



PUBLIC SCOPING *for a proposal to* **Construct a Fish Passage Barrier on Lower Akokala Creek** Environmental Assessment

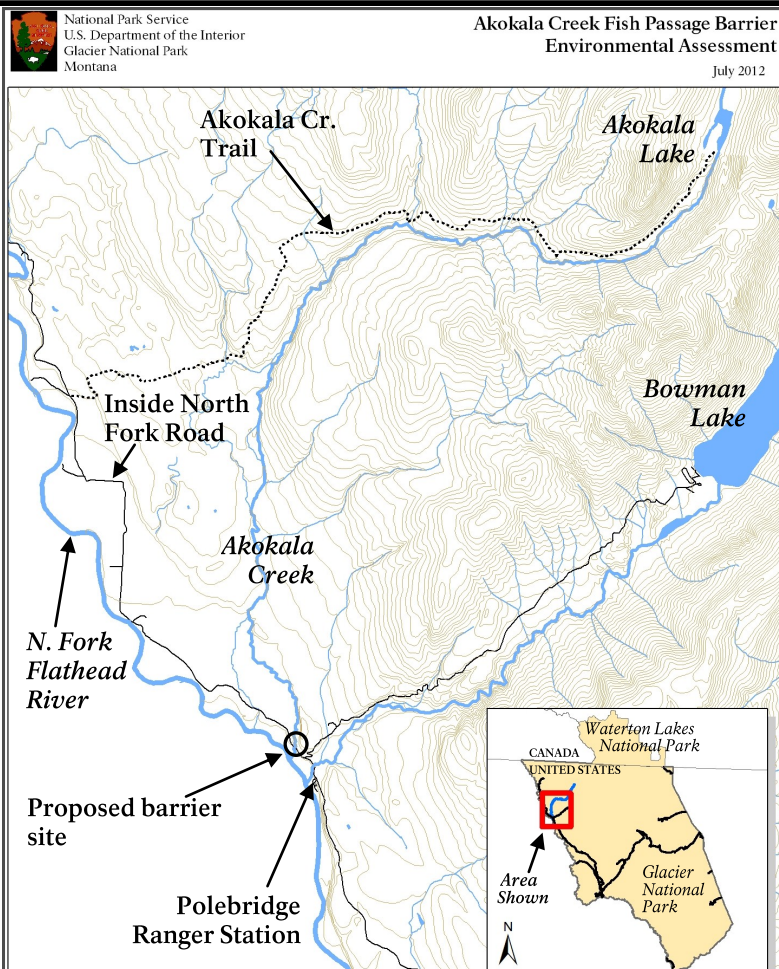
Background—Akokala Lake is a small body of water at the headwaters of Akokala Creek in the backcountry of Glacier National Park's North Fork District. Relatively recent genetic testing indicates that the lake supports genetically pure westslope cutthroat trout. It is also one of seventeen lakes on the west side of the park that support bull trout; bull trout in Akokala Lake are genetically distinct from other bull trout west of the Continental Divide. Both bull trout and westslope cutthroat trout are native to the park.

The Akokala drainage is a direct tributary of the North Fork of the Flathead River (NFFR) and as such is very susceptible to invasion by non-native fish including lake trout, rainbow trout, and possibly brook trout. Lake trout have already invaded nine of twelve lakes to which they have access on the west side of the park. Akokala Lake is one of the park's last bull trout supporting lakes west of the Divide that is accessible to lake trout but has not yet been colonized.

Lake trout are known to have severe detrimental effects on native fish populations. In lakes where monitoring data exist, lake trout have replaced bull trout as the dominant aquatic predator. Rainbow trout are also invading NFFR tributaries both within and outside the park and threaten westslope cutthroat trout populations with competition and hybridization. Within the last few years, a westslope cutthroat-rainbow trout hybrid was documented migrating into Akokala Creek during springtime (presumably to spawn) and genetic testing of juvenile westslope cutthroat trout in the proposed project area has shown that westslope cutthroat-rainbow trout hybridization is beginning to occur in Akokala Creek.

Brook trout can outcompete westslope cutthroat trout and hybridize with bull trout. While brook trout are not currently known to be present in the NFFR, the species occurs in tributaries of the Middle Fork of the Flathead River, and the potential exists for brook trout to invade the NFFR and its tributaries, including Akokala Creek. Stressors to native fish from non-native invasive species are likely to be compounded by climate change, as changes in stream flow and warmer water could favor invasive non-native species and impact native fish that require colder water temperatures.

Given the number of lakes that have already been invaded, it is clear that Akokala Lake is at risk of invasion by non-native lake trout and increasing levels of hybridization between westslope cutthroat and rainbow trout; expanded invasion by rainbow trout



Akokala drainage and proposed barrier site, North Fork District.

appears especially imminent. Preliminary evidence suggests that habitat suitability in Akokala Lake is good for rainbow trout and marginal for lake trout. But because the bull trout population at Akokala Lake is small (estimated at less than fifty reproducing adults), it could be readily impacted by lake trout migrating up the drainage, even without an established lake trout population.

To protect native fish in the Akokala system, the park is proposing to build a fish passage barrier in the vicinity of the Akokala Creek Bridge along the Inside North Fork Road. A barrier would prevent additional non-native fish from accessing the drainage, reduce or eliminate further expansion of westslope cutthroat-rainbow trout hybridization (thereby protecting much of the native westslope cutthroat trout genetic composition within the drainage), and reduce the probability of more costly and time consuming lake trout removal. The Akokala Creek Bridge was constructed in 1983, replacing a log stringer bridge, and is a non-contributing resource along the historic North Fork Road. The bridge is also within the Wild and Scenic River Corridor of the NFFR.

Objectives

- Protect the Akokala drainage and native fish populations, including the threatened bull trout, from invasive non-native lake trout and brook trout.
- Protect the native westslope cutthroat trout population in Akokala Creek from expanded hybridization with non-native rainbow trout.



Akokala Lake, NPS photo.

Issues and Resources to Consider

- The protection and long-term conservation of native fish populations west of the Continental Divide
- Native migratory fish species
- Water quality and possible alterations to the stream channel
- Wildlife
- Adjacent recommended wilderness
- Vegetation and soils
- The Wild and Scenic River Corridor
- The historic North Fork Road

Alternatives Identified to Date

- *Alternative A*— construct a fish passage barrier at or near the Akokala Creek Bridge.
- *Alternative B*—do not construct a fish passage barrier at or near the Akokala Creek Bridge (no action).

Public Comments During Scoping

Your comments will help identify issues and other alternatives to evaluate in the EA. There will be another opportunity for you to comment when the plan/EA is completed. Please post your comments online at:

www.parkplanning.nps.gov/AkokalaFishBarrier
or

Send comments to:

***Superintendent, Glacier National Park
Akokala Fish Barrier EA
PO Box 128
West Glacier, MT 59936
Phone: 406-888-7901***

Please provide comments by
September 4, 2012

No public meetings are scheduled at this time.

Environmental Assessment Process Overview:

- Public Scoping
- Preparation of Plan/Environmental Assessment (EA)
- Public Review of Plan/EA
- Analysis of Public Comments
- Decision Document