

All in for water conservation

It looks like we're in for another dry summer. As this issue of *Montana Outdoors* goes to press in mid-April, snowpack is below or far below normal for most of Montana, with predictions of continued severe or extreme drought. That could change with some heavy late-spring snows, but I wouldn't bet on it.

Here's what that means for Montana's fish, wildlife, and outdoor recreation—and what all of us can do to help.

Last year was Montana's driest in more than two decades. By October, 100 percent of the state was in severe drought and 70 percent was in extreme drought. Fort Peck Reservoir was so low that some boat ramps were left high and dry. Trout numbers in the upper Clark Fork River reached record lows. The drought also hammered prairie ponds. These family-friendly fisheries experienced lower water levels, higher water temperatures, and low dissolved oxygen that in some cases led to fish kills.

Record low flows in the Smith River last year forced us to impose "hoot owl" restrictions far earlier than normal to protect already stressed trout. We also had to place these restrictions, which close fishing from 2 p.m. to midnight, on eight other popular rivers, including the Missouri below Holter Dam, Madison, upper Yellowstone, Stillwater, and Beaverhead. By late July, we actually had to close fishing entirely on the Gallatin and Jefferson and part of the Big Hole.

Even in northwestern Montana, the state's wettest region, below-normal snowpack contributed to low streamflows for bull trout, a federally threatened species that needs even colder and cleaner water than most other trout species to survive.

As for wildlife, our biologists tell me that terrible range conditions led to poor nutrition and reduced survival for many elk, deer, and pronghorn. Wetlands dried up, reducing places for waterfowl and shorebirds to nest and decreasing nesting success. Green areas of grasslands where sage-grouse, sharp-tailed grouse, and pheasant chicks usually find insects in summer dried up, too. Some upland bird hunters told me that 2021 was their worst season ever.

Now we're looking at more of the same conditions, if not worse, for the rest of 2022.

Montanans can't make more rain or snow, but all of us can

conserve water to keep as much moisture on Montana's landscape as possible. Last summer I met Big Hole ranchers doing just that.

Several years ago, they entered into special agreements that required them not to use some of their water rights, in order to keep more water in the river and its tributaries to help Arctic grayling. In return, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service agreed to ease any new restrictions if the species is ever federally listed. That program was a main reason the USFWS decided in 2020 not to list the grayling as an endangered species.

Here's something that really impressed me: The Big Hole at Wisdom went completely dry in the drought of 1988, but it still had water in 2021, an even worse drought year. Not a lot of water, but enough for trout and grayling to survive (see photo and story starting on page 30).

Keeping water in streams and rivers benefits all Montanans and visitors, including landowners, kayakers, trout guides and anglers, and anyone who uses community water supplies. Out of that shared benefit comes recognition of the need for shared sacrifice. Some ranchers and farmers give up part of their precious irrigation water; anglers forego fishing opportunities during hoot owl or total closures; people in towns and cities water their lawns less and use low-flow faucets.

Protecting wetlands helps, too. These wet areas act as sponges, absorbing and storing spring runoff to feed streams and grow lush vegetation in summer.

Helping make all this happen are dozens of local watershed groups that bring together a wide range of people to find ways to preserve water for the benefit of all.

Last summer I was encouraged by the willingness of landowners, anglers, biologists, the local watershed group, and others in the Big Hole Valley to work together. I came back to Helena inspired and hopeful. It seems to me that if diverse interests can come together and conserve water on the

Big Hole, they can do it elsewhere, too.

If you or your community want to learn how to conserve water for the good of Montana, call this number and we'll put you in touch with the right people to help: (406) 444-2449.

—**Hank Worsech**, Director, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks



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