



# MONTANA FISH AND WILDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET

THE **OUTSIDE** IS IN US ALL.

**Meeting Date:** June 8, 2023

**Agenda Item:** 2023 Big Hole, Beaverhead, and Ruby River Emergency Regulation Changes

**Action Needed:** Final

**Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation:** 10 minutes

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**Background:** The Big Hole, Beaverhead, and Ruby rivers are managed to provide quality angling experiences for brown and rainbow trout. Trout abundances at the three monitoring sites sampled on the Big Hole River in 2023, Jerry Creek, Melrose, and Hogback, as well as many sections on the Beaverhead and Ruby rivers downstream of their respective dams, have been declining since the exceptional water year of 2011, and are at or near historical lows. Recent declines in trout abundances, coupled with increased fishing pressure and continued environmental limiting factors, have led to increased interest in modifying fishing regulations based on trout population trends. Data indicate that water flow timing, and quantity, are the main drivers of fish densities in most southwest Montana rivers. The management action to adjust fishing regulations is aimed at variables we can control that stand to limit the impacts of angling (harvest, catch-and-release of spawning fish, and redd trampling).

**Public Involvement Process & Results:** Most of the proposed regulation changes were included as part of scoping in the 2022 adaptive management plans for the associated rivers. Scoping meetings were held with the Region 3 Citizens Advisory Council, George Grant Trout Unlimited, Chuck Robbins Trout Unlimited, Skyline Sportsmen Association, Anaconda Sportsmen Club, Beaverhead Outdoors Association, Fishing Outfitters Association of Montana, Montana Trout Unlimited, Big Hole Watershed Committee, Beaverhead Watershed Committee, Big Hole River Foundation, Ruby Valley Strategic Alliance, Ruby Valley Conservation District, Beaverhead Conservation District, Mile High Conservation District, Clark Canyon Joint Irrigation Board, and the Ruby Valley Water Users Association. The adaptive management plan and the associated regulation proposals were generally well-supported, although concerns were raised over the dates associated with spawning closures. As part of the adaptive management strategy, the public also generally supported implementing less restrictive fishing regulations once the population improves, and abundances increase to levels near long-term averages.

**Alternatives & Analysis:**

- A. To adopt all or parts of the regulation proposals, which is expected to reduce impacts on the wild trout populations.
- B. To not adopt any parts of the regulation proposals, which removes expected beneficial effects of this management tool.
- C. To not adopt any parts of the regulation proposals now, but to consider implementing regulation proposals at a later commission meeting. Later adoption may still provide some benefits during fall spawning.
- D.

**Agency Recommendation & Rationale:** Based on the historically low brown and rainbow trout abundances and recent drought conditions that will likely inhibit population growth for the next several years, the department recommends adopting the Big Hole, Beaverhead, and Ruby River fishing regulations, with immediate implementation.



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**Proposed Motion:** I move the Fish and Wildlife Commission adopt the proposed fishing regulations for the Big Hole, Beaverhead, and Ruby rivers, with immediate implementation.