



File Code: 1950/2630

Date: August 2, 2021

Dear Interested Party:

The Westside Ranger District of the Caribou-Targhee National Forest is seeking public comments on the proposed Mink Creek Beaver Restoration Project. The project area is located in the riparian corridors on Forest Service administered lands in the Bannock Range, including the Mink Creek drainage. This area is immediately south and west of Pocatello, Idaho.

This project would programmatically cover beaver mediated restoration activity in the entire Mink Creek watershed and surrounding drainages, but specifically outlines two treatment sites in the West Fork and South Fork of Mink Creek where the project will start (figure 1).

Proposed Action

We propose to install Beaver Dam Analogs (BDAs) and Post-assisted Log Structures (PALS) (Wheaton, et al., 2019) in select locations to facilitate beaver re-colonization and encourage their presence in the watershed, and in their absence, mimic beaver activities on the landscape which would restore or improve riparian habitat conditions. BDAs are hand-built structures using small diameter logs (<6”), willows and other brush, mud and other natural materials to mimic dam activity. They are structures that span the channel and promote temporary ponding of water. PALS are also hand-built structures using natural woody materials that mimic and promote the processes of wood accumulation in the stream. PALS are intended to have a range of habitat restoration impacts, including providing high flow refugia for aquatic species, connecting the stream and the floodplain, as well as creating a more complex and diverse stream channel structure by creating areas of erosion and deposition, which will, over time move the riparian/aquatic system toward aggradation, widening and raising of the water table.

We will be working closely with the Idaho Department of Fish and Game and the Department of Water Resources and US Army Corp of Engineers to accomplish this project. Additionally, we will communicate closely with downstream water users to ensure that we do not disrupt their water systems.

Purpose and Need

The purpose of this project is to encourage beaver occupation in certain drainages within the watershed, and reap the ecological benefits of their activity, and in their absence, utilize a low-tech, cost-effective technique to restore riparian conditions. The need for this project is best seen by comparing the desired riparian conditions outlined in the Caribou National Forest, Revised Forest Plan (RFP) and the current , or existing conditions (table 1).



Table 1: Comparison of desired and existing conditions in the Aquatic Influence Zone (AIZ) along Mink Creek in the project area.

RFP Desired Conditions (RFP, pg4-47)	Existing Conditions
<p>Riparian areas filter sediments, protect stream banks, improve water quality, reduce flooding, recharge groundwater, and maintain stream flow. Riparian areas are covered by deep-rooted and other desirable, protective vegetation which provides adequate summer and winter thermal regulation. They provide food, water, cover, nesting areas, and protected pathways for aquatic and wildlife species.</p>	<p>Although the Mink Creek watershed provides excellent beaver habitat, beaver activity has diminished along particular stream segments. Reductions in beaver activity leads to decreases the water tables, drying of riparian areas, and a plant species shift to more upland species that do not provide for streambank protection nor critical riparian habitats.</p>
<p>Riparian areas identified as being in properly functioning condition are managed to maintain at least that condition with no downward trends. Areas identified as functioning-at-risk or nonfunctioning show an upward trend toward proper functioning condition.</p>	<p>One of the PFC rating components is “beaver dams are stable.” Beaver dams in the area are not stable. The loss of beaver activity and beaver dam maintenance is a contributing factor for streams not to be in PFC.</p>
<p>Stream channels and floodplains are functioning properly relative to the landform and climate. Aquatic ecosystems are within the capability of the channel types and landform.</p>	<p>Streams in the watershed naturally evolved with beaver as a key component of stream stability. The loss of beaver activity in portions of the watershed is limiting particular stream segments from functioning properly.</p>
<p>Public waters are restored where water quality does not support beneficial uses and otherwise are maintained or improved.</p>	<p>Idaho DEQ identified Mink Creek as not supporting cold water aquatic life. Total maximum daily loads for sediment, nitrogen, and phosphorus apply. Restoring beaver activity in degraded stream reaches would likely reduce sediment and phosphorus loads and thereby improve water quality.</p>
<p>Properly functioning riparian systems contain a mosaic of well-connected habitats that support diverse populations of native and desired non-native species. All life phases are fully supported. Native aquatic and riparian-dependent species population strongholds are increasing and well distributed within historic ranges. Improved aquatic and riparian habitat conditions contribute to the recovery of federally listed aquatic and riparian-dependent species and keep species-at-risk from becoming listed, allowing them to expand into previously occupied habitat. Fragmentation is reduced as connectivity between streams and rivers improves.</p>	<p>Beaver activity has decreased in the West and South Forks of Mink Creek. This decrease in beaver has directly decreased the amount of quality habitat available for fish and other aquatic and riparian habitat dependent species. Fisheries habitat tends to contract in a downstream direction when beaver is not present. Aquatic habitat is simplified, water depths and pool habitats decrease, and de-watered reaches are present. Beaver have the potential to modify and expand aquatic habitat for fish and other riparian dependent species and therefore have the potential to increase fisheries populations into suitable and historic headwater habitats.</p>

Decision Framework

It is anticipated that the proposed action may be categorically excluded from documentation in an environmental impact statement or an environmental assessment as per direction contained in FSH 1909.15 (Chapter 30 – § 31.2 (6)) and 36 CFR (§ 220.6(e) (6)):

- “...habitat improvement activities that do not include the use of herbicides or do not require more than 1 mile of low standard road construction.”

A categorical exclusion (CE) may be appropriate if no extraordinary circumstances are identified during the environmental analysis. I will be the deciding officer on this project, and should the proposed action be approved, my decision will be documented in a Decision Memo. Pursuant to the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2014 (Pub. L. No. 113-76) and the Agricultural Act of 2014 (Farm Bill) (Pub. L. No. 113-79), this decision is not subject to pre-decisional administrative review or administrative appeal.

Opportunity to Comment

To complete the environmental analysis in a timely manner, your comments would be most useful if received by August 30, 2021. For more information on project specifics, feel free to contact Chris Colt, Wildlife Biologist, at (208) 236-7506 or chris.colt@usda.gov.

Please send any comments or concerns with this action to the following email: comments-intermtn-caribou-targhee-westside@usda.gov. Written comments can also be submitted to me at the following address: Kim Obele, Westside District Ranger, 4350 Cliffs Dr. Pocatello, ID 83204 or kim.obele@usda.gov.

Sincerely,

KIM A. OBELE
District Ranger

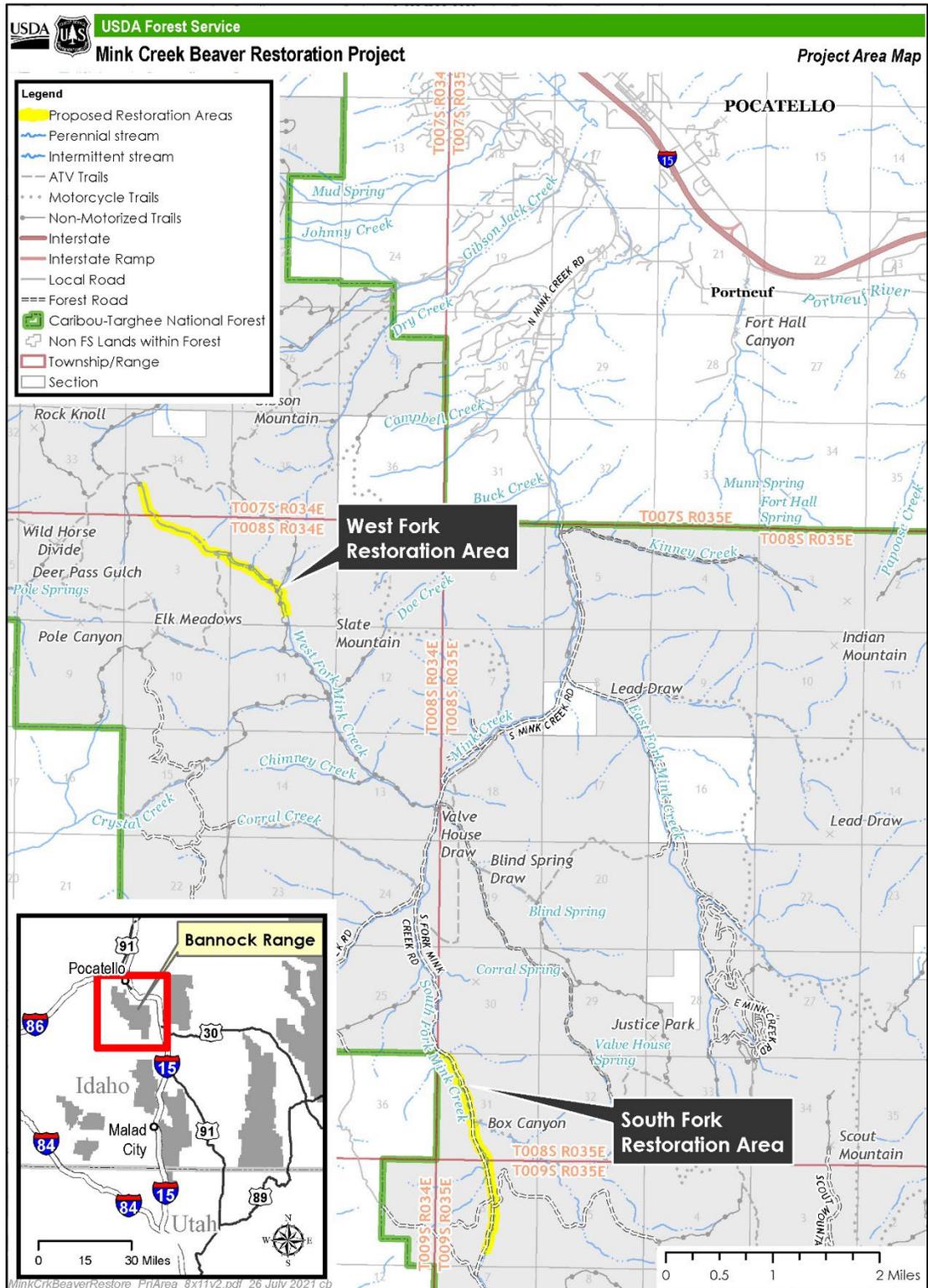


Figure 1. Bannock Range project area, with two site-specific treatment sites highlighted.