



# United States Department of the Interior

## FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

### Washington Fish and Wildlife Office

Central Washington Field Office

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Hydrologic Unit Code: 17-03-00-01-01 Upper Yakima

David Gerth, Executive Director  
Kittitas Conservation Trust  
P.O. Box 428  
Roslyn, Washington 98941

Dear Mr. Gerth:

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) enthusiastically supports proposal 12-1306, "Gold Creek Habitat Assessment and Conceptual Design," developed by the Kittitas Conservation Trust. The proposed work will assess causes of seasonal dewatering and habitat degradation in Gold Creek that currently limit use and access by the local population of bull trout and other fish species. This proposal will jump-start long overdue restoration and recovery actions in Gold Creek.

Bull trout were listed as "threatened" under the Endangered Species Act in 1998, and Gold Creek was designated as critical habitat for bull trout in 2010. Key functions of Gold Creek critical habitat include providing connectivity, passage, and other habitat features to support foraging, migration, spawning, and rearing of bull trout. The Service's 2002 Draft Bull Trout Recovery Plan and the Draft 2012 Yakima Basin Bull Trout Action Plan describe recovery actions for the Gold Creek local population of bull trout and other local populations in the Yakima Basin. One recovery action in these plans is to determine the causes of channel dewatering in Gold Creek.

The proposal from the Kittitas Conservation Trust is the essential first step toward solving one of the most persistent and vexing challenges that has delayed effective restoration and recovery projects in Gold Creek. Understanding the hydrology and fluvial processes of Gold Creek has long been recognized as an important conservation need. But there has been much uncertainty, speculation, and debate about what factors might be responsible for currently degraded conditions. This uncertainty, combined with

high risk associated with the precarious status of the Gold Creek bull trout population, and the lack of key habitat information, have resulted in reluctance to take actions that could inadvertently make matters worse. By increasing our understanding of underlying processes responsible for current conditions, this proposal will increase our confidence in proposed restoration solutions.

By compiling and analyzing existing information about hydrology, stream habitat characteristics, and fluvial processes, this proposal will enhance our understanding of the factors shaping fish habitat in the Gold Creek watershed. The proposed review of existing information will also highlight knowledge gaps that need to be filled by new studies. The resulting synthesis of existing and new information will create a strong foundation for conceptual designs for restoration actions that address the key factors causing unfavorable habitat conditions.

This proposal also capitalizes on two existing partnerships of public and private entities that are active in promoting aquatic habitat restoration in the upper Yakima watershed, both of which have diverse, talented, and technically sophisticated participants. The first partnership has developed around the I-90 Snoqualmie Pass East Project, currently under construction by the Washington State Department of Transportation. This project has emphasized interagency collaboration during planning, and is also notable because it incorporates an unprecedented level of ecological connectivity into the expansion of an interstate highway, including the replacement of undersized highway bridges over Gold Creek with bridges that span the floodplain. The partnership affiliated with the I-90 project has also implemented major habitat preservation actions in the Gold Creek drainage upstream of the highway crossing. The second partnership is associated with bull trout recovery planning in the Yakima Basin. This partnership has prioritized completion of the type of assessment described in the Kittitas Conservation Trust proposal. Both of these partnerships have an impressive record of conservation success. The U.S. Forest Service, a key participant in both of these partnerships, is simultaneously completing plans for extensive restoration actions in the Gold Creek drainage and surrounding areas. By working with these partners, the Kittitas Conservation Trust will ensure that the proposed assessment will provide the information needed to design effective restoration that meshes well with ongoing activities.

The Service is proud and privileged to work with these partnerships that have been planning and implementing restoration projects in the Snoqualmie Pass area for over 15 years. Improving conditions for the isolated bull trout population that spawns in Gold Creek is among the most urgent endangered species issues that remain to be addressed in this area. This proposal from the Kittitas Conservation Trust will engage existing partnerships to address this critical issue in a well-informed and comprehensive way. The proposed assessment will create a roadmap for restoration of fish access to Gold Creek that will enable bull trout to realize fully the benefits of past and ongoing restoration. This proposal is also likely to generate and sustain the momentum needed to make restoration happen as soon as possible. We support this proposal and look forward to implementing restoration measures that result from it.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Karl C. Halupka', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Karl C. Halupka, Ph.D.  
Fish and Wildlife Biologist

cc: via e-mail

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