a recent successful project involving the restoration of a genetically pure westslope cutthroat trout population. The project site is located approximately 6 miles north of the town of Wisdom in Beaverhead County on property owned by state of Montana (school trust).

I. Location of Project: This project will be conducted on McVey Creek, a tributary to the Big Hole River within Township 2 South, Range 15 West, Section 12 in Beaverhead County (Attachment 1).

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.

McVey Creek is the site of a recent successful project that restored a genetically pure population of westslope cutthroat trout. A grazing plan for state managed properties includes a rest rotation system where pastures are grazed early, late and then rested. Riparian assessments have shown that this grazing system has improved riparian conditions, with the exception of a few reaches that have been slow to recover. This proposed project would be directed toward one of the more heavily affected reaches which lacks the willow cover found both upstream and downstream. Within this reach, livestock tend to loaf adjacent to the stream because of the surrounding arid conditions, resulting in trampled banks and the loss of woody vegetation. Juvenile willows are present within the reach, but are substantially suppressed by livestock over-use. Additionally, an existing road ford that provides access to FWP block management lands and U.S. Forest Service lands has been over-used, resulting in an over-widened channel and extensive bank erosion. The intent of this project would be to protect this reach of riparian corridor from livestock over-use and provide for an improved stream crossing with the installation of a bridge.

III. Scope of the Project:

This proposed project would install approximately 2,800 feet of riparian corridor fencing, consisting of treated wood posts and 4-strand wildlife friendly wire (Attachment 2). The bottom wire would be smooth and placed 16 inches above the ground. The remaining three wires would be barbed, with the top wire placed at 40 inches above the ground. The new fence would tie into existing fencing and a new gate would be installed where the access road crosses the proposed fence line. At the southeast corner, approximately 175 feet of jack leg fencing would be installed to provide for a 25-foot wide livestock water gap. The proposed bridge would be composed of concrete blocks for abutments with 22-foot wood stringers spanning the stream. Treated wood decking would be installed on the stringers. Once completed, the bridge would span a minimum of 15 feet and would be a minimum of 4 feet above the bed of the stream. The bridge approach would be set at a lower elevation to accommodate flood flows. This project is expected to cost $23,000.00. Of this total, the Future Fisheries Improvement Program would be contributing up to $17,480.00. The remainder of the funding would come from the following:

Contributor	In-kind service	In-kind cash
DNRC	$1,080.00	
Arctic Grayling Recovery Program	$1,420.00	$2,000.00
Skyline Sportsman		$1,000.00

IV. Environmental Impact Checklist:

Please see attached checklist.

V. Explanation of Impacts to the Physical Environment

1. Terrestrial and aquatic life and habitats.

Resident fish populations within this reach of McVey Creek would be enhanced by improving the health of the vegetation within the riparian corridor with the installation of riparian fencing and by eliminating a chronic source of sedimentation by replacing an existing road ford with a bridge. The fencing and associated recovery of the riparian vegetative community also is expected to improve habitat for riparian dependent wildlife.

2. Water quantity, quality and distribution.

Short-term increases in turbidity will occur during bridge 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. In the long-term, water quality in McVey Creek is expected to improve as a result of the elimination of a chronic source of sedimentation coming from the over-use of an existing road ford.

3. Geology and soil quality, stability and moisture.

Soils within the footprint of the bridge site would be temporarily disturbed during construction. All disturbed areas would be re-seeded with native grass seed.

4. Vegetation cover, quantity & quality.

The installed riparian fencing would protect a reach of McVey Creek from over-use by livestock, allowing for the recovery of vegetation within the riparian corridor, especially willows.

5. Aesthetics.

In the short term, aesthetics would be adversely impacted due to ground disturbance and the presence of heavy construction equipment. In the longer term, aesthetics would be improved by restoring a degraded reach of riparian corridor.

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

McVey Creek is the site of a recent successful effort involving the restoration of a genetically pure population of westslope cutthroat trout. This species of fish has been classified as a species of special concern in Montana due to their declining numbers and shrinking distribution. This project is expected to improve water quality in McVey Creek and restore portions of the riparian corridor. These habitat improvements are expected to enhance this westslope cutthroat trout population.

9. Historic and archaeological sites

The bridge site has been chronically disturbed with the continued over-use of the existing road ford. As a result, there is a very low likelihood that cultural properties will be impacted by 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.

14. Transportation networks & traffic flows

The existing ford through McVey Creek provides road access to Block Management properties and to the National Forest. Construction of the new bridge is expected to disrupt traffic flow over the short term and public traffic would be either delayed or re-routed. The construction period would take place outside the time period the road receives the most use, which is fall hunting season. Public traffic would need to be delayed, interrupted, or re-routed during the period of construction.

VII. Discussion and Evaluation of Reasonable Alternatives.

1. No Action Alternative

If no Program funding is provided, the applicant would have to either seek other sources of funding to complete the project or existing land use activities will continue to degrade the water quality and the health of the riparian corridor on a reach of McVey Creek. Aquatic habitat for westslope cutthroat trout will remain diminished.

2. The Proposed Alternative

The proposed alternative is designed to improve water quality and habitat for westslope cutthroat trout located in a reach of McVey Creek. Presently, a portion of McVey Creek has been negatively affected by livestock over-use and by an existing road ford has lead to degraded stream channel conditions. This project would protect the riparian corridor from livestock over-use and would eliminate a chronic disturbance to the channel as a result of the existing road ford. The project is expected to enhance a resident westslope cutthroat trout population.

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 project application to the Future Fisheries Improvement Program has been posted on the Montana Fish, Wildlife and Park webpage for public comment. No comments have been received to date. 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 February 15, 2013.

4. Person responsible for preparing the EA.

Mark Lere, Program Officer
Habitat Protection Section
Fisheries Bureau
Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks
1420 East 6th Avenue
Helena, MT 59620

Telephone: (406) 444-2432
e-mail: mlere@mt.gov

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 McVey Creek Riparian Fencing and Bridge Project
Division/Bureau Fisheries Bureau -Future Fisheries Improvement
Description of Project The Future Fisheries Improvement Program is proposing to provide partial funding to a project calling for the installation of about 2,800 feet of riparian fencing and the construction of a bridge at an existing road ford on McVey Creek, a tributary to the Big Hole River. The intent of the project is to improve habitat for a population of westslope cutthroat trout. The project site is located approximately 6 miles north of the town of Wisdom in Beaverhead County.

POTENTIAL IMPACT ON PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

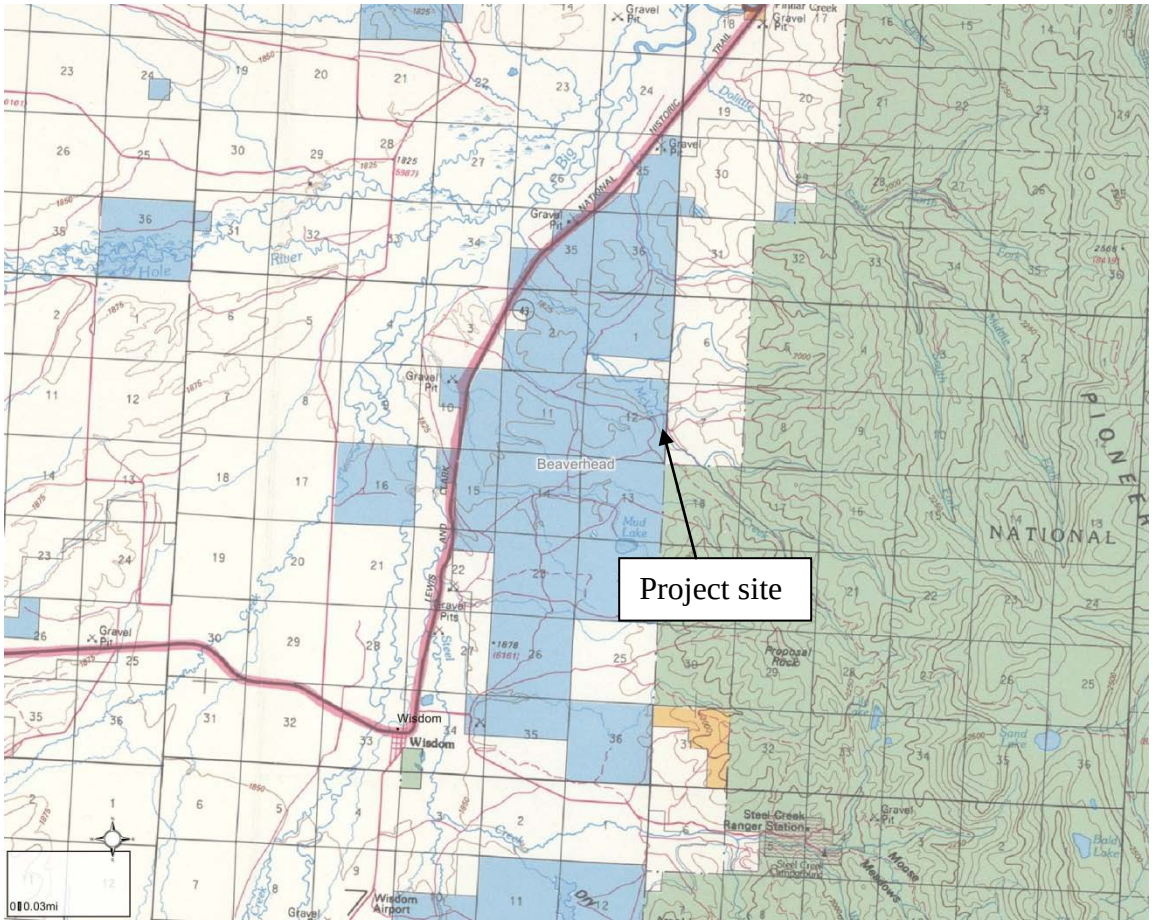
	MAJOR	MODERATE	MINOR	NONE	UNKNOWN	COMMENTS ON ATTACHED PAGES
1. Terrestrial & aquatic life and habitats			X			X
2. Water quality, quantity & distribution			X			X
3. Geology & soil quality, stability & moisture			X			X
4. Vegetation cover, quantity & quality			X			X
5. Aesthetics			X			X
6. Air quality				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

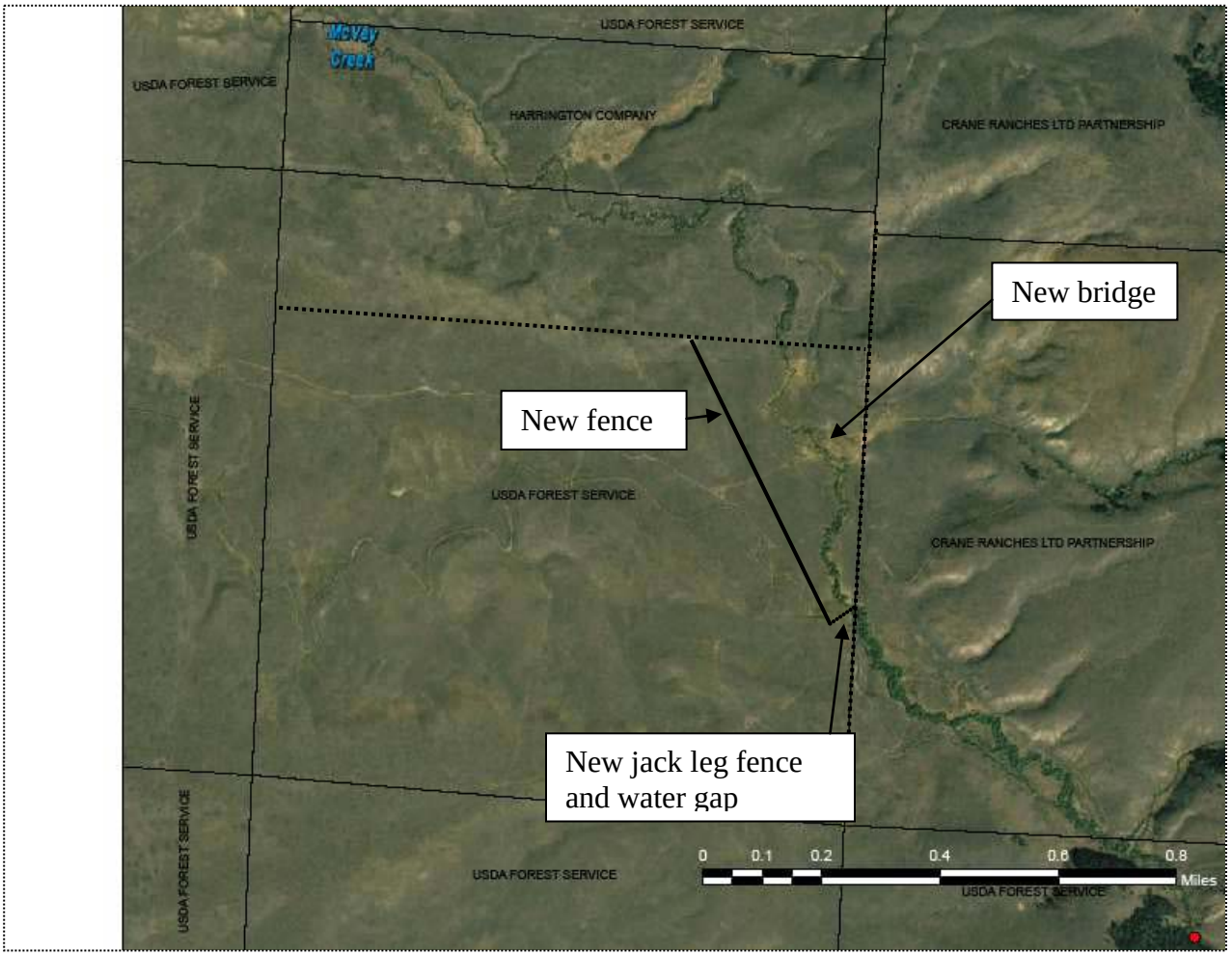
	MAJOR	MODERATE	MINOR	NONE	UNKNOWN	COMMENTS ON ATTACHED PAGES
1. Social structures & mores				X		
2. Cultural uniqueness & diversity				X		
3. Local & state tax base & tax revenue				X		
4. Agricultural or industrial production				X		
5. Human health				X		
6. Quantity & distribution of community & personal income				X		
7. Access to & quality of recreational and wilderness activities				X		
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 Beaverhead Conservation District, Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation, 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 Jim Olsen, Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks
Recommendation concerning preparation of EIS No EIS required.
EA prepared by: Mark Lere
Date: January 7, 2013



ATTACHMENT 1. Map of McVey Creek.



ATTACHMENT 2