July 7, 2017
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
Region 3 Office
Montana State Library, Helena
MT Environmental Information Center
Montana Audubon Council
Montana Wildlife Federation
Park County Conservation District
U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Helena
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Helena
State Historic Preservation Office, Helena
Landowner

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 toward a riparian fencing and erosion control on Horse Creek, a tributary to the Shields River. The project site is located west of Wilsall in Park County.

Please submit any comments by August 6th 2017 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
Horse Creek Grazing Management and Stream Restoration

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 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. 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 tentatively plans to provide partial funding toward the installation of riparian fencing along 3,160 feet of stream, mechanical restoration of eroding terraces, revegetation, and installation of stock water tanks and a well. The overall goal is to reduce sediment loading and improve habitat conditions for Yellowstone Cutthroat Trout, as well as Brook Trout, Brown Trout, Longnose Dace, Sculpin, and White Sucker.

I. Location of Project:

This project will be conducted on Horse Creek, a tributary to the Shields River, located near Wilsall, within Township 3N, Range 9E, Section 24 in Park County (Figure 1).

II. Need for the Project:

One goal within FWP's six-year operations plan for the fisheries program is to "protect, maintain, and restore native fish populations, their habitats, life cycles, and genetic diversity to ensure stewardship of native species." Horse Creek supports a population of nonhybridized Yellowstone Cutthroat Trout, which have been recognized as a species of concern in Montana and is a federally sensitive species. Within the project area, stream health has suffered due to poor livestock grazing practices. Many banks suffer from erosion and hoof shear and, as a result, the streambed is covered in silt. Additionally, the riparian area is in poor condition with shrubs not recruiting. The project will greatly reduce the rate of erosion by limiting the access of livestock and allowing the banks to revegetate and stabilize before grazing is allowed again.

III. Scope of the Project:

The project proposes to install riparian fencing along 3,160 feet of the stream, install off-stream watering devices for livestock, mechanically restore eroding terraces, and revegetate the area using

willows and wetland sod. After 5 years, flash grazing will be allowed during the fall when the ground is hard and less susceptible to erosion. The overall goal is to restore habitat and decrease sediment loading. This project is expected to cost $74,542. Of this total, the FFIP would be contributing up to $26,228 to complete the project.

Contributor	In-kind services	In-kind cash
Landowner	$1,800.00	
MT Dept. of Environmental Quality	$2,400.00	
Volunteers		$41,370.00
Total Match: $45,570.00		

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: Horse Creek Grazing Management and Stream Restoration
Division/Bureau: Fisheries Division / Habitat Bureau (FFIP)
Description of Project: The project involves the installation of riparian fencing along 3,160 feet of stream, mechanical restoration of eroding terraces, revegetation, and installation of stock water tanks along with a well to fill them. The overall goal is to reduce sediment loading and improve habitat conditions for Yellowstone Cutthroat Trout, as well as brook trout, brown trout, longnose dace, sculpin, and white sucker.

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			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		
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			X
9. Introduction of new species into an area				X		
10. Changes to abundance or movement of species			X			X

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		
8. Cultural and historic resources				X		X
9. Evaluation of significance				X		
10. Generate public controversy				X		

V. Explanation of Impacts to the Physical Environment

1. Geology and soil quality, stability and moisture

This project is expected to improve soil stability through reduced erosion. The bank treatments, revegetation, and change in grazing practices are expected to improve bank stability. The overall impact is expected to be positive.

3. Water quantity, quality, and distribution.

There will be no change in water quantity, but a positive change in quality is expected. The bank stabilization and change in grazing practices will result in less erosion and, therefore, less sedimentation. A 318 authorization will be obtained, if necessary, to meet short-term water quality standards. Long term, the project is expected to improve water quality through reduced sediment inputs.

5. Vegetation cover, quantity and quality

Vegetation cover, quantity, and quality will all be positively affected by this project. Wetland sod, mature willows, and willow sprigs will all be planted and a native seed mix sown to promote the establishment of a healthy vegetative community and discourage reed canary grass from infesting the area.

7. Terrestrial or aquatic life and/or habitats.

This project would create and vegetate floodplain benches as well as restrict cattle access to the riparian area. This will reduce bank erosion and sedimentation in the stream by allowing plant communities to establish before flash grazing is allowed. Additionally, the channel will be shaded, narrower, and deeper once plant communities take hold. This will benefit overall stream and riparian health and function, which support both terrestrial and aquatic life.

8. Unique, endangered, or fragile wildlife or fisheries species.

This project will benefit Yellowstone Cutthroat Trout, which is federally recognized as a species of concern in Montana and is federally sensitive. The impacts on this species due to this project are predicted to be positive, potentially increasing recruitment and survival.

10. Changes to abundance or movement of species.

A narrower, deeper, shaded channel will reduce water temperature, which is beneficial to fish survival. Reduced sediment loading will also improve fish spawning and rearing. Any change to abundance and survival is expected to be positive.

VI. Explanation of Impacts to the Human Environment

8. Cultural and historic resources.

No cultural or historical resource impacts are anticipated. However, the State Historical Preservation Office will be notified of the 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 Horse Creek would continue to erode and stream health would not improve.

2. The Proposed Alternative.

The proposed alternative intends to provide partial funding through the FFIP to restore Horse Creek through a series of bank stabilizations (mechanical restorations and revegetation) and riparian fencing.

IX. Environmental Assessment Conclusion Section.

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

Montana Department of Environmental Quality
Park County Conservation District
Army Corps of Engineers
Montana Department of Natural Resources
Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks

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 August 6, 2017.

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
Contributors: Kyrsten Wolterstorff, Carol Endicott

FIGURE 1: project location