

Resolution #10
Federation of Western Outdoor Clubs

SUPPORT REMOVAL OF THE FISH LAKE DAM IN THE SELWAY-BITTERROOT WILDERNESS

Submitted by: Wilderness Watch

Background: The Forest Service is proposing maintenance work on the Fish Lake Dam located in the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness in Montana, citing the build-up of debris in the spillway and the structures deteriorating condition. However, the dam is an unnecessary administrative structure in the Wilderness, and it represents a potential public liability should it ever fail. Conversely, breaching or removing the dam presents an extraordinary opportunity to restore a piece of the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness to a condition that existed prior to its degradation by humans. The Forest Service should honor its responsibility under the Wilderness Act and restore the area's wilderness character.

The Fish Lake Dam is a man-made structure built by private interests for irrigation purposes in 1921 and abandoned in 1971. It is approximately 20 feet high and 200 feet long. It is a rock and earth structure that is falling into disrepair from age and lack of maintenance. It is rated as a "low hazard" dam because it stores a relatively small amount of water (estimated at 150-250 acre feet). That the dam is a non-conforming structure in Wilderness must be an important consideration for the Forest Service when deciding how to deal with the dam.

The maintenance work the Forest Service is considering, which includes removal of the logs, blasting of the rock in the spillway, and buttressing the downstream slope of the dam, is incompatible with Wilderness, as it seeks to maintain a non-conforming structure using motorized equipment. The Forest Service should re-evaluate its plans for the area and consider breaching or removing the dam using non-motorized means. This would restore the lake and its surroundings to their natural condition, restore many acres of wetlands that surrounded the much smaller natural lake, and improve and protect the wilderness character of this area.

Resolution: The FWOC urges the Forest Service to breach or remove the dam on Fish Lake and restore the lake to its natural level and function.

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