



NEWS RELEASE

Lolo National Forest

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Lolo Employees, Partners Receive Restoration Award

Missoula, MT. – A collaborative effort that began on the Ninemile Ranger District in 2002 to reclaim a section of Eustache Creek 25 miles west of Missoula has been selected by The Western Division of American Fisheries Society for its 2008 Riparian Challenge Award. The restored section of creek had been heavily impacted from decades of mining activity and the work was cited by the American Fisheries Society as an example of exceptional riparian protection and restoration. The project is expected to primarily improve native westslope cutthroat trout populations within the creek and the local watershed.

The American Fisheries Society is a professional organization that works to “improve the conservation and sustainability of fishery resources and aquatic ecosystems by advancing fisheries and aquatic science and promoting the development of fisheries professionals.” The western chapter of the society annually recognizes outstanding restoration work through the Riparian Challenge Award program.

Ninemile Ranger District fisheries biologist Scott Spaulding noted several positive signs in the project area already. He said there has been an increase in cutthroat trout numbers in two of the three project monitoring reaches and he noted that fish redistribution into previously fragmented habitat has likely occurred already.

“We have completely reconnected this 1.3 mile section of stream for fish movement,” Spaulding said. “It was previously fragmented by dead-end ponds, late-season de-watered channel, an upstream headcut (a vertical channel drop of approximately four feet), and an upper culvert that was undersized with a three foot drop. There were no fish found in five sites above this culvert. This year will allow us to see if fish have re-colonized above these upper two barriers.”

The Eustache Creek restoration work drew on the talents, energy, and expertise of Lolo National Forest scientists, local Trout Unlimited members, and local volunteers – even Lolo National Forest firefighters who felled trees used for in-stream habitat. The work has resulted in more than a mile of restored stream channel that was heavily braided and eroded, 6,000 new native trees planted, and removal of several fish barriers. The project will ultimately allow westslope cutthroat trout and other fish to move into areas that had been fragmented as a result of fish barriers, return native vegetation to its natural role in the area, reduce sediment, and provide a host other watershed and habitat benefits.

Eustache Creek is a tributary to Ninemile Creek, which flows into the middle fork of the Clark Fork River. The headwaters of Ninemile Creek are considered important producers of westslope cutthroat by fish biologists. More than a mile of Eustache Creek was heavily mined for gold and other precious metals from the late 1800s thru the early 1900s. The mining operations left behind stream floodplain and riparian disturbances and created a variety of resource impacts that all limited native fish populations.

“Probably the most rewarding part of this project has been the varied interest and support that we have had – from Trout Unlimited staff, volunteers, retired Forest Service silviculturists, the Lolo National Forest aquatics group,

District fire personnel and the forest and Regional Office geology shops,” Spaulding said. “Having some of the same volunteers present for all significant aspects of the project is especially rewarding.”

The project first came into initial planning discussions in 2002 as a part of fish and water evaluations of the Upper Ninemile Creek for the Lolo National Forest’s Post-Burn Environmental Impact Statement. Spaulding’s advice to others taking on lengthy restoration work is to stay focused on the long-term goal.

“Patience and persistence are needed to navigate a project of this size over a variable and somewhat unpredictable planning horizon,” Spaulding said. “You have to be willing to take some risks related to keeping a good project moving forward, sometimes in the face of uncertainty.”

Spaulding and the others involved in the project were honored at the Western Division of the American Fisheries Society’s annual conference luncheon, in Portland, Oregon, this past May. They will also receive a plaque that acknowledges the accomplishment.

Fore more information, please contact the Lolo National Forest Public Affairs Office at (406) 329-1024, or Scott Spaulding, Ninemile Ranger District fisheries biologist, at (406) 626-5424.

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