



MIDDLE CLARK FORK RIVER DRAINAGE

PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION

The Middle Clark Fork River drainage begins at the confluence of the Clark Fork and Blackfoot rivers at Milltown, and extends downstream for 120 miles to the mouth of the Flathead River. The river flows generally westward as it runs through Missoula, Mineral and Sanders Counties. Just downstream of the city of Missoula, the Bitterroot River enters and nearly doubles the river's discharge. Other major tributary watersheds (upstream to downstream) include Rattlesnake Creek, Grant Creek, Mill Creek, Ninemile Creek, Petty Creek, Trout Creek, Cedar Creek and the St. Regis River system. River volume roughly doubles again when the Clark Fork joins with the Flathead River near Paradise.

The main stem Clark Fork River channel is generally entrenched and stable throughout its length. The one exception is a 25 mile section through the Missoula Valley from Kelly Island (west side of Missoula) to the Ninemile Creek area (near Huson), where the river has a wide, accessible floodplain and active lateral migration. The river alternates between relatively narrow rock canyons and wider agricultural valleys as it progresses downstream. Major canyons include Hellgate Canyon (East Missoula), the Alberton Gorge (Alberton) and the "Cutoff" section between St. Regis and the Flathead River Confluence. Land ownership along the main stem is predominantly private, with scattered FWP, DNRC and USFS parcels.

Tributary watersheds include more than 50 coldwater trout streams that lie primarily on publically-owned timberlands at high and mid-elevations. As tributaries reach foothills and near the valley floor, private land ownership becomes much more prevalent. Most tributary streams are bisected by major transportation system crossings (i.e., railroad, interstate highway, frontage roads) on the valley floor before they reach the Clark Fork River. Many of these crossings on smaller streams act as complete barriers to upstream fish movement.

There are numerous high elevation "mountain" lakes within the Middle Clark Fork Basin, as well as a few constructed lakes and ponds on the valley floor. More than 120 alpine mountain lakes (> 1 acre) occur in two general areas: (1) in the Bitterroot Mountains along the Montana-Idaho divide from Alberton to Lookout Pass; and (2) within the Rattlesnake National Recreation Area and Wilderness area near Missoula. Although some have been enhanced by dams, nearly all of these waters are natural lakes formed in high glacial troughs and cirque basins. Valley ponds and small lakes (managed as public fisheries and recreation sites) are generally man-made reservoirs and reclaimed gravel pits. These include Frenchtown Pond, Kreiss Lake, Silvers Lagoon at McCormick Park and several other small water bodies.

FISHERIES MANAGEMENT

Located in the west-central part of the state, the middle Clark Fork River is a large system that runs through a major population center (Missoula) and developed valleys downstream. Although the fishery is not as renowned as in some of its major tributaries (e.g., Rock Creek, Blackfoot River, Bitterroot River), the middle Clark Fork River supports a popular trout fishery. This system has gained national notoriety in the past decade with the removal of Milltown Dam, clean-up of river contaminants at its upper end, and anticipated recovery of fishery resources.

The middle Clark Fork River is managed as a wild trout fishery, emphasizing natural reproduction. Although native bull trout (low numbers) and westslope cutthroat trout (moderate numbers) are present throughout all reaches, the river fishery is dominated by non-native rainbow trout, rainbow x westslope cutthroat trout hybrids and brown trout. Rainbow trout and their hybrids generally make up 70-80% of the trout population within this river section. Brown trout are found in moderate densities in the Missoula area, but generally decrease in abundance in lower reaches. Mountain whitefish are common throughout the mainstem river section.

In addition to salmonids, the Middle Clark Fork is home to eight other native fish species including peamouth, northern pikeminnow, longnose dace, redbreast shiner, longnose sucker, largescale sucker, and two species of sculpin. Ten non-native fish species are also common in various parts of the basin, including brown trout, brook trout, rainbow trout, Yellowstone cutthroat trout, northern pike, pumpkinseed, largemouth bass, smallmouth bass, yellow perch and white sucker. Prior to removal of Milltown Dam and Milltown Reservoir, northern pike were becoming more prevalent in the Clark Fork River. The reservoir served as a primary spawning and rearing area for this species, which then dispersed downstream and occupied the mainstem river in significant numbers. Since removal of the dam, northern pike numbers have declined and are no longer considered a major threat to salmonids populations. More recently, smallmouth bass densities have increased dramatically in the lower Flathead River. However, no major colonization of the Clark Fork River upstream of the Flathead River confluence has been detected.

Tributary stream drainages support a range of abundant, resident trout species and are essential for spawning and rearing of fluvial (river-migratory) trout that reside in the mainstem river. Species composition varies greatly among tributaries and, in many streams, changes along a continuum from headwaters to mouth. Larger tributaries are generally “open” to fish movement with the Clark Fork, and are dominated by rainbow/cutthroat trout hybrids and brown trout. From the mainstem, species composition typically transitions to westslope cutthroat trout in an upstream direction, with pockets of brook trout also occurring in many transition areas and warmer tributaries. Smaller tributary systems and those at higher elevations are generally dominated by westslope cutthroat trout. Many of these populations are protected from hybridization with rainbow trout by artificial fish barriers associated with the extensive valley transportation system (e.g., road culverts, railroad tunnels).

The coldest remaining systems with suitable habitat still support viable bull trout populations, including Rattlesnake Creek, Fish Creek, Cedar Creek, and portions of the St. Regis River. The Fish Creek drainage supports the most intact habitat and abundant native trout populations within the middle Clark Fork region. These few remaining bull trout populations provide a limited amount of bull trout recruitment to the Clark Fork River where densities are 1-2 adults per mile in most reaches.

Although nearly all of the >100 mountain lakes in the basin were historically fishless, roughly 45% now support trout populations. Many still contain self-sustaining, wild populations of brook trout, westslope cutthroat trout, rainbow trout, and Yellowstone cutthroat trout that were introduced in the mid-1900s. Most of these lakes are no longer stocked, but many others with limited natural reproduction are stocked periodically with westslope cutthroat trout. Management of stocked lakes ranges from high density, frequently planted waters designed for high catch rates to infrequently stocked, low density trophy waters. A large number of fishless lakes are also

maintained to preserve natural ecological integrity (e.g., for conservation of native amphibians such as the long-toed salamander and spotted frogs). Management strategies and information for all mountain lakes in the basin are described in recent plans available from the FWP Region 2 office in Missoula.

Angling occurs year-round on the middle Clark Fork River, but is most popular in the early spring, summer and fall. Opportunities exist for both wade and float angling and while fly-fishing is particularly popular, artificial lures and bait fishing are also common. Special fishing regulations have been instituted to protect spawning fish, native fish strongholds and staging areas, and to retain the quality of trout fisheries – despite increasing fishing pressure. Summer and fall also offer excellent angling opportunities on tributary streams and mountain lakes.

Valley lakes and ponds provide popular put-and-grow trout fisheries that are accessible for most of the year. The waters are stocked frequently and offer opportunities for high catch rates and liberal harvest. All of these fisheries are geared to kids fishing and family-friendly environments with easy access.

HABITAT

The middle Clark Fork River is considered a recruitment-limited fishery where enhancing spawning access for wild fish and improving the quality of tributary habitats has been a priority for the past decade. Restoration and improvement efforts have occurred throughout the watershed, but have focused on native fish strongholds. Fish passage improvements, riparian restoration projects, instream enhancements, fish screens, etc., have involved a number of partners on both public and private lands. As the largest land manager in the basin, the USFS has undertaken many activities on their lands associated with fish passage and the forest road system. In addition, key land acquisitions have been completed in tributary drainages to protect spawning and rearing habitat. Notable projects include public acquisition of more than 50,000 acres to form the Fish Creek Wildlife Management Area and purchase of more than 5 miles of riparian corridor on Cedar Creek. Numerous other conservation easements and smaller acquisitions have been completed by public and private organizations throughout the basin.

River and stream dewatering from irrigation is generally not a significant limiting factor in the basin, particularly when compared with neighboring river systems. However, legacy impacts of historic mining and timber management (roads) remain significant factors degrading habitat quality on a large scale and in many tributary drainages. Restoration and remediation activities addressing these impacts will likely be a priority in the future that will be led by the USFS, Trout Unlimited, FWP and other partners.

FISHING ACCESS

There are more than 15 publicly owned or managed access sites along the river. Some sites are located near local communities and, in addition to river access, provide convenient land-based recreation opportunities. The section of the Middle Clark Fork River between St John's FAS and Forest Grove FAS (Alberton Gorge), is a popular stretch of river for scenery, whitewater and angling with much of the riverfront in that section owned by FWP. The Alberton Gorge is managed by FWP's Parks Division. Overall, public access opportunities along the Middle Clark Fork are good with no urgent needs for additional access.

SPECIAL MANAGEMENT ISSUES

Habitat and Water Quality Issues

Over the past decade, a tremendous amount of resources have been invested in the removal of Milltown Dam, remediation of river contaminants, and restoration of the Clark Fork River. Monitoring of river habitat, water quality, and fish and aquatic populations will be essential in evaluating the long-term effects of this work. Similarly, possible contaminant remediation and restoration at the Smurfit-Stone Mill site near Frenchtown could have major benefits for river water quality, floodplain function, and habitat quality in that reach.

Social Conflicts

Proximity to Missoula, a large overall population base, and many conflicting demands make managing public recreation challenging on the Clark Fork River. In 2011, the reach through Missoula and downstream to the Alberton Gorge were part of a revised river recreation plan, balancing motorized and non-motorized boat use in the area. This and other issues, including management of river access and non-angling recreationists, will certainly be a focus in the future.

In 2011, FWP completed a public process to revise boating regulations for this section of the Clark Fork River. The regulation changes were in response to an increase in river use in and around Missoula, and intended to provide for diverse river recreation opportunities and to address public safety and social concerns associated with fast-moving motorboats operating in proximity to other users. These regulations took effect November 26, 2011.

FISHERIES MANAGEMENT DIRECTION FOR MIDDLE CLARK FORK RIVER DRAINAGE

Water	Miles/acres	Species	Origin	Management Type	Management Direction
Clark Fork River - Blackfoot River confluence downstream to confluence with Flathead River	120 miles	Bull trout, Westslope cutthroat trout	Wild	Conservation/Special Regulations	Continue yearlong closure on angling for bull trout. Enhance fluvial populations for conservation and catch-and-release westslope cutthroat trout fishery.
		Rainbow trout, Brown trout	Wild	Quality/Special Regulations	Protect adults and fishery quality through fishing regulations. Protect habitat, ensure adequate connectivity with tributaries & enhance natural recruitment in areas that are not native trout strongholds.
		Northern pike, Smallmouth bass	Wild	General/Special Regulations/ Suppression	No creel limit for pike; encourage harvest of both introduced warmwater species to reduce competition with and predation on trout.
Habitat needs and activities: Assess long-term impact of Milltown Dam removal. Assess contamination of Smurfit-Stone Mill site and facilitate remediation/restoration. Further enhance connectivity with tributaries where appropriate. Protect and improve habitat quality in spawning and rearing areas to enhance natural recruitment of wild and native trout.					
Kreiss Lake	10 acres	Westslope cutthroat trout	Hatchery	Put-Grow-Take	Facilitate high catch rates and quality harvest opportunity.
		Largemouth bass	Wild	General	Provide liberal harvest opportunity.
Habitat needs and activities: Evaluate westslope cutthroat trout stocking prescription. Ensure that adequate water volume is maintained in lake.					
Silers Lagoon (McCormick Pond)	5 acres	Westslope cutthroat trout, Rainbow trout	Hatchery	Family Fishing/ Put- Grow-Take/ Special Regulations	Kids fishing pond - Facilitate high catch rates and quality harvest opportunity for kids.
		Northern pike, Pumpkinseed, Yellow perch	Wild	General	Provide liberal harvest opportunity. Reduce numbers if possible.
Habitat needs and activities: Reduce entrainment of unwanted fish from water supply canal. Ensure adequate water exchange rate.					
Frenchtown Pond	22 acres	Rainbow trout	Hatchery	Put- Take	Facilitate high catch rates and quality harvest opportunity for kids fishing events and families.
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Water	Miles/acres	Species	Origin	Management Type	Management Direction
		Largemouth bass	Transfer	Social/Quality/Special Regulations	Restrictive harvest regulations to ensure quality of fishery. Continue to plant adult fish if available.
		Northern pike, Pumpkinseed, Yellow perch	Wild	General	Provide liberal harvest opportunity. Reduce numbers if possible.
Habitat needs and activities: Continue adult bass transfer from Lee Metcalf Refuge. Ensure enforcement presence to promote compliance and maintenance of quality largemouth bass fishery.					
Fish Creek, Little Joe Creek, and Cedar Creek Drainages	264.7 miles 37.6 miles 42.7 miles	Bull trout, Westslope cutthroat trout	Wild	Conservation/Special Regulations	Conserve and enhance migratory and resident populations. Continue yearlong closure on angling for bull trout.
		Rainbow trout, Brown trout, Brook trout	Wild	General/Special Regulations	Maintain present numbers and sizes. Consider management that reduces numbers and distribution if it would improve native trout numbers and WCT angling opportunities.
Habitat needs and activities: Improve habitat to support ecosystem function and production of native trout and whitefish. Enforcement presence needed to ensure compliance. Eliminate brook trout from headwater lakes.					
Open Tributary Systems (Fish Barriers Generally Absent): St. Regis River, Ninemile Creek, Rattlesnake Cr. Grant Creek, Dry Creek, Trout Creek, Mill Creek, Albert Creek, Nemote Creek, Sixmile Creek, Siegel Creek, Petty Creek	 38.6 miles 25.5 miles 23.3 miles 18.3 miles 15.3 miles 14.7 miles 13.4 Miles 11.4 Miles 9.8 Miles 8.9 Miles 7.0 Miles 4.3 Miles	Bull trout, Westslope cutthroat trout Rainbow trout, Brown trout Brook trout	Wild Wild Wild	Conservation/ Special Regulations Quality/ Special Regulations General/Suppression	Conserve and enhance migratory and resident populations. Continue protective regulations to enhance westslope cutthroat trout fishery. Continue yearlong closure on angling for bull trout. Protect adult spawners and fishery quality through fishing regulations. Protect habitat and ensure adequate connectivity with tributaries to enhance natural recruitment in areas that are not native trout strongholds. Provide liberal harvest opportunity and reduce numbers if possible.

Water	Miles/acres	Species	Origin	Management Type	Management Direction
Habitat needs and activities: Improve habitat quality and connectivity where needed.					
Closed Tributary Systems (Barriers Prevent Upstream Movement from Clark Fork River) - Contain Genetically Pure, Isolated Westslope cutthroat trout Populations:		Westslope cutthroat trout	Wild	Conservation	Ensure isolation and restrict introduction of hybridizing species. Restrict harvest to maintain or enhance numbers.
Patrick Cr.,	4.5 Miles	Brook trout		General/Suppression	Provide liberal harvest opportunity and reduce numbers where possible.
Sevenmile Cr.,	6.2 Miles				
Tamarack Cr.,	8.7 Miles				
Cold Cr.,	7.2 Miles				
Thompson Cr.,	8.6 Miles				
Slowey Gulch,	3.1 Miles				
Flat Cr.,	8.2 Miles				
Johnson Cr.,	6.1 Miles				
First Cr.,	6.7 Miles				
Second Cr.,	7.4 Miles				
Deep Cr.,	9.4 Miles				
Meadow Cr.,	7.3 Miles				
Quartz Cr.,	3.1 Miles				
Rock Cr.,	18.7 Miles				
West Mountain Cr.,	4.2 Miles				
Rock Cr.,	9.5 Miles				
Deep Cr.,	7.5 Miles				
O'Keefe Cr.,	1.7 Miles				
Lavalle Cr.,	1.6 Miles				
Butler Cr.,	2.7 Miles				
Marshall Cr.	4.8 Miles				

Water	Miles/acres	Species	Origin	Management Type	Management Direction
Habitat needs and activities: Maintain fish passage barriers isolating populations from Clark Fork River, improve habitat and connectivity within drainages, and restrict new fish introductions – particularly in fish ponds.					
High Elevation (Mountain) Lakes: 121 Lakes Total > 1 Acre in Bitterroot Mountains and Rattlesnake Wilderness <i>See specific Mountain Lake Management Plan Reports for Each Water Body</i>	1-30 Acres each, 861 Acres Total	Westslope cutthroat trout	Wild	Conservation	13 lakes – Self-sustaining fisheries of various quality.
		Westslope cutthroat trout	Wild/Hatchery	Put-Grow-Take	14 lakes – Management objective varies by lake, including trophy, quality, and harvest-oriented fisheries.
		Brook trout	Wild	General	18 lakes – Reduce densities or eliminate to improve quality.
		Yellowstone cutthroat trout	Wild	General	3 lakes – Self-sustaining fisheries of various quality
		Rainbow trout	Wild	General	8 lakes - Self-sustaining fisheries of various quality
		<i>Fishless Lakes</i>	N/A	Conservation	65 lakes – Maintain ecological integrity.
Habitat needs and activities: Evaluate stocking prescriptions for Put-Grow-Take fisheries. Maintain fishless lakes. Remove or suppress brook trout to enhance quality of fisheries and complement downstream native fishery goals.					

