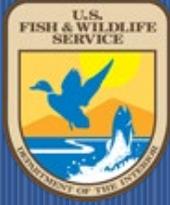


Montana Fish and Wildlife Conservation Office

BILLINGS–BOZEMAN–LEWISTOWN, MT

May 2020



May often conjures up thoughts of spring flowers, Cinco de Mayo, the Kentucky Derby, Mother's Day, Memorial Day, planting gardens, and lawn mowing, but for Montana FWCO staff it typically marks the beginning of Field Season! Well that would be the case in most years. With the U.S. being plagued with COVID-19, our office operated in a nearly 100% telework status. The following narratives are intended to highlight May work accomplishments.

St. Mary Bull Trout:

As mentioned last month, in late April, Jim Mogen and George Jordan were asked to join an interagency team to identify mitigation measures that could be implemented at Reclamation's St. Mary Canal to help reduce entrainment of threatened Bull Trout.

As members of the inter-agency St. Mary Bull Trout Minimization Measures Team (Team), George and Jim, along with other members from Ecological Services and Reclamation, virtually met to begin exploring interim measures to minimize negative impacts to Bull Trout that result from diversion and entrainment.

About a week or so later, the St. Mary Canal, the "Lifeline of the Highline," experienced a catastrophic failure, resulting in complete shutdown of project operations and the draining of the canal. The canal's final drop

structure, a concrete flume that conveys the canal's flow down off the divide to the North Fork of the Milk River, was undercut causing severe erosion and eventual mass destruction as much of the flume washed into the river.



St Mary Canal drop structure (Drop 5) failure that occurred May 17 2020. Photo: US Bureau of Reclamation

Following this failure, the Team determined that an immediate emergency fish rescue effort should be employed to recover stranded fish from isolated pools in the canals upper reach.

The Team decided that the fish salvage methodologies developed by MTFWCO staff and previously presented to the Team should be employed to capture and return stranded Bull Trout to the St. Mary River.

In late May, following some relaxation of telework mandates, MTFWCO staff began preparations for the salvage that is scheduled for June 8-12.

Additionally, during May, Jason Marsh and Geoff Popken continued developing and testing PIT-antenna designs for future deployment in the St. Mary River and Canal.

Tribal Trust:

Andrew Gilham and Michael (Josh) Melton continued to work on updating older tribal fish management plans. Draft plans Revisions for the Crow and Blackfeet Reservations are ongoing.

In early May, the US Fish and Wildlife Service received a FOIA request from The Wyoming Game and Fish Department. This request is seeking any and all records including, but not limited to correspondence, emails, telephone conference notes, meeting minutes, and/or reports, reflecting the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's assistance to the Crow, Eastern Shoshone and Arapaho tribes in Montana and Wyoming.

Josh and Andrew were approved to return to their respective offices in Lewistown and Bozeman to search files for responsive documents. These documents have been compiled and will be scanned into electronic versions.

Activities cancelled or postponed due to COVID pandemic:

- We were unable to complete our annual Yellowstone Cutthroat Trout population surveys in Red Rock Creek, Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge (NWR).
- We were unable to complete fish population surveys on Elk Springs Creek, Red Rock Lakes NWR.
- We were unable to retrieve temperature and dissolved oxygen loggers from Dahl Lake, Lost Trail NWR, or conduct follow-up habitat evaluation for a proposed reintroduction of Westslope Cutthroat Trout on the refuge.
- We were unable to conduct an additional year of White Sucker suppression in Kipp Lake (Blackfeet Reservation), which is intended to bolster growth and condition of stocked Rainbow Trout.
- We were unable to conduct Burrowing Owl surveys on Malmstrom Air Force Base.
- We were unable to address a misaligned game camera at one of the missile launch facilities.
- Our Sikes Act Game Camera retrieval effort was postponed until June.
- We were unable to conduct a Walleye removal effort on Williamson Reservoir on the Rocky Boy Reservation.
- Due to COVID-19 trends in Big Horn County, we have postponed all activity on the Crow Reservation for the foreseeable future.
- Installation of additional PIT-array and conducting maintenance and data downloads at several existing PIT-arrays important to our St. Mary Bull Trout studies have been postponed until June.

Other Happenings:

George participated on a task force comprised of a small group of ES, Refuges, and Fisheries project leaders. This group was tasked with generating an initial list of recommended categories of work (specific jobs, tasks, and activities for FWS field employees) to provide a starting point to begin moving toward resumption of normal operations, in areas or locations determined to have met the existing national Phase 1 guidelines issued by the Administration. The majority of this task force's recommendations were adopted by the Regional Director and helped pave the way for increased non-telework compatible duties to be started in June.

Andrew continued editing and revising his Arctic Grayling standard weight manuscript. After receiving comments from co-authors and final editing, he will resubmit the manuscript to North American Journal of Fisheries Management.

Judy KobusFisk continued to keep the office running by paying bills, ordering safety PPE for eventual resumption of work, and assisting with the FOIA request.

Jim's co-authored manuscript was accepted for publication. Volume/page information will follow once published.

Kaeding, L.R., J.M. Mogen. 2020. Quantification and characterization of bull trout annually entrained in the major irrigation canal on the St. Mary River, Montana, USA, and identification of operations changes that would reduce that loss. River Research and Applications. DOI:10.1002/rra.3656



Our debt to the heroic men and valiant women in the service of our country can never be repaid. They have earned our undying gratitude. America will never forget their sacrifices. ~Harry S. Truman

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