



DECISION NOTICE

Morony Pond Wildlife Habitat Improvement Project

FWP-CEA-POR-R4-24-013

May 24, 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 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 April 25th to May 9th. A legal Notice was published and 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 one comment on the Morony Pond Wildlife Habitat Improvement Project during the public comment period.

DESCRIPTION OF PROPOSED ACTION

Montana Fish Wildlife & Parks, in coordination with NorthWestern Energy, proposes the implementation of a wildlife habitat improvement project on State owned property that is managed as part of Giant Springs State Park, located on the North Shore of Morony Reservoir northeast of Great Falls. The project area would be roughly .15 acres, comprised of Northwestern Glaciated Plains, and contains a 60' X 60' pond with a small stream flowing approximately 600 feet into the Missouri River. The landscape is predominately sagebrush steppe, prairie grasslands, Russian olive trees, and native shrubs.

The proposed project would include:

- Hand planting approximately 25 trees along the seep periphery of the pond. Trees would consist of roughly 20 mixed cottonwood trees (of the Black, Daniels, and Plains varieties) as well as 5 Ponderosa pine trees. Seedlings would be approximately 2-3 feet in height. The ponderosa pine trees would provide habitat for other bird species such as great horned owl and bats.
- Installing a 6-foot-tall mesh fence around each tree with steel T posts to hold in place. The fencing would protect the trees from deer browsing. Fencing would remain in place for 3-5 years or until trees reach a size that ensures deer browsing will not jeopardize tree health.
- Removing the wooden outlet structure in the pond and replacing with natural materials. The pond outlet had been enhanced with plywood to increase the head at the outlet, this material would be removed and replaced with stacked rocks to provide a more natural, fortified outlet structure. A small skid-steer will be utilized to transport 5-10 rocks, roughly 3-4 cubic feet in size, to the site where they would be placed into position by hand.

PURPOSE AND NEED

The proposed project would consist of planting approximately 25 trees and improving the pond outflow structure. Project success would be measured by the growth of the trees and changes in bird species and abundance of birds at the site.

The Proposed project would provide the following benefits:

- Address the issue of decreasing cottonwood tree populations along the Missouri River by developing a large stand of viable cottonwood and ponderosa pine trees.
- Provide new wildlife habitat, particularly for riparian birds.
- Improve soil stability in the proposed project area.
- Replace a rotting pond outlet structure with natural materials.
- Provide new recreational opportunities for the public including birdwatching and shade for trail users.

Implementation of the proposed project would occur during the spring of 2024.

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 was chosen, the proposed project would not be implemented and the benefits including increased cottonwood tree numbers and improving wildlife habitat would not be realized. Thus, no impacts to the physical environment or human population in the analysis area would occur in association with the project and conditions leading to the proposed action would continue.

Alternative 2: Proposed Action

Under the Proposed Action, the Morony Pond Wildlife Improvement Project would include:

- Hand planting approximately 25 trees along the seep periphery of the pond. Trees would consist of roughly 20 mixed cottonwood trees (of the Black, Daniels, and Plains varieties) as well as 5 Ponderosa pine trees. Seedlings would be approximately 2-3 feet in height. The ponderosa pine trees would provide habitat for other bird species such as great horned owl and bats.
- Installing a 6-foot-tall mesh fence around each tree with steel T posts to hold in place. The fencing would protect the trees from deer browsing. Fencing would remain in place for 3-5 years or until trees reach a size that ensures deer browsing will not jeopardize tree health.
- Removing the wooden outlet structure in the pond and replacing with natural materials. The pond outlet had been enhanced with plywood to increase the head at the outlet, this material would be removed and replaced with stacked rocks to provide a more natural, fortified outlet structure. A small skid-steer will be utilized to transport 5-10 rocks, roughly 3-4 cubic feet in size, to the site where they would be placed into position by hand.

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).

Comment:

I strongly support the Morony Pond Habitat Improvement Project.

FWP response:

Thank you for your comment on the Morony Pond Habitat Improvement 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.

Sincerely,



Jason Rhoten
Regional Supervisor, Region 4
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks