



**LOWER BITTERROOT RIVER SMALLMOUTH BASS REGULATION**  
**Fish and Wildlife Commission**  
**August 17, 2023**

On July 5, an angler caught a smallmouth bass on the lower Bitterroot River near its confluence with the Clark Fork River. Video of the catch was provided to FWP staff, and the species and location were subsequently verified. Smallmouth bass have been observed and reported in other portions of the upper Clark Fork River Basin, but this fish represents the first documented report of the species in the Bitterroot River, where the lower section could support a self-sustaining population. The nearest documented reports of smallmouth bass in the region have occurred approximately 70 miles upstream in the Clearwater River system and 80 miles downstream in the lower Clark Fork River. Additional reports have occurred at isolated private fish ponds in the Bitterroot Valley near Hamilton. It is unknown if this fish emigrated from existing river populations, escaped from private ponds, or was illegally introduced into the lower Bitterroot River.

Following guidance from the Unauthorized Placement of Fish Administrative Rule ([ARM 12.7.1503](#)), the department is proposing a mandatory catch, kill, and report regulation for the lower Bitterroot River in the reach from the Florence Bridge to the mouth.

Proposed new language is presented in *red italics*

## Bitterroot River

Page 28 change:

**under BITTERROOT RIVER**

**Florence Bridge to mouth of Bitterroot River. During General Season (third Saturday in May through Nov. 30)**

- Catch-and-release for cutthroat trout
- Combined trout: 3 rainbow or brown trout daily and in possession, only 1 over 14 inches

***Florence Bridge to mouth of Bitterroot River (Entire Year)***

- *Smallmouth Bass: All Smallmouth Bass caught must be killed immediately, kept and the entire fish turned into FWP. Anglers who catch Smallmouth Bass in the lower Bitterroot River are required to report the catch to FWP within 24 hours (406-542-5500). Anglers will be asked to provide location, date, and time of capture and may be asked to provide their full name, ALS number, and phone number. Anglers are required to turn in the whole Smallmouth Bass to a FWP office within 10 days of capture (frozen is allowed) during regular business hours.*

**Rationale:** Catch, kill, and report is an effective tool to determine the status and potential impacts of a new smallmouth bass population and helps FWP determine a course of action to minimize resource impacts.

**Regulation Type:**

Conservation: expansion of smallmouth bass in the lower Bitterroot River could have adverse impacts to the existing native and non-native sport fishery.

**Public Engagement:**

Since this is a recent discovery there has been minimal public engagement. These types of actions are typically widely supported by the angling public to address unauthorized fish introductions.

**Interdivisional Review:**

Regional Enforcement staff support this proposal.