



SPA 124 PERMIT DECISION NOTICE

Woods Creek Drainage Culvert Replacements – Bitterroot National Forest; Conner, MT

April 4, 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 Bitterroot National Forest has applied for a Montana Stream Protection Act 124 permit to replace two culvert crossings on National Forest System Road (NFSR) 5669 in the Woods Creek drainage of the upper West Fork of the Bitterroot River. Both culverts are undersized and at least partially impede upstream fish movement.

The project sites are located at milepost (MP) 3.9 where the road crosses an unnamed tributary to Woods Creek and at MP 6.2 where the road crosses another unnamed tributary to Woods Creek. Both existing squash pipes will be removed and replaced with bottomless arches designed to pass flow and debris more than the 100-year recurrence interval as well as provide for uninhibited aquatic organism passage.

The projects are expected to commence in July 2025 and will be completed by the end of August 2025.

PURPOSE AND NEED

The proposed culvert replacements in the Woods Creek drainage will eliminate two undersized culverts that are at least partial fish passage barriers. Woods Creek supports native westslope cutthroat trout, bull trout, and Columbia slimy sculpin, as well as non-native brook trout.

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 existing undersized culverts would remain in place. Upstream fish passage would continue to be impacted.

Alternative 2: Proposed Action

Under the Proposed Action alternative, FWP will issue an SPA 124 permit to the Bitterroot National Forest for the Woods Creek Drainage Culvert Replacements. The following Special Conditions apply:

1. A fish rescue shall be performed as the worksites are dewatered. Fish rescued from the dewatered channel shall be returned to the stream outside of the project limits as quickly as possible to avoid handling mortality.
2. Work in the stream channel should be completed between 7/1/2025 and 8/31/2025.

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 Bitterroot National Forest will be allowed to replace the culvert to improve aquatic organism passage and reduce the risk of culver failure.

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

Sincerely,



Kendra McKlosky
Regional Supervisor
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks