



SPA 124 PERMIT DECISION NOTICE

Ninemile Area Stream Crossing Upgrades
SPA 124 Permit Application – U.S. Forest Service – Lolo National Forest
July 10, 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

SPA-124 Permit Review – Alberton Area Stream Crossing Upgrades

This project involves a SPA-124 stream permitting application associated with replacement or removal of undersized culverts on existing US Forest Service roads on the Lolo National Forest near Alberton. Projects are designed to improve hydrologic function, fish passage, and road safety at the sites, while reducing chronic water quality impacts. Sites are located within Cromwell, Stark, and Stony Creek watersheds.

PURPOSE AND NEED

The proposed projects will improve fish passage and hydrologic function and reduce chronic water quality impacts at sites on Cromwell, Stark, and Stony Creek Creeks near Alberton. These sites are part of a comprehensive watershed improvement efforts in the area to mitigate impacts of undersized stream crossing structures on the U.S. Forest Service road system.

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.

If the No Action alternative is selected, FWP would not issue an SPA-124 permit and identified diversion improvements would not be implemented. Existing impacts, including poor diversion efficiency, fish entrainment losses, and impaired fish passage, would continue.

Alternative 2: Proposed Action

Under the Proposed Action, FWP would issue a SPA 124 permit and the project would be completed following standard and special conditions provided in the SPA 124 permit. Special Conditions include:

- 1) Project Timing: All instream work or activities that generate significant turbidity shall be completed between July 1 and October 31.
- 2) Work shall be completed as proposed with no disturbance to stream banks or vegetation outside of proposed project footprint.

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. The project will allow the U.S. Forest Service and collaborators to implement road crossing improvements on Cromwell, Stark, and Stony Creek watersheds.

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

Sincerely,



Kendra McKlosky
Region 2 Supervisor
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks