



SPA 124 PERMIT DECISION NOTICE

DNRC – Bear Creek Culvert Replacements and Installations

April 28, 2025

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 Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC) has applied for a SPA 124 permit to conduct several culvert replacements, a crossing removal, and one culvert installation to improve road stream crossings associated with timber harvest in the Bear Creek drainage. The existing culverts in West Fork Bear Creek are undersized, creating hydrologic and fisheries concerns. One of the culverts will be upgraded and the other culvert and associated road infrastructure will be removed and decommissioned. Two of the culverts are in streams that support westslope cutthroat trout. The proposed replacements will improve fish passage at these locations. The other culvert replacement and installation are in unnamed tributaries that do not support fish. The proposed culverts will enhance hydrologic function at these locations and reduce potential erosion and downstream sedimentation issues. Overall, the proposed package of stream crossing work is expected to result in improved aquatic resource conditions.

PURPOSE AND NEED

The proposed culvert replacements, crossing removal, and culvert installation are to improve the road system DNRC uses to access school trust lands. This area is ready for timber harvest and the proposed work would happen before hauling would cross at each project site. These crossings would allow for permanent access for future monitoring and management by the DNRC. The proposed work at locations B and C are also needed to meet fish passage standards in DNRC's Habitat Conservation Plan.

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 a SPA 124 permit. The existing undersized culverts would not be upgraded and the new crossing would not be installed. Impacts to aquatic resources would continue.

Alternative 2: Proposed Action

Under the Proposed Action, FWP will issue the SPA 124 permit with the following special conditions:

- 1) Instream work shall not occur until July 15th.

- 2) Minimize disturbance to existing woody vegetation and attempt to salvage/transplant.
- 3) Willow stakes shall be planted while dormant.

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,



Kendra McKlosky
Regional Supervisor
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks