

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE—APRIL 14, 2000**

**Montana Press Release**

**FEDS SAY "NO" TO WESTSLOPE CUTTHROAT TROUT LISTING**

The Federal announcement that Montana's state fish, the westslope cutthroat trout, is not warranted for listing as a threatened species under the Endangered Species Act is a clear sign that Montana's continuing effort to protect and restore the native species has paid off for the fish and for the people of Montana, the director of Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks said today.

"This is the right decision, made at the right time, for all of the right reasons," FWP Director Pat Graham said. "The recovery and protection of our state fish has been—and will continue to be—one of the major conservation efforts of this agency, our governor, dozens of landowners and many state, federal and tribal cooperators. Everyone in Montana can take comfort in knowing that the hard work is making a difference."

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's decision that the westslope cutthroat trout does not warrant listing under the Endangered Species Act was based in part on the fact that the fish currently inhabits more than 23,000 linear miles of habitat in 4,275 rivers and streams located in 12 major drainages and 62 component watersheds in the Columbia, Missouri, and Saskatchewan River basins. In addition, it inhabits six lakes in Idaho and Washington and at least 20 lakes in Glacier National Park.

The decision was also based on Montana's continuing efforts to protect the fish. "The Service is encouraged by ongoing and planned state and local programs, most notably those in Montana, to protect and restore [westslope cutthroat trout] within its historic range," the USFWS stated in today's prepared announcements.

American Wildlands, Clearwater Biodiversity Project, Idaho Watersheds Project, Inc., Montana Environmental Information Center, Trout Unlimited's Madison-Gallatin Chapter, and other groups petitioned the USFWS to list the westslope cutthroat trout as threatened throughout its range in 1997.

Last summer, FWP collaborated with several state and federal agencies and private groups to complete an agreement to conserve and restore the westslope cutthroat trout in Montana's Columbia and upper Missouri river basins. The resulting "Conservation Agreement and Memorandum of Understanding for Westslope Cutthroat Trout in Montana," was the result of more than two years of negotiations initiated by Gov. Marc Racicot at the 1996 Governor's Westslope Cutthroat Trout Workshop.

"Our aim then was the same as our aim today," Graham said. "We want to do all we can to ensure the survival of westslope cutthroat trout within the five major river drainages the fish historically inhabited in Montana—the Clark Fork, Kootenai, Flathead, upper Missouri, and Saskatchewan," Graham said. "Our goal is to maintain all existing pure populations of westslope cutthroat trout. In addition, we'll be working to ensure that at least 10 populations will be

distributed throughout these drainages with each population occupying at least 50 miles of connected habitat. This will continue to provide healthy cutthroat trout populations."

Graham said FWP will continue 20 years of work to:

Protect genetically pure westslope cutthroat trout populations.

Protect some hybrid populations while determining the role these populations may play in westslope cutthroat trout restoration.

Ensure the long-term survival of westslope cutthroat trout within their native range.

"We are extremely pleased that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service recognized our commitment to westslope cutthroat trout conservation," Graham said. "We will continue our work to ensure that there will always be places in Montana for our state fish and for anglers to pursue them."

The westslope cutthroat trout is bright yellow, orange, and red, with the characteristic red slash marks on its lower jaw. It is generally distinguishable from other subspecies of cutthroat trout by the particular pattern of black spots that appear on the body. It is one of a dozen subspecies of cutthroat trout found in the Columbia and Missouri drainages and the Rocky Mountains. The scientific name for westslope cutthroat trout is *Oncorhynchus clarki lewisi*. The North American trout share the genus name *Oncorhynchus* with the Pacific salmon. The species (*clarki*) and subspecies (*lewisi*) names for westslope are a reminder of the great explorers Lewis and Clark, who in 1805 first described the subspecies.

Historically, westslope cutthroat were found in the Missouri River upstream of Fort Benton as well as its tributaries including the Judith, Milk and Marias rivers. West of the Continental Divide they were found in the Clark Fork and Kootenai river drainages in Montana and extending downstream into Alberta, Idaho and the extreme eastern portion of Washington. By far the majority of their historic distribution is in Montana.