

A little more state, a little less federal

It seems to defy logic.

Last fall, FWP had to cut slightly more than \$1 million from our fisheries management budget. Revenue was substantially down while operating costs continued to rise, so the cuts were essential to balance the budget.

Yet anyone who has been fishing in Montana can't fail to notice that streams, rivers, reservoirs, lakes, and fishing access sites statewide are filled with anglers. You'd think FWP would have plenty of angling license revenue to fund fisheries management.

This shortfall has not come from a drop in state fishing license sales (angler numbers in Montana remain steady). It's the result of declines in national expenditures for fishing gear and boat fuel over the past several years. A portion of those total sales is sent to every state each year as part of the federal Dingell-Johnson Program. Historically, roughly 75 percent of Montana's fisheries budget came from D-J (the percentage, set by the Montana Legislature, is now about 60 percent).

When anglers in Texas, Florida, and New York aren't buying new rods, reels, lures, and boats, that sets off a fiscal chain reaction reverberating all the way to Montana.

Balancing our fisheries budget with declining federal revenue meant cutting programs. Senior Fisheries Division staff met with fisheries workers across the state. They decided it made the most sense to cut programs and projects that had the fewest long-term effects and whose absence would do the least harm overall. To identify these programs and projects, FWP went through a "zero-budgeting" process. We started with a fisheries management budget of zero dollars and built it with essential costs for each program.

Legislative mandates and previous department commitments kept two big programs off the table: aquatic invasive species and fishing access sites. Cuts had to come elsewhere.

In all regions, we cut maintenance, supplies, intern programs, and travel; new fish management and hatchery equipment; and FWP's contribution to stream-flow monitoring. We also cut hatchery fish production and stocking statewide.

Two positives emerged from this painful process. We have a bet-

ter understanding of our fisheries program's top priorities, and we've found ways to manage Montana's diverse fisheries more efficiently and cost effectively.

Still, these cuts have been tough on FWP's dedicated and hard-working fisheries staff—especially our hatchery crews. The cuts won't be easy on anglers, either, especially those who fish stocked lakes and reservoirs and those who check stream-gauge data for river flows, levels, and temperatures.

We're hoping the program reductions will be temporary, and we aim to restore base operations budgets to former levels, though re-allocated to meet newly identified priorities such as more emphasis on native fish conservation and management. We're also working to pay for key programs with other federal funding sources and will lean on watershed groups and other organizations for funding help. This is a perfect example of how we can't—and don't—go it alone. We rely heavily on our partners. We'll need them more than ever as we work to resolve this funding dilemma.

The good news is that restoring our base fisheries budget won't require a fishing license fee increase at the next legislative session.

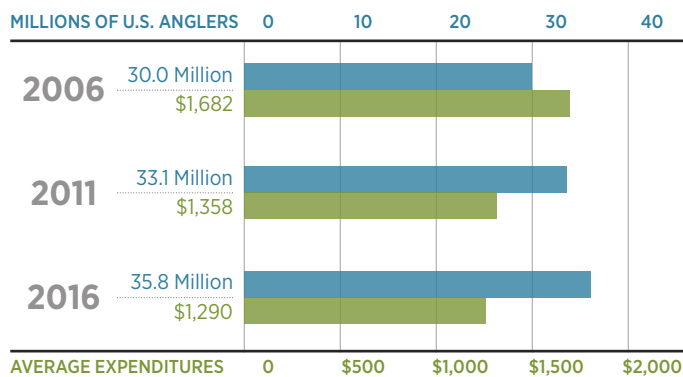
Right now the FWP General License Account has a surplus. But because of how our budget is structured, we need the 2019 Montana Legislature to grant FWP the authority to change the ratio of state funds to federal funds that comprise our fisheries budget from the current 60:40 to about 50:50.

In other words, we have the cash; we just need permission from lawmakers to use a bit more of it.

Each year more than 270,000 resident and nonresident anglers fish in Montana, spending \$900 million on lodging, food, travel, and related items. FWP promises to effectively and efficiently manage the fisheries and habitats that support that valuable recreation economy. In early 2019, we'll be requesting authority from the Montana Legislature to adjust our funding ratio of state and federal dollars so we can fulfill that promise.

—Martha Williams, Director, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks

More anglers, less spending



More than half the FWP fisheries budget comes from a portion of taxes on angler expenditures nationwide. When spending goes down, so does federal revenue to the states, which is the situation FWP finds itself in.

SOURCE: USF&WS