

October 25, 2013

Western Native Trout Initiative

Dear Steering Committee,

Montana Trout Unlimited strongly supports the French Creek Native Fish Restoration project in the Big Hole watershed of Southwest Montana. A conservation priority of Montana TU is to restore declining populations of native fish in the state, and French Creek presents an ideal opportunity.

Montana TU's mission is to conserve, protect and restore coldwater fisheries and their watersheds throughout the state. We represent 13 chapters and over 1,600 TU members in Montana.

French Creek is part of a large stream system with many tributaries, offering habitat requirements for multiple life history stages of native fish. It is an excellent area to carry out a large-scale restoration project for westslope cutthroat trout and Arctic grayling. Westslope cutthroats in the upper Missouri River drainage have not fared well; non-hybridized populations occupy less than 5% of their historic range. Restoration of this species to 38 miles of habitat in the Big Hole drainage would represent one of the largest native fisheries projects in Montana. The possibility of restoring Arctic grayling and westslope cutthroats to a stream is unprecedented in Montana. French Creek would represent the only location where Arctic grayling would exist within their native range in Montana without the presence of non-native species. Further, because the project is nearly entirely on public property, it will be accessible to anglers, greatly increasing opportunities for the public to fish for native species.

One of the first steps of the project is to construct a fish barrier near the downstream end of the drainage. This fish barrier would block upstream fish passage and would prevent non-native fish from recolonizing the stream. Upstream of the fish barrier, approximately 38 miles of stream is currently occupied by native and non-native trout. There are 2 westslope cutthroat trout populations remaining in the entire drainage. American Creek is home to a native population of fish isolated to the upper 1.5 miles of the stream above a natural cascade fish barrier. Cutthroat trout were restored to the upper 3 miles of Sixmile Creek in 2013.

Montana TU has already contributed to the restoration of French Creek through a cash donation for the restoration of habitat degraded through past placer mining activities. TU also supports the large-scale habitat restoration goals for the watershed. Ongoing restoration efforts to reclaim riparian and upland areas of the watershed – degraded by past mining and grazing activities – will greatly benefit aquatic species and their habitat.

Feel free to contact me to discuss this project in more detail.

Sincerely,

Mark Aagenes

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