United States Department of Agriculture
Forest Service
Allegheny National Forest
Marienville Ranger District
131 Smokey Lane
Marienville, PA 16239
(814) 927-6628
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File Code: 1950-1
Date: September 17, 2009

Big Mill Creek Remediation Project

Dear Interested Party:

The Marienville Ranger District of the Allegheny National Forest (ANF) is evaluating a proposal by the Elk County Freshwater Association (ECFA) to construct three acid remediation sites under a special use authorization on National Forest System (NFS) lands to reduce the impacts of acid rain on Big Mill Creek, which is a tributary to the Clarion River. The three proposed sites are located in the Big Mill Creek watershed in Elk County, Pennsylvania. The portion of the watershed above the Ridgway Reservoir, the targeted area for this proposal, is located almost entirely on NFS lands (approximately 80 percent of the upper watershed).

The ECFA is an organization with the goals of (1) identifying and increasing public awareness of the environmental conditions of local waters, (2) mitigating the identified environmental impacts in order to improve, restore, and protect water quality and aquatic life, and (3) improving recreational opportunities for local and regional groups. The ECFA has targeted Big Mill Creek as their first watershed due to its value as a local fishery, recreational area, and public water supply (Ridgway Reservoir).

Background

Historically, Big Mill Creek has been a valued stocked trout and wild brook trout fishery. It has deteriorated over the past 70 years from progressive and long term acidification of the watershed. Sampling indicates Big Mill Creek is chronically acidified (pH less than 5) in its headwaters and in a majority of its tributaries, which has resulted in the loss of wild brook trout fisheries. The lower reaches of Big Mill Creek are periodically acidified (pH less than 5) during high stream flows with the most severe conditions occurring in late winter and early spring jeopardizing spring trout stocking. The acidification in Big Mill Creek has reached a level that the Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission (PFBC) is considering eliminating trout stocking iin Big Mill Creek, which would eliminate Big Mill Creek and many of its tributaries as recreational fishing resources.

As a result of this water quality impairment, the ECFA has initiated efforts to restore Big Mill Creek through remediation involving adding alkalinity to the stream. The technology being proposed is a passive treatment approach involving a combination system utilizing aerobic limestone basins (AeLB) and anaerobic vertical flow wetlands (AVFW). This combination involves diversion, treatment, and return of a portion of the stream flow at four headwater tributary locations (one on private [already constructed] and three on NFS lands [proposed for construction]) in the Big Mill Creek watershed. The diverted and treated stream flow would contain elevated alkalinity sufficient to mitigate chronic and episodic acidification in the tributaries with the combination of four sites preventing episodic acidification in the lower portions of Big Mill Creek. It would maintain baseflow pH greater than 6.5 and stormflow pH

greater than 6. This combination of systems and sites would restore water quality and aquatic life to at least 20 miles of Big Mill Creek and its tributaries and maintain continued trout stocking in approximately 12 miles of Big Mill Creek.

Four sites in the headwaters of Big Mill Creek have been identified for the proposed restoration effort and include:

1. A site on an unnamed tributary to Ellithorpe Run located on private property and already constructed.
2. A site on an unnamed tributary to Ellithorpe Run located on the ANF.
3. A site in the headwaters of Cherry Run located on the ANF.
4. A site located on Big Mill Creek located on the ANF.

Purpose and Need

The proposed remediation sites are located in Management Area (MA) 8.6–Kane Experimental Forest. The goals and objectives for these management areas are discussed on pages 165–166 of the ANF LRMP.

The following goals and objectives were identified in the ANF LRMP:

- Maintain or restore watersheds and their associated stream and groundwater processes, channel stability, riparian resources, and aquatic habitats to a functional condition (ANF LRMP, p. 14).
- Provide habitat for game species to make opportunities available for quality hunting and fishing experiences while promoting the management of game species that sustains healthy forest understories (ANF LRMP, p. 14).
- Complete one to two miles of stream restoration or enhancement for native and desired non-native species where suitable aquatic habitat is lacking, annually (ANF LRMP, p. 20).

Some tree cutting and temporary road construction would occur during construction of the remediation sites. Existing openings and corridors would be used whenever possible. Any temporary roads would be rehabilitated following construction of the sites.

Type of Analysis

This project falls within category of exclusion 36 Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) 220.6(e)(7). This category allows for “modification or maintenance of stream and lake aquatic habitat improvement using native materials or normal practices.” This falls within the categories of actions for which a project file and decision memo are required. The analysis will consider whether extraordinary circumstances related to the proposed action warrant further consideration in an environmental assessment or environmental impact statement. Resource conditions that will be considered include: federally listed threatened or endangered species and Forest Service sensitive species; floodplains, wetlands, and municipal watersheds; Congressionally designated areas such as wilderness, wilderness study areas, and national recreation areas; inventoried roadless areas; research natural areas; American Indian and Alaska Native religious and cultural sites; and archaeological sites, and historical properties and areas (36 CFR 220.6(b)). The mere

presence of one or more of these conditions does not preclude use of the category. The degree of the potential effect determines whether extraordinary circumstances exist. This decision will not be subject to appeal.

How to Comment

Submit written comments to Robert T. Fallon, Marienville District Ranger, 131 Smokey Lane, Marienville, PA 16239 or by facsimile (814) 927-2285. Submit hand-delivered comments to the Marienville District office, business hours are 8:00 am–4:30 pm Monday through Friday, excluding holidays. Submit oral comments to the Marienville District office during normal business hours via telephone (814) 927-6628. Submit electronic comments to comments-eastern-allegheny-marienville@fs.fed.us using one of the following formats: e-mail message, plain text (.txt), rich text format (.rtf), Word (.doc), or any software supported by Microsoft applications. Comments, including names and addresses of those who comment, will be considered part of the public record and will be available for public inspection. Comments submitted anonymously will be accepted and considered. Comments should be submitted or postmarked no later than October 17, 2009.

This scoping package is also available on the ANF website at http://www.fs.fed.us/r9/forests/allegheny/projects/other/. For additional information, contact Kevin Treese, district NEPA coordinator, at (814) 927-5759. Thank you for your interest in the management of the ANF.

Sincerely,

/s/ Robert T. Fallon
ROBERT T. FALLON
District Ranger