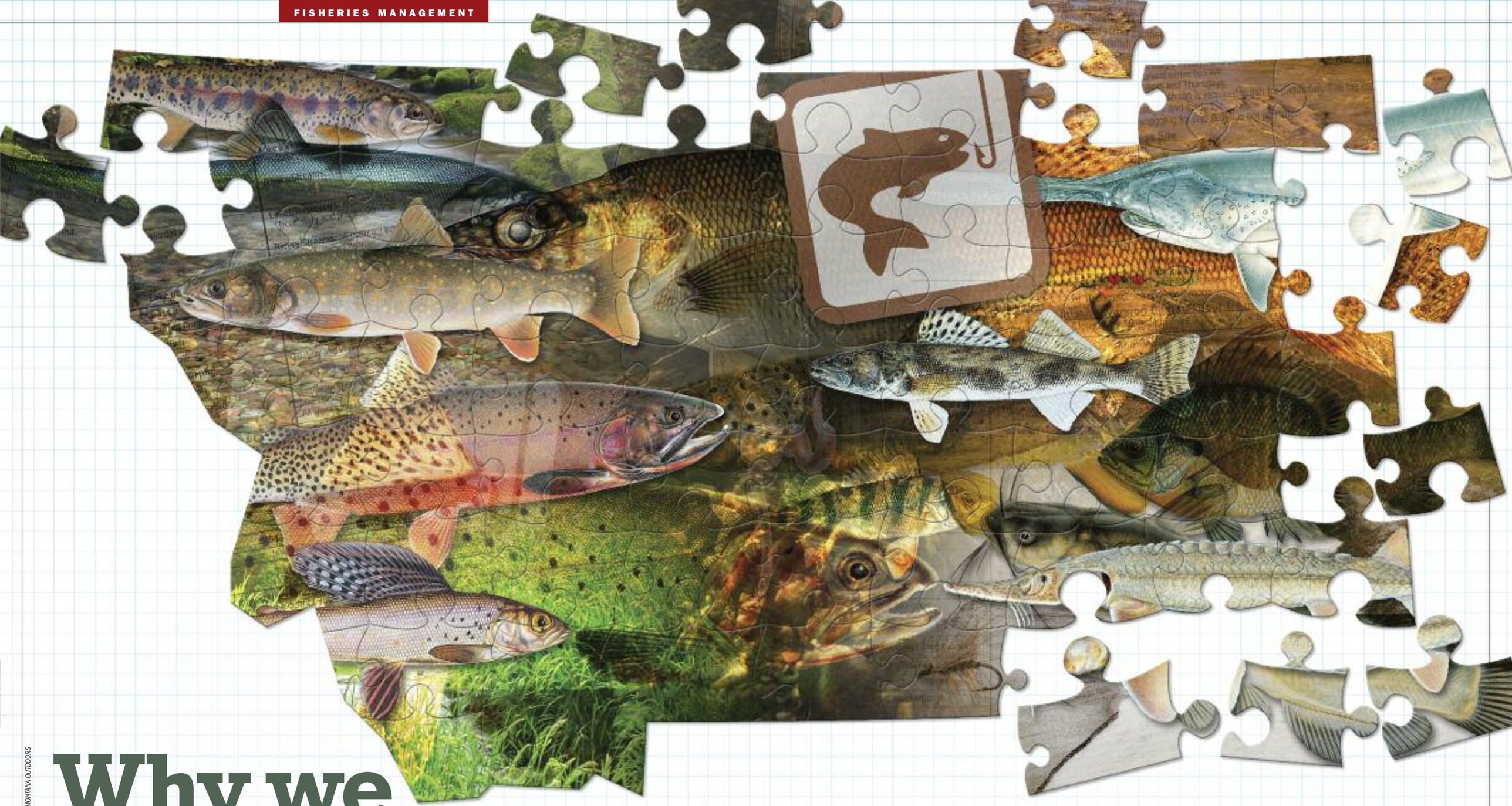

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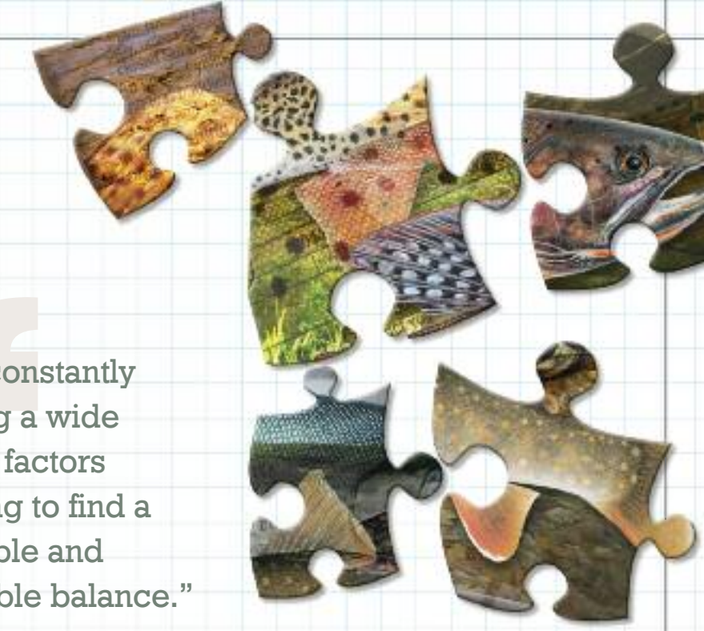
Why we do it this way

FWP unveils a new plan that explains the agency's approach to managing Montana's diverse and complex fisheries. BY TOM DICKSON



By catching a trout, walleye, or other game fish, an angler can easily see the results of how Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks manages the state's fisheries.

An angler can also find evidence of the department's decisions in the fishing regulations booklet. Its pages are filled with information on open and closed areas, possession limits, bait constraints, and other restrictions designed to protect fisheries and improve angling recreation.

What's never been easy, however, is figuring out the *reasoning* behind FWP's fisheries management decisions and activities.

That's about to change.

FWP will soon unveil the draft of a new statewide fisheries management plan that will clarify what the department does and why. "This is about transparency as much as anything," says Bruce Rich, FWP Fisheries Bureau chief. "We're about to put on paper our existing management directions, open them to public review, and then commit to those decisions for the next five years."

The proposed plan, which will be available for public comment early this fall, divides Montana's fisheries among 40 drainages. For each drainage (and major waterbody within a drainage), the plan lists what Rich calls "prescriptions," or the general actions biologists use to protect, restore, and improve fish populations. "The prescriptions are like the road maps biologists can consult as they decide how best to manage local fisheries," he says.

Equally important, says Rich, is the background information the plan provides that explains the reasoning behind prescriptions in each drainage. For instance, FWP recently changed fishing regulations in the upper Bitterroot River drainage in ways that increase the brown trout harvest. "Most anglers wouldn't know why we made those changes, that we want to reduce the brown trout population in order to lessen competition with native bull trout and westslope cutthroat trout populations," says Rich. "In the new plan, they'll be able to find the rationale for that and every other regulation."

Rich wants the information to assist anglers and others in discussions with FWP on fisheries management issues and activities. "This won't be the 'shelf art' that so many plans end up becoming," he says. "We intend for it to be a working document that our staff and the public can constantly refer back to."

Many factors go in

The health of native fish populations like bull trout and cutthroat trout is just one of many components FWP biologists must consider. As the new plan will make clear, they also take into account the

- number and type of fish in a waterbody and how the species interact;
- requirements imposed by state and federal laws;
- likelihood of species such as arctic grayling and westslope cutthroat trout becoming federally listed;
- effects of drought and low water levels;
- threats of fish disease and aquatic invasive species;
- growing numbers of illegal fish introductions;
- water and bank damage caused by growing riverside residential development;
- potential dangers of new oil and gas development; and
- long-term effects of hydropower dams.

In addition to these biological and environmental factors, biologists must balance the diverse and often conflicting expectations of anglers. For instance, a rainbow trout stream might produce more trophy fish, favored by some anglers, with tighter harvest restrictions on larger fish. Or it could produce more fish for the table, favored by other anglers, with more liberal harvest restrictions. But the stream can't do both.

"The complexity of what we have to take into account can be staggering," Rich says. "So we want to make clear to the public the reasoning behind what we do—and need to do, legally—to protect and improve fisheries while balancing the interests of the many different anglers out there."

Does news of a statewide plan mean FWP has been managing fisheries all these years without a rudder? "Not at all," says Rich. "But in many cases the plans and prescriptions for individual watersheds and waterbodies are stored in our biologists' heads. What we're doing now is documenting them and pledging to carry them out."

Don Skaar, a senior Fisheries Bureau official in Helena who is managing the planning process, says the plan will provide readers with previously unavailable insight into FWP actions. It will explain why, for instance, the department stocks some lakes and reservoirs but not others. And how biologists decide which waters to restore with native species and which to retain with popular nonnative sport fish.

"Without a plan, our regulations and other actions can seem arbitrary, when in fact they are carefully thought through and carried out with extensive public input," Skaar says. "The idea is to explain that our management decisions are based on laws, rules, and policies that are shaped by scientific knowledge and our interactions with the angling public."

Skaar says that currently the only time the public gets to hear FWP's rationale for fisheries management decisions is during the often-contentious regulations-setting process. "Now they'll be able to read, anytime, the department's case for its actions," he says.

Many benefits come out

In addition to satisfying anglers' curiosity about FWP decisions, the statewide management plan will have several other public benefits. One is to hold the department accountable. As Rich says, "We're making a public commitment with this document."

Another is that the plan will give the public confidence that current fishing opportunities won't suddenly change. "A huge amount of public involvement has already gone into the way we're managing Montana's fisheries," Rich says. "Those fishing opportunities are vulnerable in the sense that much of the reasoning behind how we are managing them isn't documented anywhere."

The lack of an established plan, Rich explains, makes it difficult for biologists and local anglers to maintain popular management approaches. "But if that rationale is in an FWP planning document, the public can have confidence that their fishing traditions won't be changed all of a sudden just because a few anglers decide they want to catch a new species they saw on a TV show."

> "We are constantly weighing a wide range of factors and trying to find a reasonable and sustainable balance."

According to Rich, the plan will also save time and reduce conflicts during the annual regulations-setting process. "We often hear the same arguments from and between various angling constituencies each time we need to adjust a regulation or make some other decision," he says. "With this plan we hope to resolve those conflicts early on, get whatever resolution we can into the plan, and then base future decisions in part on that, instead of revisiting the conflicts every time we reach a new decision point. That way we and the majority of anglers can say, 'Look, we've been through this before, we've discussed it at length and had lots of public input, and here is our decision. So let's move on.'"

As an example, Skaar points to a recent increase in nonnative northern pike in the Missouri River up- and downstream from Toston Reservoir. In May FWP announced plans to remove as many of the predator fish as possible, using gill nets and electrofishing. "Under the plan, the prescription for that drainage is to suppress northern pike," Skaar says. "The rationale is to protect the world-class trout fishery in the Madison, Jefferson, and Gallatin Rivers and the popular rainbow trout and walleye fisheries in the upper reservoirs. By having that prescription down in print, we won't have to revisit it every year. It allows us to be proactive in responding to species that don't belong there."

Adapting to circumstances

Rich says the plan will also help reinforce FWP's flexible approach to fisheries management. "We're not single minded, focusing just on native species or just on sport fish. We adapt as circumstances dictate," he says. As an example, Rich notes that FWP strongly urges the U.S. Corps of Engineers to release warmer water down the spillway of Fort Peck Dam to benefit sauger, pallid sturgeon, and paddlefish in the Missouri River downstream. "But 200 miles to the south, on [the Bighorn River's] Yellowtail Dam, we want releases of cold water," says Rich. "There we have no intention of restoring the native warmwater fishery in the tailwater section of the river, because that would be detrimental to what's become a world-class rainbow and brown trout fishery.

"The point," Rich explains, "is that we are constantly weighing a wide range of factors and trying to find a reasonable and sustainable balance that's good for fish populations and the wide diversity of angler expectations out there."

Explaining what those factors are, and what the department means by "balance," are in part what FWP wants the proposed statewide fisheries plan to accomplish.

Tom Dickson is editor of Montana Outdoors.

The proposed statewide fisheries plan will be available for public comment and review this fall. For more information, visit the FWP website at fwp.mt.gov.