



MONTANA FISH, WILDLIFE & PARKS

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ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT CHECKLIST

PART I. PURPOSE OF AND NEED FOR ACTION

1. Project Title: Willow Creek Aquatic Invasive Species Inspection / Decontamination Station

2. Type of Proposed Action:

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) proposes to lease approximately 1/2 acre of private ranch land along State Highway 2 approximately 0.5 miles south of the town of Lothair, Montana on Willow Creek road to establish a seasonal aquatic invasive species (AIS) inspection station.

3. Location Affected by Proposed Action:

The proposed Willow Creek AIS Inspection Station is located on private ranch land on the SE corner of intersection of 200 East (Willow Creek Rd) and 3700 South approximately 1150' south of Highway 2 south of Lothair in Liberty County. NW ¼ NW ¼ Section 9 Township 31 North Range 4 East (Figure 1).

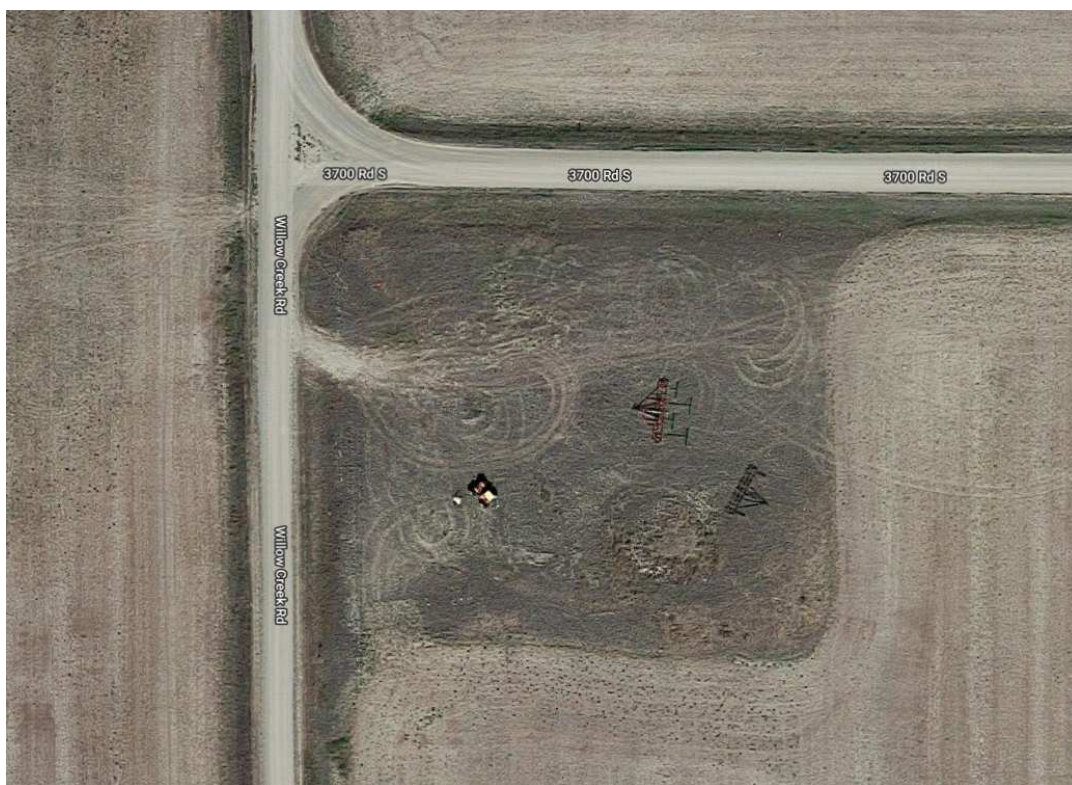


Figure 1 - General Location of Willow Creek AIS Inspection Station, Lothair, Montana.

4. Agency Authority for the Proposed Action:

ARM 12.8.602 requires the Department to consider the wishes of the public, the capacity of the site for development, environmental impacts, long-range maintenance, protection of natural features, and impacts on tourism as these elements relate to development or improvement to fishing access sites or state parks. This document will illuminate the facets of the Proposed Action in relation to this rule.

5. Need for the Action(s):

Invasive zebra and quagga mussels have caused tens of millions of dollars in damages in the Great Lakes region and, more recently, in the southwestern U.S. They likely arrived in the ballast water of ocean-going ships and appeared in the Great Lakes in the 1980s. They've since spread to at least 30 states. The primary vector for transporting invasive mussels is water hauled by boats and associated equipment. All boaters and anglers are urged to take year-round precautions and to Clean, Drain and Dry their equipment after each use.

In the absence of their natural predators, invasive mussels rapidly cause significant problems by altering natural systems that support fisheries. High numbers of invasive mussels filter out zooplankton and phytoplankton that larval fish rely upon, thereby disrupting the aquatic food chain. Invasive mussels also cause millions of dollars in damage to boats, motors, and associated gear, thereby impacting water-based recreation. Invasive mussels can also clog water pipes and hydropower facilities, jam municipal water supply lines, and choke off agricultural irrigation systems. Once established, there are no known methods for controlling mussel populations in lakes or rivers.

Invasive mussel larvae were detected for the first time in Montana in October 2016 in Tiber Reservoir and "suspect" detections turned up in Canyon Ferry Reservoir, the Missouri River below Toston Dam, and the Milk River.

The discovery triggered a natural resource emergency in Montana and led to several recommended strategies to manage the threat of invasive mussels spreading to other areas both within the state and neighboring states and provinces. In January 2017, Montana's Mussel Response Implementation Team leaders presented a series of recommendations to the Montana Legislature to address prevention, detection and containment efforts, including the creation of an AIS management bureau within FWP.

Recommendations include additional mandatory watercraft inspection stations; deployment of watercraft decontamination stations at Tiber and Canyon Ferry Reservoirs; and doubling sample collection to more than 1,500 samples to be taken from more than 200 water bodies.

The specific rule amendments outline several new regulations, including:

1. Mandatory inspections of out-of-state motorized or non-motorized watercraft prior to launching on any Montana water body.
2. Mandatory inspections of motorized or non-motorized watercraft traveling across the Continental Divide into the Columbia River Basin within Montana.
3. Mandatory inspections of all motorized or non-motorized watercraft coming off Tiber and Canyon Ferry Reservoirs, and decontamination if necessary.
4. Drain plugs would be required to be removed at the boat ramp to drain water, if the watercraft doesn't have drain plugs, reasonable measures must be taken to dry or drain all compartments, including bilges.
5. Transporting lake and river water would be prohibited.
6. Live bait and fish would be required to be transported in clean domestic water where allowed in current fishing regulations. Upon leaving Tiber and Canyon Ferry Reservoirs, bait and fish must be transported without water.
7. Emergency response vehicles and equipment engaged in emergency activities would be exempt from the rule amendments.

In order to comply with the rules and to control the spread of zebra and quagga mussels as well as other aquatic invasive species in Montana, FWP proposes to lease approximately 1/2 acre of private ranch land along US Highway 2 south of Lothair, Montana to establish a seasonal AIS inspection station. Proposed developments include expansion of an existing gravel access road with a culvert, a gravel inspection pad; temporary parking area; portable latrine; and a 12X26 structure for storage of gear and wash unit, shelter, and solar power. The proposed inspection station would be located on a disturbed section of ranch land (See Figure 1).

The property would be managed under existing FWP public use regulations. Management of the site would include routine maintenance, control of vehicles and firearms, and other accepted FWP management policies. Protection of the natural resources, the health and safety of visitors, and consideration of neighboring properties would all be considered and incorporated into management for this site. The property would be managed for use as an inspection station only and no overnight public camping, hunting, or ATV use would be allowed on the site.

Further information about the ecology, habitat, range, means of introduction, and control of zebra and quagga mussels and other aquatic invasive species can be found in *Appendix E- Aquatic Invasive Species in Montana* and at:

6. Objectives for the Action(s):

The objective of the proposed project is to establish a seasonal AIS inspection station in a convenient location along US Highway 2 south of Lothair in order to minimize the introduction and spread of aquatic invasive species in Montana waterways.

7. Project Size: estimate the number of acres that would be directly affected:

The proposed project involves the lease of approximately 1/2 acre of a disturbed piece of ranch land used to store equipment south of US Highway 2 in Lothair, Montana.

8. Affected Environment (A brief description of the affected area of the proposed project):

The Willow Creek AIS Inspection Station would be located on 1/2 acre of ranch land south of US Highway 2. The property is not located within a floodplain and, according to the Montana Natural Heritage Program (MNHP) Wetland Mapping Program, there are no permanent surface waters or wetlands on the project site. The site does not provide critical habitat for any wildlife or plant species. It is unlikely that the proposed inspection station would have any impact on any threatened or endangered species because the site is already highly disturbed by the land owner for storage of ranching equipment; the project area is small; the inspection station will only be operated during the boating season; the site is over one mile from a river or reservoir; and the site does not provide preferred habitat for any of threatened or endangered species.

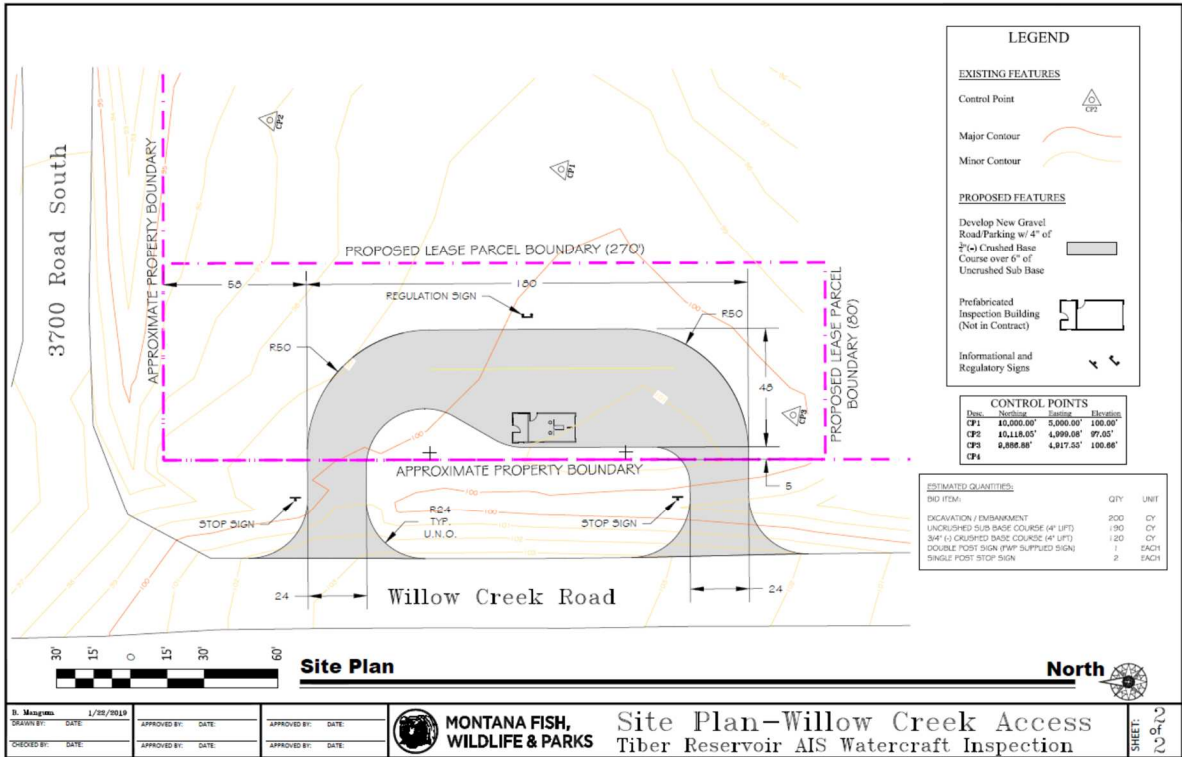


Figure 2. Proposed Willow Creek Inspection Station Site, Lothair, MT.

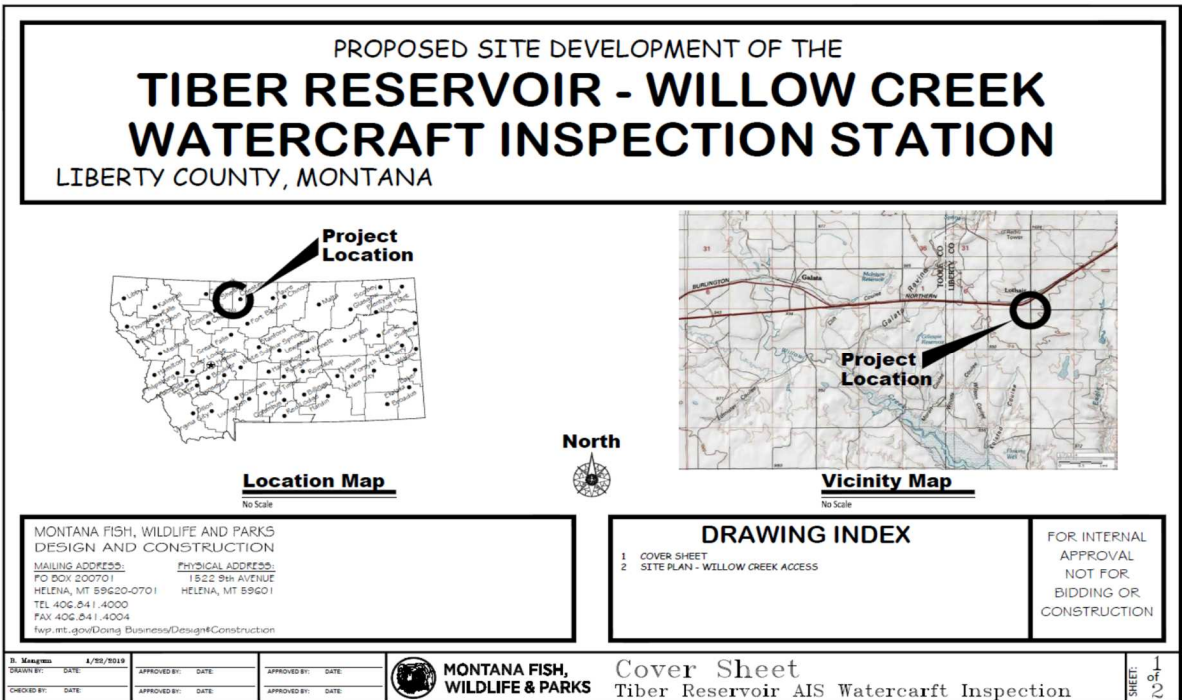


Figure 3 - Willow Creek Inspection Station Preliminary Concept Plan.

9. Description of Project

FWP proposes to lease approximately 1/2 acre of disturbed ranch land to develop a seasonal watercraft inspection station and includes a gravel access road, culvert, gravel inspection pad, a portable latrine, and portable shelter. The station would be used for inspections and decontaminations (Figure 2 and 3).

10. List any Other Local, State, or Federal Agency that has Overlapping or Additional Jurisdiction:

(a) **Permits:** Permits would be filed at least 2 weeks prior to project start.

A	Name	Permits
	No permits needed	

11. History of the Planning and Scoping Process, and Any Public Involvement:

The public will be notified in the following manners to comment on the Willow Creek AIS Inspection Station and the Proposed Action and alternatives:

- Two public notices in each of these papers: *The Great Falls Tribune and the Helena Independent Record.*
- Public notice on the Fish, Wildlife & Parks web page: <http://fwp.mt.gov/>
- Draft EA's will be available at the FWP Region 4 Headquarters in Great Falls and the FWP State Headquarters in Helena.
- A news release will be prepared and distributed to a standard list of media outlets interested in FWP Region 4 issues.

This level of public notice and participation is appropriate for a project of this scope having limited impacts, many of which can be mitigated.

If requested within the comment period, FWP will schedule and conduct a public meeting on this Proposed Action.

12. Duration of comment period:

The public comment period will extend for (15) fifteen days. Written comments will be accepted until 5:00 p.m., February 19th, 2019 and can be emailed to fwpfsh@mt.gov or mailed to the addresses below:

Willow Creek AIS Inspection
Station
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
PO Box 200701
Helena, MT 59620

13. List of Agencies Consulted/Contacted During Preparation of the EA:

- Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
- Montana Natural Heritage Program

14. Names, Address, and Phone Number of Project Sponsor:

Thomas Woolf, FWP AIS Bureau Chief, PO Box 200701, Helena, MT 59620 (406) 444-1230

15. Other Pertinent Information:

The proposed Willow Creek AIS Inspection Station is one of approximately 40 seasonal AIS inspections stations in Montana during the 2019 boating season. The proposed station is located within 5 miles of Tiber Reservoir, which receives recreational use from boaters. The site is especially convenient to boaters due to its proximity to Shelby and Highway 2.

PART II. IDENTIFICATION OF THE PREFERRED ALTERNATIVES

Alternative A, the **Proposed Alternative**, and **Alternative B**, the **No Action Alternative**, were considered.

- **Alternative A (Proposed Alternative)** is as described in Part I, paragraph 9 (Description of Project), to lease approximately ½ acre of disturbed ranch land to establish a seasonal AIS Inspection Station. There are beneficial consequences to acceptance of the **Proposed Alternative**.
- **Alternative B (No Action Alternative)** Under the No Action Alternative, the land would not be leased, and a seasonal Inspection station would not be established at this convenient location. Without an inspection station in this area, some boats could miss inspection thus increasing the risk of aquatic invasive species being introduced or spread to Montana water bodies. The No Action Alternative would have no significant or potentially negative environmental impacts or consequences.

Description and analysis of reasonable alternatives (including the no action alternative) to the proposed action whenever alternatives are reasonably available and prudent to consider and a discussion of how the alternatives would be implemented: Only the Proposed Alternative and the No Action Alternative were considered. There were no other alternatives that were deemed reasonably available, nor prudent. Neither the proposed alternative nor the no action alternative would have significant negative environmental or potentially negative consequences.

Describe any Alternatives considered and eliminated from Detailed Study:

None. Only the Proposed Alternative and the No Action Alternative were considered. There was no other alternative that were deemed reasonably available, or prudent. Neither the **Proposed Alternative** nor the **No Action Alternative** would have significant negative environmental or potentially negative consequences.

List and explain proposed mitigating measures (stipulations): None

PART III. ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW

Abbreviated Checklist - The degree and intensity determines extent of Environmental Review. An abbreviated checklist may be used for those projects that are not complex, controversial, or are not in environmentally sensitive areas.

Table 1. Potential impact on physical environment

Will the proposed action result in potential impacts to:	Unknown	Potentially Significant	Minor	None	Can Be Mitigated	Comments Below
1. Unique, endangered, fragile, or limited environmental resources				X		1
2. Terrestrial or aquatic life and/or habitats				X		2
3. Introduction of new species into an area				X		3
4. Vegetation cover, quantity & quality				X		4
5. Water quality, quantity & distribution (surface or groundwater)				X		5
6. Existing water right or reservation				X		6
7. Geology & soil quality, stability & moisture				X		7
8. Air quality or objectionable odors				X		8
9. Historical & archaeological sites				X		9
IO. Demands on environmental resources of land , water, air & energy				X		10
11. Aesthetics				X		11

1. No designated critical habitat for any wildlife species is located near the proposed project. According to the MNHP, no observations or known populations of Black-footed ferrets (listed as Endangered by the USFWS) have been recorded within many miles of the proposed project. The proposed project would have no impact on this species.

2. The proposed project would have only minor and short-term impacts on wildlife and no impact on native plant species. Resident or transient wildlife may temporarily leave the area during inspections but would return upon completion of the inspections.

3. No new animal or plant species would be introduced to the site as a result of the proposed project. The purpose of the proposed project is to help prevent the introduction or spread of aquatic invasive animal and plant species in Montana.

4. Because the inspection station would be established on a disturbed area, the project would have no impact on the quantity or quality of any vegetation.

5. The proposed project would have no impact on water quality, quantity, and distribution. There are no delineated wetlands within the project area:

6. The proposed project would have no impact on water rights or reservation.

7. The Proposed Action would not affect existing soil patterns, structures, productivity, fertility, erosion, compaction, or instability because the site is heavily disturbed. Soil and geologic substructure would remain stable during and after the proposed work.

8. The proposed project would have no impact on air quality in the vicinity of the Willow Creek AIS Inspection Station and would not result in any discharge that could conflict with federal or state air quality regulations.

9. Because there would be no soil disturbing activities during establishment of the inspection station, the proposed project would have no impact on cultural resources.

11. Because the area is already used as a lot for equipment and the project area is small, the proposed project would have no additional impact on the aesthetics of the area.

Table 2. Potential impact on human environment

Will the proposed action result in potential impacts to:	Unknown	Potentially Significant	Minor	None	Can Be Mitigated	Comments Below
1. Social structures and cultural diversity				X		
2. Changes in existing public benefits provided by wildlife populations and/or habitat				X		
3. Local and state tax base and tax revenue				X		
4. Agricultural production				X		
5. Human health				X		
6. Quantity & distribution of community & personal income				X		
7. Access to & quality of recreational activities				X		
8. Locally adopted environmental plans & goals (ordinances)				X		

9. Distribution & density of population and housing				X		
10. Demands for government services				X		
11. Industrial and/or commercial activity				X		

Because the proposed inspection station is seasonal and small in scope, the proposed station would have no impact on social structures and cultural diversity; public benefits provided by wildlife; tax revenues; agricultural production; human health; community and personal income; recreation, environmental ordinances; population density and housing; government services; and commercial activity.

PART IV. NARRATIVE EVALUATION AND COMMENT

All of the pertinent or potential impacts of the project have been reviewed, discussed, and analyzed. None of the projects reviewed were complex, controversial, or located in an environmentally sensitive area. The projects being implemented are already on established disturbed areas that together with the insignificant environmental effects of the Proposed Action indicates that this should be considered the final version of the environmental assessment. There are no significant environmental or economic impacts associated with the proposed alternative.

PART V. ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES

Does the proposed action involve potential risks or adverse effects, which are uncertain but extremely harmful if they were to occur? No

Does the proposed action have impacts that are individually minor, but cumulatively significant or potentially significant? Individually, the Proposed Action has minor impacts. However, it was determined that there are no significant or potentially significant cumulative impacts. Cumulative impacts have been assessed considering any incremental impact of the proposed action when they are combined with other past, present, and reasonably foreseeable future actions, and no significant impacts or substantially controversial issues were found. There are no extreme hazards created with this project and there are no conflicts with the substantive requirements of any local, state, or federal law, regulation, standard or formal plan.

Recommendation and justification concerning preparation of EIS:

There are no significant environmental or economic impacts associated with the proposed alternative; therefore, an EIS is not required.

PART VI. EA CONCLUSION SECTION

Individuals or groups contributing to, or commenting on, this EA:

- Thomas Woolf, FWP AIS Bureau Chief, PO Box 200701, Helena, MT 59620. (406) 444-1230.
- MT Fish Wildlife and Parks

EA prepared by:
Zach Crete

Date Completed:
February 1, 2019

Describe public involvement, if any:

This draft EA will be advertised on FWP's web announcing a public comment period.