



DECISION NOTICE

Tiger Trout Introduction to Seven Region 4 Ponds/Reservoirs

Bair Reservoir (EA# FWP-CEA-FSH-R4-25-004)

Crow Coulee Reservoir (EA# FWP-CEA-FSH-R4-25-005)

Hansen Reservoir (EA# FWP-CEA-FSH-R4-25-006)

Kingsbury Pond (EA# FWP-CEA-FSH-R4-25-007)

Leningtons Reservoir (EA# FWP-CEA-FSH-R4-25-008)

Maiden Spring Pond (EA# FWP-CEA-FSH-R4-25-009)

Upper Carter Pond (EA# FWP-CEA-FSH-R4-25-010)

April 16, 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 14, 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 seven comments during the public comment period.

DESCRIPTION OF PROPOSED ACTION

FWP proposes to stock tiger trout into seven Region 4 waters, including Bair Reservoir (EA# FWP-CEA-FSH-R4-25-004), Crow Coulee Reservoir (EA# FWP-CEA-FSH-R4-25-005), Hansen Reservoir (EA# FWP-CEA-FSH-R4-25-006), Kingsbury Pond (EA# FWP-CEA-FSH-R4-25-007), Leningtons Reservoir (EA# FWP-CEA-FSH-R4-25-008), Maiden Spring Pond (EA# FWP-CEA-FSH-R4-25-009), and Upper Carter Pond (EA# FWP-CEA-FSH-R4-25-010). The species is not indigenous to the proposed waters or their drainages and has not been present historically. The primary goal of the tiger trout introduction would be to provide a unique recreational opportunity and secondarily to provide some biocontrol of nongame species.

Tiger trout are a produced hybrid of brook trout and brown trout. Triploid tiger trout eggs from Wyoming would be used as the source for stocking. They are sterile; therefore, their numbers can be highly managed by stocking practices. The lifespan of an individual tiger trout can vary greatly, but they generally live from four to eight years. Tiger trout generally average 10-16 inches in length. They are capable of larger growth in some situations, with record fish of greater than 20-inches in nearby states ranging from 10 to 27 pounds. Tiger trout generally consume zooplankton, aquatic invertebrates, and small fish. Tiger trout are known to become piscivorous when small-bodied forage fish are available.

The proposed waterbodies vary in size but are all managed as recreational trout fisheries that are sustained through hatchery stocking of primarily rainbow trout. Tiger trout stocking densities and frequencies would vary by waterbody. Stocked tiger trout would be produced by the FWP hatchery system and follow AIS and disease testing protocols. FWP would continue to monitor the fisheries at each waterbody to evaluate the success of the introduction and impacts to existing fisheries. The stocking rates may be adjusted depending on management goals and impacts to other aspects of the fisheries.

PURPOSE AND NEED

Bair Reservoir: The fishery at Bair Reservoir is quite simple. While catch rates are generally high, the quality of the fishery is poor. The proposed project has been identified in the SFMP and is intended to increase angling diversity and opportunity at Bair Reservoir to provide a unique, recreational angling opportunity. A secondary intent is to provide some biocontrol of nongame species in the reservoir which may convert biomass to a more desirable recreational use and improve growing conditions for the broader recreational fishery. This would be accomplished by stocking tiger trout in Bair Reservoir.

Crow Coulee Reservoir: The proposed project falls within management goals for the waterbody and is intended to increase angling diversity and opportunity at the waterbody to provide a unique, recreational angling opportunity. This would be accomplished by stocking tiger trout in Crow Coulee Reservoir.

Hansen Reservoir: The proposed project falls within management goals for the waterbody and is intended to increase angling diversity and opportunity at Hansen Reservoir to provide a unique, recreational angling opportunity. This would be accomplished by stocking tiger trout in Hansen Reservoir.

Kingsbury Pond: The proposed project falls within management goals for the waterbody and is intended to increase angling diversity and opportunity at the waterbody to provide a unique, recreational angling opportunity. This would be accomplished by stocking tiger trout in Kingsbury Pond.

Leningstons Reservoir: The proposed project falls within management goals for the waterbody and is intended to increase angling diversity and opportunity at the waterbody to provide a unique, recreational angling opportunity. This would be accomplished by stocking tiger trout in Leningstons Reservoir.

Maiden Spring Pond: Maiden Spring Pond does not currently provide a recreational fishery. The proposed project falls within management goals for the waterbody and is intended to increase angling diversity and opportunity at the waterbody to provide a unique, recreational angling opportunity. This would be accomplished by stocking tiger trout in Maiden Spring Pond.

Upper Carter Pond: The proposed project falls within management goals for the waterbody and is intended to increase angling diversity and opportunity at the waterbody to provide a unique, recreational angling opportunity. This would be accomplished by stocking tiger trout in Upper Carter Pond.

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 introduce tiger trout to the proposed waterbodies and the status quo would be maintained.

Alternative 2: Proposed Action

Under the Proposed Action, FWP would stock tiger trout in the proposed waterbodies beginning in 2025. The status of the fisheries would be monitored. Monitoring of stocking success, recreational quality, impacts to other aspects of the fishery, and criteria outlined in existing management goals would inform future management and subsequent tiger trout introductions in the proposed waters.

PUBLIC COMMENT AND FWP RESPONSE

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

Comment 1: *"I support the stocking of Tiger Trout in various Region 4 ponds and reservoirs. This project will enhance sport fishing opportunities for the public and the introduced Trout will help naturally manage unwanted or undesirable existing fish populations in the proposed areas."*

FWP Response: Thank you for your comments.

Comment 2: *"I would like to give my input as to planting tiger fish in Montana reservoirs. I would support the planting of these fish in the recommended reservoirs. In addition i would like to see them planted in some reservoirs in southwest Montana. I would highly recommend Clark Canyon near Dillion as the reservoir has drastically been abused by the fish and game. For a 5000 acre lake it has been drastically underplanted for the past 4 years to the point you cannot catch a Rainbow. What used to be one of the pristine fishery's in Montana is currently a disaster. I am 77 years old and have fish the reservoir since it was filled with water in thhe 60's and have never saw a fishery so mismanaged. Put some dam fish in it. If you cant find Rainbow then try some tiger trout. I know you won't but i had to get my two cents in."*

FWP Response: Thank you for your comments. The concerns noted regarding fisheries management in southwest Montana are outside the scope of the listed EA's.

Comment 3: *"I heartily applaud FWP's effort to try something new by stocking tiger trout into the several proposed bodies of water in region 4. Please proceed at full throttle. As a long time Montana angler, I have been a long-time advocate for trying tiger trout for the reasons explained in the EAs, so I personally find this proposal quite exciting. Other western states success with tiger trout and the opportunity afforded anglers will hopefully be enjoyed in north central Montana. And if for some unforeseen reason, stocking of tiger trout turns out to be a big mistake in a certain body of water, it's a mistake that time can easily heal since they are sterile. Thank you for the opportunity to comment."*

FWP Response: Thank you for your comments.

Comment 4: *"I am totally on board with planting tiger trout, a spectacular fish which if large drives an urge to have an unusual and striking mount on display. However I question two of the choices. Hansen Creek reservoir is heavily fished especially during the winter, although after having tried to eat winter fish twice from there during my first two years here, we found them to taste like pond scum and mud. I fly fished it occasionally for some years and found that with a bottom of silt, they fed primarily on midges, with a very slow growth rate. The other is Kingsbury pond, as several fly fishermen and people from that area say they have not fished in some years due to poor growth and murky water. Possibly suckers have been introduced, silt has diminished productivity, or agricultural chemicals and fertilizer runoff have caused damage. More suitable water may exist in some smaller Kolar ponds near Geyser. I have walked in two miles several times to fish what they refer to as the "pasture pond", a relatively shallow but spring fed pond which seems to have good productivity. I have not fished several small ponds east of that pond, but as they are in steep little coulees which likely have some springs, they may be suitable."*

I believe upper Carters to be an excellent choice, assuming no problems occur with the aeration system, as trout growth there is very good. I no not whether the tiger trout will seek deeper

cold water like the brook trout or have the temper tolerance of the brown, but in several private ponds where people had difficulty catching good brookies, I found that they had moved to the coldest water they could find, either near a spring or in deep water requiring different methods and patience.

My views may not co-incide with the general public, but I appreciate the opportunity to express them."

FWP Response: Thank you for your comments. The palatability of fish in Hansen Reservoir is not a consideration in the proposed action. Based on FWP surveys of Hansen Reservoir, there is abundant minnow forage available and we would anticipate tiger trout to utilize all available forage in the reservoir, similar to other stocked salmonids historically present in the reservoir. Kingsbury Pond has been identified as a location for tiger trout because it offers great growth potential via abundant minnow forage. We have not documented suckers in that waterbody to date. It is used for livestock watering which may contribute to water clarity issues. The introduction of tiger trout to the Kolar Ponds is outside the scope of the draft EA's.

Comment 5: *"Tiger trout seems like an invented species which would displace natural occurring species. Not crazy about the concept. Are the recreational "improvements" that much greater than natural species? Doesn't seem like it. I would rather put the money/costs of this proposed program to other uses. Money is always a limited resource and this does not seem like a priority to me."*

FWP Response: Thank you for your comment on the proposed action. The proposed waters are all artificial impoundments that do not contain naturally occurring salmonids. In all situations proposed, the only naturally occurring fish are minnow, sucker, and/or stickleback species that generally do not provide a recreational opportunity. All aspects of the proposed fisheries, including the habitat/reservoir and stocked species are artificial and manufactured to provide recreational angling. The stocking of tiger trout would not be expected to displace other stocked trout. There are numerous examples throughout the Rocky Mountain west of tiger trout coexisting with other stocked salmonids, including High Savary Reservoir and 12 others in Wyoming, Montpelier Reservoir and others in Idaho, Spirit Lake (Utah), 27 waters in Colorado, and 40+ waters in Washington. In all proposed waters, tiger trout would be expected to forage on small-bodied fish, similar to other existing stocked species such as brook trout, brown trout, and rainbow trout. FWP would monitor the fisheries and maintain the ability to take corrective action via removal or the cessation of tiger trout stocking should negative and/or undesirable impacts be observed. FWP invests money for raising fish at hatcheries regardless of the species. All waterbodies proposed, with the exception of Maiden Springs Pond, are already being stocked with FWP hatchery fish by FWP personnel. The associated costs stemming from producing the fish for the proposed action are negligible. The associated costs with stocking fish from the proposed action are already part of the hatchery operating budget. The additional cost and labor associated with producing the fish and stocking the proposed waters can readily be incorporated into existing hatchery budgets and workplans.

Comment 6: *"Thank you for the opportunity to review and provide comments on "Tiger Trout Introduction to Seven Region 4 Ponds/Reservoirs". My comments apply to Upper Carter, Kingsbury, Maiden Springs, Hansen, and Bair ponds.*

The FWP announcement from Helena was issued on 2/18. The EA lists the comment period as 2/7-22 which only allowed me a 4-day comment period. Hopefully, you received my two emails with Dave

and Jason about this glitch in the public notice process. I hope you will receive adequate public input with this shortened comment period.

I support your proposal as it will provide additional angling opportunities for this unique species.

The following are my comments –

How will tiger trout be managed? Catch and release? Or can they be harvested? My preference is for catch and release, but I'm concerned that many anglers won't be able to correctly identify them. Either way, this will require a modification to the fishing regulations.

If there are any concerns with tiger escapement from these ponds, Hansen would be the one to drop as some tigers will end up in Big Spring Creek, just like some of the cutthroats stocked there did.

I recommend monitoring these ponds to determine how successful this project is and if there are any impacts to other trout species stocked in these ponds.

Lastly, if this proposal is rejected based on public input, are any of these ponds approved for stocking a few browns? I think Kingsbury is. This could provide an opportunity to utilize nongame fish and result in trophy size trout."

FWP Response: Thank you for your comments. The comment period issues were addressed by extending the comment deadline on these EA's. Solutions to the broader issue regarding public notices are being developed and implemented. There are no special regulations in place for tiger trout currently. Tiger trout would fall under Fishing District Standard Daily and Possession Limits for Combined Trout. This would require an addition to the FWP Fishing Regulations. Special regulations, if deemed necessary or proposed via the public, may be considered in the future and would follow the FWP regulation setting process. Fish identification signs may be placed at the proposed waters if deemed necessary. Escapement from the proposed waters would be possible and such impacts were evaluated and summarized in the draft EA's. FWP's evaluation of those impacts did not find reason to anticipate major impacts to potentially connected waters. Minor impacts stemming from potential predation were identified and evaluated in the draft EA. All of the proposed waters are routinely monitored to evaluate the status of the fisheries. Such monitoring would be continued and adjustments to the stocking strategies at each waterbody may be considered if unforeseen and/or detrimental impacts to existing fisheries or management goals occur. The stocking of brown trout is outside the scope of the listed EA's. Brown trout and brook trout have been used similarly in Region 4 waters to take advantage of nongame forage and increase unique/trophy opportunity in recreational ponds and reservoirs including Bair Reservoir, Kingsbury Pond, and Upper Carter Pond. The addition of brown trout to the other waters proposed in the draft EA's would require additional environmental review.

Comment 7: *"Dear Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, Upper Missouri Waterkeeper opposes the introduction of Tiger Trout into Region 4 Ponds and Reservoirs. The introduced Tiger Trout would compete with wild Brook Trout in Bair Reservoir; risk the introduction of disease into all seven reservoirs and ponds, neighboring drainages, and the entire Missouri River; and prioritize stocking over protecting water quality and habitat for healthy self-sustaining wild species. Recreational opportunities should be realized by preserving wild species and protecting water from pollution and negative impacts. The biocontrol of nongame species does not include enough science or data for introduction, which would be needed for each introduction. Any risk that the newly and heavily*

stocked Tiger Trout would breed amongst themselves, with other wild or hatchery fish, or introduce an unknown or undetected disease or pathogen is an unacceptable risk. Upper Missouri Waterkeeper is a Montana not-for-profit membership organization that defends fishable, swimmable, drinkable water throughout the 25,000 sq. miles of southwest and west-central Montana's Upper Missouri River Basin. We use a combination of strong science, citizen action, and the law to champion the importance of lawful governance and clean water protections that provide critical defense against threats to healthy rivers and water resources. We know that Montana can and must protect our waters from the known and unknown risks of introducing hatchery fish to a healthy aquatic ecosystem. Further, dependency on hatchery fish is a risky and costly method that risks devastating impacts, as seen with whirling disease. More focus is needed to protect and restore water quality and habitat to sustain viable wild fisheries. A new introduction with the noted long-term impacts necessitates a full environmental impact statement with the MEPA and NEPA due to the long-term change to aquatic life and the risks spreading beyond the ponds and reservoirs at the headwaters of the longest river in America. Additional comments follow using the checklist for Bair Reservoir as a template. Thank you very much for your consideration.

Our comments are to the introduction of Tiger Trout into the Bair Reservoir, Crow Coulee Reservoir, Hansen Reservoir, Kingsbury Pond, Leningtons Reservoir, Maiden Spring Pond, and Upper Carter Pond. DRAFT ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT CHECKLIST TIGER TROUT INTRODUCTION TO BAIR RESERVOIR FWP-CEA-FSH-R4-25-004 as been quoted and shown below, but concerns are to all introductions.

As noted on page four of the draft environmental assessment checklist: "Tiger trout are known to become piscivorous when small-bodied forage fish are available and have a larger gape size than brown or brook trout of the same size. Bair Reservoir has an abundance of nongame fish, primarily white suckers, that may provide adequate forage opportunities for tiger trout. Converting nongame biomass to a desirable recreational species such as tiger trout would improve the recreational fishery at Bair Reservoir and potentially reduce forage competition for the rainbow trout population which may improve rainbow trout growth rates and condition" This competition threatens the cycle of the established fish in competition for resources and the ability of wild Brook Trout to develop from egg, alevin, fry, and juvenile to adult due to predation by the Tiger Trout, which would become dominant under the goal of this proposal.

Page four also notes that "Tiger trout would be added to the stocking program for Bair Reservoir to provide a unique recreational opportunity and to provide some biocontrol of nongame species." The biocontrol goals and objectives are not provided in enough detail and necessitate a full environmental impact statement and additional data collection for great detail of the aquatic and species conditions in the reservoir.

Page four also notes that "The SFMP specifies rainbow trout management goals of at least 10 fish per net and an average relative weight of 85. The three-year average based on fall gill netting surveys is 19.3 fish per net and a relative weight of 87.7." Recreational goals are being met already.

The anticipated dominance of Tiger Trout could threaten this situation due to changes to the aquatic stability due to the changes noted in Table three "Tiger trout would likely impact other aquatic life through predation and competition. Tiger trout would be expected to prey upon aquatic zooplankton, macroinvertebrates, and other fish" on page ten of the checklist EA. The resource impacts on "Terrestrial, avian, and aquatic life and habitats" should be noted as "major" due to the

scale of change to the aquatic environment and composition of aquatic species as noted and the additional risks outside the reservoir as noted here. The cost of mitigation efforts would be great and costly.

*[referring to Unique, endangered, fragile, or limited environmental resources section on page 11]
This category should be listed as major, as overlap could easily occur if fish are transferred by enthusiasts catching live fish and depositing them in nearby waters, which also includes the Smith Subbasin. Connection to the larger Missouri watershed would include threat to unique, endangered, and fragile resources. Self-sustaining wild fish, such as the brook trout, should be considered a limited resource, critical for recreation, and indicative of water quality and healthy habitat."*

FWP Response: Thank you for your comments. Your comments have been summarized and addressed as follows:

Bair Reservoir Brook Trout Competition, Predation, and Reproduction: Wild brook trout in Bair Reservoir are rare based on FWP survey data and are not of conservation concern. The brook trout populations in the Upper North Fork Musselshell River drainage are the result of historic stocking practices and do provide some recreational value but are not considered a resource of concern due to their pervasive abundance in the area and non-native status. Competition and predation impacts to wild brook trout would be anticipated to be minor as the area of overlap, should it occur, would be limited by time and space. Tiger trout are sterile and would compete with overlapping salmonids while present. Persistent presence outside of Bair Reservoir would not be expected due to the tiger trout's sterility and life expectancy. Should negative and/or undesirable impacts to wild trout fisheries be observed, impacts could be mitigated by removal of tiger trout and/or the cessation of stocking. In the North Fork Musselshell drainage above Bair Reservoir, impacts would also be limited by space as there is a natural waterfall barrier approximately 1.5 miles upstream of the reservoir which would prevent tiger trout movement beyond that point. Tiger trout are functionally sterile and the egg source for the proposed action would create triploid fish, further eliminating any risk of the fish interbreeding with wild salmonids or naturally reproducing.

Hatchery Fish, Disease Risk, and Water Quality: Quality habitat, which includes water quality, is critical for the fish and wildlife resources in the state of Montana. FWP works hard to protect and improve habitat throughout the state. The proposed waters are all artificial impoundments that would not support recreational angling opportunities without the use of hatchery fish. FWP Fish Division's mission is to *"manage and enhance the state's fisheries, including native and non-native fish species, to ensure their health and abundance. This includes preserving, maintaining, and enhancing aquatic ecosystems to meet public demands for recreational opportunities and stewardship."* The stocking of hatchery fish in the proposed waters falls within the Fish Division's mission by maintaining and enhancing systems for recreational opportunities. These efforts are balanced with concerns to water quality, aquatic invasive species (AIS), and fish health. FWP acknowledges there is inherent risk in fish stocking and takes exhaustive efforts to minimize that risk. All FWP hatcheries are routinely tested for AIS and fish health. FWP hatcheries use scientifically proven and nationally accepted decontamination procedures to treat eggs that arrive at the facilities and ensure pathogens are not spread to receiving waters. All waters proposed, with the exception of Maiden Springs Pond, have been and would continue to be stocked with FWP hatchery fish regardless of the proposed tiger trout introduction. The inherent risk has been and would continue to exist on the landscape. The proposed action does not present a new risk regarding the use of hatchery fish and disease or water quality impacts. FWP would continue to balance the responsibility of providing recreational opportunities with potential disease, AIS, and water quality impacts by continuing to follow

proven procedures that are in place to protect habitats while providing angling opportunity. FWP invests money for raising fish at hatcheries regardless of the species. All waterbodies proposed, with the exception of Maiden Springs Pond, are already being stocked with FWP hatchery fish by FWP personnel. The associated costs stemming from producing the fish for the proposed action are negligible. The associated costs with stocking fish from the proposed action are already part of the hatchery operating budget. The additional cost and labor associated with producing the fish and stocking the proposed waters can readily be incorporated into existing hatchery budgets and workplans.

Bair Reservoir Tiger Trout as Biocontrol: Tiger trout as a biocontrol tool is Bair Reservoir is a secondary purpose of the proposed action, with the primary intent stated as increasing angling diversity and opportunity. The use of tiger trout as a biocontrol tool has been thoroughly documented and studied throughout the Rocky Mountain West. Studies in Utah^{1,2}, Idaho³, and Washington⁴ have evaluated the use of tiger trout as biocontrol agents and, while there is variability and location specific differences, they have generally shown that tiger trout can be effective biocontrol tools for fisheries managers. In Bair Reservoir, white sucker abundance is high and, based on FWP survey data, they account for almost 75% of the biomass in the reservoir. Rainbow trout, which are the primary recreational opportunity in the reservoir and stocked annually, routinely have poor condition and have a long-term average relative weight of approximately 77. An FWP study in the 2000's found that there was substantial diet overlap between white suckers and rainbow trout in Bair Reservoir and that mechanical removal of white suckers resulted in improved growth rates and condition of stocked rainbow trout, indicating a competitive release occurred when sucker abundance was suppressed⁵. The Statewide Fisheries Management Plan goals for rainbow trout do not have direct bearing on the proposal to stock tiger trout. Catch rate goals are routinely met at Bair Reservoir, however, condition goals are rarely met and the quality of the fishery remains poor as indicated by the 2024 observed Proportional Stock Density (PSD) of 0.0 and the fact that PSD's above 5.0 are rare. The primary objective of introducing tiger trout to Bair Reservoir would be to increase angling diversity and opportunity. FWP also believes that the tiger trout introduction could benefit the stocked rainbow trout fishery by reducing sucker abundance and therefore it is listed as a secondary intent of the proposed action.

Concern of Major Impacts and EIS: The Montana Environmental Protection Act (MEPA) and associated Administrative Rules of Montana (ARM) provide direction and guidance for the appropriate level of environmental review. In preparing the draft EA's regarding the proposed action, FWP considered the complexity of the proposed action, the environmental sensitivity of the affected area, the degree of uncertainty of potential impacts associated with the proposed action, and the need for and complexity of mitigation measures that might be required. FWP defines impact duration and severity criteria for draft EA's. Based on the above considerations and the significance criteria set forth, FWP is confident that the draft EA's are the appropriate level of environmental review. Short-term impacts are defined as those that would not last longer than the proposed project. Long-term impacts are defined as those that would remain or occur following the proposed project. The proposed project is the introduction of tiger trout to the listed waterbodies. Impacts that were identified as long-term were because the tiger trout would

¹ Winters, L.K.; Budy, P.; Thiede, G.P. *Earning their stripes: The potential of tiger trout and other salmonids as biological control of forage fishes in a western reservoir*. North American Journal of Fisheries Management 2017, 37, 380-394.

² Winters, L.K.; Budy, P. *Exploring Crowded Trophic Niche Space in a Novel Reservoir Fish Assemblage: How Many is Too Many?* Transactions of the American Fisheries Society 2015, 144, 1117-1128.

³ Messner, J.; Schoby, G.; Belnap, M.; Amick, M.; Loffredo, J. *Fisheries Management Annual Report, Salmon Region, IDFG 16-115*; Idaho Department of Fish and Game. Salmon, ID. 2017.

⁴ Miller, A.L. *Diet, growth, and age analysis of tiger trout from ten lakes in eastern Washington*. Master's thesis. Eastern Washington University, Cheney, WA. 2010.

⁵ Tews, A.; Miller, D.; Horn, C. *Changes in zooplankton, diet and stocked rainbow trout growth after sucker manipulation in small north central Montana reservoirs*. Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks. Lewistown, MT. 2011.

remain on the landscape beyond the initial introduction. However, due to their sterile nature and management-controlled presence on the landscape, tiger trout impacts could end based on future management action. They would not be uncontrolled and would not become self-sustaining, wild populations. Negligible impacts are those that may have an adverse or beneficial effect but would be at the lowest levels of detection. Minor impacts are those where the effect would be noticeable but would be relatively small and would not affect the function or integrity of the resource. Major impacts are those where the effect would irretrievably alter the resource. At the proposed locations, the introduction of tiger trout would not be expected to result in long-term changes to aquatic life that would irretrievably alter the resource. Tiger trout are sterile and therefore FWP would maintain control over the term of their impacts on the environment. Should negative and/or undesirable impacts to other aquatic life be observed, such impacts could be mitigated by the removal of tiger trout and the cessation of stocking. Mitigation efforts would be quite simple, as the cessation of stocking and allowing the remaining tiger trout to age-out would not require funding or labor. Active removal, if deemed necessary, would be readily incorporated into existing netting surveys or electrofishing work plans. Again, because of their sterile nature, tiger trout would naturally no longer persist on the landscape in a relatively short timeline if their presence becomes problematic. Because of these factors, potential impacts, which are described in the draft EA's, would not be considered irretrievable and therefore do not warrant classification as Major Impacts. Additionally, such impacts to aquatic life are already present on the landscape in all proposed waters as stocked salmonids, and one or both parent species (brook trout and/or brown trout) are present. Novel and/or cumulative impacts beyond those already on the landscape would not be expected. There is no reason to suspect that tiger trout would become dominant in these systems. Tiger trout are sterile and FWP would retain management control over their abundance in the proposed waterbodies. The proposed stocking rates are intended to provide a unique recreational opportunity at the listed waterbodies and rates are relatively low compared to other stocked salmonids. FWP would retain the ability to manage tiger trout abundance via stocking rates and, if deemed necessary, removal tools such as netting and electrofishing.

Illegal Introductions: FWP recognizes that unauthorized introductions are an ever-present risk on the landscape and have the potential to negatively impact existing recreational fisheries, conservation populations, and habitats. Those risks are present regardless of the proposed action. The use of tiger trout actually presents a lower risk than other stocked salmonids as they would be unable to reproduce and/or hybridize with other wild trout due to their sterile nature, therefore their presence on the landscape would be limited in time. As mentioned above, potential impacts would not be irretrievable and therefore do not warrant classification as a major impact. In the proposed waters, there are no identified unique, endangered, fragile, or limited environmental resources that would be expected to be impacted by the proposed action. In nearby waters that contain unique, endangered, fragile, or limited environmental resources, should an illegal introduction occur, potential impacts would be expected to be similar to those listed in the draft EA regarding competition and predation. Impacts would be limited in time due to the sterile nature of tiger trout and unlikely to result in irretrievable impacts. Additionally, the number of tiger trout on the landscape, or that could realistically be moved or somehow overlap with limited environmental resources, would not be expected to meet a threshold where significant impacts would be possible.

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 script is cursive and fluid, with the first letter of each word being capitalized and prominent.

Jason Rhoten
Region 4 Supervisor
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks