



## DECISION NOTICE

### Big Coulee Fish Barrier Enhancement Project

#### FWP-DN-FSH-R4-25-003

03/17/2025

#### **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 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 February 7, 2025 to March 13, 2025.

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 during the public comment period.

### **DESCRIPTION OF PROPOSED ACTION**

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) is proposing to enhance a previously constructed fish barrier on Big Coulee to protect a nonhybridized population of westslope cutthroat trout *Oncorhynchus lewisi* (WCT). The fish barrier project site on Big Coulee is located entirely on the Helena-Lewis and Clark National Forest, Judith-Musselshell Ranger District. The proposed enhancements to the Big Coulee fish barrier include constructing a cast-in-place concrete weir on top of a previously blasted bedrock waterfall and pouring a concrete splash pad at the base of the waterfall to eliminate the formation of a plunge pool. Additionally, drilling, blasting, and/or hydraulic hammering of the bedrock directly downstream the barrier would be performed to grade the streambed in a manner that prevents pooling of water during periods of high stream discharge.

### **PURPOSE AND NEED**

The intent of the proposed action would be to support the following FWP goals and objectives:

- Isolate the upper 2.4 miles of fish habitat in Big Coulee from nonnative fish invasion
- Increase the amount of protected WCT habitat in the Upper Missouri-Dearborn River drainage by 40% (from 6 miles to 8.4 miles; FWP 2022)
- Create a refugium for an at-risk WCT conservation population of highest conservation need
- Use the affected section of Big Coulee as a donor stream for future WCT conservation efforts in north central Montana
- Reduce the likelihood of ESA-listing of WCT

### **ALTERNATIVES ANALYZED**

#### **Alternative 1: No Action. Evaluation and Summary of Potential Impacts on the Physical Environment and Human Population**

Under the "No Action" alternative, the proposed project would not occur. Therefore, no additional impacts to the physical environment or human population in the analysis area would occur. The "No Action" alternative forms the baseline from which the potential impacts of the proposed Project can be measured.

Under the No Action alternative, FWP would not enhance the existing Big Coulee fish barrier. If the "No Action" alternative were selected, the Big Coulee fish barrier would only restrict upstream movement of nonnative trout in low discharge years. Nonnative trout would reinvade Big Coulee threatening the WCT population with extirpation by competition and hybridization.

#### **Alternative 2: Proposed Action**

Under the Proposed Action, FWP intends to begin construction of the Big Coulee fish barrier enhancements in August 2025 and reach substantial completion by December 2025.

### **PUBLIC COMMENT AND FWP RESPONSE**

FWP received one public comment on the Draft EA. A substantive public comment is defined as the identification of a specific issue or impact. The following provides the public comments received and FWP response(s).

**Comment 1:**

"I fully support the Enhanced Big Coulee Barrier project to help preserve a non-hybridized strain of Westslope Cutthroat Trout. Everything needs to be done to protect this beautiful, native fish for future generations."

**FWP Response:**

Thank you for your comment.

**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.

With this DN, FWP hereby adopts the Final EA, without modifications, and approves 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