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**Montana Fish
Wildlife & Parks**
LEGISLATIVE ENVIRONMENTAL
POLICY OFFICE

Region 4 Headquarters

4600 Giant Springs Road

Great Falls, MT 59405

March 24, 2014

To:

Belt Creek Ranger District, 4234 US Highway 89 North, Neihart MT, 59465
Blackfeet Tribal Business Council, 1 Agency Square, PO Box 850, Browning MT, 59417
Blackfeet Tribal Historic Preservation Office – THPO, 620 All Chiefs Rd, PO Box 850, Browning MT, 59417
Cascade Co. Commissioners, Joe Briggs, Chairman, 325 2nd Ave. North, #111, Great Falls MT, 59401
Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribal Council, 42487 Complex Blvd, PO Box 278, Pablo MT, 59855
Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes Preservation Dept, THPO, PO Box 278, Pablo MT, 59855
Dan Vermillion, FWP Commission Chairman, PO Box 668, Livingston MT, 59047
Dept. of Environmental Quality, PO Box 20091, Helena MT, 59620-0901
Environmental Quality Council, Todd Everts, Room 106, PO Box 201704, Helena MT. 59620
Fort Peck Tribal Executive Board, Chairman, 501 Medicine Bear Rd, PO Box 1027, Poplar MT, 59255
Fort Peck Tribal Historic Preservation Office, THPO, P.O. Box 1027, Poplar MT, 59255
Gayle Fisher, Russell Country, PO Box 3166, Great Falls MT, 59403
Governor's Office, Tim Baker, PO Box 200802, Helena MT, 59620
Janet Ellis, Montana Audubon Council, PO Box 595, Helena MT, 59624
Little Shell Cultural Representative, 625 Central Ave. West, Suite 101, Great Falls MT, 59401
Little Shell Tribe of Chippewa Indians, Chairman, P.O. Box 543, Black Eagle MT, 59414
Missouri River Fly Fishers, PO Box 6885, Great Falls MT, 59405
Montana Environmental Information Center, Adam McLane, PO Box 1184, Helena MT, 59624
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks:
 Design and Construction, Paul Valle, 1522 9th Avenue, Helena MT, 59601
 Fisheries Division, Jackie Windon, PO Box 200701, Helena MT, 59620
 Lands Section, Candace Durran, PO Box 200701, Helena MT, 59620
 Legal Unit, Kaedy Horne, PO Box 200701, Helena, MT, 59620
 Wildlife Division, Laura Geary, PO Box 200701, Helena MT, 59620
Montana Land Reliance, PO Box 355, Helena MT, 59624-0355
Montana River Action Network, 304 N 18th Ave, Bozeman MT, 59715
Montana State Library, 1515 E 6th Ave, Helena MT, 59601
Montana Wilderness Association, 80 S Warren, Helena, MT, 59601
Montana Wildlife Federation, Dave Chadwick, PO Box 1175, Helena MT, 59624
MT Historical Society, State Historic Preservation Office, PO Box 201201, Helena MT, 59620-1201
***Thirty four local landowners were also mailed this scoping letter**

To whom it may concern,

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks is requesting public input on a potential project to restore native westslope cutthroat trout (westslope) to the Dry Fork of Belt Creek. Dry Fork currently supports a few isolated populations of native westslope in headwater tributaries. Current efforts to clean up mine tailings in the upper Dry Fork may have a negative impact on native westslope. As mine reclamation efforts progress and impacted sections of stream are able to support trout, existing populations of westslope, our state fish, may be threatened by hybridization and competition with non-native trout species. We propose removal of non-native fishes in Dry Fork Belt Creek for the purpose of re-connecting isolated populations of westslope in the watershed

Dry Fork Belt Creek as a restoration site has several advantages:

- Dry Fork Belt Creek would be treated when the stream channel is dry during summer or fall months – This would completely prevent any downstream movement of rotenone and preclude the need to detoxify with potassium permanganate
- Dry Fork Belt Creek already has 6 populations of pure or nearly pure westslope in tributaries.

A separate component of this project involves construction of a fish barrier approximately 1.8 miles upstream of the confluence of Dry Fork Belt Creek and Belt Creek.

Construction of the fish barrier should provide some benefit to upstream native westslope cutthroat trout populations even if the preferred alternative of fish removal with rotenone is not implemented.

The USDA Forest Service will be making a decision to approve the installation of a fish barrier on federal lands on the Dry Fork of Belt Creek. The decision is expected during Spring of 2014 and will be made using the Forest Services' authority under the Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation and Liability Act (CERCLA). Construction of the fish barrier is expected in the summer of 2014. For more information regarding this action contact Beth Ihle, On-Scene Coordinator for the Forest Service at 495-3863.

If this project were implemented, and westslope populations were to reach self-supporting levels as we would expect, management objectives would include changing the current catch and release fishing regulations to allow harvest of westslope cutthroat trout. Other mitigation would include stocking of sterile westslope obtained from Washoe Park Hatchery, Anaconda MT. These fish would provide a fishery until existing populations of westslope in headwater reaches fully colonize the mainstem Dry Fork Belt Creek.

Historically, Dry Fork Belt Creek would have supported westslope in approximately 26 miles of stream. Currently, less than 6 miles of headwater streams in the Dry Fork drainage support westslope

populations; the remainder of the Dry Fork drainage holds brook trout, rainbow trout, and a few hybridized westslope.

Westslope are considered a species of concern by the State of Montana. Primary threats to westslope include competition and hybridization with non-native rainbow trout and competition with non-native brook trout. Projects which restore westslope to historically occupied habitats are necessary to prevent the extinction of the species. In addition, efforts to stabilize and increase westslope populations are undertaken to prevent a future listing under the Endangered Species Act. In addition, when projects like this are proposed, private landowners in the project area can be protected from any land use restrictions even if listing did occur under the Candidate Conservation Agreement with Assurances.

This project, if implemented, would restore westslope to an additional 20 miles of stream in the Dry Fork drainage. Additional important benefits of the project would include:

- Restoration of connectivity between isolated populations of westslope in the Dry Fork drainage.
- Reduction in the risk of potential listing under the Endangered Species Act. Actions such as the proposed would be considered should additional petitions for listing are submitted to the USFWS. If listed as threatened or endangered, the USFWS would be officials responsible for assessing threats and acting on those threats to existing westslope populations in the Dry Fork drainage.
- Preservation of the life history and genetic legacy of westslope in the Dry Fork drainage.
- Fishing regulations for westslope in the Dry Fork Drainage are currently catch-and-release only. In the future, total population numbers of westslope in the Dry Fork should support a change from catch-and-release only to allow some level of harvest.
- If the preferred alternative of non-native fish removal is selected – sterile hatchery westslope would be stocked in mainstem Dry Fork Belt Creek to provide a fishery until native westslope descend tributaries and full colonize the drainage.

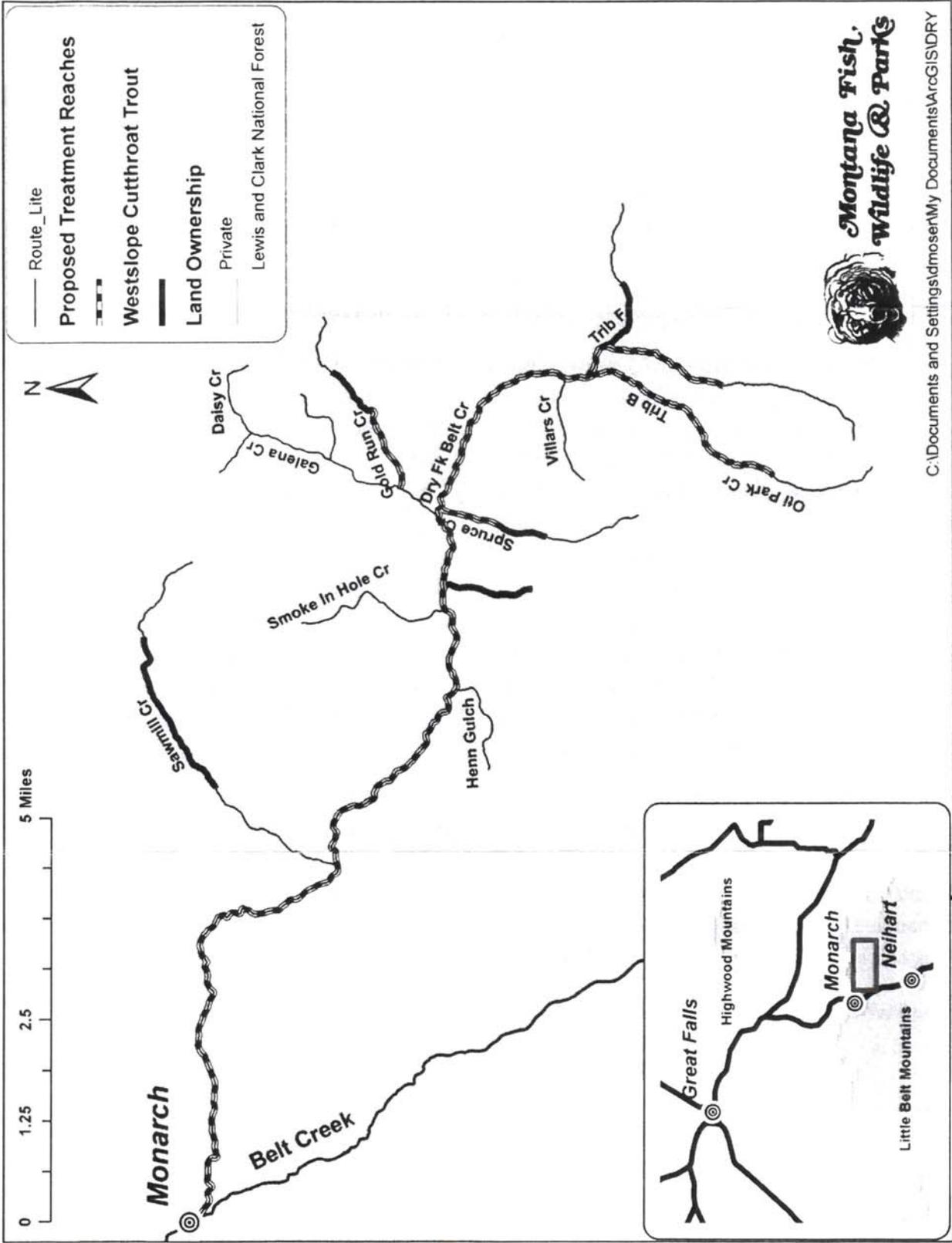
We are requesting input and comments on the aforementioned project. We would welcome meeting with area residents to familiarize people with the project, answer questions, and learn about concerns. An Environmental Assessment has been posted on the FWP public notices website at: <http://fwp.mt.gov/news/publicNotices/recent.html>. An initial public open house meeting has been scheduled for April 23 at 6:30 PM at the Monarch - Neihart Senior Citizens Center. For those wishing to talk one on one about the project feel free to phone David Moser directly at 406-454-5855.

Send written comments to:

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
c/o Dry Fork Restoration Comments
4600 Giant Springs Rd.
Great Falls, MT 59405

Or by email to:

dmoser@mt.gov



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