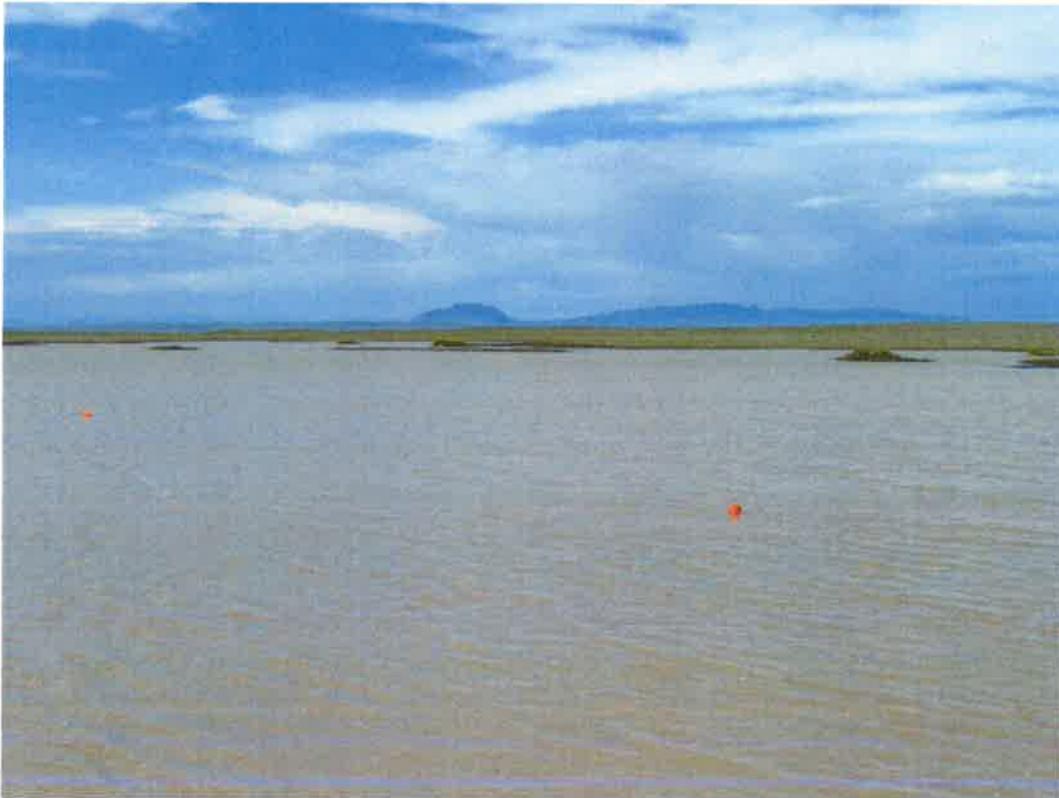




# **MONTANA FISH, WILDLIFE & PARKS**

## **Draft Environmental Assessment**



## **Jakes Reservoir Wild Fish Transfer**

**April 15, 2020**

## **PART 1. PROJECT SUMMARY**

**Project Title:** Jakes Reservoir Wild Fish Transfer

**Project Location:** Jakes Reservoir, Fergus County, Montana  
SW ¼ of section 11, Township 20 North, Range 24 East

### **Description of Project**

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks proposes to perform a wild fish transfer of channel catfish collected from the lower Musselshell River to Jakes Reservoir (Figure 1). Anywhere from 50-500 channel catfish would be moved between 2020 and 2022. The proposed action would first occur in the spring/summer of 2020. The fish would be captured via trap nets, set lines, and/or hook & line. Once collected, the fish would be moved to Jakes Reservoir via truck.

Jakes Reservoir is a highly turbid, stockwater reservoir located on BLM lands at the head of the Little Crooked Creek drainage in Fergus County (Figure 2). The reservoir has historically been stocked with northern pike and sauger. No northern pike have been documented in the reservoir since 2009. Sauger are the result of wild fish transfers from the Missouri River, the last of which occurred in 2014. Other species present in the reservoir are yellow perch, white sucker, fathead minnow, and flathead chub.



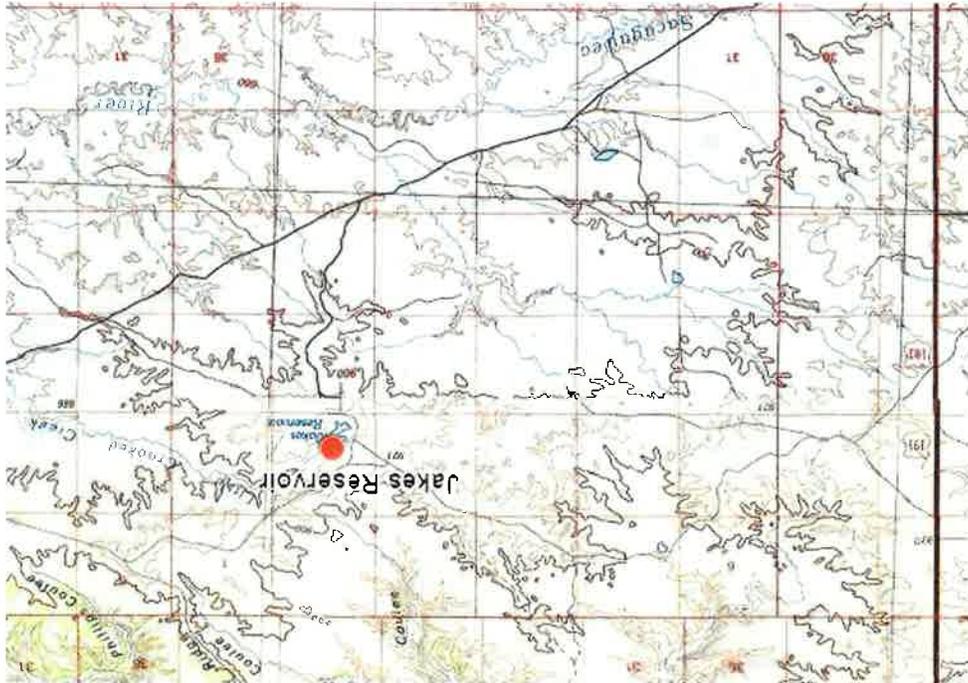
Figure 1. Map showing wild fish collection location of the Lower Musselshell River (yellow shading) relative to the stocking location at Jakes Reservoir (red dot) and the likely transfer route (green line).

Channel catfish would not be expected to reproduce in Jakes Reservoir in its current state due to a lack of appropriate spawning habitat (i.e. crevices, caves, holes, burrows, etc.). However, FWP also proposes to utilize catfish spawning boxes (figure 3) in Jakes Reservoir in an effort to encourage natural reproduction. The spawning boxes would be placed in the reservoir every few years to provide recruitment of new fish to the population. If recruitment occurs it may eliminate the need for future wild fish transfers, maintain a recreational fishery, provide biological control of the perch, and provide educational opportunities to teach students and interested publics about various fish spawning behaviors and habitats.

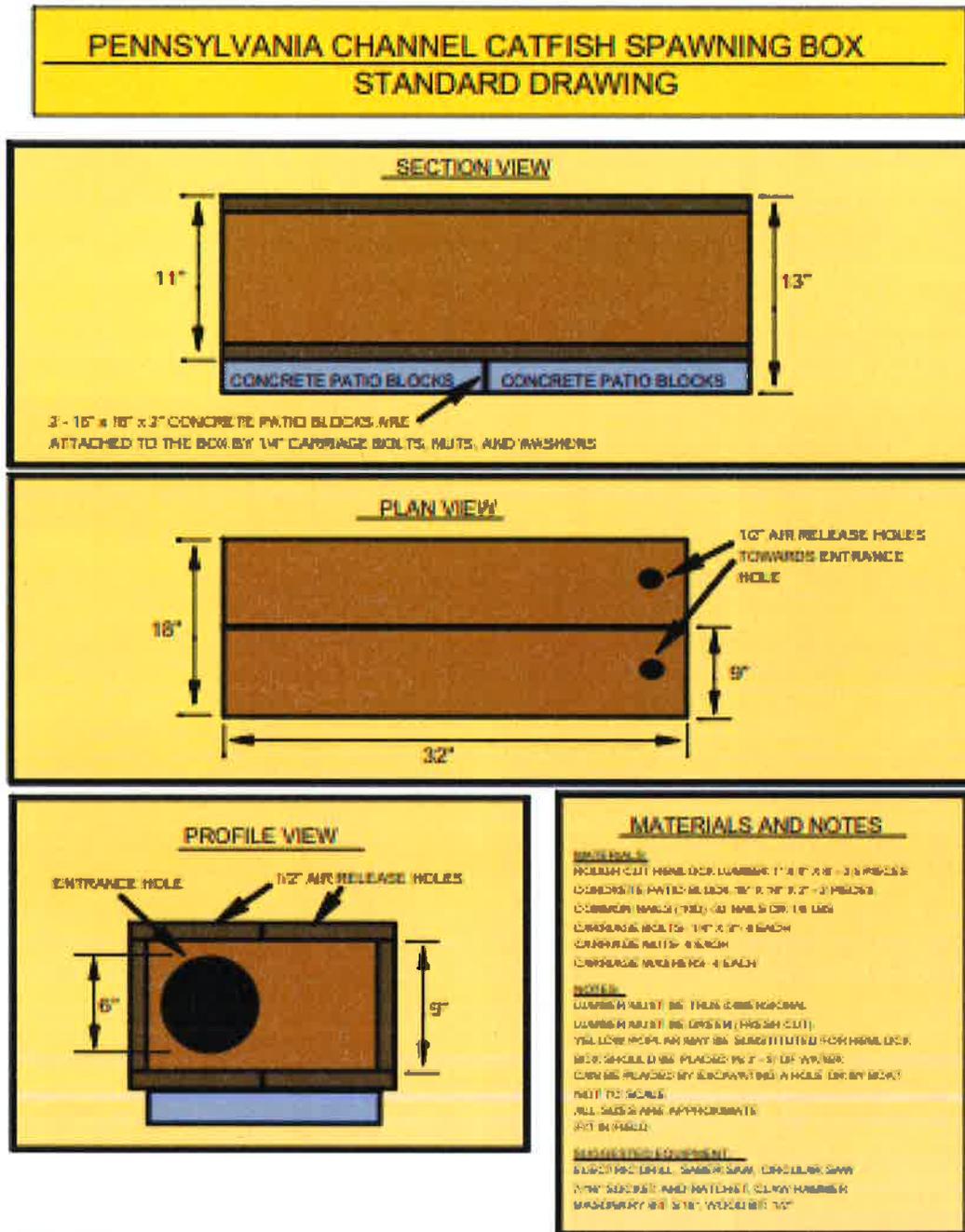
the preferred species to stock. Channel catfish would be expected to perform well in the turbid conditions at Jakes and are thus should fish from the reservoir escape downstream to the Lower Musselshell River drainage. wild fish for the proposed action over hatchery fish in an effort to maintain localized genetics negative impacts from removing wild fish from the population are minimal. FWP prefers to use abundance in the Missouri and Musselshell Rivers and Fort Peck Reservoir are stable and potential improve the yellow perch fishery and provide an angling opportunity for catfish. Channel catfish As such, FWP proposes to use channel catfish as a top-down control in the reservoir to both of concern.

River is time consuming, labor intensive, and deemed an unnecessary use of a Montana species control of the perch, however any changes are short-lived and moving sauger from the Missouri consists primarily of stunted yellow perch. Sauger have been able to provide some top-down The current recreational value of the reservoir is limited due to turbid conditions and a fishery that

Figure 2. Map showing location of Jakes Reservoir in Northeast Fergus County, Montana.



Channel catfish have been certified disease free by Montana FWP Fish Health personnel and the Musselshell is routinely tested by AIS personnel (no detections to date).



PFBC 10/22/09

NBS 09

Figure 3. Standard drawing and schematic of channel catfish spawning box proposed to be used in Jakes Reservoir. Drawing attributed to Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission.

## **Project Timeline**

The proposed action would first occur during the spring/summer of 2020, with fish being captured from the lower Musselshell River and moved to Jakes Reservoir over a period of a few days to weeks. If necessary, additional fish may be moved between spring/summer 2020 and autumn 2022.

## **Need and Benefits**

The low angler use of Jakes Reservoir is attributed to low numbers of angler-preferred sized yellow perch and few remaining sauger following previous wild fish transfers in 2013 and 2014. The proposed action is intended to introduce an effective top-down control to the yellow perch population and provide additional recreational angling opportunity. The identified fisheries management objectives of the proposed action would be to increase the average size of yellow perch and provide an additional species for angling opportunity with the goal of increasing recreational angler use of Jakes Reservoir.

## **Relevant Authorities**

Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks has the authority under state law (§ 87-1-301 Montana Code Annotated (MCA)) to "set the policies for the...propagation of the...fish...of the state for the fulfillment of all other responsibilities of the department related to fish and wildlife as provided by law."

Furthermore, it is the policy of Montana FWP, under Administrative Rules of Montana (ARM) 12.7.601(4), that "Introduction of fish not indigenous to a particular drainage may be made only after careful study to ensure these fish will be beneficial to that area." This EA is intended to document careful study of the proposed fish introduction.

## **Relevant Plans**

The 2019-2027 *Statewide Fisheries Management Program and Guide* identifies the management direction at Jakes Reservoir and for channel catfish in the Lower Musselshell River. In that plan, the management direction at Jakes is to evaluate additional stocking options of sauger and to manage yellow perch for consumptive harvest. The identified management direction for channel catfish in the warmwater zone of the Musselshell River is to maintain a recreational fishery at historic levels.

While sauger have proven able predators in the turbid waters of Jakes Reservoir, they are unable to successfully reproduce in the reservoir and the feasibility of continued wild fish transfers is labor intensive and unsustainable while no other stocking options of sauger currently exist (e.g. hatchery source). Additionally, the ethics of continued wild fish transfers of a sensitive species in the Missouri River solely for recreational uses is questionable. As such, FWP is evaluating

alternative stocking options that might be able to efficiently forage in the turbid conditions at Jakes Reservoir as a means to better manage the yellow perch fishery for consumptive harvest and increase recreational value at the reservoir. Admittedly, this is a deviation from the management direction identified in the Program and Guide. However, the proposed alternative has been identified as a better management direction for the reasons discussed above.

## **Alternatives to Proposed Action**

### Alternative A

The **No Action Alternative** would result in the status quo and channel catfish would not be moved from the lower Musselshell River to Jakes Reservoir. This alternative would not take action to improve the recreational quality of the fishery at Jakes Reservoir. This alternative would eliminate all risks associated with moving wild fish.

### Alternative B

The **Use Hatchery Fish Alternative** would provide similar benefits compared to the proposed alternative and eliminate risks associated with moving wild fish. The hatchery source of channel catfish has a varied genetic history with genetics from out-of-state and the lower Yellowstone prevalent. As such, these fish may have negative impacts to localized genetics in the Lower Musselshell drainage.

## **Decision to be Made**

The decision to be made is whether FWP should move forward with the proposed alternative of stocking channel catfish in Jakes Reservoir via a wild fish transfer from the lower Musselshell River. Following completion of the Environmental Assessment (EA) and public comment period, the FWP Region 4 Regional Supervisor will issue a decision notice recommending a course of action. This course of action could be the Proposed Alternative, the No Action Alternative, the Use Hatchery Fish Alternative, or an action that is within the scope of the analyzed alternatives. This EA and the public comments FWP receives are part of the decision-making process.

## **Other groups or agencies contacted, or which may have overlapping jurisdiction**

Jakes Reservoir occurs on Bureau of Land Management (BLM) lands. Previous conversations with the BLM have not identified concerns with the proposed action. The BLM will be notified of this EA and will have additional opportunity to provide input.

## **PART 2. ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW**

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 Provided
1. Unique, endangered, fragile, or limited environmental resources				X		X
2. Terrestrial or aquatic life and/or habitats			X			X
3. Introduction of new species into an area			X		X	X
4. Vegetation cover, quantity and quality				X		
5. Water quality, quantity and distribution (surface or groundwater)				X		
6. Existing water right or reservation				X		
7. Geology and soil quality, stability and moisture				X		
8. Air quality or objectionable odors				X		
9. Historical and archaeological sites				X		
10. Demands on environmental resources of land, water, air & energy				X		
11. Aesthetics				X		

### **Comments**

1. At the HUC-4 level, blue sucker and sauger are known species of special concern present, with their presence in the drainage limited to the Musselshell River. Blue suckers may be extirpated from the drainage as they've not been documented since 1963. Although not documented, chrosomid species may also be present in the drainage based on professional opinion. Associated risks to species of special concern are considered negligible. The proposed species, channel catfish, are present throughout the Lower Musselshell River drainage and the proposed introduction would not result in cumulative impacts.

2. No impacts to terrestrial life or habitats would be expected. Potential impacts to other fish populations through competition and/or predation, genetic impacts to existing fish

populations, and potential impacts to other aquatic life forms have been considered. The proposed species is piscivorous. Predation of other species present in the reservoir, primarily yellow perch, would be anticipated. Competition impacts of escaped stocked fish would be of little concern as the species are already present in the Lower Musselshell River drainage and cumulative impacts are not anticipated. Predation impacts downstream in the Lower Crooked Creek and Musselshell River drainages are of little concern as the species is already present and cumulative impacts would not be anticipated.

The potential genetic impacts to downstream channel catfish populations would be considered negligible. The Musselshell drainage supports a robust, native channel catfish population that is known to move throughout the Missouri River and Fort Peck Reservoir. As the proposed source of the wild fish transfer, no impacts to the wild population's genetic structure would be anticipated.

Aquatic invertebrates and amphibians would be consumed if present, but no population level impact would be expected.

3. The proposed action would involve the introduction of a new species, channel catfish, to Jakes Reservoir. Channel catfish are native to the area and exist in the perennial waters of the lower Sacagawea River (Crooked Creek) drainage and the Musselshell River drainage. Potential fish pathogen and Aquatic Invasive Species (AIS) risks associated with moving wild fish would be minimized by following the guidelines in FWP's Wild Fish Transfer Policy, which details disease and AIS testing requirements.

The new introduction to Jakes Reservoir would be managed under the Eastern Fishing District regulations. Additionally, if necessary, the introduction could be mitigated and/or removed from the waterbody via angling, netting, chemical treatment, and/or cessation of stocking.

Channel catfish may be able to successfully reproduce in the reservoir. If stocked, FWP plans to temporarily introduce catfish spawning boxes to the reservoir in an attempt to produce successful reproduction in the reservoir. The boxes, untested in Montana, have been utilized in other areas of the United States to varying degrees of success. FWP would use the boxes to occasionally replenish the catfish population via natural means within the reservoir.

Table 2. Potential impacts on human environment.

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

**Comments**

2. The proposed action would be intended to improve recreational angling conditions, opportunity, and species diversity in Jakes Reservoir for the public’s enjoyment. These would be anticipated benefits of the proposed action.

7. The proposed action would be intended to improve the quality of the recreational fishery at Jakes Reservoir. This would be an anticipated benefit of the proposed action.

10. The proposed action would result in a slight increase in demands for government services. The proposed action would necessitate FWP fisheries personnel to collect and transfer the fish from the Musselshell River to Jakes Reservoir. This would be a short-

term increase and would not be expected to impact responsibilities elsewhere. Installing, monitoring, and maintaining catfish spawning boxes would result in an increase in local FWP fisheries personnel time. These responsibilities would be absorbed into the existing responsibilities of the Lewistown Area Fisheries Management project without impacting other services of the project.

**Does the proposed action involve potential risks or adverse effects which are uncertain but extremely harmful if they were to occur?**

No, the proposed action does not involve uncertain risks or adverse effects that would be extremely harmful.

**Does the proposed action have impacts that are individually minor, but cumulatively significant or potentially significant?**

No, this environmental review found that cumulatively/potentially significant impacts from the proposed action would not be anticipated.

### **PART 3. NARRATIVE EVALUATION AND COMMENT**

This analysis did not reveal any significant impacts to the human or physical environment.

The No Action Alternative would result in no impacts to the physical or human environments. Maintaining the status quo at Jakes Reservoir is not preferable from a fisheries management perspective. The No Action Alternative is not recommended because it does not meet the objectives of improving the recreational fishery at Jakes Reservoir.

The Use Hatchery Fish Alternative would result in similar impacts to the physical and human environments as those described in the assessment of the Proposed Alternative, including meeting desired objectives and the goal of an improved recreational fishery. The primary difference between the Proposed and Use Hatchery Fish Alternatives is the potential genetic impacts to the wild population. While the Proposed Alternative would result in no impacts to the wild population's genetic structure, the Use Hatchery Fish Alternative would potentially introduce genetics from outside the wild population, which could theoretically have negative impacts to local adaptations of the wild population. Because of this factor, the Use Hatchery Fish Alternative is not preferable given the alternatives available.

After consideration of the alternatives listed, the desired objectives, and any limitations identified in this analysis, it is recommended that the Proposed Alternative, as described in this Environmental Assessment, has the greatest potential of fulfilling the desired objectives while having minimal impacts to the human and physical environments.

### **PART 4. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION**

**Describe the level of public involvement for this project if any, and, given the complexity and the seriousness of the environmental issues associated with the**

**proposed action, is the level of public involvement appropriate under the circumstances?**

Notice of this draft EA will be distributed to the Lewistown Area BLM office, local recreational groups, local sporting goods stores, and interested parties to ensure awareness of the proposed action. This EA will be posted on the FWP website and copies will be made available at the FWP Lewistown Area Resource Office. A notice of the proposed project and EA will be advertised in the *Lewistown News-Argus*.

Due to the simple nature and minor impacts of the proposed action, the level of public involvement is appropriate for the proposed project.

**Duration of comment period, if any:**

The draft EA will be open for public comment for a period of 30 days from April 16, 2020 through May 16, 2020.

**PART 5. EA CONCLUSION**

**Based on the significance criteria evaluated in this EA, is an EIS required?**

No, an EIS is not required.

**If an EIS is not required, explain why the EA is the appropriate level of analysis for this proposed action.**

Based on an evaluation of impacts to the physical and human environment stemming from the proposed action, this assessment revealed no significant negative impacts from the proposed action. Additionally, the proposed action is not expected to be highly controversial. Therefore, an EIS is not necessary and an environmental assessment is the appropriate level of analysis.

**Name, title, address and phone number of the person(s) responsible for preparing the EA:**

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**List of agencies consulted during preparation of the EA:**

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**Date Completed**

April 15, 2020