

We see it, and we're on it

One of Montana's most important blue-ribbon trout rivers is in trouble—and has been for some time. Fish surveys by FWP crews show that trout numbers on the Big Hole have been dropping for more than a decade. Several stretches, like the Jerry Creek and Melrose sections, are now at or near historic population lows. In addition, our fisheries crews are finding few young trout, indicating poor reproduction. They and others also report dead and dying trout, many with fungal growths.

Anglers, guides, and fly shop owners are understandably troubled. So am I, along with everyone else in this department. The Big Hole is a world-renowned fishery that for decades has been a recreational mainstay for local and visiting anglers, and the economic lifeblood for people throughout the basin and surrounding areas.

Making things worse for this region, trout numbers on two other important rivers, the nearby Beaverhead and Ruby, are dropping.

What's causing the declines? We don't know, but we aim to find out.

What we do know is that there's not enough water in the rivers and their tributaries—which is where many mainstem trout reproduce—and the water that is there is often too warm in late summer for trout.

Our plan to address the issues on the Big Hole, Beaverhead, and Ruby has three main features.

One, we're working with Montana State University to figure out why more adult fish aren't surviving, as well as young fish produced in tributaries that feed the main rivers. Is it low flows, warming water, disease, or some combination of these and other factors?

We will also figure out why so many trout are unhealthy. We've already set up a web portal—sickfish.mt.gov—where ranchers, anglers, guides, and others can report ailing, deformed, or dead fish and upload photos to help aid biologists. FWP will continue to share what we learn in the coming years about trout in the three rivers.

Two, we will intensify the work we have been doing for more than a decade with local ranchers and other landowners to keep more water in spawning tributaries and mainstem rivers, especially

at critical times. Sometimes all it takes is a little extra water for a few weeks to allow newly hatched fish to swim downstream to the mainstem, enough so they do not get trapped in shallow pools and become easy prey for birds. Our past focus on water conservation in the basin has been mainly to protect Arctic grayling while supporting agriculture. Now we're widening the scope to include brown and rainbow trout.

Three, while our crews continue traditional and essential management activities like population monitoring, I'm encouraging FWP employees and others to think of new ways to solve the problems we do know about.

For instance, we're looking into whether some irrigators who have water rights on cooler tributaries might be willing to let some of their water flow into the Big Hole River in exchange for the same amount of warmer Big Hole water upstream. That warmer water would



Fishing the Canyon stretch of the Big Hole River below Divide.

not hurt their alfalfa, but the cooler water would help trout.

Montanans have long been innovators in coldwater fisheries management. We lead the nation in wild trout management, whirling disease research, and grayling conservation. I'm confident we'll continue to come up with new innovations as scientists learn more about what's afflicting the trout populations in the Big Hole, Beaverhead, and Ruby rivers.

Like so many Montanans, we at FWP care strongly about these three fisheries, the health of the surrounding watersheds, and the businesses and livelihoods sustained by those ecosystems. We recognize there are problems, we have a plan to figure out what's causing the problems, and I'm confident we can work together with outfitters, anglers, irrigators, and others to find solutions.

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