



July 25, 2024

Montana Trout Unlimited
312 North Higgins, Suite 200
P.O. Box 7186
Missoula, Montana 59807

Montana Fish and Wildlife Commission
1420 East Sixth Avenue
P.O. Box 200701
Helena, Montana 59620-0701

Submitted via email to: FWComm@mt.gov

Re: Montana Trout Unlimited comments on *Proposed Commission Agenda Items – August 16th Commission Meeting*

Commissioners:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide written comments on the various items that you will be considering at your August 16, 2024, Fish and Wildlife Commission meeting. We appreciate the opportunity to be involved with various stages of development of these items, working closely with Department staff and leadership in the development and implementation of many of them. Montana Trout Unlimited (MTU) wishes to offer our full support for the following agenda items that you will be considering: (1) recommendations for the *Future Fisheries Improvement Program* Summer 2024 cycle grant awards, (2) the proposed *Nongame Checkoff Work Plan*, (3) the proposed *Montana Great Outdoors Project Conservation Easement*, and (4) the proposed *Parsons Slough/Willow Creek Water Lease*. Thank you in advance for your consideration of these written comments in addition to public testimony that will be provided at your meeting on August 16th.

Founded in 1964, Montana Trout Unlimited is the only statewide grassroots organization dedicated solely to conserving, protecting, and restoring Montana's coldwater fisheries. Montana Trout Unlimited is comprised of 13 chapters across the state, from the Kootenai Valley to the Magic City, and represents more than five thousand Trout Unlimited members and supporters across the state. Our chapter leaders and members help to inform the following comments on the proposed agenda items.

(1) Future Fisheries Improvement Program (FFIP)

From the program's inception, the FFIP has been a cornerstone to making fishing better across the state by focusing on demonstratable habitat improvements that support our wild and native fisheries (cold and warm water). Throughout your time on the Commission, you have no doubt heard MTU offer our support for not only the projects in front of you, but the program and staff that support

making each one of these outstanding projects possible. The tangible results of these investments often include improving water management in a manner that supports production agriculture, creating local jobs and supporting community economic resilience, and making our fisheries better now and into the future. In addition, the FFIP serves as an important catalyst to securing other sources of federal, state, local, and private funding to see a project through to completion, made evident by the more than 3:1 funding match for this batch of proposals. Rarely does a project get funded by one source, so having FFIP dollars helps our project managers leverage additional dollars to get good work done.

Once again, MTU, our chapters, and national Trout Unlimited are partners or project leads in a number of the proposals in this batch of recommendations. We look forward to being available to answer any questions that you may have about the program generally, or these projects specifically. We also have a standing invitation to you to join us in the field to see these good projects on the ground. We urge you to adopt the recommendations made by the Review Panel.

(2) Nongame Checkoff Work Plan

MTU has been a strong advocate for the nongame species and habitat program within the Department both in front of the Commission and at the Legislature. We were pleased to support the robust funding that makes this work possible in the most recent HB2 budget discussions passed by the Montana Legislature, especially the authorizing additional monies received from the revenue associated with recreational marijuana that was dedicated to the nongame program. In our opinion, the nongame program staff are critical partners to conserving our wild and native coldwater fisheries throughout the state since most nongame species rely on healthy and intact aquatic and riparian habitats. The proposed habitat restoration, species inventory and monitoring, and associated conservation work are all important components of this work. This program has been beneficial to enhancing Arctic Grayling habitat in southwest Montana, for one example, which has helped to thwart listing attempts under the Endangered Species Act.

We appreciate that the staff bring forward their workplan to the Commission each year. It is a chance for us all to hear and celebrate the important work these staff are doing within the Department. We support the direction that is proposed here to use the increased revenue to expand the impact of the priorities that were identified in last year's workplan. We hope that you will endorse the proposal.

(3) Montana Great Outdoors Conservation Easement

MTU strongly supports the proposed Montana Great Outdoors Project and the proposed conservation easement you are considering. We believe that it is a win for our state's strong tradition of public access to lands and waters, that it supports the robust outdoor recreation economies of our local communities, promotes forest health by retaining the working landscapes in the region, and supports the aquatic and riparian health of northwest Montana's world class wild and native fisheries. We also appreciate the innovative and collaborative funding that makes this proposed conservation easement possible. MTU asks that you approve the purchase of the Montana Great Outdoors Conservation Easement.

(4) Parsons Slough/Willow Creek Water Lease

On behalf of our membership across the state and in southwest Montana specifically, Montana Trout Unlimited is writing in strong support of proposed habitat improvements through water leasing on

Willow Springs Creek and Parson's Slough. Along with local chapters, George Grant Trout Unlimited in Butte, and Chuck Robbins Trout Unlimited in Dillon, MTU has been a steadfast partner supporting habitat projects on these two critical spring creeks in the upper Jefferson watershed for more than two decades. Most recently, in 2021, MTU completed 1,750 feet of channel restoration to improve stream function and spawning habitat on Willow Springs Creek with multiple private donations.

Water quality and quantity are two of the primary goals for this project. Exchanging colder irrigation water sources with warmer water irrigation sources is a well-established strategy to improve habitat conditions for salmonids, while simultaneously serving the needs of irrigated agriculture. Stream flow and temperature are on the forefront of the challenges Montana's fisheries face in southwest Montana and elsewhere. This project addresses both of these issues, while keeping the senior water right holder whole. This is the type of win-win solution MTU strives to develop and support. To that end, MTU will commit \$2,000 for water measurement devices to assist in documenting the data necessary to implement the water lease.

The 2023 Legislature recognized the value of these kinds of innovative water leases for both supporting production agriculture and enhancing our coldwater fisheries. They increased the amount of money authorized to the Department to pursue these types of leases. We believe strongly that this project is a shining example of the good work that is made possible with these investments. We ask that you approve the proposed water lease with the landowner.

Please do not hesitate to contact us with any questions or if you need additional information regarding the comments that we have submitted (via email at clayton@montanatu.org or by phone at 406-543-0054). Again, we thank you for the opportunity to comment, and we appreciate the open public process used by the Commission on these matters.

Respectfully,



David Brooks
Executive Director
Montana Trout Unlimited



Clayton Elliott
Conservation Director
Montana Trout Unlimited

cc:

FWP Director Dustin Temple
Lands Division Administrator Bill Schenk
FFIP Administrator Michelle McGree