



Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks

Livingston Fisheries Office, 111 ½ N 3rd, Livingston, MT 59047

Dear Mill Creek Water Users and Paradise Valley Residents,

For many years, Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP) has been working to restore Yellowstone cutthroat trout populations in the Yellowstone River and its tributaries. In the early 1980's biologists identified the lack of adequate stream flow in tributaries of the Yellowstone River as the major factor limiting the abundance of Yellowstone cutthroat trout. Unfortunately, cutthroat trout spawn just as runoff ends and the eggs incubate as irrigation demand peaks. Since then, FWP has worked with irrigators to improve late summer stream flows to allow young cutthroat trout to return to the river and complete their life cycle. Improving irrigation efficiency, reconnecting tributaries, and water leasing have each been successful tools for restoration of healthy populations of Yellowstone cutthroat trout, Montana's State Fish, a species of special concern, and a candidate for listing under the Endangered Species Act.

Over the years, water leases and improved irrigation efficiency resulted in drastic increases in the numbers of cutthroat trout produced in Mol Heron Creek, Cedar Creek, and Big Creek. Improved "recruitment" of young cutthroat trout to the river increased the number of cutthroat trout in the Yellowstone River. In Mill Creek, water leases had a mixed success. During several years, instream flows were adequate to deliver young cutthroat trout to the river due in part to leases and also some good water years. In addition, a short-term flush in mid-August was also successful in delivering young fish to the river. At the time, the measure of success was whether or not Mill Creek flows flowed at lease levels near the mouth. Due to natural leakage of water out of the channel into gravels, it was difficult to deliver the full lease amount all the way to the mouth. This was viewed by some as a failure of the lease. In a sense, the real failure of the lease was the animosity the leases created among neighbors and between irrigators and FWP.

Since the leases were allowed to expire, we have spent quite a bit of time observing Yellowstone cutthroat trout in Mill Creek. What we have found has allowed us to develop some more realistic expectations. We found that most cutthroat trout migrating out of the Yellowstone River into Mill Creek spawn within the lowest two miles of stream –between the Allen-Sexton ditch and the mouth – the most heavily dewatered reach. We also found that if flows in Mill Creek remain above around 13 cfs (cubic feet per second) at the East River Road Bridge the young cutthroat trout had enough flow to get to the river. Most of the migration to the river occurred by the end of August. Simply put, if we can maintain a consistent flow of 13 cfs at the East River Road bridge through August, we will be able to restore a healthy reproducing population of Yellowstone cutthroat trout, especially if we are able to couple a short-term flushing flow during the middle of August. This is a significant difference in the goals of the original lease.

We feel that the time is right to revisit the lease. The biggest reason is the formation of the Upper Yellowstone Watershed Basin group (UYWB). This has provided a forum among the local community to recognize what residents value and discuss options to maintain a healthy

agricultural base and a healthy watershed. In recent discussions with many water users, we think there is enough interest in restoring instream flow to proceed, but with a whole different model.

Instead of relying on a few leases with individual irrigators, we think community-based problem solving will provide a less contentious and more successful long-term restoration project.

In the Big Hole and Jefferson rivers, for instance, watershed groups like the UYWB have built bridges between ranchers, irrigators, anglers and concerned residents to address drought situations. In those basins, the community has banded together to implement water conservation projects and restore streamflows at critical times. They have used a variety of tools like voluntary conservation during critical times, drilling stockwater wells, improving irrigation efficiency, and leasing irrigation water. There are a wide variety of options available.

We would like your assistance in developing strategies in partnership with the UYWB and FWP.

The UYWB agreed to host a meeting this fall where we can work together to develop solutions to restore flows to Mill Creek in the critical period. A variety of grant programs and partners are available to provide funding and assistance to accomplish our goals. For example, The Montana Water Project of Trout Unlimited, the Montana Water Trust, and FWP's Future Fisheries Improvement Program are all willing partners. We can't expect a few irrigators to make sacrifices to benefit the rest of us. But if we can develop solutions that can maintain base flows at the critical time period and provide realistic incentives without causing bad will between neighbors, this project will be a success.

We hope you will participate in our discussions this fall. We will send out details soon. In the interim, if you have ideas or comments that will help us succeed, please feel free to call or write me at the address listed above or (406) 222-5105. You can also contact Nicole McClain at (406) 222-0266, ext. 2.

Thanks for your assistance.

Sincerely,

Scott Opitz
Livingston Area Fisheries Biologist