



SPA 124 PERMIT DECISION NOTICE

USFS –North Fork Cottonwood Creek Unnamed Tributary Culvert Removal

March 2, 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 U.S. Forest Service (USFS) has applied for a SPA 124 permit to remove a culvert in an unnamed tributary to North Fork Cottonwood Creek in the Blackfoot River drainage. The unnamed tributary is presumed fishless because of channel size, limited discharge, and intermittent flows. However, North Fork Cottonwood Creek contains westslope cutthroat trout and bull trout. The existing culvert is undersized and remains at risk of hydrologic failure which could increase sedimentation in North Fork Cottonwood Creek. The USFS would use explosives to remove the culvert and road fill. The proposal is part of an ongoing effort within the Cottonwood Creek drainage to decommission roads and remove road crossing infrastructure. Following culvert removal, the site would be restored to natural conditions.

PURPOSE AND NEED

The proposal is part of an ongoing effort within the Cottonwood Creek drainage to decommission roads and remove road crossing infrastructure to enhance aquatic resources by preventing the risk of future hydrologic failures and fisheries impacts. The existing culvert is undersized and remains at risk of hydrologic failure which could increase sedimentation in North Fork Cottonwood Creek.

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 culvert would not be removed and the hydrologic function of the channel would continue to be impaired.

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 before August 1st or after August 31st unless the channel is dry.
- 2) Minimize disturbance to existing woody vegetation and attempt to salvage/transplant.
- 3) Must remove blasting debris that enters the channel.

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,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Kendra McKlosky". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style. The first name "Kendra" is written with a large, stylized 'K' and 'H' that are connected. The last name "McKlosky" follows, with a large, stylized 'M' and 'K' that are also connected. The signature is written in blue ink.

Kendra McKlosky
Regional Supervisor
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks