

Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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**ANNOUNCEMENT OF AN AGREEMENT FOR THE CONSERVATION OF
WESTSLOPE CUTTHROAT TROUT IN MONTANA**

The Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks, in collaboration with other state and federal resource management agencies, conservation groups, land-use organizations, industry groups, and private landowners has recently completed a Conservation Agreement and Memorandum of Understanding for Westslope Cutthroat Trout in Montana. The Agreement, initiated by Governor Marc Racicot at the Governor's Westslope Cutthroat Trout Workshop, is the result of more than two years of collaborative work, with significant scientific input from an independent Technical Committee. It outlines the actions necessary to ensure the long-term persistence of Montana's state fish in the Columbia and upper Missouri River basins, and has the ultimate goal of restoring or maintaining population of westslope cutthroat trout at levels sufficient enough to allow recreational fishing and harvest.

The goal of the Conservation Agreement is to ensure the long-term, self-sustaining persistence of westslope cutthroat trout within each of the five major river drainages they historically inhabited in Montana (Clark Fork, Kootenai, Flathead, upper Missouri, and Saskatchewan), and to maintain the genetic diversity and life history strategies represented by the remaining local populations. To meet this goal, the following objectives will need to be met:

Objective 1. Protect all genetically pure WCT populations

All genetically pure populations are to be provided the protection necessary to ensure their long-term persistence.

Objective 2. Protect slightly introgressed (less than 10% introgressed) populations

The protections afforded to pure westslope populations will be provided to introgressed populations until land management and fish management agencies make a determination about the role of such habitats and populations for WCT restoration.

Objective 3. Ensure the long-term persistence of the westslope cutthroat trout within their native range

The long-term persistence of westslope cutthroat trout within their native range will be ensured by maintaining at least ten population aggregates distributed throughout the five major river drainages in which they occur, each occupying at least 50 miles of connected habitat, distributed as follows:

Saskatchewan River At least one interconnected population

Kootenai River drainage: At least one interconnected population

Flathead River drainage: At least two geographically separate interconnected populations

Clark Fork River drainage: At least two geographically separate interconnected populations

Missouri River drainage: At least four geographically separate interconnected populations, with at least one each in the following drainages:

East Front tributaries (Sun, Teton, Marias)
Southern tributaries (Smith, Belt, Judith)
Upper Missouri (Big Hole, Gallatin, Madison)
Middle Missouri (Boulder, Jefferson)

Objective 4. Provide technical information, administrative assistance, and financial resources to assure compliance with the listed objectives and encourage conservation of WCT.

Objective 5. Design and implement an effective monitoring program by the year 2002 to document persistence and demonstrate progress towards goal.

Westslope cutthroat trout historically occupied many of the rivers and streams west of the Continental Divide, as well as those in the upper Missouri River basin in Montana. Although they are still widely distributed, occupying more than 10,000 stream miles in Montana, westslope cutthroat trout numbers and distribution have declined since the days of Lewis and Clark. Declines have been attributed to numerous causes including over-harvest, degradation and loss of habitat, impacts to water quality and flows, and the introduction of nonnative trout species that compete with, prey on, or hybridize with westslope such as rainbow trout and brook trout. Because of the declines, westslope cutthroat trout are classified as a Species of Concern by the State of Montana and federal land management agencies. Westslope cutthroat trout have been petitioned for listing as threatened under the Endangered Species Act. A review of their status is being conducted by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to determine if listing is warranted. Threats that warrant consideration of westslope cutthroat trout as a Species of Concern by the State of Montana, the U.S. Forest Service, and the Bureau of Land Management, and that would warrant federal listing under the Endangered Species Act, should be significantly reduced or eliminated through implementation of this Agreement.

Although the Conservation Agreement was just completed, actions directed towards the conservation of westslope cutthroat trout have been underway for many years, and include restrictive fishing regulations, numerous stream and habitat restoration projects, installation of fish barriers to prevent mixing with nonnative species, and changes to land use practices such as logging and grazing. Projects like the Cherry Creek Native Fish Introduction project and the Elkhorn Mountain Westslope Cutthroat Trout Restoration Program are examples of how the Conservation Plan will be implemented. Both of these examples contribute towards realization of the Agreement objectives.

Signators to the Conservation Agreement include the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks, Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation, Montana Department of Environmental Quality, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, U.S. Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, Natural Resources Conservation Service, Montana Chapter of the American Fisheries Society, Montana Wildlife Federation, and the Montana Westslope Cutthroat Trout Technical Committee. By signing the Agreement, these agencies and organizations accept the goals and objectives contained in the Conservation Agreement, will incorporate them into their respective planning and budgeting process, and will strive to accomplish the goals and objectives within identified time frames. In addition to the above signators, others who helped develop the plan include representatives from the Montana Stockgrowers Association, Montana Farm Bureau, Trout Unlimited, American Wildlands, Intermountain Forest Industry Association, and private landowners.

For a copy of the Conservation Agreement and Memorandum of Understanding for Westslope Cutthroat Trout in Montana, contact the FWP Fisheries Division at 406-444-2449.