

I am against the proposed changes that FWP is recommending for the motorized use of the Bitterroot River. This proposal only benefits a few landowners at the sacrifice of the public sportsman and will limit access to the lower section of the Mitchell branch of the Bitterroot River. The language is vague and lacks specific details

Currently, tributaries and creeks are closed to motorized use year-round. Why is this language included in the proposed changes?

For instance, there are numerous sloughs or channels/branches of the main river. Does this apply to all of them or is this ruling specifically targeting the Mitchell branch of the Bitterroot River?

The river changes year by year and channels/branches are constantly being formed. How is the general public going to know what is opened and closed in the future if this proposal is passed?

Just to be clear, the Mitchell branch of the Bitterroot River is not a tributary. It is one of the main branches of the Bitterroot River.

In this proposal, FWP states their view that motorized use is unsafe and potentially damaging to habitat.

Where is the evidence or how has it been determined to be unsafe? Are there documented accidents that include motorized watercraft?

Current regulations limit motorized watercraft to 20 Hp. A jon boat with 20 hp jet doesn't go faster than approximately 15 mph loaded with 2 hunters and duck decoys going upstream. How does FWP consider this to be unsafe?

FWP also states that current practices are potentially damaging to the habitat. How has this been determined? A jetboat operates on the top 2 inches of the water column. Therefore, there is minimal disturbance and does not damage or disturb the stream bed. In my opinion, wading fishermen walking on the streambed cause more damage than a jetboat. If motorized use is banned, we will be walking up the channel making contact with the streambed with every footstep. How is that going to be less damaging to native fish?

I have counted over 9 places that have vehicle crossings on the Mitchell Channel between Stevensville and Bell Crossing. Is that not damaging to fish habitat?

There is also constant dredging on the channel and excavation modifications to the streambank by the landowners causing silting and debris. Is this not a concern?

Historically, jet boat usage on Mitchell branch has only occurred in the lower section where it returns to the main Bitterroot River at Stevensville.

The section I access is up from the main river 1 ½ miles, beyond that, there are man made waterfalls and fences obstructing the ability to go any further. The Mitchell branch forks twice and gets smaller in regards to waterflow and I would support restrictions placed on that section.

I would like to propose you keep the first 1 ½ miles of the Mitchell branch of the Bitterroot River open to motorized watercraft under the same regulations as the main Bitterroot River. This section of the river has the waterflow, depth, and width to support safe motorized use without damage to the streambed. This section has excellent waterfowl hunting and should be accessed by all, including hunters with physical limitations.

Thank you for the opportunity to voice my opinion as a user of the Bitterroot River.

Mark Liedtka

Comments Bitterroot Motorized Use

Comments Bitterroot Motorized Use

For the past sixteen years I have lived near the confluence of the Mitchell Slough and the Bitterroot River, one of the streams impacted by the proposed rule making. I fish and hunt on the lower three miles of the stream extensively.

The stream has an average width of less than 30 feet and can be characterized as small and shallow with well vegetated banks. The stream provides significant spawning and rearing habitat for rainbow, cutthroat and brown trout. Redds and spawning fish can be readily observed. The riparian habitat adjacent to the stream also provides important year-round habitat for moose, elk, deer, furbearers and numerous non game wildlife species.

Currently access to the stream is provided by willing landowners and the state's stream access law. Until the last three years access has been by foot and non motorized watercraft. The current ARM however allows for motorized use on the entire Bitterroot and its tributaries between October 1 and January 31 annually with a motor size restriction not to exceed 20 hp. Recently motorized use has started to occur with individuals utilizing jet outfitted outboards and long horizontal shaft propelled engines.

Due to the narrow and shallow characteristics of the stream it is not possible to utilize motorized watercraft without disturbing spawning gravels and spawning redds. I have personally observed where the boats and or their motors have disturbed both the gravel and redds.

Reduced trout numbers in the lower Bitterroot by any means is a serious concern and declining trout numbers in the lower Stevensville section of the Bitterroot has been documented by the state. There are numerous reasons that could be contributing to this decline such as low flows, drought, high water temperatures all of which are difficult to control. We can however control the type and manner of human use.

I am very supportive of the proposal to initiate rule making, the proposed change brought forward by FWP and request that you vote in favor of the proposed motion.

Tom Puchlerz Stevensville Montana

January 26, 2026

BITTERROOT RIVER

Protection Association



Bitterroot College, 103 S. 9th St. Hamilton, MT 59840

January 23, 2026

RE: Administrative Rules of Montana 12.11.610 (2) Bitterroot River

To FWP Commission:

The Bitterroot River Protection Association would like to make the following recommendation regarding the changes proposed by Montana Department of Fish Wildlife and Parks to Administrative Rules of Montana 12.11.610 (2) Bitterroot River.

The proposed rule reads as follows:

All tributaries, and natural streams, sloughs, and channels flowing into the Bitterroot River between the Woodside Crossing Fishing Access Site and the John and Nancy Owen Fishing Access Site are closed to the use of any motorized watercraft.

While we are in agreement with the intentions of the proposed rule, that is protecting the environmental integrity and health of the fisheries, we believe the wording could be improved in a way that adds clarity and enforceability to the new rule. As it reads now it is a bit vague in that it closes "channels flowing into the Bitterroot River" to the use of any motorized watercraft.

The Bitterroot River is a braided river meaning that in places it has multiple channels. If one comes to a fork in the river how is one to determine which one is flowing into the other, that is which one is open and which one is closed? If the aim is to close shallow 'side-channels' but leave the 'mainstem' open, it would be a judgement call that might be difficult to make on any given year.

This might be addressed by designating a mainstem and placing signage at the mouth of the closed channels. The signage could be changed if the river should shift from running mainly in one channel to the other as it does historically.

Our suggested changes would be:

All tributaries, and natural streams, sloughs, and **side-channels** flowing into **the mainstem of** the Bitterroot River between the Woodside Crossing Fishing Access Site and the John and Nancy Owen Fishing Access Site are closed to the use of any motorized watercraft.

Montana DEQ has adopted the Bitterroot River Nutrient Protection Plan which identifies the mainstem between Corvallis and Stevensville.

Thanks for considering our comments.

Michael Howell, Executive Director
Bitterroot River Protection Association
(406)239-4838.

Motorized Watercraft on Tributaries to the Bitterroot River

Most of the involved tributaries are less than 10 feet deep and some are less than a foot deep in places. Such shallow depth means these ecosystems cannot effectively absorb or dissipate the wake energy, which will lead to habitat destruction, reduced fish reproduction, increased fish mortality, undermined banks and collapsed shoreline habitat. Wake turbulence and propellers will stir up sediment, can damage aquatic plants, and may uproot submerged and emergent vegetation, which serve as essential nursery grounds for fish and invertebrates.

When the following potential adverse impacts on fish, wildlife, water quality, and the spread of invasive species are weighed against the desire of the relatively few individuals who might benefit by operating motorized watercraft on the subject tributaries instead of the abundant alternative waterbodies available for their boats, the public benefit of the proposed closure is undeniable. Tributaries that enhance a resource like the Bitterroot River should be protected and improved and not be jeopardized for the convenience and pleasure of a few boatowners.

Impacts on Fish Populations

- Motorized watercraft can disturb fish in shallow nesting areas, causing adults to abandon nests, which leaves eggs vulnerable to predation.
- Waves from boats can wash away fish eggs and displace juvenile fish, reducing reproductive success.
- Suspended sediment from motor wash can smother fish eggs and reduce water clarity, affecting the ability of fish to feed.
- In extremely shallow water, fish can suffer direct hits from boat propellers.

Impacts on Wildlife and Behavior

- Noise and movement from boats cause birds and other wildlife to abandon nests, exposing eggs to predators or extreme temperatures.

- The noise and commotion can cause mammals and birds to flee, leading to unnecessary energy expenditure and displacement from feeding or resting areas.

Water Quality Degradation

- Constant churning of the bottom in shallow water makes the water cloudy, which hinders photosynthesis for aquatic plants and impacts feeding behavior.
- Small motors can introduce hydrocarbons, heavy metals, and fuel into the water column, which can be toxic to fish and microscopic animals.
- The resuspension of sediments can release phosphorus stored in the bottom, promoting harmful algae growth.

Spread of Invasive Species

- Boats often carry non-native species and invasive plants, from other waterbodies on their hulls or trailers that can negatively impact native habitats.

Dear Members of the Town Council,

I am writing to strongly oppose allowing motorboats on the Mitchell River and through to the Bitterroot. These rivers are ecologically sensitive and valued for their quiet, low-impact recreation.

Motorboats pose a direct risk to fish habitat, particularly spawning redds, which can be damaged or destroyed by prop wash and increased turbulence. They also disturb resting and nesting waterfowl, with noise and repeated disruption causing birds to abandon otherwise suitable habitat.

Motorized use would significantly increase noise and alter the character of these rivers, diminishing the experience for anglers, paddlers, and residents who value them for their natural quiet.

Additionally, motorboat travel would require portaging around bridges, fences, and other obstructions, leading to bank erosion, vegetation loss, and degradation of riparian areas. These impacts reduce water quality and harm long-term river health.

Allowing motorboats through the Bitterroot would open the door to ongoing and cumulative impacts that would be difficult to reverse. I urge the town to protect these waterways by maintaining them as non-motorized rivers.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Laurence Mindel



January 27, 2026

Montana Trout Unlimited
P.O. Box 7186
Missoula, Montana 59807

Montana Fish and Wildlife Commission
P.O. Box 200701
Helena, Montana 59620-0701

RE: Fish, Wildlife, and Parks Department proposal to initiate rulemaking concerning amendments to ARM 12.11.610 to limit motorized watercraft use on tributaries of the Bitterroot River

Members of the Montana Fish and Wildlife Commission:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide written comments on the proposed administrative rule amendment by the Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks Department (FWP) to ARM 12.11.610 pertaining to closing tributaries, sloughs, and channels of the Bitterroot River to all motorized watercraft between Woodside Crossing and John and Nancy Owen Fishing Access Sites (FAS). The ask of the Commission at your upcoming February 12th meeting is to initiate rulemaking on the proposal under the Montana Administrative Procedures Act (MAPA). We have reviewed the proposal put forward by the Department and proposed to the Fish and Wildlife Commission, and we wish to go on record supporting the change to the ARM and initiation of rulemaking. We look forward to the opportunity to further discuss this important proposal in the public processes afforded to the public under MAPA.

Founded in 1964, Montana Trout Unlimited (MTU) is the only statewide grassroots organization dedicated solely to the mission of conserving, protecting, and restoring Montana's coldwater fisheries and their watersheds. We carry out our mission by advocating for stronger policies, education and outreach, and completing on-the-ground restoration projects. As the voice for healthy rivers and wild trout, MTU represents more than 5,000 members and supports in Montana, including local chapters across the state that prize our rivers, streams, their coldwater fisheries and recreation opportunities. That includes the Bitterroot Chapter of Trout Unlimited in this watershed.

Further, our combined organizations have more than five decades of direct restoration project work within the Bitterroot watershed. We have worked

THE VOICE FOR HEALTHY RIVERS & WILD TROUT SINCE 1964

with landowners, communities, and user groups to invest in cold, clean, and connected habitat that supports the native and wild fish assemblage of the river system. We take great pride in that record of collaborative restoration work and seek to ensure its success into the future.

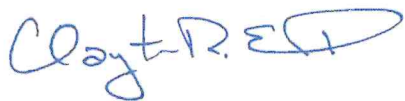
As an organization we are not opposed to motorized watercraft in general; however, we do believe that there is a time and place where those uses should and can be balanced between recreation, agriculture, safety, and conservation of the aquatic resource. We believe that the small tributaries in the heart of the Bitterroot River are one of those places where balance is necessary.

We support this rule change that will work to reduce conflict between all river users, preserve fragile riparian ecosystems and aquatic ecosystems, and help prevent the spread of aquatic invasive species. Ongoing research by the Department in other watersheds (particularly in southwest Montana) is shedding additional light on the importance of these small tributaries for spawning, juvenile trout recruitment, macroinvertebrates, and thermal refuge. What is becoming clearer in that research is that the health and function of the mainstem fisheries is reliant on the function of small tributaries, which are also most susceptible to damage from motorized watercraft. Further, our discussions have indicated that this proposal has broad support from the local landowners and communities along the Bitterroot River.

The ask in front of the Commission is to initiate rulemaking under the MAPA, which is a process that will help gather the public's viewpoints on this matter. Both robust public comment periods and a formal hearing will afford the public ample opportunities to make their viewpoint heard. It also allows the agency to make changes to the proposal before final adoption. We ask that you support moving forward with that public process at the February meeting.

Thank you again for the opportunity to offer our comments on this matter. 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 provide public comment on this important topic before the Commission.

Sincerely,



Clayton R. Elliott
Conservation and Government Affairs Director
Montana Trout Unlimited