



DECISION NOTICE

Winslow Creek

Westslope Cutthroat Trout and Arctic Grayling Restoration Project

FWP-DN-FSH-R3-24-16

5/10/2024

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 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 Standard 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 March 21 through April 20, 2024, 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/>, and was mailed to individuals and groups by request. One comment was received via email during the public comment period. See *Public Comment and FWP Response* below.

DESCRIPTION OF PROPOSED ACTION

With this action, FWP would restore native Westslope Cutthroat Trout (WCT) and Arctic grayling to a segment of Winslow Creek in the Centennial Valley of southwest Montana. Historically, WCT, Arctic grayling, and mountain whitefish were the only salmonid species found in the Centennial Valley. Today, in addition to these native salmonids, the Centennial Valley hosts non-native brook trout and hybridized Yellowstone cutthroat and rainbow trout.

The primary threat to WCT in southwest Montana, including the Centennial Valley, is hybridization, competition for resources, and predation by nonnative fish species. The native WCT population in Winslow Creek has been eliminated through hybridization with rainbow trout. Further, Arctic grayling were once widespread in the Centennial Valley and spawned in over 15 tributary streams; however, current Arctic grayling distribution is primarily limited to Upper Red Rock Lake and Red Rock River. The primary threat to grayling in the Centennial Valley is a lack of over-winter habitat in Upper Red Rock Lake with a secondary threat identified as access to tributary streams.

Under the proposed action, nonnative fish upstream of an existing fish barrier on Winslow Creek will be removed using a piscicide (rotenone), applied over two consecutive years. After the two annual treatments have been completed and the stream has been verified to be fishless using a process evaluating environmental DNA, WCT will be repopulated with fish from nearby streams where nonnative trout introgression is <1% and the WCT population is at-risk. Grayling will be stocked using fertilized eggs or newly hatched fry from spawning efforts at three mountain lakes with a Centennial Valley Arctic grayling origin (i.e., genetic ancestry). Repopulation efforts for both WCT and Arctic grayling will occur over a 2 to 3-year consecutive period following the elimination of fish from the affected segment of Winslow Creek.

PURPOSE AND NEED

WCT conservation efforts, such as the proposed project, are necessary to ensure the species' long-term persistence within their historic range. WCT (<10% nonnative trout introgression) currently occupy 11% of their historic range in SW Montana, but core populations (<1% nonnative trout introgression) exist in only 5.5% of their native habitat. Additionally, 47% of core WCT populations remain at-risk. Since 2010, 23 WCT population restoration projects have been completed in FWP Region 3, restoring approximately 329 miles of core WCT. The proposed project would restore and protect an additional 5 [five] miles of core WCT.

Historically, Arctic grayling were widely distributed in the Upper Missouri River drainage above Great Falls but have been reduced to approximately 5% of their historic range in Montana. Indigenous populations of Arctic grayling in Montana are currently limited to the Big Hole and Centennial Valley drainages of southwest Montana. The native Centennial Valley Arctic grayling population historically occupied Upper and Lower Red Rock lakes, Lima Reservoir, and Elk Lake and spawned in at least 15 tributaries (MAGW 2022). Currently, most of the remaining Arctic grayling in the Centennial Valley reside in Upper Red Rock Lake and spawn in Red Rock River. This population has declined significantly in the past ten years due to poor overwinter conditions in Upper Red Rock Lake and is at risk of genetic and demographic extirpation (Warren et al. 2022). The proposed action would create a self-sustaining population of Arctic grayling with Centennial Valley genetic ancestry to conserve the genetic legacy of this unique population.

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.

The no action alternative would result in continued status quo fisheries management, and WCT and Arctic grayling would not be protected in Winslow Creek. Many of the remaining 11 at-risk core ($\geq 99\%$) populations of WCT in the Beaverhead, Ruby, and Red Rock drainages would be lost to hybridization or competition with nonnative species, and FWP would pursue a similar project in a different drainage.

Loss of additional core WCT populations would adversely impact the State's obligation to conserve native fish and may contribute to potential future listing of the affected species under the ESA. Although there is limited angling that occurs in Winslow Creek, the no action alternative would maintain the existing fishery and provide uninterrupted opportunities for angling. The no action alternative would also avoid the short-term adverse impacts of rotenone on non-target aquatic invertebrates.

The no action alternative would also eliminate Winslow Creek as a possible new conservation population of UMR Arctic grayling into historically occupied drainages, which is a stated goal in the UMR Arctic Grayling Conservation Strategy (2022). Winslow Creek would not serve as a potential source for future introductions or genetic rescue for either species.

Alternative 2: Proposed Action

Under the proposed action, FWP would restore and protect WCT and Arctic grayling in Winslow Creek by removing nonnative hybrid trout upstream of the existing fish barrier using the piscicide rotenone. FWP would salvage nonhybridized WCT from up to five neighboring populations that cannot be protected in place. FWP would also repopulate Winslow Creek with Arctic grayling of Centennial Valley genetic ancestry which would serve as a future source for reintroductions and genetic rescue.

PUBLIC COMMENT AND FWP RESPONSE

Comment. *One comment was received in support of FWP's general conservation strategies for WCT and Arctic grayling in the affected area.*

FWP Response: Thank you for your support.

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.

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

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Morgan E. Jacobsen". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized 'M' and 'J'.

Morgan Jacobsen
Acting Region 3 Supervisor