

Mill Lake Dam Scoping

Summary of Proposed Action and Purpose and Need for Action for the Mill Lake Dam Access for Embankment Stability Project in 2006 and 2007

The purpose and need for the project stems from the Mill Creek Irrigation District's existing rights and obligations to operate and maintain Mill Lake Dam to meet current State and Federal Dam Safety Standards and pertinent laws and regulations governing the proponent's use and the protection of National Forest System lands. The irrigation district is authorized to operate and maintain their dam and reservoir on National Forest Lands under a valid pre-Forest easement recognized under the Act of 1866 (R.S. 2339) granted by the Secretary of the General Land Office/Department of Interior.

Proposal

The Forest Service proposes to authorize Mill Creek Irrigation District (MCID) access to their easement at Mill Lake Dam, with certain terms and conditions, so that MCID may make their facilities safe, consistent with their responsibilities under federal dam safety laws and regulations and consistent with their rights and responsibilities under terms of their easement.

This project will address potential long term embankment instability issues that were identified in the geotechnical investigation completed by Hydrometrics, Inc. (engineering representative for the Mill Creek Irrigation District), in the fall of 2003. The Forest Service would authorize sufficient helicopter access to allow for the work to be done safely and effectively during the 2007 and 2008 field seasons. At this time it is anticipated there will be 35 to 45 helicopter flights needed for each field season for the purpose of mobilizing and demobilizing equipment and supplies necessary to accomplish the work. The work at the dam is estimated to occur from July through the end of September in 2007 and 2008. The majority of helicopter use is expected to be concentrated within limited timeframes during mobilization and demobilization of equipment and supplies near the beginning and end of the project. Access for personnel, food and camp supplies will be limited to stock or foot travel on Trail 364.

Purpose

The purpose of this proposal is to authorize MCID adequate access to their facilities and to prescribe terms and conditions related to this access and subsequent work on the facilities as necessary to protect the National Forest. Adequate access is defined as, "The combination of routes and modes of travel that the Forest Service has determined will have the least-lasting impact on the wilderness resource and, at the same time, will serve the reasonable purposes for which State or private land or right is held or used" (FSM 2320.5.15).

Additional Information

Mill Creek Irrigation District is the owner and responsible party for the safety of Mill Lake Dam. MCID is responsible for complying with the requirements of the Federal Dam Inspection Act of 1972 (P. L. 62-367), and the Federal Guidelines for Dam Safety of 1979. Both section 1323(a) of ANILCA (16 U.S.C. § 3210) and section 5(b) of the Wilderness Act (16 U.S.C. § 1134) provide for access to the dams for operation and maintenance of the facilities, within provisions of Forest Service regulations 36 CFR 251 subpart D and CFR 293.13 which implement these statutes. Based on these authorities, the Forest Service may neither unilaterally terminate the easement or deny reasonable use of or access to the dams and reservoir, but may impose reasonable terms and conditions on the use of such easements for the protection of the national forests.

Mill Lake Dam is classified as a high hazard dam. This classification is based on the potential consequences if the structure failed, which includes damage to both public and private property, including private residences located downstream. There continues to be ongoing development in the Bitterroot Valley, and housing locations along creeks are increasing. This project will address long term embankment instability issues identified with Mill Lake Dam, which ensures protection of public safety as well as wilderness and National Forest resources.

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Mill Lake Dam is an earthfill dam with a steep, downstream stacked rock shell and stores approximately 780 acre-ft of water. The dam is approximately 25 feet high at the outlet pipe and approximately 450 feet long. MCID has requested authorization for sufficient access to accomplish this project. The proposed modifications to the dam to control piping and seepage include addition of an upstream impermeable liner and a downstream seepage filter. The upstream membrane will limit saturation of the embankment during high reservoir levels and prevent the development of high hydraulic gradients that lead to piping, which is a potential dam failure mechanism. Installation of the liner will require the removal and temporary stockpiling of the upstream riprap, preparation of the soil bed, then addition of protective armoring, which includes but may not be limited to a filter cloth and replacing the riprap after the liner is installed. The project also includes flattening and buttressing the downstream slope with a rock fill. The rock source for this downstream buttress is likely to be from a rocky outcrop located within the reservoir area approximately 300 to 400 feet south of the dam crest. The reduction in slope of the steep downstream face, along with the proposed liner on the upstream face, will allow Mill Creek Dam to meet current safety standards for embankment stability.

Mill Lake Dam is located approximately 15 air miles northwest of Hamilton, Montana and approximately 13 miles by foot from the Mill Lake trailhead. The dam and the lake are located in the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness, Stevensville Ranger District, Bitterroot National Forest. The dam is located in T.6 N., R. 23 W., Sec. 1. PPM, Ravalli County, Montana. The work and related helicopter access could start as early as July 2007. This work must be accomplished with respect to erosion control and adequate protection of the embankment completed prior to winter conditions and the following snowmelt and runoff in the spring of 2008.

The Bitterroot National Forest will perform an environmental analysis to consider and disclose the environmental effects of authorizing Mill Creek Irrigation District the required access. Based on past experience with these types of activities on the Bitterroot National Forest, we do not expect significant effects from this proposal, which is why we are preparing an Environmental Assessment (EA).

Information related to the environmental effects of similar and more extensive past wilderness dam repairs can be reviewed at our website http://www.fs.fed.us/r1/bitterroot/projects/mill_lake_100106.shtml

We have not identified any reasonable alternatives to the proposed action at this time. Any alternative that is developed must meet the project's need to authorize adequate access for the intended repairs. If you believe there are specific environmental concerns that could result in significant effects from this authorization, please let us know now, during the designated comment period, so they can be addressed in the environmental analysis process.

Comments for this proposed project would be most useful 30 days after publication of the legal notice in the Ravalli Republic. Comments should be mailed to Daniel T. Ritter, District Ranger, Stevensville Ranger District, telephone (406) 777-5461, or FAX (406) 777-7423. The Stevensville Ranger Station is open from 8 AM to 4:30 PM Monday through Friday for those who wish to submit hand-delivered comments. Electronic comments may be sent to [mailto: comments-northern-bitterroot@fs.fed.us](mailto:comments-northern-bitterroot@fs.fed.us) Acceptable electronic formats include e-mail (i.e. ASCII text or html) and MSWord. Comments should include: 1) name, address, phone number, and organization represented, if any; 2) title of project on which the comments are being submitted; and 3) specific facts and supporting information for the responsible official, the Forest Supervisor, to consider. The names and addresses of people submitting comments will be included as part of the public record. If you would like to be put on the mailing list, or would like more information, please call Elizabeth Ballard, Team Leader, at the Stevensville Ranger District (406) 777-5461.