

## Thanks, landowners, for the water

As you drive over bridges this time of year, take a moment to look down at the streams and rivers and appreciate just how much water is flowing down there.

I know: Late summer is when water levels in streams and rivers are at their lowest. By now, crops have been irrigated for several months, snowpack is gone, and it seems like a long time since we last saw a decent rain.

But Montana's water flows could be a lot worse.

Here at FWP, we talk a lot about the contributions that agriculture makes to *wildlife* habitat—rotational grazing that keeps grasslands healthy, wetlands protected from unnecessary drainage, prairie lands left unplowed, and residual grain and alfalfa that help sustain wildlife through the winter.

But landowners do a lot to conserve *fish* habitat, too. Many river systems in this mostly parched state would have a lot less water if not for conservation-minded farmers and ranchers.

Yes, it's true that some ag operations take every last drop of water they are legally entitled to from streams and rivers. But many others care about fish and lean in to donate water for the common good.

In some cases, that conservation is part of a formal agreement, like those between the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service and landowners in the Big Hole River watershed who are helping keep Arctic grayling off the federal endangered species list. Sometimes it's part of a drought-management plan that groups like the Blackfoot Challenge establish with area ranchers and farmers. In many cases, it's simply a personal decision by an ag producer to carry on their family's long tradition of doing what's right for a stream or river.

For trout, some of the most critical water conservation results

from instream flow leases purchased by FWP, Trout Unlimited, and the Clark Fork Coalition. In these legal agreements, willing landowners temporarily leave a certain amount of water in key spawning tributaries. Sometimes just maintaining a few extra cubic feet per second is enough to maintain connectivity between the upper reaches where fish spawn and the mainstem river with no dry spots in between. That allows trout to make their way downstream without getting stranded in shallow pools, where they become easy prey for predators.

Another trout-friendly innovation we are working on with landowners is changing what's known as "points of diversion." Through these agreements, subject to approval by the state Department of Natural Resources and Conservation, participating landowners irrigate with warmer water from a mainstem river instead of drawing from tributaries, which can be considerably cooler.

Hayfields don't need water that's chilled, but trout sure do.

Most of these water-saving efforts come about thanks to solid relationships built between private landowners and the staff of FWP, conservation nonprofits, federal agencies like the Natural Resources Conservation Service, and local Soil and Water Conservation Districts.

These partnerships can't do anything to make more snow or rain. But we are all working together to find new, innovative ways to retain more of the precipitation that does fall. And we are focusing that work on stream stretches where water savings do the most good for Montana's trout populations, while still providing sufficient amounts for the crops that sustain the state's ag families and economy.

—**Dustin Temple**, *Director, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks*



The upper Yellowstone River in Paradise Valley. Water conservation by many landowners helps the blue-ribbon river support trout even in drought years.