United States Department of the Interior
BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT
Challis Field Office
1151 Blue Mountain Road
Challis, Idaho 83226

In Reply Refer To:
4130/8120 (IDI030)

September 27, 2013

Dear Interested Public:

You are receiving this letter because you have been identified by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Challis Field Office (CFO) as an interested public for the Mill Creek Reconnect Project. The project proponent is Trout Unlimited, a non-profit organization focused on the restoration and conservation of native salmonids and their habitats. The project applicant, related to BLM Rights of Way, is the Big Creek Ranch. Mill Creek is a tributary to Big Creek in the upper Pahsimeroi River Watershed. Mill Creek has been historically disconnected by irrigation practices and does not directly convey water to Big Creek or allow for upstream and downstream fish migration. The proposed project, described below, would restore stream flow and fisheries connection among Mill Creek and Big Creek, and contribute to the potential future restoration of flow and fisheries connectivity of Big Creek to the Pahsimeroi River. The purpose of this letter is to update and inform interested and affected parties of the proponent's proposed action and to solicit comments to assist with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) analysis and formulation of issues. Analysis of the proposal is ongoing, and will be documented in an Environmental Assessment [(EA); NEPA# DOI-BLM-ID-I030-2013-0006-EA)] with scheduled completion during the summer of 2014. Comments received in response to this solicitation will be used to identify potential environmental issues related to the proposed action and to identify potential alternatives to the proposed action.

Purpose and Need for Action

Historic irrigation practices have eliminated the connection of Mill Creek to Big Creek in the Pahsimeroi River Valley. These practices altered or obliterated the natural stream channel(s) for Mill Creek, such that Mill Creek flows are diverted or intercepted by irrigation ditches and do not contribute surface water to Big Creek. The proponent's goal is to restore connectivity of Mill Creek to Big Creek by reconstructing or restoring the Mill Creek stream channel(s).

The purpose of the action is to reconnect Mill Creek to Big Creek by providing a restored stream conveyance to allow hydraulic connectivity, fish passage, and reestablishment of an adjacent continuous riparian area. An additional purpose of the action is to 1) provide access to the Right of Way applicant to install and maintain an irrigation pipeline, 2) provide access to the proponent to conduct riparian vegetation restoration along restored or reconstructed Mill

Creek stream channels on BLM lands, and 3) provide protection to the stream restoration project from livestock and wildlife.

The need for the action is for the BLM-CFO to respond to a request by the proponent to implement the proposed stream reconnection project and application from the existing water rights holder (i.e. applicant) for a Right-of-Way allowing legal access to construct and maintain a buried irrigation pipeline on lands managed by the BLM. This action is in accordance with the Federal Land Policy and Management Act (FLMPA) and consistent with Challis BLM Resource Management Plan (RMP).

Additional needs of this project include:

1) Historic Mill Creek stream channels have been obliterated and remnant channels are intercepted by an existing ditch, and as a result Mill Creek flow cannot reach Big Creek. A buried pipeline in the ditch is needed along with reconstructed stream channels for Mill Creek to flow across BLM lands and over the existing interception ditch.
2) Constructed stream channels will need to be planted with hydric vegetation to protect against the anticipated increased flows in Mill Creek and allow for development of a riparian zone and maintenance of stream channel function.
3) Riparian vegetation plantings along Mill Creek will need to be temporarily fenced for protection from wildlife and livestock grazing to allow for vegetation establishment and to ensure long term success.
4) Big Creek downstream of the Mill Creek Reconnect Project area only flows intermittently, and the Mill Creek Reconnect project may increase seasonal flow duration and riparian vegetation. The need is to respond to the proponent's request to install livestock fence along approximately 1 mile of Big Creek to limit foraging and encourage riparian area recovery while removing other existing fencing that may no longer be needed for livestock management.

Preliminary Description of Proposed Action

The proponent has proposed a restoration project within the historic channel alignment of Mill Creek, a tributary to Big Creek, within the Pahsimeroi River Watershed in Lemhi County, Idaho. The attached map depicts the proposed action, including: 1) Enhancement of existing Mill Creek stream channels to adequately convey the anticipated increase in stream flow; 2) Designed channel reconstruction where historic channels have been obliterated by historic agricultural practices; 3) Transplanting native hydric vegetation and native seed mix along the reconstructed channel. Vegetation would be sourced from commercially available potted plants, potentially transplanted from private lands, and also salvaged from adjacent BLM lands that have been historically subject to unauthorized irrigation and would be dewatered as a result of this project; 4) Installation of a buried pipeline under an existing length of ditch which currently intercepts flow from Mill Creek, allowing for reconstruction of the Mill Creek channel over the pipeline; 5) Installation of an additional length (≈250 feet) of buried pipeline to increase efficiency and continue ongoing agricultural irrigation on private lands using existing water rights for flow diverted from Big Creek; 6) Construction of a temporary fence exclosure (approximately 1 acre on BLM lands and 1 acre on private lands) around the enhanced or reconstructed stream

channels to improve the likelihood of hydric vegetation planting and seeding success by limiting wildlife (e.g. Elk) and livestock foraging; 7) Construction of fence-line posts to allow for seasonal take-down livestock fence on the adjacent County Line Allotment along Big Creek for approximately 1-mile to limit livestock access during authorized grazing season. This reach has intermittent flow and may respond to an increased duration of surface water resultant of this proposed project and other restorative actions ongoing in the Pahsimeroi River Watershed. The seasonal application of livestock fence would limit foraging and would be intended to accelerate the potential increase in riparian vegetation and instream habitat along Big Creek. The removal of some existing fencing that may no longer be needed for livestock management is also proposed. The proposed project would occur both on private lands and on adjacent public land administered by the BLM.

Preliminary Issues

Table 1. Issues Identified for the Mill Creek Reconnection Project Through Internal Scoping

Resource	Resource Issue
Soils	How would the proposed action effect long-term viability of soils (productivity, infiltration, ground cover)?
Vegetation	How would the proposed project impact existing vegetation composition and vigor?
Threatened, Endangered, and Sensitive Plants	How would the proposed project impact existing communities of threatened, endangered and sensitive plants?
Invasive/Non-Native Species	How would the proposed project impact the abundance and distribution of invasive/non-native species?
Wetland and Riparian Zones	How many acres of wetlands would be impacted as a result of the proposed action? What wetland/riparian species and vegetation types would be disturbed/created as a result of the proposed action? What would be the net gain/loss of wetland and riparian areas as a result of implementation of the proposed action?
Water Quality	How would the proposed action and alternative(s) impact temperature and sediment in Mill Creek and Big Creek? How would sediment and erosion be mitigated both during and following implementation of the proposed action? Would the proposed action and alternative(s) be in compliance with the

Table 1. Issues Identified for the Mill Creek Reconnection Project Through Internal Scoping	
Resource	Resource Issue
	existing TMDL for the Pahsimeroi Subbasin? Would the proposed action and alternative(s) affect ground water? How would instream flows be affected by the proposed action and alternative(s)?
Threatened, Endangered, Sensitive Fish and Fisheries	How would designated critical habitat for Chinook salmon and essential fish habitat (EFH) in Mill Creek, designated critical habitat for bull trout, Chinook salmon and EFH in Big Creek, and threatened, endangered or sensitive (TES) fish individuals holding or spawning, which may be present in Mill Creek and Big Creek in the action area, be initially affected by in-channel disturbance/enhancement activities and resultant sediment delivery? How would designated critical habitat for Chinook salmon and EFH in Mill Creek, designated critical habitat for bull trout, Chinook salmon and EFH in Big Creek, and TES fish individuals holding or spawning, which may be present in Mill Creek and Big Creek in the action area, be affected by the project further in time when hydrologic connectivity, fish passage, and restored instream flows occur? How will the proposed project affect individuals or distribution of westslope cutthroat trout or other native and non-native fish which may be present in the project area?
Threatened, Endangered, and Sensitive Animals/ Wildlife	How would the proposed project impact sage grouse and their habitat including designated Preliminary Priority Habitat (PPH) in the upper project area and Preliminary General Habitat (PGH) in the lower project area? Specifically, how would fencing density and design, and amount of ground disturbance in mapped habitat impact sage grouse habitat? How would vegetation removal and burrow disturbance potentially impact pygmy rabbits?
Wildlife	How would disturbance in the riparian as a result of the proposed project impact wildlife habitat for deer, elk, and antelope?
Migratory Birds	How would proposed fencing and ground disturbance (removal of vegetation) impact migratory birds?

Table 1. Issues Identified for the Mill Creek Reconnection Project Through Internal Scoping	
Resource	Resource Issue
	How would timing of the proposed project affect migratory birds?
Visual Resources	How would the proposed project affect the character of the viewshed and the basic elements of form, line, color, and texture found in the predominant natural features of the landscape?
Range Resources	How would the proposed project alter grazing patterns due to fencing modifications and exclusion from Big Creek on private land? How would the proposed project impact forage resources and livestock use patterns in the area?
Tribal Treaty Rights and Interests	How would access to and utilization of treaty- reserved resources be impacted by the proposed project?
Native American Religious Concerns	How would the proposed project impact Native American Religious concerns within the action area?
Historic Properties	How would the proposed project impact historic properties that may be present in the action area?

Decision to be Made

The Challis Field Manager is the official responsible for decisions regarding the management of BLM administered lands within the project area. Based on the results of NEPA analysis, the Field Manager will determine if the action would have significant effects; if so, an EIS would be prepared. If the action would not have significant effects, a Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) would be prepared. Following appropriate NEPA analysis, the Field Manager would issue a decision document or documents consistent with 43 CFR 2800 for Federal Land Policy and Management Act (FLPMA) Rights of Way (ROW), 43 CFR 4160 for grazing administrative remedies, 43 CFR 4120.3-2 for cooperative range improvement agreements and 43 CFR 4120.3-3 for range improvement projects. Decisions which may be issued include: 1) A decision to approve or deny the project proponent's proposed activities related to the Mill Creek Reconnect, including associated channel construction or enhancement, riparian vegetation restoration, fence construction, and other temporary disturbance to BLM administered lands; 2) Other terms and conditions intended to ensure conformance with the Challis RMP and minimize, avoid or offset impacts to affected resources (Table 1); 3) A decision to approve or deny a FLPMA ROW request by the private land owner to allow for adaptation of their irrigation system necessary to utilize increased efficiency to maintain irrigated lands and allow for reconnection of surface water conveyance from Mill Creek to Big Creek, 4) Other ROW stipulations that ensure adherence to Idaho Statutes, conformance with the Challis RMP, and minimize, avoid or offset impacts to affected resources (Table 1).

The factors to be considered when selecting from alternatives would be:

- The degree to which the alternative(s) meet the purpose and need for action.
- The nature and intensity of environmental impacts that would result from implementation and the expected effectiveness of related mitigations.
- The degree to which the alternative(s) are consistent with the IM-2012-043 Greater Sage-Grouse Interim Management Policies and Procedures.
- The degree to which the alternative(s) are consistent with ESA responsibilities for bull trout, steelhead, Chinook salmon and their designated critical habitat and if the alternative is able avoid any adverse effects.
- Compliance with the Challis Resource Area Resource Management Plan (RMP).

Public Input Needed

Comments are specifically requested on the proposed action, preliminary issues, and alternatives. Comments made on this proposal would be most helpful if they are received by October 27, 2013, and are directly relevant to the proposal and project area. The BLM will not reject public feedback outside established public involvement timeframes; however, these comments may be considered secondary to comments received in a timely manner and may only be assessed to determine if they identify concerns that would substantially alter the assumptions, proposal, design, or analysis presented in the EA.

This scoping letter and future documents will available at the following ePlanning website:

https://www.blm.gov/epl-front-office/eplanning/lup/lup_register.do
Comments should be sent to the Challis Field Office at 1151 Blue Mountain Road, Challis, Idaho 83226. Please identify whether you are submitting comments as an individual or as the designated spokesperson on behalf of an organization. Issues that are outside the scope of the proposal will not be addressed at this planning level.

Map

A map depicting the Mill Creek Reconnect design concept and land ownership is enclosed with this letter.

If you have any questions, please contact me or Fisheries Biologist, Ryan J. Beatty at 208-879-6200 or by email at rbeatty@blm.gov.

Sincerely,

Todd Kuck
Field Manager

Enclosure