

## **Paving North Fork Road a bumpy process, committee learns**

**Posted May 18, 2009**—The Endangered Species Act continues to present a major obstacle to paving the North Fork Road, the North Fork Landowners' Association Road Committee learned April 21. Committee members Betsy Holycross, Margaret Heaphy and Ed Heger met at the Creston National Fish Hatchery with U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service fish and wildlife biologists Ben Conard and Scott Jackson (by phone from Helena), who outlined the process for road improvements on environmentally sensitive federal lands.

In general, the committee learned that “forest highways” (those for which the Western Federal Lands, Highway Division is responsible) are roads that are often in sensitive areas and tend to have controversial environmental issues when upgrades are discussed.

For example, plans to pave the North Fork Road from Canyon Creek to Camas Creek in 1980 were thwarted by a “jeopardy opinion” regarding the environmental impact it would have, and the project was halted. In 1999, plans to pave the road did not take into account the required environmental impact assessment, a costly, years-long process—and the funds were diverted to improve Big Mountain Road near Whitefish.

In addition, while certain developments—such as the delisting of the gray wolf (which is in litigation) and the listings of the bull trout and Canadian lynx as threatened—have changed the EIS landscape, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service and other planners are now looking at broader environmental effects, not just the effects of the project's immediate “footprint,” including population and traffic growth and land-use planning. A jeopardy opinion may not be overridden by a governor, or any other state, local or federal agency or individual.

Because improving a forest road can be complicated, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has begun working more closely with federal and local agencies to make the process less contentious and less acrimonious.

For a summary of meeting, [\*\*click here\*\*](#)