

U.S. Department of Interior
FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE
Region 6, Lakewood, Colorado

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

Lost Trail National Wildlife Refuge
Pleasant Valley Road Relocation and
Stream and Wetland Restoration Project

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) has completed the attached environmental assessment (EA) in compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA) and the regulations of the Council on Environmental Quality for implementing NEPA (40 Code of Federal Regulations [CFR] 1500-1508). The purpose of this action is to move a county road out of the wetland and riparian areas of the refuge and reestablish the natural hydrology in this portion of the refuge. This action will restore the natural meander of 5.7 miles of Pleasant Valley Creek and 220 wetland acres within Lost Trail National Wildlife Refuge. To accomplish this goal, the Service is proposing to relocate 3 miles of Pleasant Valley Road outside these creek and wetland areas. This is a county road that travels 6.6 miles through the refuge and is the main access point for refuge visitors. In addition to restoring wetland and riparian habitat, this project will also address long-standing maintenance and safety issues with this road. It has been in disrepair primarily due to seasonal saturation, high groundwater, and flooding.

This 9,225-acre refuge was established in 1999 as a result of the settlement and habitat losses to the Flathead Waterfowl Production Area attributed to past and future operations of the Kerr Dam, located on Flathead Lake. Prior to establishment of the refuge, these lands were used primarily for cropland, livestock grazing, and agriculture. These historical land uses practices substantially altered wetlands and other aquatic resources within the refuge. In addition Pleasant Valley Creek was straightened and channelized in order to allow for construction and passage of the Great Northern Railroad through this valley floor. The Service is partnering with numerous agencies to complete this project including the Natural Resources Conservation Service, Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC), Flathead County, and the Federal Highway Administration, who approved this proposal and will be relocating the roadway for the Service. The relocation project will require an easement from DNRC as a portion (0.7 miles) of the new road travels through state trust lands.

The EA evaluated two alternatives, no action and the proposed action (preferred alternative). The preferred alternative would implement management recommendations to restore Pleasant Valley Creek and associated wetlands found in the 2005 Lost Trail National Wildlife Refuge Comprehensive Conservation Plan and Environmental Assessment. Moving the road will allow the Service to conduct restoration work including removing on-stream fish barriers, reconstructing stream channels, improving fish passage at roadway crossings, restoring and enhancing riparian and floodplain functions and wetland environments. Eventually 8.9 miles of artificial drainage ditches would be re-graded and filled in order to elevate the water table and improve the overall functions and values of existing wetlands.

Public Involvement

The public was given 30 days to review the draft EA and provide comment. The public comment period closed on June 5, 2015. On May 13, the Service held an open house in Kalispell, Montana to present the plan and solicit comments. The meeting was attended by cooperating partners and a few members of the public. The Service and other partner agencies responded to questions and only one comment was received requesting that the design incorporate additional parking areas along the new road. The Service agreed with this request, given the lack of safe stopping points along this county road. The Service met with FHWA on the refuge and determined potential sites for at least one additional parking area.

Effects of the Proposed Action

The Service examined the effects of the proposed action on air quality, wetlands, stream channels and fisheries, floodplains, water quality, geology, soils, vegetation, waterfowl, threatened and endangered species (T&E) and critical habitat, historic and archaeological resources, recreation, invasive plant and animals, transportation, public services, utilities, and easements, economics, visual aesthetics, as well as cumulative impacts. Overall, the preferred alternative was found to have beneficial effects on most of the elements considered. There were some temporary adverse impacts associated with the road construction, primarily on air quality, transportation, and recreation due to dust and limited access until the road is completed. There would be permanent adverse effects on upland vegetation within the new road site and temporary effects in construction staging areas. The vegetation in this area is a combination of native and nonnative grasses and shrubs that is found throughout the refuge and surrounding landscape. There could be both adverse and beneficial impacts on invasive and nonnative plants and animals. While the relocation of Pleasant Valley Road from the valley bottom to upland areas will decrease the spread of invasive plants to wetlands and riparian areas, the road could serve as a means for transporting invasive species to the upland sites. The Service plans to mitigate this through monitoring and the refuges active weed management program. In addition, heavy equipment used for construction will be cleaned to remove noxious weed propagules and dirt prior to entering the refuge.

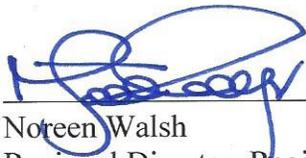
There will be little to no effects on T&E species, such as the threatened Spalding's catchfly or grizzly bear. The road relocation site is below the elevation where this plant species is known to grow on the refuge. Some T&E wildlife species, such as the grizzly bear, could be temporarily disturbed by the ongoing construction noise. Measures will be taken to prevent any human-animal conflicts during construction including storage and disposal of food and refuse and the removal of other animal attractants. In the long term the restored wetland and riparian habitat will benefit grizzly bears giving them new feeding areas and cover. The threatened bull trout, while not documented in Pleasant Valley Creek, could expand its range to the refuge as migration barriers are removed and the diversity of aquatic and riparian habitat is restored. The Service's Ecological Services Division has been consulted through a Section 7 Intra-Service consultation process and concurs with these findings.

Findings and Basis for Decision

The analysis indicates that there will not be any significant impact, individually or cumulatively, on the quality of the human environment as a result of the proposed action. I agree with this conclusion and therefore find that an EIS need not be prepared. This determination is based on the following factors.

1. The environmental consequences of implementing the proposed action will largely benefit fish and wildlife resources and their habitats.
2. The proposed action would pose no known risk to public health and safety and would improve the safety of the road used by visitors.
3. The effect on the quality of the human environment is not highly controversial.
4. The proposed action will not affect sites, structures, or objects listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places, nor would it likely cause any loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historic resources.
5. No significant cumulative effects were identified through this assessment.

Based on this analysis, I find that the preferred alternative is not a major federal action that would significantly affect the quality of the human environment within the meaning of Section 102(2)(C) of NEPA. Accordingly, the preparation of an environmental impact statement on the proposed action is not required.



 Noreen Walsh
Regional Director, Region 6
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Lakewood, Colorado

7.2.15

Date