



Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks

NEWS

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FWP, FEDERAL AGENCIES DECIDE TO IMPLEMENT THE SOUTH FORK FLATHEAD CUTTHROAT CONSERVATION PROJECT

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP), along with the Flathead National Forest (FNF) and the Bonneville Power Administration (BPA), has made the decision to implement the South Fork Flathead Watershed Westslope Cutthroat Trout Conservation Program. FWP Region One Supervisor Jim Satterfield signed the Record of Decision on May 1. Implementation of the project will begin after a 105-day appeal period required by the USFS.

“We plan on keeping the public informed as we implement this project,” said Satterfield. “There will be opportunities to learn the details of the project and to give input as we go forward.” Satterfield said that FWP will hold a public meeting each year working through the Region 1 Citizens Advisory Committee to present the status of the project and to evaluate the implementation and results of each year’s treatment.

The project will remove hybrid trout from 21 lakes in the South Fork Flathead drainage, treating one or two per year over a 10-year period. The hybrid trout threaten the genetically pure westslope cutthroat trout downstream in the South Fork Flathead River drainage. The South Fork currently has the largest genetically pure population in the world. The hybrid trout will be removed using EPA approved piscicides. The lakes will then be restocked with pure westslope cutthroat trout to restore angling and the natural aquatic community of the lakes and associated streams.

FWP prepared an Environmental Impact Statement jointly with FNF and BPA. The Forest Service is the major land management agency and BPA will provide the funding for the project under the Hungry Horse Mitigation program. The Bonneville Power Administration is the lead agency for the environmental review, and the state of Montana acceded to and followed the more stringent NEPA requirements of the cooperating federal agencies.

Genetically pure westslope cutthroat trout have been reduced to about 9 % of their historic range. The South Fork Flathead River drainage is a stronghold for westslope cutthroat, representing

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nearly 50% of the large, interconnected westslope cutthroat habitat in the state. This area is also an important recreational fishery for the public. For some time the South Fork Flathead cutthroat trout population has been facing the threat of hybridization from non-native trout that are spreading downstream from headwater lakes and streams.

Satterfield said that re-stocking the lakes and some stream segments with genetically pure westslope cutthroat trout will serve the best interest in meeting the project goals, maintain established social practices and recreation opportunity, and minimize socioeconomic impacts. FWP's westslope cutthroat trout stock, currently the only certified source for state restoration projects, will be planted in most locations. FWP is committed to developing sources of fish from selected streams where feasible to preserve genetic diversity. He added that the project would aid the state of Montana in maintaining management authority for the species.

Implementing the action during the fall period is designed to reduce user conflicts and impacts to non-target organisms. The sequence of lake treatments will be geographically separated to reduce impacts. Restocking with fish will be rapid and in some cases involve stocking larger westslope cutthroat trout to restore recreational fishing and natural reproduction quicker. With the help of the public, FWP will develop final evaluation criteria to judge the success of the project. These criteria include: reclamation success, site clean-up, restocking status, and continued genetic monitoring.

In wilderness, the project incorporates traditional transportation methods as much as possible. Using helicopters and airplanes to transport materials and equipment in non-wilderness areas will minimize ground impacts to trails that are not designed for heavy transport with livestock.

The environmental review process for this program has spanned 5 years. Extensive public input has included: four separate scoping periods between 2001 and 2005, 129 comments received, 22 meetings with the public, organizations and agencies (in Kalispell, Polson, Ronan, Clearwater, Missoula, Seeley Lake, Lincoln, Boulder, Choteau), and at least 40 newspaper articles, press releases, radio programs, newsletters, agency and organization newsletters.

Electronic copies of the decision documents can be accessed from the MFWP website at <http://fwp.mt.gov>.

ATTACHED: FWP'S RECORD OF DECISION

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