



# MONTANA FISH AND WILDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET

THE **OUTSIDE** IS IN US ALL.

**Meeting Date:** December 27, 2021

**Agenda Item:** Big Hole River Brown Trout Fishing Regulations

**Action Needed:** Final

**Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation:** 5 minutes – lengthy public comment portion

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**Background:** The statewide fish regulation-setting process currently occurs on a four-year cycle. The last four-year process occurred for the 2020 fishing regulations, with the next scheduled for the 2024 regulations. This four-year cycle does not preclude the potential for annual adjustments by the commission and staff may propose annual changes based on specific criteria.

At its August 2021 meeting, the commission adopted fishing regulations intended to protect brown trout populations on the Big Hole River and Beaverhead River. New regulations were applied immediately after commission approval to implement restrictions prior to the fall spawning season. The fishing season on the Big Hole River from BLM Maiden Rock to Brownes Bridge FAS was adjusted to begin the third Saturday in May and run through October 31. The commission and staff have continued to receive public inputs advocating adjustments to the fishing season dates on this section of the Big Hole. These inputs include advocacies for an earlier starting date to allow fishing opportunity in spring, an earlier closing date to protect spawning brown trout, or both.

**Public Involvement Process & Results:** Four regulation alternatives for multiple waterbodies were released for public comment June 15 – July 11. The department participated in or hosted four public meetings and convened a workgroup to evaluate and assess alternatives to present to the commission. Following evaluation of public input, the department developed brown trout regulation alternatives for the Beaverhead River and the Big Hole River. Big Hole alternatives included the adopted third Saturday in May through October 31 in the river section from BLM Maiden Rock to Brownes Bridge FAS. Another alternative was allowing fishing April 1 through September 30. The public will have opportunity to provide comment during the December 27 meeting.

**Alternatives and Analysis:** Based on deliberations prior to the August commission meeting, the adopted fishing season of third Saturday in May through October 31 was generally preferred by commercial interests who had concerns that closing fishing October 1 could adversely impact client trips. The adopted season protects spawning redds and fry after emergence, but brown trout are still vulnerable to angling during most of the spawning season.

Starting the fishing season April 1 in the BLM Maiden Rock to Brownes Bridge FAS section would have minimal impact to redds or fry due to higher flows and low water temperatures. This start date would provide additional angling opportunity early in the spring.

Ending the fishing season after September 30 in this section would reduce angling impacts to spawning brown trout and minimize disturbance of spawning redds. Most brown trout spawning in the Big Hole occurs in this section in October. This end date would restrict angling opportunity earlier in the fall.

**Proposed Motion:** I move the commission allow fishing on the Big Hole River from BLM Maiden Rock to Brownes Bridge FAS from \_\_\_\_\_ through \_\_\_\_\_, effective March 1, 2022.