

# **MONTANA FISH, WILDLIFE AND PARKS**

## **NEWS RELEASE**

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### **FWP PROPOSES WESTSLOPE CUTTHROAT TROUT RECOVERY EFFORT IN UPPER MADISON RIVER**

FWP Director Pat Graham announced today the agency is considering a wide-ranging proposal to recover Montana's state fish, the westslope cutthroat trout, in the whirling-disease plagued upper Madison River drainage.

The Upper Madison River Westslope Cutthroat Trout Recovery Project would seek to restore the native trout to headwater portions of tributaries with hopes of developing a fishable cutthroat trout population in the upper Madison River.

Graham said the project offers an opportunity to reestablish the westslope cutthroat trout to its native range. Some of these native, wild fish also would be expected to migrate downstream to the Madison River to fill a portion of the niche left by the decline in rainbow trout caused by whirling disease. Public meetings to discuss the project proposal are being arranged for January.

"We have identified headwater portions of 30 upper Madison River tributaries where we believe the risk of whirling disease transmission is low. We would work to bring back Montana's native westslope cutthroat trout in at least 10 of the streams by 2001 with a goal of completing the project by 2006." Graham said. "Ultimately, we believe native cutthroat trout should grow in the small streams past the stage where they are most susceptible to whirling disease and then naturally migrate downstream to the Madison River."

Graham said the proposal calls for non-native fish to be removed from the headwater areas to reduce potential competition with newly stocked westslope cutthroat trout and for barriers to be placed in streams to attempt keep out both non-native fish and fish that may be carrying whirling disease.

The initial westslope cutthroat trout recovery effort would begin in the spring of 1997 and focus on the potential recovery of Soap and Gazelle creeks, both tributaries to the West Fork of the Madison River; and on Standard Creek and an unnamed spring creek. Standard Creek flows into the Madison River about two miles below the West Fork and the spring creek reaches the Madison about four miles above the West Fork. At this time, researchers believe whirling disease is not likely to be in these streams and that the streams are relatively free of tubifex worms. The streams will be examined before recovery work begins. Costs are projected at \$216,000 for 1997-98, and about \$200,000 for each of the following two years.

Whirling disease, a parasitic and potentially fatal infection of trout and salmon for which there is no known cure, has caused a 90 percent decline in the Madison River's rainbow trout population. The disease is caused by a microscopic, water-borne, protozoan parasite which has a complicated two-host lifecycle. The parasite attacks the cartilage of young trout, causing skeletal deformities that sometimes result in the characteristic tail-chasing in young, infected fish.

Under the proposal, tributaries selected for westslope cutthroat trout restoration must show a low incidence or be free of whirling disease. They similarly must show low or no tubifex worm populations. The thread-like tubifex worm is a linch-pin host in the whirling disease parasite's lifecycle.

The long-term goals of the westslope cutthroat recovery effort would be to: (1) protect or establish genetically pure populations of westslope cutthroat trout in headwater areas of tributaries of the upper Madison River by 2006; and (2) develop a fishable westslope cutthroat trout population in the Madison River. Officials emphasized that this project would be conducted in concert with FWP's on-going efforts to identify clues for rainbow survival in the Madison River.

With 30 streams in the upper Madison River drainage identified as potential candidates for westslope cutthroat trout restoration, Graham said the entire proposal is too big for FWP to carry out alone. He said FWP is presently seeking cooperation and support from the U.S. Forest Service, the federal Bureau of Land Management, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Montana Power Company, the Montana State University, private landowners, and conservation organizations. Graham said the need for multi-agency cooperation and citizen partnerships was one of the primary points raised during Gov. Marc Racicot's Westslope Cutthroat Trout Workshop, which was held in Helena in September.

The push to recover westslope cutts in the upper Madison River was in part prodded by information gathered by FWP researchers who, with the diminished rainbow trout population, have picked up increased numbers of catchable cutthroat trout in the river. These cutthroat trout were likely recruited from headwater tributaries. Electrofishing data collected from the 3-mile-long Pine Butte section, which is open to catch-and-release fishing, show an incidental count of about 40 catchable cutthroat trout in 1996 where fewer than six were counted in years prior to 1991, when rainbow numbers began to decline.

That's a hopeful sign for Dick Vincent, FWP whirling disease coordinator. "I've always thought our way out of the whirling disease problem would be through the wild trout's life history," Vincent said. "We are still searching for a resistant strain of rainbow trout, but we might do best right now to follow the clues nature's providing. Because cutthroat trout spawn, hatch, and begin their lives in tributary streams they may simply avoid being infected at an early age when they are most vulnerable to whirling disease."

By comparison, Madison River rainbow trout generally spend their entire lives in the mainstem of the Madison where they can be immediately and continually exposed to whirling disease, Vincent said.

Vincent and other researchers surmise that the proposed recovery plan could produce a Madison River fishery composed of brown trout, westslope cutthroat trout, and rainbow trout survivors. "Under the proposal, the Madison could become a tri-level wild trout fishery," he explained. "Brown trout would continue to hold their own and perhaps expand, while the westslope cutthroat trout would pull in some of the slack left by the rainbow trout. While we will continue our work on rainbow trout in both the upper and lower drainage, I don't think the rainbow can recover its former numbers in the near future. We're not expecting to see a one-for-one replacement of rainbow with cutts, but we would expect a partial replacement."

The westslope cutthroat trout shares the title of Montana's state fish with Yellowstone cutthroat trout. It was once widely distributed and abundant in the Clark Fork, Kootenai and upper Missouri river drainages of Montana. Today, the westslope is found in less than 5 percent of its historic range in the upper Missouri River drainage. While westslope cutthroats are doing better west of the Continental Divide they are still greatly reduced in both their numbers and their range.

Graham said before restoration work commences, each stream will undergo examinations and surveys to determine if they are truly capable of supporting wild populations of westslope cutthroat trout. Most projects will be evaluated in an environmental assessment.