

NorthWestern Energy
Thompson Falls Annual Technical Advisory Committee (TAC) Meeting
Missoula, Montana
December 6, 2016

Location: Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks Office, Missoula, Montana

Meeting Time: 10:00 – 3:00pm

10:00 Welcome

The Thompson Falls TAC Meeting was held at the Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks office in Missoula. Brent Mabbott, NorthWestern Energy facilitated the meeting.

) **Introductions**

Marc Terrazas MFWP hire in 2016 (Jay Stuckey's position)

Brita Olson Lower Clark Fork Watershed Group Coordinator
Brita was unable to attend this meeting.

Jason Garber MDEQ (joined via phone) replaced Jeff Ryan following his retirement

List of attendees provided at the end of the meeting summary.

) **2017 – Proposed Maintenance and Drawdown (BJ Cope)**

NorthWestern is proposing to install two new radial gates near to the left abutment on the main dam. The gates will be similar in dimension and configuration to the existing radial gates, but located roughly 1/3rd of the length of the spillway from the left abutment and separated from the existing radial gates by about 6 bays. Additional gates will allow for greater spill capacity and reduce the need to manually remove spill panels and flash boards and reduce extended drawdowns during high flow year. In an average year, the flows exceed the existing radial capacity for approximately 3 months. Existing operations require a lot of manual efforts and safety risk to address reservoir levels and debris build up. The new radial gates will help operations and reduce need/frequency to trip stanchions. Each radial gate (includes existing) allow approximately 10,000 cfs through. With the new gates, capacity for spill will be just over 40,000 cfs for all four gates combined.

There are no anticipated operational changes for the upstream fish passage facility during construction phase or when the new gates are in use. The new radial gates are not anticipated to impact the TDG plan and sequence for opening the panels. The new radial gates will just allow greater capacity for automated radial gate operation versus manual operations. NorthWestern does not believe TDG will change significantly with the new radial gates. Past TDG studies found that when the stanchions were tripped (as in 2011), gas levels increased downstream. If the radial gates reduce the need to trip the stanchions, the radial gates may be beneficial.

Wade Fredenberg asked if there was a need for FWS consultation. At this time, NorthWestern is not proposing any federal action, there is no license amendment or change occurring with the proposed project. The project is a dam operations and safety project and is categorized as maintenance. The project does not change overall river flow patterns, but will concentrate flows to automated gates versus spread across numerous bays of manually operated flow control. NorthWestern will coordinate with the local conservation district, USACE, and other agencies as appropriate to obtain the necessary permits for construction. Through Clean Water Act Section 404 permitting process, USACE completes a review regarding ESA compliance and consultation requirements.

Any questions, contact BJ Cope, Project Manager.

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Thompson Falls Upstream Fish Passage – Project Updates 2016

A PowerPoint was presented by Brent Mabbott summarizing the results from the 2016 baseline fisheries, ladder operations, upstream fish passage, and ladder fish detections in the Thompson River.

2016 – Baseline Fisheries Results

- Spring Electrofishing Thompson Reservoir (upper and lower section)
- Fall Electrofishing Clark Fork River (Above Islands)
- Fall Electrofishing Clark Fork River (Paradise to Plains) every other year
- Fall Gillnetting Thompson Reservoir

One reason the baseline fisheries surveys was established was to evaluate or detect ladder fish. Baseline fisheries data is not really capturing any notable impact or response to ladder fish. Approximately 11 ladder tagged fish were detected during 2016 baseline surveys. MFWP is in support to reducing the frequency of some of the baseline sample. Brent and Ryan will coordinate to discuss some options and present these to the TAC to vote on in early 2017.

FWS stated that the existing baseline fisheries data covers a range of hydrologic conditions and temperatures and the Service has no major objection to reducing the frequency of the baseline surveys, but thinks the surveys should continue to monitor the system and identify any changes, if they occur. FWS also suggested any modification to the gillnetting sampling interval coincide with efforts by Avista in Noxon.

CSKT supported the idea of decreasing the frequency of baseline surveys to every other year and did not identify any concerns.

2016 – Ladder Operations and Upstream Fish Passage Results

2016 was the first year the ladder was open entire season, no closures related to maintenance or high water. 2016 hydrology was second lowest peak since operations began in 2011. The total number of salmonids has increased annually from 242 in 2011 to 624 in 2016.

2016 mortalities appear to occur when fish numbers are high and sometimes the gate is closed on a fish, other times some fish have not recovered following anesthetizing and tagging.

In 2016, MFWP made a decision that brook trout (EB) will no longer be passed upstream of the dam following the second brook trout recorded at the ladder that was genetically tested and a confirmed EBxBULL hybrid. At this time lake trout, walleye, and brook trout are not allowed to be passed upstream. In 2016, no walleye and no lake trout were recorded at the ladder. Only 2 brook trout were recorded at the ladder in 2016 and only one was passed upstream (prior to the decision to stop passage of brook trout).

NorthWestern monitors fish entering the ladder at pools 7 and 8 via two remote PIT tag arrays. There is also a third tag arrays in pool 45 (holding pool). These data are used to evaluate ascent time, how many fish entering the pool ascend to the top, and can help in the evaluation of fallback.

Fallback fish are defined as fish that are recorded at the ladder in a given year (e.g. 2016) and are then recorded below the dam in the same year (e.g. 2016). These fish may be recorded in the ladder again or

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downstream of the project in other tributaries, by anglers, etc. In 2016 about half of the fallback fish were also recorded in the Thompson River. So fallback, as defined, does not appear to be a negative issue to fish migration to tributaries or spawning opportunity.

Break for Lunch

Finished up the PowerPoint presentation – Summary of daily fish detections by species, detections of fish in the ladder (via remote arrays), and detections of ladder fish in the Thompson River.

2016 – Ladder Fish Detections in the Thompson River

Approximately 39% of 2015 tagged fish (n=540) passed upstream of the ladder were detected in the Thompson River in 2015. Approximately 32% of 2016 tagged fish (n=594) passed upstream of the ladder were detected in the Thompson River in 2016 (data through Nov 15, 2016).

J Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks Summary for 2016

Lower Clark Fork Watershed Group (LCFWG)– Brita Olson was unable to attend this meeting and Ryan Kreiner provided a brief introduction and bio of Brita Olson, as well as summary of activities completed in 2016 and efforts planned for 2017 and the future. Brita is the Thompson River watershed coordinator for LCFWG. Her time is split (not equally) between Avista and now NorthWestern in the lower Clark Fork River. Thompson Falls TAC approved funding for the coordinator position in May 2016 (via email).

In the past, the work of LCFWG was limited to areas downstream of Thompson River, primarily because most the funding was provided by Avista. There is more to the LCFWG area, including Thompson River and areas upstream to Paradise. Brita has worked with the watershed group since 2015.

In 2016, Brita spent time meeting and coordinating with USFS, MFWP and Weyerhaeuser. She signed two agreements in 2016:

1. One agreement was with USFS for \$5000 and NorthWestern as match
2. The second was with SWCDM for \$8800 for the development of a Watershed Restoration Plan (WRP) for the Thompson River. The WRP is required to get 319 monies. WRP will help open other funding projects.

Brita is coordinating with FWP, USFS, and Weyerhaeuser to develop projects in the Thompson River drainage. Lolo National Forest's 5-year work plan identifies goals that focus on the Thompson River drainage, including LWD enhancement in Fishtrap and road decommissioning and realignment in the Thompson River (Fishtrap and WFTR). Out of tributaries with bull trout present on the Lolo NF, Fishtrap has one of the highest density of roads. LCFWG hopes to have proposals in 2017 for implementation of projects in 2018-2019.

There was a question about conservation easements in the drainage. Most of the Weyerhaeuser land in the lower Thompson River drainage has an existing Conservation Easement on it (13-14 years old).

Tributary data in Fishtrap and WF Thompson River

MFWP continued to track PIT tag detections in the tributaries, a continuation of Jeff Glaid's graduate work. MFWP will continue to monitor drainage with the goal of finding out what percentage of bull trout return to the Thompson River and its tributaries after leaving the drainage. So far 1 upstream transport

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(in 2016) likely spawned in Fishtrap. It is estimated that approximately 20% of the fish moving from the tributaries to the mainstem have moved into the Thompson Reservoir

MFWP Fish Surveys in Thompson River

MFWP tagged 17 BULL in Fishtrap (2016). MFWP electrofished Fishtrap and Little Thompson River and completed redd counts. 2016 was a lower water year and MFWP found a lot of beaver dams and redds detected below the beaver dams. No bull trout were detected in the Little Thompson River during MFWP surveys (no redds either).

) **2016 – Avista Program Updates**

Two bull trout sampled below Cabinet Gorge Dam in 2016 were transported and released upstream into Region 4 (upstream of Thompson Falls Dam). Cabinet Gorge Dam fish facility is on hold. Project went out to bid, but estimates received were higher than expected. Avista re-evaluated needs and reviewing alternative approaches to reduce costs. Because this will be a trapping facility and not volitional passage, the multi-pool system may not be necessary and excluding this component may reduce costs.

) **2016 – Progress Reports for TAC Funded Activities**

1. Bull Trout Genetic Baseline – Albert Creek (Ladd Knotek)
Samples sent to Avista for analysis, updating existing baseline

2. Rattlesnake Creek Fish Screen Phase 1 (Ladd Knotek, Rob Roberts)
Mitigation funds were leveraged through several sources. Funded tasks: contacted landowners for the 4 fish screen sites, completed topographic surveys, completed conceptual designs, installed one fish screen, one more fish screen is anticipated to be installed in 2017 once permitting process is complete, designing the fish screen for the last two locations.

3. Cedar Creek Phase 2 Road Relocation and LWD Enhancement (Jon Hanson)
USFS and TU realigned the road that restricts the floodplain and added large wood to Cedar Creek. Received money in 2016 and will implement project in 2017 (funds were used as seed money). Secured an additional \$55,000. Survey complete. Design underway. Plan to implement 2017. Project timeline is on track.

4. Beartrap Fork Culvert Removal (Jon Hanson)
Culvert removal – tributary to Fishtrap creek. Plan to remove. Jon gone 4 months on a detail. Then copper King fire shut down drainage during fish season. On docket for 2017 implementation. USFS has master agreement with LCFWRG so more efficient way to run contract through and control overhead costs.

5. MSU Study (Jeff Glaid) – Jeff was not able to attend the meeting. Brent provided a brief update on the project and thesis.
Jeff is finalizing his thesis. He found that bull trout did not emigrate out of the Thompson River in schools. Once the thesis is final, it will be made available on the Thompson Falls Project website and the TAC will be emailed with a link.

6. Brent also used about \$1700 for PIT tag purchase out of the TAC Fund.

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2016 – Progress Reports for TAC Funded Activities

Project	Agency	TAC Funding Approved for 2016	Amount Spent 2016	Project Completed?
MSU Study (2016)	MSU – Jeff Glaid	\$24,669	\$24,699	Yes, thesis is pending
Beartrap Fork Culvert Removal	USFS – Jon Hanson	\$11,000	0	In 2017
Cedar Creek Phase 2 Road Relocation	USFS – Jon Hanson	\$30,000	\$30,000	In 2017
Watershed Coordinator Thompson River	LCFWG – Brita Olson	\$16,500	\$16,500	2016 efforts complete
Rattlesnake Fish Screen Phase I	MFWP – Ladd Knotek	\$13,125	\$13,125	In 2017
Bull Trout Genetics	NorthWestern – Brent Mabbott	\$10,000	\$2,940	Yes
PIT tags	Brent Mabbott	\$1,898	\$1,898	Yes
Water turbine for PIT tag antenna Fish Trap	Brent Mabbott	\$2,310	\$2,310	Yes
Refund FWP			(\$634)	
TOTAL		\$109,502	\$90,838	

Brent requested that TAC members provide updates in proposal and once project is complete on matching funds received, so that NorthWestern can better track cost-share

2016 - Water Quality/TDG Monitoring Plan

None in 2016

2017 – Water Quality/TDG Monitoring Plan

Protocol in place for TDG monitoring if runoff at or above 125 percent
Andy will notify TAC of the spring runoff forecast in early 2017 and confirm whether TDG monitoring will occur based on the established protocol.

2016 – Funding and US Bank Account

Fidelity Account – January 1, 2016	\$238,151.80
Expenditures 2016	\$ 90,838.00
Estimated Budget end of 2016	\$147,313.80
Start of 2017 NorthWestern (add to account)	\$100,000.00
Available Funds 2017	\$247,313.80
(Account Cap at \$250,000)	

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)] **Proposals for 2017**

No proposals were provided to the TAC for review prior to the meeting. Brent will be distributing two proposals to the TAC for review and vote. One will be for continuation of funding for the Thompson River watershed coordinator (Brita Olson) in 2017. The second proposal will be to have funding available for bull trout genetics analysis. In 2016, the Thompson River coordinate position was funded \$16,500 by the Thompson Falls TAC. In 2016, the bull trout genetics analysis effort was funded \$10,000 and less than half of the funds were spent.

Fish Creek – Koch Property

Ladd Knotek (MFWP) presented background regarding a potential project that may become an official proposal in the next year or two. The project includes the acquisition of an in-holding along the mainstem of Fish Creek, a valuable bull trout drainage. The lower mainstem is a migratory corridor. Thompson Falls TAC has previously approved TAC funds to acquisition in-holdings in the drainage, including Holme Property and Rehbein Property. The Holme acquisition was a cost-share among FWP, NorthWestern, and Trout Unlimited. Funds approved the Rehbein property were not spent, FWP ended up funding the full acquisition costs.

The proposed project is the Koch Property, encompassing 160 acres. Five Valleys Land Trust is coordinating with the land owner. FWP cannot currently acquire new lands. Need to find a conservation owner for the property. If this project moves forward, MFWP will likely seek out a 60:40 or 70:30 match. The anticipated timeline for this project is for an appraisal to be completed in 2017 and acquisition in 2017 and 2018. Ladd estimates the proposal will likely range from 40-60,000... the amount will be determined by the funds MFWP needs to leverage the match. This property has power available, so it is vulnerable to development. Today's presentation was an introduction of the project to the TAC. No official proposal has been submitted for review. No further action by the TAC is requested at this time.

)] **2017 – MFWP Recommendations for Ladder Operations (Ryan Kreiner)**

Below is a copy of the recommendations provided by MFWP:

FWP Recommendations for Thompson Falls Fish Ladder Operation in 2017

Marc Terrazas

Ryan Kreiner

Recommendation 1 – Do not operate the ladder when temperatures exceed 23°C

Justification- Current Montana Statute (ARM rule 12.5.507) dictates that fishing restrictions be placed on salmonid streams when maximum daily water temperatures exceed 23°C at any point on three consecutive days. In the fish ladder, total catch declines dramatically when water temperatures exceed 23°. For example, from 2011-2015 1,021 fish used the ladder above 23°C, 576 of which were SMB (56%). This compares to 24,669 (96%) fish which used the ladder at temperatures below 23°C. Additionally, only 3.7% of ladder checks over the past six years have occurred at temperatures exceeding 23°C. Additionally, observations by FWP indicate decreased health of captured fish including salmonids, suckers, and minnows at these temperatures. No Bull Trout have been captured when water temperatures exceed 23°C, and it would likely be detrimental to hold Bull Trout overnight at these temperatures. Because of the risks associated with handling fish at elevated temperatures, and to be

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consistent with Montana statutes aimed at reducing injury or mortality to trout, the ladder should be temporarily shut down when water temperatures exceed 23°C.

TAC Discussion Recommendation 1: Do not operate ladder when temperatures exceed 23 °C

There is a concern that species may be stressed when “held” in the holding pool at warmer temperatures. MFWP is recommending to shut the ladder when temperatures exceed 23 degrees C. Shutting the ladder will include shutting the valve and dewatering the ladder. Wade requested further analysis be completed to investigate the implications and logistics of the recommendation. Wade requested an evaluation based on an annual basis between 2011 and 2016 as to how many calendar days temperatures were above 23 C and how many fish per year were recorded in the ladder. One logistical question includes how temperature will be measured and the threshold for determining if/when ladder is shut down. Brent recommended some other options to consider such as moving fish upstream and not anesthetize. Brent proposed this topic be discussed at a follow up meeting once additional analysis is complete and provided to TAC for review.

Recommendation 2 – If limiting Smallmouth Bass movement is desirable by all members of the TAC, operate the ladder only in notch-weir mode when the temperature exceeds 18°C

Justification- Prior to construction of the Thompson Falls fish ladder, it was not believed that bass species would use the ladder in high densities. However, through the first six years of operation, nearly 3,800 Smallmouth Bass (SMB) have used the ladder. The USFWS has indicated that passage of SMB is contradictory to their recovery goals for Bull Trout. A tagging study in 2015 revealed that Smallmouth Bass which pass the fish ladder may travel 100 miles up-river, but colonization of previously unoccupied habitat has not been documented. Based on our analysis, if a reduction in SMB movement is desirable, operation of the ladder in notch-weir mode during times when water temperatures are greater than 18°C would significantly reduce SMB use of the fish ladder. In 2011 and 2012 when the ladder was operated in alternating modes, 165 SMB were passed in orifice while only 4 SMB were passed in notch-weir [$t = -3.07$, $df = 152.86$, $P = 0.002$]. In 2016, during a four-week ‘experiment’, 468 SMB were passed in orifice while only 21 were passed in notch-weir [$t = -3.30$, $df = 7.19$, $P = 0.01$]. Additionally, SMB rarely use the ladder at temperatures less than 18°C. From 2011 to 2015, 2,766 SMB used the ladder at temperatures over 18°C and 10 SMB used the ladder at temperatures under 18°C. While operation in notch-weir mode would likely reduce catches of sucker and minnow species too, this would be compensated for at other times of the year as these species move primarily at the descending limb of the hydrograph when temperatures are below 18°C.

The USFWS has also raised concerns about the potential threat that Smallmouth Bass “stacked-up” below the dam pose to Bull Trout (i.e., SMB not passed over the ladder). However, the mean length of a ladder-caught SMB from 2011-2015 was only 217 mm. Although the length of outmigrating Bull Trout is unknown, on average they were 160 mm at tagging and outmigrated four months later. Therefore, the 57 mm (2 inch) difference would be even less, and based on water temperatures when Bull Trout move (mean: 5.4°C) versus temperatures when SMB would ‘stack-up’ (18°C+), any interaction would be unlikely.

To be clear, FWP believes there is no biological impact to passing or not passing SMB. They are abundant above and below the ladder. However, operation in notch-weir mode above 18°C will reduce their catch

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without impacting the catch of target species. This is a practical solution to concerns which have been raised by other members of the TAC.

TAC Discussion Recommendation 2: Operate ladder in notch mode when temperatures exceed 18 °C
MFWP heard concerns expressed by FWS in past years when SMB numbers at the ladder were exceeding 1,000 individuals. MFWP identified a potential solution to reduce total numbers of SMB based on previous weir mode studies at the ladder. The data indicate fewer SMB ascend the ladder in notch mode versus orifice mode. MFWP does not have a preference as to whether SMB are reduced at the ladder. There is a trade off with changing the mode to v-notch, fewer native non-salmonids will likely ascend the ladder.

FWS agreed that concerns regarding SMB passage have been discussed. FWS did not indicate that SMB passage was or was not an issue at Thompson Falls Dam. FWS asked if SMB passage is desirable by the members of the TAC? MFWP did not have a preference.

To switch the ladder from orifice to v-notch, it's straight forward. When going from v-notch to orifice, it takes 2 people approximately 2 hours. Water levels must be lowered in the pools to reduce water pressure and switch modes.

Note: the first 5 pools in the ladder are permanently in v-notch mode to stabilize flows in the lower section of the ladder. Pools 7 and 8 are permanently in orifice mode due to the remote tag arrays located in each of these pools. Pools 9 and higher can operate in v-notch and orifice modes.

FWS requested that additional analysis be completed to better understand the implications of Recommendations 1 and 2, if implemented. Evaluate ladder operations if in orifice until 18 C, then in v-notch until 23 C, then closed until temperatures below 23 C, then in v-notch until below 18 C, then in orifice until end of season.

Brent proposed providing additional information to TAC, follow up with a meeting in early 2017 and come back together and review after TAC has a chance to digest.

Recommendation 3 – Explore the use of different flows in the fish ladder. How do changes in flow and operational mode influence species composition and abundance of fish completely ascending the fish ladder?

Justification- Since operation began in 2011, a variety of operating procedures have been adjusted to look at fish movement and response (i.e., notch v. weir mode, attractant flow, etc.). However, the ladder has primarily been operated with a standard 6 cubic feet per second (cfs) flow in its pools. If possible, it would be useful to investigate alternative flows and look at salmonid use of the ladder in response to different flows. A multi-year study could run weekly flow changes in concert with alternate operation modes when water temperatures are less than 18°C. We could still change flows >18°C but would likely operate in notch-weir if all are amenable to reducing SMB abundances in the ladder (Recommendation 2). Total numbers of fish ascending could be investigated, as well as ascent time (for already PIT tagged individuals), and proportion of entries which make the full ascent. Additional effort could be invested

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below the dam to PIT tag salmonids and monitor ascent time, and flow/operating mode preferences. This effort would constitute some night electrofishing, and hook and line sampling below the dam. A target of 100 tags per year would be a starting point considering the large numbers of PIT tags already in the system and likelihood of future ladder use by a portion of previously tagged fish.

TAC Discussion Recommendation 3: Explore different flows in ladder

MFWP and NorthWestern have discussed this recommendation. NorthWestern has operated the ladder at various flow combinations (within design limits).

Again, TAC agreed this recommendation needs to be further discussed. This recommendation will be further discussed at the next meeting, anticipated to occur in January 2017.

) **FERC Schedule/Reporting Requirements**

The 2016 Annual Report will be distributed to the TAC for 30-day review around February 10, 2017. File with FERC by April 1.

) **Ladder Operation Requirements/10-year Plan/FERC Order/BO**

) **Resources**

Historic Reports Available: <http://thompsonfallsfishpassage.com/reference.html>

Ladder Count data: <http://thompsonfallsfishpassage.com/>

Meeting Minutes and PowerPoint Presentations: <http://thompsonfallsfishpassage.com/notes.html>

) **Other discussion/questions**

) **Action Items**

1. Ryan and Brent will coordinate in December 2016 to discuss baseline fisheries frequency, the three recommendations, and channel reconfiguration below the fish ladder.
 - a. Ryan and Brent met on December 12, 2016 and propose to continue spring and fall electrofishing every other year, so the next round of electrofishing (Above Islands, Reservoir, Paradise-to-Plains) will be 2018. Fall gillnetting will continue on an annual basis.
2. Additional analysis of MFWP recommendations:
 - a. Recommendation 1: Evaluate number of days per year ladder operated with temps over 23 C, how many fish per year were recorded at ladder.
 - b. Recommendation 2: FWS requested that additional analysis be completed to better understand the implications of Recommendations 1 and 2, if implemented. Evaluate ladder operations if in orifice until 18 C, then in v-notch until 23 C, then closed until temperatures below 23 C, then in v-notch until below 18 C, then in orifice until end of season.
 - c. Recommendation 3: Additional discussions and review of existing data.
3. Brent will set up a follow up meeting for TAC to meet to review outcome of Ryan and Brent's discussions. TAC will vote on any proposed baseline fisheries changes and/or ladder operations changes.
4. Brent will distribute to TAC 2017 proposals for vote via email: 1) Thompson River coordinator position and 2) bull trout genetics.
5. Jeff Glaid's thesis will be posted to the Project website (link listed below) once finalize and the TAC will be notified via email.
6. Draft Annual Report will be distributed to TAC around February 10, 2017.

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3:00 PM Adjourn Meeting

December 6, 2016 Meeting Attendees:

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