



Date: December 18, 2008

Greetings:

The Gunnison Ranger District is evaluating a project to improve fish distribution in the Cochetopa Creek watershed by replacing culverts that currently block fish migration. Sites have been identified in Los Pinos Creek (2 sites), Elk Creek, Pauline Creek, Perfecto Creek, Nutras Creek, and Stewarts Creek.

Legal description:

Sections 1, 11, 27, and 35, Township 44 N, Range 1 E, New Mexico Principle Meridian
Sections 3 and 19, Township 45 N, Range 1 E, New Mexico Principle Meridian
Section 35, Township 45 N, Range 1 W, New Mexico Principle Meridian

I am asking for public comments regarding the proposed action, and that they be submitted within the next 30 days. Your responses will help the interdisciplinary team identify key issues related to the proposed action. At this time our review does not indicate extraordinary circumstances are present or that the proposed action will result in a significant effect to the environment. We anticipate the environmental analysis will be documented as a categorical exclusion.

Purpose and Need

The purpose of this project is to increase fish habitat availability and stream connectivity in the Cochetopa Creek watershed by replacing eight culverts (identified in the proposed action) that are currently barriers to fish passage and to maintain the existing Forest Service road (FSR) system. Colorado River cutthroat trout (CRCT) and bluehead suckers (BHS) are present in the Cochetopa watershed and are listed as Regional Forester's sensitive species due to substantial declines in abundance and distribution. This action is needed to improve the distribution and abundance for these sensitive fish species and other non-native sportfish by expanding their distribution throughout the project area.

Proposed Action

The action currently proposed to meet the purpose and need include:

- Replacement of two existing culverts at Los Pinos Creek and Los Pinos-Cebolla Road (FSR 788) to improve stream habitat and allow passage for CRCT and BHS.
- Replacement of the existing culvert at Elk Creek and Los Pinos-Cebolla Road (FSR 788) to improve stream habitat and allow fish from the main stem of Los Pinos Creek to move into this tributary.
- Replacement of the existing culvert at Los Pinos Creek and East Fork Los Pinos Road (FSR 790.1A) to improve stream habitat and allow passage for CRCT and BHS.
- Replacement of the existing culvert at Pauline Creek and Cochetopa Creek Road (FSR 794) to improve stream habitat and allow passage of cutthroat trout, brook trout and brown trout.



- Replacement of the existing culvert at Perfecto Creek and Cochetopa Creek Road (FSR 794) to improve stream habitat and allow fish passage.
- Replacement of the existing culvert at Nutras Creek and Cochetopa Creek Road (FSR 794) to improve stream habitat and allow fish passage.
- Removal of the existing culvert at Stewart Creek and Cochetopa Creek Road (FSR 794) and construction of a low water ford to improve stream habitat and allow fish passage.

The attached project area map identifies which culverts are proposed for replacement, perennial stream names, and FS road numbers (the first number identifies county jurisdiction; 7 denotes Saguache County).

The proposed action involves the replacement of eight existing culverts and the rehabilitation of the stream and floodplain area adjacent to the project site. A small excavator would be used to accomplish the work and would likely impact 100 feet of stream channel per site. Stream habitat improvement structures may be placed near the site to provide additional fish habitat and protect stream bank improvements. Culvert replacements would be carried out at low flow conditions to reduce turbidity and sedimentation. Construction is expected to take 5 days per site. Road/stream crossing designs would maintain the existing road standard objectives.

Project sites would be accessed from Los Pinos-Cebolla Road (FSR 788) and Cochetopa Creek Road (FSR 794). Scheduling of road closures will be coordinated with the Gunnison District staff to minimize travel restrictions and public conflicts. No road closures will be scheduled during rifle seasons to avoid impacts to hunters.

The crossing at Pauline Creek would likely be the first site for improvement, followed by the Perfecto Creek crossing. The second phase of construction would likely include Elk Creek and the two sites on Los Pinos Creek that are upstream of Elk Creek. The third phase would include the Nutras and Stewart Creek crossings. The Nutras Creek crossing may require a temporary road crossing structure to provide access to the trailheads and private property. All other crossing sites appear to have detour options and accessibility by routing traffic through Lake City, the Big Meadows Road (FSR 790) and the Perfecto Creek Road (FSR 794.2B). The Los Pinos Creek crossing on private property would likely be final project site.

Project Implementation

Project implementation is scheduled to begin in August of 2009. Completion of the proposed action may take several years, depending on available funding and personnel.

Forest Plan Consistency

This project is consistent with the Land and Resource Management Plan direction (LRMP), standards and guidelines for management of Threatened, Endangered and Sensitive Species as specified in the Regional Forester's (2670) letter, which lists CRCT and BHS as sensitive fish species (LRMP III-33-34 and FS Manual 2672.11). This project is consistent with Strategy 7 of the *Conservation Agreement for Colorado River Cutthroat Trout in the States of Colorado, Utah, and Wyoming* (June 2006). The U.S. Forest Service, Rocky Mountain Region, is a signatory partner in this agreement. This project is consistent with the Regional Watershed Conservation Practices Handbook to provide for passage of flow, sediment, and free movement of resident

aquatic life (FS Handbook 2509.25, 12.2(4)). And lastly, the proposed action is consistent with the LRMP, standards and guidelines for Habitat Improvement and Maintenance of perennial streams to optimize community structure and aquatic habitat diversity (LRMP III-31).

Decision Framework

The decision framework is whether to conduct these fisheries improvements, to modify the existing proposal based on resource and public issues, or to take no action.

How to Comment and Timeframe

To ensure your issues can be fully considered, please respond by the close of business within 30 days of the date of this letter. Written, facsimile, hand-delivered, oral and electronic comments concerning this action will be accepted.

Mail your comments to: GMUG National Forests
 Attention: Pauline Adams
 2505 South Townsend Ave.
 Montrose, CO 81401.

Fax comments to: (970) 240-5367

E-mail comments to: comments-rocky-mountain-gmug-gunnison@fs.fed.us

When responding to our proposal, please indicate if you wish to be put on the mailing list to receive further information on this project. Only those indicating a desire to be added to the mailing list will receive further mailings.

We appreciate your interest regarding the management of our public lands. If you have questions, please contact Pauline Adams, Fisheries Biologist, at (970) 240-5422.