



Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
Region 4
4600 Giant Springs Rd.
Great Falls, Montana 59405

September 10th, 2021

Dear Interested Party:

Thank you for your input and feedback on the environmental assessment (EA) for the introduction of Largemouth Bass to Lake Shel-oole, located in Shelby, Montana. The goal of the proposed action is to provide an additional angling opportunity within north-central Montana and to improve the size structure of the existing Yellow Perch fishery.

Enclosed is a decision notice document in which Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) explains its rationale for proceeding with the proposed action and response to public comment received during the public comment period.

Please feel free to contact Katie Vivian, Choteau Area Fisheries Biologist, 406-466-5621 or email kvivian@mt.gov with any questions. Thank you for your interest and participation.

Sincerely,

 for Gary Bertellotti

Gary Bertellotti
Regional Supervisor
FWP Region 4



Environmental Assessment Decision Notice For Lake Shel-oole Largemouth Bass Introduction

Proposed Action

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) proposes to introduce Largemouth Bass (*Micropterus salmoides*) to Lake Shel-oole, Shelby, Montana from the FWP Miles City Fish Hatchery. The Largemouth Bass will provide an additional angling opportunity within north-central Montana. In addition to the angling opportunity, the proposed action is intended to create a top-down control to the Yellow Perch population thereby improving the size structure of the existing Yellow Perch (*Perca flavescens*) fishery.

Montana Environmental Policy Act

FWP is required by the Montana Environmental Policy Act (MEPA) to assess potential impacts of its proposed actions to the human and physical environments. An Environmental Assessment was prepared by FWP for the proposed project and released in August 2021 for public comment. The EA was titled "Largemouth Bass Introduction to Lake Shel-oole". The EA was distributed to media contacts throughout Region 4 and posted to the FWP website. A copy was provided to the City of Shelby government officials. The EA evaluated the potential impacts of the following alternative in addition to the proposed action.

Alternative A: No Action Alternative

The No Action alternative would result in not stocking the proposed species and not providing an additional angling opportunity in north-central Montana. This would also result in no attempt to improve the existing size structure of Yellow Perch in Lake Shel-oole.

Summary of Public Comment and FWP Response

There was one comment submitted during the open comment period for this project. This comment did not support the introduction of Largemouth Bass and requested a different species to be introduced. It should be noted that City of Shelby officials discussed the proposed action and verbalized support of Largemouth Bass introduction however did not submit written comment.

**Comment 1**

“Straight to the point, I do not believe largemouth bass will do well in Lake Shel-oole. There is not enough structure or shore cover that largemouth tend to gravitate towards to protect their eyes from sunlight and to spawn around. I do believe that there needs to be an introduction of a predator species to help cull the numbers of perch that are present. I think that Smallmouth Bass, Walleye, or Tiger Musky would be much better suited to the habitat that Shel-oole has to offer. I fish that lake quite frequently and have gone as far as to map the contours and minimal structure using side scan and newer sonar tech over the last two years, comparing 2019 and 2020 year scans the vast majority of structure are large weed beds that cover the entire shore and down to roughly 8-10 feet some places having the weeds deeper. It is probably my most frequently fished lake aside from Tiber/Frances. The trout that were planted did fairly well but the numbers caught have really fallen off with anglers and I believe that has to do with the very large number of juvenile yellow perch basically eating the majority of the available food. Another way to add fishing opportunities to the pond would be to add another species of pan fish such as Crappie, Bluegill, etc etc or potentially a forage fish like fathead, or chubs. That lake has the potential to be an amazing fishery if managed correctly and I believe that the addition of Largemouth Bass is not going to be enough to quell the numbers of yellow perch, if the Largemouth are even able to reach a size big enough to remain a predator to the yellow perch after they reach lengths in the 4-5” range they are still going to have a minimal impact on the population of yellow perch.”

Response:

There is some uncertainty if Largemouth Bass will survive in Lake Shel-oole, however drawing comparison to other waters with similar species assemblages and similar habitat types minimizes the uncertainty if Largemouth Bass will survive in Lake Shel-oole. Within the region there are multiple examples of Largemouth Bass thriving in similar waterbodies. These case examples suggest high probability that Largemouth Bass will survive in Lake Shel-oole.

Largemouth Bass are piscivores and will eat Yellow Perch. It was acknowledge within the EA that while one of the intents of stocking Largemouth Bass was to improve size structure of Yellow Perch in Lake Shel-oole, there is some level of uncertainty with the population level impact Largemouth Bass will have on Yellow Perch size structure. Within the EA it stated, “It is anticipated that Largemouth Bass will prey upon Yellow Perch and possibly decrease Yellow Perch abundance and improve their size structure.” The uncertainty that remains is if Largemouth Bass will consume large enough quantities of Yellow Perch that there is an observable population level shift in Yellow Perch size structure.



Largemouth Bass were the predator species considered in the EA because of the species success in waterbodies with similar habitat types and species assemblages. Other angling opportunities such as Bluegill or crappie were not pursued because current limited forage base is attributed to the small size structure of Yellow Perch in Lake Shel-oole. The addition of other species at the same trophic level would be anticipated to exacerbate the stunted growth concerns.

Decision

Based on the Environmental Assessment, public comment, and FWP evaluation, it is my decision to proceed with the introduction of Largemouth Bass to Lake Shel-oole.

I find there to be no significant impacts to human and physical environments associated with this project. Therefore, I conclude that the Environmental Assessment is the appropriate level of analysis, and that an Environmental Impact Statement is not required.

 for Gary Bertellotti

Gary Bertellotti
Regional Supervisor
FWP Region 4