



Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks

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Missoula County Commissioners
200 W. Broadway
Missoula, MT 59802

Reference: Maclay Bridge Planning Study, Final Report

Dear Commissioners:

The "Final Report, Maclay Bridge Planning Study"¹ evaluated three potential options to address deficiencies identified for the existing Maclay Bridge and its siting. Those options were to improve safety and operations on the existing bridge, rehabilitate the existing bridge, or build a new bridge. Building a new bridge on South Avenue (specifically Option 3E.1, "South 1") was identified as the best alternative given the needs and objectives of the planning process.

After the Planning Study identified a best alternative, Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP) fisheries staff conducted a site visit and evaluated the South 1 option's location. On the west bank of the Bitterroot River, it appears that a South 1 bridge would be located in the riparian area of O'Brien Creek, immediately downstream of this stream's confluence with the river. FWP believes that bridge construction at this location could create significant short-term and long-term aquatic impacts.

O'Brien Creek is an extremely important spawning tributary for native and introduced trout, and it is one of the few streams in this portion of the Missoula Valley that flows year-round and connects directly to the Bitterroot River. Over the past 15 years, a number of restoration and improvement projects that targeted coldwater fisheries have been completed on this stream. These projects were focused in the lowest reach (~0.2 mile above the mouth) and included channel reconstruction and replacement of the stream crossing structure on Blue Mountain Road to provide upstream fish passage (Missoula County/FWP joint project) and instream flow leases (Montana Water Trust/Clark Fork Coalition), as well as restrictive subdivision covenants to help protect the O'Brien Creek riparian area in a subdivision along the lower creek. Several Montana

¹ Prepared by Robert Peccia & Associates (Helena) for Missoula County (Missoula) and Montana Department of transportation (Helena), 22 March 2013.

Stream Protection Act (“SPA 124 permit”) and subdivision covenant violations over the past 10 years have elicited enforcement actions to protect the stream corridor immediately upstream of the stream mouth (which also appears to be immediately south of the identified “South 1” bridge location). As FWP understands the South 1 option, bridge construction could compromise the integrity of the lower O’Brien Creek stream corridor that we have all worked hard to protect and improve. In addition, relocating the bridge to this location would impact a large reach of currently intact riparian vegetation along the Bitterroot River.

Locating a bridge at South 1 would also be expected to facilitate increased public access to the Bitterroot River at this location (via Montana’s Stream Access law) and to direct angling pressure at congregations of spawning trout at the mouth of O’Brien Creek. The lower Bitterroot River is a very popular fishery in spring (March-May), which is the primary trout spawning period, and the current Maclay Bridge location is a heavily used access point for anglers. Potentially relocating a new bridge adjacent to the mouth of O’Brien Creek would thus be expected to increase angling pressure on congregations of adult trout that stage at the mouth of O’Brien Creek prior to and after spawning. Experience with similar situations--public access points at stream mouths--has highlighted the potential resource impacts and how undesirable this could be from an aquatic conservation standpoint.

We would also point out that the South 2 option, which would involve locating a new bridge over the Bitterroot River just *upstream* of the mouth of O’Brien Creek, would be expected to have essentially the same resource issues as those identified for the South 1 alignment.

Thank you for the opportunity for FWP to comment on this potential bridge replacement.

Sincerely,



Vivaca Crowser
Acting Regional Supervisor

VC/sr

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