



SPA 124 PERMIT DECISION NOTICE

USFS Culvert Replacement on Unnamed Tributary of Russian Creek – Judith Basin County, MT
FWP-CEA-FSH-R4-24-024

6/24/2024

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 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 United States Forest Service (USFS) Helena-Lewis and Clark National Forest has applied for an SPA 124 Permit to remove an undersized and failing 18-inch culvert on Forest Service Road 6513 over an Unnamed Tributary of Russian Creek. The USFS Helena-Lewis and Clark National Forest, as the sponsor of the project, proposes replacing the culvert with a 10.5-foot by 4.5-foot bottomless arch culvert.

PURPOSE AND NEED

The purpose of this project is to issue a Stream Protection Act 124 Permit to the USFS Helena-Lewis and Clark National Forest for the purpose, by the means, at the location, and in accordance with the timeline identified in the Joint Application (see draft EA), only after careful review of the potential impacts to state fish and wildlife resources stemming from the proposed action.

The existing culvert crossing is undersized and nearing the end of its functional life. Replacing the existing culvert with the proposed bottomless arch culvert will result in a more reliable crossing for vehicle traffic while improving aquatic organism passage and the hydrologic function of the crossing.

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 status quo would continue. The undersized and failing culvert on the Unnamed Tributary of Russian Creek would remain in place and at continued risk of failure.

Alternative 2: Proposed Action

Under the Proposed Action, FWP would issue the SPA 124 Permit with the applicable general and special conditions outlined in both the draft EA and issued permit.

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 associated with the proposed action 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 black ink that reads "Jason Rhoten". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Jason Rhoten
Region 4 Supervisor
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks