

January 7, 2016
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
Region 3 - Bozeman
Montana State Library, Helena
MT Environmental Information Center
Montana Audubon Council
Montana Wildlife Federation
Wayne Hadley, Deer Lodge, MT
Gallatin Conservation District
Montana River Action, Bozeman MT
U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Helena
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Helena
State Historic Preservation Office, Helena
Big Sky Owners Association

Ladies and Gentlemen:

Enclosed is an Environmental Assessment (EA) prepared for the Future Fisheries Improvement Program (FFIP). The Program tentatively plans to provide partial funding to a project intending to restore the West Fork Gallatin River stream channel and isolate the adjacent Little Coyote and Silver Bow ponds, which would improve fish habitat and angling opportunities. The West Fork Gallatin River is a tributary to the Gallatin River, located near Big Sky in Gallatin County.

Please submit any comments by 11:59 P.M., February 7, 2016 to Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks at the address listed above. The funding for this project through the FFIP is contingent upon approval being granted by the Fish & Wildlife 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,



Michelle McGree, Program Officer
Habitat Bureau
Fisheries Division
E-mail: mmcgree@mt.gov

ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT
Fisheries Division
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
West Fork Gallatin River Stream and Pond Improvement

General Purpose: The 1995 Montana Legislature enacted sections 87-1-272 through 273, MCA that direct Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) to administer a Future Fisheries Improvement Program (FFIP). The program involves providing funding for physical projects to restore degraded fish habitat in streams 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. This legislation was amended again in 2013 to open the program to all native fish species (statute section 87-1-283). The program now calls for the enhancement of native fish through habitat restoration, natural reproduction and reductions in species competition by way of the FFIP.

The FFIP is proposing to provide partial funding to a project intending to restore the West Fork Gallatin River stream channel and isolate the adjacent Little Coyote and Silver Bow ponds, which would improve fish habitat and angling opportunities. The West Fork Gallatin River is a tributary to the Gallatin River, located near Big Sky in Gallatin County.

I. Location of Project:

The project site is located on the West Fork Gallatin River, a tributary to the Gallatin River, within Township 6 South, Range 3 East, Section 36 in Gallatin County (Figure 1). It is located within the town of Big Sky.

II. Need for the Project:

One goal within FWP's Statewide Fisheries Management Plan for the fisheries management program is to "restore and enhance degraded fisheries habitats." By implementing an improvement project and creating/restoring important habitat, this proposed project would help meet this goal. In the stream, adult fish habitat and function are expected to improve with this project. Additionally, two ponds will be isolated from the stream and habitat will be created through dredging. Angler access and opportunities would increase.

III. Scope of the Project:

The West Fork Gallatin River primarily supports populations of rainbow and brook trout. Within the floodplain are two instream ponds, Little Coyote and Silverbow. Historical activities involving the construction of the Big Sky golf course created the ponds and straightened the stream channel. The applicant proposes to restore the stream channel, create a floodplain, disconnect the ponds from the stream, and dredge the ponds to improve fish habitat. A trail system and docks will accompany the habitat improvements. The overall goal is to improve fish habitat in the West Fork Gallatin River and Little Coyote and Silver Bow ponds and increase access to the fisheries.

The total estimated cost for this project is \$479,777. Of this total, the FFIP would be contributing up to \$30,000. The remaining funds will come from other sources and from in-kind services (not all funds are secured):

Contributor	In-kind services	In-kind cash
Big Sky Owners Association	\$47,682	\$182,095
Trout Unlimited		\$25,000
Big Sky Resort Tax District		\$100,000
Community Pond Program		\$25,000
TOTAL = \$379,777		

IV. Environmental Impact Review Checklist:

Evaluation of the impacts of the Proposed Action including secondary and cumulative impacts on the Physical and Human Environment

Project Title: West Fork Gallatin River Stream and Pond Improvement

Division/Bureau: Fisheries Division / Habitat Bureau (FFIP)

Description of Project: The FFIP tentatively plans to provide partial funding to a project calling for restoration of the West Fork Gallatin River stream channel and isolation of the adjacent Little Coyote and Silver Bow ponds, which would improve fish habitat and angling opportunities.

A. POTENTIAL IMPACTS TO THE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

Will the proposed action result in potential impacts to:	Unknown	Potentially Significant	Minor	None	Can Be Mitigated	Comments Provided
1. Geology and soil quality, stability and moisture				X		
2. Air quality or objectionable odors				X		
3. Water quality, quantity and distribution (surface or groundwater)			X			X
4. Existing water right or reservation				X		X
5. Vegetation cover, quantity and quality			X			X
6. Unique, endangered, or fragile vegetative species				X		
7. Terrestrial or aquatic life and/or habitats			X			X
8. Unique, endangered, or fragile wildlife or fisheries species				X		
9. Introduction of new species into an area				X		

10. Changes to abundance or movement of species			X			X
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B. POTENTIAL IMPACTS ON THE HUMAN ENVIRONMENT

Will the proposed action result in potential impacts to:	Unknown	Potentially Significant	Minor	None	Can Be Mitigated	Comments Provided
1. Noise and/or electrical effects				X		
2. Land use				X		
3. Risk and/or health hazards				X		
4. Community impact				X		
5. Public services/taxes/utilities				X		
6. Potential revenue and/or project maintenance costs				X		
7. Aesthetics and recreation			X			X
8. Cultural and historic resources				X		X
9. Evaluation of significance				X		
10. Generate public controversy				X		

V. Explanation of Potential Impacts on the Physical Environment.

3. Water quantity, quality, and distribution.

No changes in streamflow would occur in the West Fork Gallatin River as a result of the proposed project. Short-term increases in turbidity may occur during project construction. To reduce turbidity, 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).

The existing ponds have been acting as sediment traps; this project would separate them from the river. A large flow event currently has the potential to release the sediment into the West Fork Gallatin and the mainstem Gallatin River, which could be detrimental to trout spawning success. This project would isolate and remove the sediment from the ponds. These impacts are considered positive and are expected to improve ecological function and create additional recreational opportunities.

4. Existing water right or reservation.

There will be no change to the water right of the Big Sky Water and Sewer District on Little Coyote pond. A headgate to regulate flows will be installed as an inlet to facilitate the continued operation of the golf course irrigation system.

5. Vegetation cover, quantity and quality.

This project would restore the stream channel and isolate the ponds, which would disturb vegetation in the riparian area during construction. However, the affected area would be revegetated appropriately. Long-term impacts are considered positive and would enhance natural riparian function.

7. Terrestrial and aquatic life habitats.

Construction activities that will affect aquatic life habitats will be short term. Impacts would be confined to the project area and be related to reconstruction of the channel and the dredging of the ponds, which includes the use of construction equipment to shape the channel and ponds into the correct dimension, pattern, and profile. The contractors would preserve existing quality habitat when practical and revegetate or restore when necessary. Long term, this project may greatly increase the amount of aquatic habitat and improve connectivity and overall stream and riparian health.

10. Changes to abundance or movement of species.

Fish passage and migration is primarily hindered by the outflow structure on Little Coyote pond. Disconnecting the ponds from the stream and restoring the stream channel should improve stream connectivity by allowing unobstructed movement of fish species. Additionally, isolating the two ponds and creating additional fish habitat should increase the overall abundance of species. These impacts are considered positive.

VI. Explanation of Impacts on the Human Environment.

7. Aesthetics and recreation.

This project should improve the overall aesthetics of the West Fork Gallatin River stream and riparian corridor. The in-channel ponds will be separated from the stream, dredged, and improved. The stream channel will be returned to the proper pattern and profile. Disturbed areas would be revegetated and compliment the natural habitat and landscaping. This project would also create an aesthetically pleasing environment for public use through development of a recreational trail system.

8. Cultural and historic resources.

No cultural or historical resource impacts are anticipated. However, the State Historical Preservation Office will be notified of this project and any potential concerns will be addressed.

VII. Narrative Evaluation and Comment.

There are no anticipated cumulative effects.

VIII. Discussion and Evaluation of Reasonable Alternatives.

1. No Action Alternative.

If no funding is provided through the FFIP, either the applicant would have to seek additional sources of funding to complete the project, or the affected area of the West Fork Gallatin River would remain untouched and connected to the sediment-impacted instream ponds.

2. The Proposed Alternative.

The proposed alternative intends to provide partial funding through the FFIP to restore a section of stream that has been affected by channelization and in-channel ponds. The project would disconnect the ponds from the stream, improve the stream channel, and allow uninhibited fish passage through the restored reach. This project should increase available habitat for trout.

IX. Environmental Assessment Conclusion Section.

1. Other groups or agencies contacted or which may have overlapping jurisdiction:

Gallatin Conservation District, Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation, US Army Corps of Engineers, Montana Department of Environmental Quality, State Historic Preservation Office

2. Evaluation and listing of mitigation, stipulation, or other control measures enforceable by the agency or another government agency:

None.

3. Is an EIS required?

No. We conclude, from this review, that the proposed activities will have an overall positive impact on the physical and human environment, and will therefore not require the extensive analysis associated with an EIS.

4. Level of public involvement.

The project application to the FFIP has been posted on the FWP 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 FFIP. The proposed project also will be reviewed by the Fish & Wildlife Commission, and funding will be contingent upon their approval. The EA will be distributed to all individuals and groups listed on the cover letter and will be published on the FWP webpage: www.fwp.mt.gov.

5. Duration of comment period?

Public comment will be accepted through 11:59 PM on February 7, 2016.

6. Person(s) responsible for preparing the EA.

Michelle McGree, Program Officer
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
1420 East 6th Avenue, P.O. Box 200701
Helena, MT 59620
Telephone: (406) 444-2432, E-mail: mmcgree@mt.gov

Contributor: Big Sky Owners Association

FIGURE 1: Project Location (ponds denoted by stars)

