



## **DECISION NOTICE**

Translocation of Westslope Cutthroat Trout within the Thompson River drainage to Big Hole Creek  
(Thompson River drainage)

July 30, 2024

### **ACTION**

Decision Notice (DN). Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) shall prepare a DN for the proposed action. The DN must identify the agency decision, the reasons for the decision, and any special conditions surrounding the decision or its implementation.

With this action, FWP hereby adopts the Draft Environmental Assessment or Draft EA as final, without modification, and approves Alternative 2, the proposed action.

### **AUTHORITY: MONTANA ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY ACT**

According to the applicable requirements of the Montana Environmental Policy Act or MEPA and its implementing rules and regulations, before a proposed action may be approved, environmental review must be conducted to identify, consider, and disclose any potential impacts of the proposed action on the affected human environment. The level of environmental review will vary with the complexity and seriousness of environmental issues associated with a proposed action. The level of public interest will also vary. The agency is responsible for adjusting public review to match these factors. *Title 75, Chapter 1, Parts 1 through 3, Montana Code Annotated (MCA)*.

Based on these factors, FWP determined a CHECKLIST EA (Draft EA) constitutes the appropriate level of review for the proposed action. Therefore, to assess and disclose potential impacts of the proposed action, FWP prepared a Draft EA for public review and comment. See *Public Participation Process* below.

Further, FWP must consider any substantive comments received in response to an EA and proceed in accordance with one of the following steps: determine the EA did not adequately reflect the issues raised by the proposed action and issue an Environmental Impact Statement or EIS; determine the EA did not adequately reflect the issues raised by the proposed action and issue a supplemental EA; or determine the Draft EA adequately addressed the issues raised by the proposed action and make a final decision, with appropriate modification resulting from the analysis provided in the Draft EA and the analysis of any substantive public comments received. See *Public Comment and FWP Response* below.

### **PUBLIC PARTICIPATION PROCESS**

The Draft EA was made available for public review and comment from June 25, 2024, to July 9, 2024. The

Draft EA was posted on FWP's Public Notice webpage: <https://fwp.mt.gov/news/public-notice>. The Draft EA was also made available for public review on the Environmental Quality Council or EQC website: <https://leg.mt.gov/mepa/search/>, by individual request, and through notice to identified interested parties. FWP received comments during the public comment period.

### **DESCRIPTION OF PROPOSED ACTION**

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) is proposing to translocate (i.e., transfer, move) non-hybridized westslope cutthroat trout (WCT) *Oncorhynchus clarkii lewisi* to suitable fishless habitat in the headwaters of Big Hole Creek (Thompson River drainage) from multiple populations across the Thompson River drainage (Figure 1). Presently, most WCT populations in the Thompson River drainage are at high risk of extirpation because of hybridization with non-native rainbow trout (RB) *Oncorhynchus mykiss irideus* and/or Yellowstone cutthroat trout (YCT) *Oncorhynchus clarkii bouvieri* and through competition/predation from non-native brown trout (LL) *Salmo trutta* and brook trout (EB) *Salvelinus fontinalis*.

Westslope cutthroat trout that would be translocated to Big Hole Creek would be individually genetically tested to ensure only non-hybridized fish are transferred. In addition, annual fish pathogen and aquatic invasive species testing is required to translocate fish within the watershed. Fish  $\geq 100$  mm, which includes juvenile and mature individuals, would be transferred to the stream. This proposed action is part of a larger conservation strategy in the Thompson River drainage to prevent the loss of remaining WCT genetic diversity, to expand the current range of non-hybridized populations into suitable and unoccupied habitats free of non-native fish species, and to reduce the likelihood of listing of WCT under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). The use of multiple stocks to translocate into a single stream is a viable strategy, especially when donor populations cannot provide large numbers of individuals as this approach also minimizes the demographic burden of any translocation removal on donor sources. Results from other WCT translocation efforts in Montana suggest that mixed-source translocations have many benefits and may be more likely to succeed.

The primary benefit of this project would be the long-term conservation of non-hybridized WCT populations across the Thompson River drainage. The project may take up to five years to complete and would increase the amount of known secure habitat in the drainage by approximately 25% (~10 miles to ~13 miles). This project is very similar the 2020-2024 WCT translocation project in the drainage which has documented successful natural reproduction in each of the three previously fishless streams, including each of the 11 sites sampled in 2022 and 2023. Monitoring for the Big Hole Creek translocation project would mirror the 2020-2024 WCT translocation project and would initially focus on documenting natural reproduction of translocated fish, distribution, and relative abundance. Genetic material would be collected from all offspring of founding parents to investigate the contribution of individuals from each donor population to evaluate measures of genetic diversity between the newly formed population and donor stocks.

### **PURPOSE AND NEED**

The intent of the proposed action would be to support the following FWP goals and objectives:

- Prevent the loss of unique genetic lineages of native WCT throughout the Thompson River drainage.
- Expand the current distribution of secure non-hybridized WCT populations in the Thompson River drainage.

- Reduce the likelihood of ESA-listing of WCT.
- Establish a self-sustaining WCT conservation population in Big Hole Creek.
- Increase the amount of occupied secure WCT habitat in the Thompson River drainage by 25% (from ~10 miles to ~13 miles).
- Prevent the extirpation of aboriginal, non-hybridized WCT throughout the Thompson River drainage. Most if not all population are not secure and thus are threatened by non-native trout species through hybridization, competition and/or predation.
- Use Big Hole Creek as a donor stream for future WCT conservation efforts within the Thompson River drainage.

FWP intends to begin WCT translocation from extant Thompson River WCT populations to Big Hole Creek in 2024. Transfers would likely occur over several years (up to five years depending on wild collections/genetic results) to maximize the number and diversity of non-hybridized WCT populations transferred to Big Hole Creek.

## **ALTERNATIVES ANALYZED**

### **Alternative 1: No Action**

In addition to the proposed action, and as required by MEPA, FWP analyzes the "No-Action" alternative in the EA. Under the No-Action alternative, the proposed action would not occur. Therefore, no additional impacts to the human environment would occur. The No Action alternative forms the baseline from which the potential impacts of the proposed action may be measured.

Under the No Action alternative FWP would not transfer non-hybridized WCT from various Thompson River populations to Big Hole Creek. Without action, hybridization and displacement by non-native trout species will continue to negatively impact most of the extant native WCT populations in the Thompson River drainage and the species would likely face genomic and/or physical extirpation in the near future. The approximately three miles of fishless habitat in Big Hole Creek above rm 1.2 will remain fishless under the no-action alternative.

### **Alternative 2: Proposed Action**

Under the Proposed Action, FWP would translocate non-hybridize WCT from extant populations across the Thompson River drainage into Big Hole Creek. This proposed action is part of a larger conservation strategy in the Thompson River drainage to prevent the loss of remaining WCT genetic diversity, to expand the current range of non-hybridized populations into suitable and unoccupied habitats free of non-native fish species, and to reduce the likelihood of listing of WCT under the ESA. The primary benefit of this project would be the long-term conservation of non-hybridized WCT populations across the Thompson River drainage. The project may take up to five years to complete and would increase the amount of known secure habitat in the drainage by approximately 25% (~10 miles to ~13 miles). This project is very similar the 2020-2024 WCT translocation project in the drainage which has documented successful natural reproduction in each of the three previously fishless streams where WCT were introduced.

## **PUBLIC COMMENT AND FWP RESPONSE**

FWP received substantive public comments on the Draft EA. A substantive public comment was defined as the identification of a specific issue or impact. The following provides the public comments received and FWP response(s).

FWP received public comment from two individuals, both of which were in support of the project.

Public Comment #1- I fully support the translocation of Westslope Cutthroat Trout Project as outlined in the explanation by MT FWP. Mark Savinski.

FWP Response- Thanks you very much for supporting this project.

Public Comment #2- I have reviewed the draft EA for the project: Translocation of Westslope Cutthroat Trout within the Thompson River drainage to Big Hole Creek (Thompson River drainage). Based on the information presented, I support Alternative 2, the proposed project.

The upper part of the Thompson River drainage tends to be warm due to outflow from the Thompson Lakes and exposure through miles of cleared fields with little riparian vegetation. Climate change has also hit the Thompson River drainage hard, warming stream temperatures and allowing brown and rainbow trout to push farther up the drainage and into tributaries. This largely restricts pure westslope cutthroat to isolated portions of tributaries. Much of the Thompson drainage has fairly low gradients, promoting upstream movement of fish to impact tributary fish populations.

Based on the one photo of Big Hole Creek and looking at the topo map of the targeted section of stream, it appears there is suitable fish habitat with perennial flow with a natural barrier downstream. Hopefully the project area will be able to meet the genetic population goals for fish abundance and watershed size. The use of donor fish from several populations will further increase genetic diversity, lending to population persistence. Previous successful translocation of westslope cutthroat into 3 other drainages in the Thompson gives a high likelihood of a successful outcome, adding 3 miles of stream with a secure pure westslope cutthroat population.

Jim Vashro jsjvash@montanasky.us  
1837 Stag Lane, Kalispell, MT 59901

FWP Response- Thanks you very much for supporting this project.

## **DECISION**

Based on the environmental review provided in the Draft EA, and in accordance with all applicable laws, rules, regulations, and policies, FWP determined the proposed action (Alternative 2), will not have significant adverse impacts on the human environment associated with the proposed action and constitutes a reasonable and appropriate strategy to achieve identified objectives. Therefore, preparation of an EIS is unnecessary. FWP hereby adopts the Draft EA as final and approves the Alternative 2, the proposed action.

Based on the environmental review provided in the Draft EA, and in accordance with all applicable laws, rules, regulations, and policies, FWP determined the proposed action (Alternative 2), as modified, will not have significant adverse impacts on the human environment associated with the proposed action and

constitutes a reasonable and appropriate strategy to achieve identified objectives. Therefore, preparation of an EIS is unnecessary.

With this DN, FWP hereby adopts the Final EA, with modifications, and approves the proposed action.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Lee Anderson". The script is cursive and fluid, with the first letters of each word being capitalized and prominent.

Lee Anderson  
Region 1 Supervisor  
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks