Decision Notice
Skelly Gulch Culvert Fish Barrier

March 11, 2011

Proposal

The proposed action involves removing an existing culvert road crossing, which currently acts as only a partial fish barrier, and replacing it with a culvert placed at the appropriate length, slope, and drop to become a complete barrier to upstream fish passage. Genetically pure westslope cutthroat trout (WCT) exist on U.S. Forest Service (USFS) and private lands above the road crossing. Eastern brook trout (EBT) are abundant below the crossing barrier. Westslope cutthroat trout are Montana's state fish and are designated as a *Species of Special Concern* by the State of Montana, a *Sensitive Species* by the USFS, and a *Special Status* species by the Bureau of Land Management. Genetically unaltered WCT are estimated to persist in less than 5% of their historic range in the Missouri River drainage. Brook trout are capable of out-competing WCT for essential resources and have completely displaced WCT in some streams.

The proposed project replaces the current 17 linear foot 36 inch diameter pipe with an 80 linear foot 48 inch diameter corrugated metal pipe. The gradient of the new pipe would be at a minimum 3% slope to act as a velocity barrier, would include a 2 foot drop on the downstream end, and an 8 foot wide by 12 foot long splash pad to minimize fish jumping capabilities. The new pipe would be capable of passing 25 year flows without overtopping the road and would transport sediment at bankfull stream flows. To minimize stream disturbance, construction activities would take place during base flow conditions, which typically occur in August.

Environmental Policy Act Process

Montana Fish, Wildlife, & Parks is required to assess potential impacts of the proposed action to the human and physical environment. In compliance with the Montana Environmental Policy Act (MEPA), a draft Environmental Assessment (EA) was completed by FWP and released for public comment on January 27, 2011. Letters describing the proposed action and the draft EA were sent to private landowners adjacent to the project area and those with interests upstream of the road crossing. The EA was posted on the FWP website as a public notice. No public comments were received during the 35 day public comment period.

Summary of Issues Addressed in the Environmental Assessment

The EA lists the issues in detail. These include:

- Characterization of the Skelly Gulch WCT population and need for conservation.
- Minor, short-term impacts to bank stability, water quality, and turbidity.
- Impacts of construction of a migratory fish barrier to native fish population.
- Minor, short-term impacts to aesthetics, vegetation, air quality, and noise levels during construction.
- Short-term impacts of limited access above the project area during construction.

Summary of Public Comment

No public comments were received during the 35 day public comment period.

Decision

Based on the EA, no public comment, and the current risk of extinction of genetically pure WCT in the Missouri River drainage, it is my decision to proceed with Alternative 2, the proposed action. Alternative 2 involves replacing the current culvert crossing, which acts as a partial fish barrier, with a culvert placed at the appropriate length, slope, and drop to make a complete fish barrier. The culvert would be sized to pass a flow calculated to be a 25 year event. The predicted benefits include protection and conservation of a genetically pure WCT population inhabiting approximately 6 miles of Skelly Gulch by preventing further upstream colonization by EBT, reduced risk of road crossing failure during high stream flows, and a reduction in the risk of a potential listing of WCT under the Endangered Species Act. Impacts to the human or physical environment are not expected to be significant, while ensuring the long-term persistence and conservation of a pure, locally adapted WCT population in the Missouri River drainage. Based on the potential impacts, I conclude that the Environmental Assessment is the appropriate level of analysis for this action, and that an Environmental Impact Statement is not required. The Draft Environmental Assessment along with this Decision Notice will serve as the final document for this proposal.

Gary Bertellotti
Region 4 Supervisor
Great Falls, Montana

Date: 3/14/2011