



DECISION NOTICE

Westslope Cutthroat Trout Expansion and Genetic Rescue in South Fork Willow Creek (Smith River drainage)

FWP-DN-FSH-R4-25-011

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 28, 2025, to March 15, 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. No public comments were received during the public comment period.

DESCRIPTION OF PROPOSED ACTION

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) is proposing to expand the nonhybridized westslope cutthroat trout (WCT) *Oncorhynchus lewisi* population in South Fork Willow Creek (Smith River drainage) into its fishless headwaters above a bedrock barrier that currently limits upstream fish movement in the drainage. The section of South Fork Willow Creek where WCT will be introduced is entirely within the Helena-Lewis and Clark National Forest, Belt Creek-White Sulphur Springs Ranger District. Presently, the nonhybridized population of WCT in South Fork Willow Creek is isolated to a 0.25-mile reach of stream between two bedrock barriers. While small, isolated populations may be safer from hybridization and competition with nonnative fishes, they are at increased risk of extinction from catastrophic events (e.g. fire, drought) and may eventually suffer negative consequences of inbreeding (Wang et al. 2002). The most recent genetic analysis of this population indicates genetic variation is very low compared to other WCT populations in the Missouri River drainage and is a clear candidate for assisted translocation focused on providing gene flow. FWP is proposing translocation of a small number (5-10 adults) of individuals from a nearby population of nonhybridized Smith River WCT to alleviate genetic load and increase fitness and persistence probability of the South Fork Willow Creek population (Kovach et al. 2022). There is an estimated 4.6 miles of suitable habitat that is presently fishless above the upper bedrock barrier. Expansion and translocation of nonhybridized WCT into the fishless headwaters of upper South Fork Willow Creek would likely secure this population resulting in 4.8 miles of protected WCT habitat and a population of over 2,500 individuals.

PURPOSE AND NEED

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

- Prevent the loss of a unique genetic lineage of WCT native to north central Montana
- Expand the current WCT range in effort to meet WCT conservation goals for the Smith River subbasin
- Reduce the likelihood of ESA-listing of WCT.
- Establish a self-sustaining WCT conservation population in upper South Fork Willow Creek
- Increase the amount of protected WCT habitat in the Smith River drainage by 24.2% (from 19.0 miles to 23.6 miles).
- Use the expanded South Fork Willow Creek WCT population as a donor stream for future WCT conservation efforts in north central Montana

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 transfer nonhybridized WCT into the fishless headwaters of South Fork Willow Creek. Without action, the nonhybridized WCT population in South Fork Willow Creek would remain at increased risk of extinction from catastrophic events (e.g., fire, drought) and would likely

suffer negative genetic consequences of inbreeding. The 4.6-miles of fishless habitat in the headwaters of South Fork Willow Creek will remain fishless under the no-action alternative.

Alternative 2: Proposed Action

Under the Proposed Action, FWP would begin WCT transfers into upper South Fork Willow Creek in 2025. Transfers would likely occur over several years (3-5 years) to maximize total number of nonhybridized WCT transferred to fishless habitat.

PUBLIC COMMENT AND FWP RESPONSE

No public comments were received during the public comment period.

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