



## SPA 124 PERMIT DECISION NOTICE

### Little Sleeping Child Culvert Removals – Bitterroot National Forest; Darby, MT

August 27, 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 prepared for the proposed action as final, 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.

#### **PUBLIC PARTICIPATION PROCESS**

Under usual circumstances, FWP makes the Draft EA available for public review and comment. However, in this circumstance, MEPA's required public process for projects of this nature is impacted by a competing statutory deadline. MEPA requires FWP to comply with its terms *"to the fullest extent possible."* To fulfill the stated policy of MEPA, the agency shall conform to the applicable rules prior to reaching a final decision on proposed actions covered by MEPA. *ARM 12.2.428, Policy Statement Concerning MEPA Rules*. More specifically, § 87-5-504, *MCA*, states:

*"Within 30 days after the receipt of such plans [for a project subject to SPA 124 permitting], the department shall notify the applicant whether or not such construction project or hydraulic project will adversely affect any fish or game habitat. If the department notifies the applicant that such construction will adversely affect*

*any fish or game habitat, it shall accompany such notice with recommendations or alternative plans which will eliminate or diminish such adverse effect."*

Effectively, within 30 days after receipt of an application [for an SPA 124 Permit], FWP must make a final decision on the proposed action/project. Within the applicable 30-day timeframe, the MEPA practitioner or author of the Draft EA must conduct a rigorous process, making it difficult or impossible for FWP to accommodate a public comment period for the Draft EA within the required 30-day time-period. § 87-5-504, MCA.

Therefore, for the purposes of achieving compliance with MEPA, *"to the fullest extent possible,"* FWP prepares a Draft EA for file, sans public comment, and issues a DN identifying the agency decision, reasons for the decision, and any special conditions surrounding the decision or its implementation. Conditions applicable to the approved action, including recommendations or alternative plans to eliminate or diminish any adverse effects, are contained in the approved SPA 124 Permit (see attached).

### **DESCRIPTION OF PROPOSED ACTION**

The Bitterroot National Forest has applied for a Montana Stream Protection Act 124 permit to remove and reclaim eight culvert crossings in the upper Little Sleeping Child Creek drainage near Darby, Montana to reduce long-term stream sedimentation risk. A medium excavator would remove the existing road fill and spread the fill across the adjacent roadbed and crossing area to recontour the roadway. The stream banks and channel dimensions would be shaped to mimic the natural conditions that exist above and below the road crossing. Locally sourced grade control rock or woody debris may be installed in the new channel if necessary. All the disturbed areas would be seeded with an approved mix, riparian vegetation would be planted, and woody slash would be scattered on disturbed areas to help stabilize the loose soils and reduce erosion.

The project is expected to be completed between August 28<sup>th</sup> and November 15<sup>th</sup> of 2024 and should take approximately two to three weeks to complete.

### **PURPOSE AND NEED**

The proposed project would remove and reclaim eight culverts that are prone to failure on a road network that has been closed to vehicular use for many years. The primary purpose is to reduce the risk of sedimentation into Little Sleeping Child Creek, a stream that supports westslope cutthroat trout, a species of concern.

### **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 issue an SPA 124 permit and the existing culverts would remain in place. There would continue to be an increased risk of failure at the sites, which could lead to increased sedimentation in Little Sleeping Child Creek should the failures occur.

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

Under the Proposed Action alternative, FWP will issue an SPA 124 permit to the Bitterroot National Forest, for the Little Sleeping Child culvert removals.

### **DECISION**

Based on the environmental review provided in the Draft EA, and, to the greatest extent possible, 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 and constitutes a reasonable and appropriate strategy to achieve identified objectives. Therefore, preparation of an environmental impact statement or EIS is unnecessary.

FWP hereby adopts the Draft EA as final and approves Alternative 2, the Proposed Action.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Kendra McKlosky". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, sweeping loop at the end of the last name.

Kendra McKlosky  
Regional Supervisor  
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks