Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks

1400 South 19th Avenue
Bozeman, MT 59718

August 9, 2023

Dear Interested Party:

Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks (FWP) proposed to restore native westslope cutthroat trout (WCT) in Bryant Creek and stock WCT in Calvert Mine Pond. Bryant Creek is a tributary to the Big Hole River upstream of East Bank Fishing Access site at Big Hole River mile 74. Historically, WCT were the only trout species in Bryant Creek, but introduced brook trout have displaced them except in the headwaters where a small, isolated population remains upstream of a natural cascade. Brook trout, which are native to eastern North America and were introduced to the Big Hole drainage in the late 1800's, outcompete WCT because of their high reproductive rate, aggressive nature and early emergence of fry in the spring (Shepard et al. 2005). Following the Alder Creek fire in 2021, brook trout were found in Trident Meadows, which is the headwaters of the Bryant Creek. Now that brook trout are present in the headwaters of the stream, FWP anticipates WCT will be eliminated from Bryant Creek within the next 5-10 years. A fish barrier was constructed on Bryant Creek in 2022 and FWP proposed to remove brook trout upstream of this fish barrier using rotenone. The rotenone would be neutralized at the fish barrier so no fish downstream would be affected. WCT in the stream would be salvaged prior to brook trout removal and used to restock the stream once the project is complete.

In addition to cutthroat restoration in the creek, FWP proposed to introduce WCT to the Calvert Mine Pond. This abandoned open pit tungsten mine has water quality suitable for fish and other aquatic life. FWP proposed to introduce at low density WCT to create a recreational fishery in the pond.

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks is required by the Montana Environmental Policy Act (MEPA) to assess significant potential impacts of a proposed action to the human and physical environment. In compliance with MEPA, an Environmental Assessment (EA) was completed for the proposed project by FWP and released for public comment on June 21, 2023. Public comments on the proposed project were taken for 30 days (through July 23, 2023). The EA notice was mailed to 135 individuals and groups and legal notice was printed in the Montana Standard (Butte) newspaper and the Dillon Tribune. A draft EA was posted on the FWP webpage: https://fwp.mt.gov/public-notices/news/2023/jun/0621-westslope-cutthroat-trout-restoration-bryant-creek-and-introduction-calvert-mine-pond-big-hole-river-drainage.--ea. A public meeting was held in Wise River 7/6/23 at the Wise River Community Center. A total of 9 written comments were received. These comments and FWP's response to the comments are listed below:

Comment 1.

I am all for planting WCT as proposed in Bryant Creek.

Endangered Species Act, replacing EBT with WCT will provide the most good for the most people. I support adoption of Alternative 2.

2. *Calvert Mine Pond:*
Alternative 2 proposes planting WCT in the Calvert Mine Pond. This artificial pond has no fish in it presently, according to the draft EA. As to planting WCT in it – why not? What good is it doing for the natural environment or the human environment, except serve as a nursery for toads? If WCT are stocked there, a new fishery will be created. Since fishing pressure has been increasing dramatically in southwest Montana and probably will continue to increase, we should be thinking about increasing fishing opportunities. Therefore, I support adoption of Alternative 2 so that the Calvert Mine Pond becomes a fishery. The Calvert Mine Pond will never be a destination fishery (although I expect there will be a Youtube video about fishing it within 5 years after it gets stocked for the first time). Having more places to fish is a good thing. However, will the toad population be monitored? I hope so, at least for a few years after stocking. If it turns out that the toad tadpoles are fed upon heavily by the WCT, then it will be an easy problem to solve. Fish, Wildlife, and Parks can stop planting WCT in the pond, and the trout population will disappear. I recommend that the daily bag limit be low, because this pond is easily accessible and the resulting high fishing pressure will keep the trout from having a chance to grow to a decent size.

Response:

FWP and U.S. Forest Service will monitor toads in Calvert Mine Pond going forward and will cease planting the lake if it is demonstrated that stocked trout negatively impact toads. The bag limit for Calvert Mine Pond will be 5 trout initially. However, given the low stocking density and if harvest is determined to be a limiting factor for the fishery, the bag limit could be reduced. The pond will be periodically monitored to determine the viability of the fishery and potential limiting factors including harvest.

Comment 3.

The discussion at the meeting on 7/6/2023 was informative even though the meeting was not well attended. In general, I oppose native fish restoration as I did on French Creek. WCT have not adapted to the natural evolution of the fishery, making them a weak species. Creating a separate environment to address this imbalance is not a natural process.

As the Bryant Creek project and other like projects go forward, my main concern would be if these projects would prevent other species from migrating into the Big Hole River. Rainbow, Brown, Brook and other species that contribute to the low numbers we now have.

As the studies concerning river condition move forward, it will be very interesting to look at the data.

Good luck on trying to figure out this complex problem.

Response:

FWP puts great value on our non-native brown, rainbow and brook trout fisheries. However, prior to their introduction in the late 1800's, WCT was the only trout species present in the Big Hole

Granted, the EA supposedly came out on June 21st (the date on the document), but by the time it was received by email, the July 6 public meeting had already happened. That's really not what you call "notifying the public" of agency actions.

I've watched your work for years now and likewise, have read and commented on EAs for decades. And as you probably know, I also wrote, lobbied and funded numerous bills into law that directly affect FWP's actions. Not the least of those was the 1989 Water Leasing for Instream Flows law, the 1989 River Restoration Act, the 1995 Future Fisheries Improvement Act and the '99 Cutthroat and Bulltrout Restoration Act. I truly believe in restoring our native species and providing our fisheries with the natural and fiscal resources to do just that -- like instream flows, for instance.

But now I'm truly wondering what's going on with the "new" FWP that seems to regard the public as simply a legal hoop to jump through rather than a meaningful interaction with those who actually own these public resources - namely, the people of Montana.

I'm not a big fan of poison and plant FWP has significantly increased the use of in the last couple decades -- and this is another one of those projects. Not a mention of how, exactly, the fire suddenly allowed brook trout to access the upper stretch of the stream, although that is cited as the primary purpose for the project, to remove those brook trout.

The fish barrier seems a reasonable solution and, again, no particular reason is given, nor data supplied, to indicate why FWP says brook trout will overtake WCT populations in 5-10 years. In many instances, as you know, genetic flooding by WCT is used as a tool by FWP to overcome non-native populations.

Anyhow, like I said, I've watched your work, have dedicated decades to maintaining and restoring both native and recreational fisheries and I'd truly appreciate it if you'd reply with the reasons FWP seems to be short-changing the public review and comment periods these days.

Response:

This project was posted for the recommended 30-day comment period, June 21 – July 22. FWP responded directly to the commenter and updated address information so future mailings reach the individual in a more timely manner. Comments about rule making are beyond the scope of this project. FWP has connected the commenter with the FWP MEPA coordinator who may be able to answer the MEPA related questions.

The EA states that "Following the Alder Creek fire in 2021, brook trout were able to access Trident Meadows, which is the headwaters of the Bryant Creek." This statement does not imply that the fire allowed brook trout to access Trident Meadows, it simply states that in surveys prior to the fire FWP failed to detect brook trout and after the fire they were present. It is unknown if the fire had anything to do with brook trout being able to access the headwaters of the stream. However, it is possible that a large woody debris jam contributed precluding brook trout and if that jam burned in the fire it could allow brook trout access to the headwaters of Bryant Creek. The Alder Creek fire intensely burned in the reach which historically precluded brook trout.

Response:

FWP has performed 11 WCT restoration projects in streams where rotenone was used to remove non-native fish (Cherry, McVey, Pintler, West Fork Mudd, French, Long Branch, Andrus, York, North Fork Doolittle, Bender, and Schultz creeks). These projects were all performed between 2011 and 2022.

The short and long-term repercussions of the WCT restoration projects using rotenone are detailed in the EA. In summary, the short-term impacts are primarily temporary reductions in aquatic invertebrates. The long-term impacts are the loss of a brook trout fishery. This is considered a minor impact because of the wide distribution and abundance of brook trout fisheries in tributaries to the Big Hole River. FWP's long-term goal is to manage 80% of the available habitat for brook trout and other non-native sport fisheries. The other long-term impact which is considered by FWP as positive and significant is the conservation of native cutthroat trout in Bryant Creek which are currently on a trajectory to be extirpated within the next 5-10 years.

The studies that are performed in advance of these projects include fisheries surveys to determine population abundance and distribution within the drainage, aquatic invertebrate studies, amphibian surveys, and flow and timing studies. Also, immediately prior to any treatment bioassay are conducted in which it is determined the travel time of rotenone in the water. Extensive studies are available in literature and cited in the EA on the effects of rotenone.

The purpose and need of the project (conservation of native WCT in their natal habitat) is detailed in the EA and is the primary conservation goal outlined by FWP in current management plans.

Comment 7.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments on the proposed project to remove Brook Trout upstream of a constructed fish barrier in Bryant Creek to protect native Westslope Cutthroat (WCT) from competition in portions of upper Bryant Creek as well as stocking WCT in the Calvert Mine Pond. We have reviewed the proposal and associated draft Environmental Assessment, and we wish to go on record strongly supporting this project under the Proposed Alternative 2. We believe this project has intrinsic benefit to conserving populations of native WCT in the Upper Missouri River Basin, helping to achieve the Department's goal of restoring the population to 20% of their historic range. Further, the project described here comports with the prioritization and strategy that came out of the Department's multi-agency and stakeholder meetings on WCT recovery across the region. As populations of native fish continue to face challenges from non-native fish, invasive species, and climate change throughout their range, this project stands to greatly benefit conservation efforts. Thank you for your work to develop and pursue this project in the Big Hole River drainage.

Founded in 1964, Montana Trout Unlimited (MTU) is the only statewide grassroots organization dedicated solely to conserving, protecting, and restoring Montana's coldwater fisheries. MTU is comprised of 13 chapters across the state and represents approximately 4,500 TU members. That includes the George Grant Trout Unlimited Chapter in the greater Butte area.

Response:

The projects are also located in an area with outstanding and expanding public access. Without question, these proposed efforts will add significant value to our publicly owned resources and in turn — value in numerous spin-off directions. One small example will be myself supporting the local gas station owner when I fill up just to drive out and enjoy the up-armored natural site.

I very much trust that we have highly learned professionals with advanced education and an abundance of practical, real world experience in carrying out projects like the two proposed and that we should give them the courtesy of earning their pay in foreseeing, proposing, and implementing the fisheries work that they deem appropriate for the best possible well being of the resource for all reasons — recreational fishing being but one of those.

Response:

No response.

After having considered these comments and the potential benefits and drawbacks of the proposed project, it is my decision to proceed with the proposed action in the Bryant Creek watershed and that the EA remains the appropriate level of analysis for this project. There are no long-term, significant impacts of the project that either cannot be mitigated for or are deemed beneficial (i.e., native fish expansion in Bryant Creek).

Questions regarding this Decision Notice should be mailed to:

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
French Creek Restoration
Attn: Jim Olsen
1820 Meadowlark Ln.
Butte, MT 59701

Or e-mailed to: jimolsen@mt.gov

Sincerely,

Marina Yoshioka
Region 3 Supervisor