



FISH AND WILDLIFE COMMISSION AMENDMENT

FWP proposal to be amended: 2027-2028 Fishing Regulation Proposals

Commissioner: *Ian Wargo, Region 1*

Date Received by Commission Liaison: ***Amendment #2- September 15, 2026 @ 1:52 PM***

Proposed Amendment: I move the Fish and Wildlife Commission adopt the following amendment to the proposed 2027-2028 Fishing Regulation Proposals:

Amend the Hungry Horse Reservoir Regulation as follows:

Dam to ~~Crossover Boat Ramp~~ Peters Creek Campground

Amend the South Fork Flathead River Regulations as follows:

River including headwaters and tributaries from the confluence of Youngs and Danaher Creeks downstream to ~~Crossover Boat Ramp~~ Peters Creek Campground

Add:

- Live/dead bait prohibited.

Amend:

- ***Bull trout: No intentional angling for bull trout except catch-and-release from ~~July 1~~ the third Saturday in May through July 31. A Hungry Horse/South Fork Flathead bull trout catch card must be in possession when fishing for bull trout. See Bull trout (page 13) for application information. All bull trout must be released without delay.***

Requested by FWP: ☐ **YES** ☒ **NO** (check one)

Rationale and Background: Based on local observations and anecdotal reports, one of the most significant sources of localized, angling-related bull trout mortality appears to occur in the Crossover Boat Ramp area, where substantial numbers of bull trout congregate during low-water conditions. These concentrations attract significant fishing pressure, particularly during late spring and early summer.



Although Crossover Boat Ramp currently serves as the regulatory boundary for Hungry Horse Reservoir, the area functions as a river reach during low water. Despite it being river during low water, the reservoir regulation applies downstream of Crossover and allows one bull trout per license year to be legally retained from this concentrated group of fish.

The concentration of fish and associated harvest opportunity also attract substantial catch-and-release fishing, for which dead bait is a common and highly effective method. When fish are given sufficient time to ingest the bait, deep hooking can occur and increase the risk of unintentional mortality. Local observations indicate that this occurs with some regularity in the Crossover reach. This is not to suggest that fly or artificial-lure fishing has no effect; all angling carries some risk of injury and mortality. Nevertheless, if the objective is to improve bull trout survival, the increased deep-hooking risk associated with dead bait is a preventable source of mortality that should be addressed.

Moving the regulatory boundary approximately 3.8 miles downstream to Peters Creek Campground would place the Crossover reach under the South Fork Flathead River regulations rather than the Hungry Horse Reservoir regulation. This change would eliminate legal bull trout retention in the Crossover area while preserving harvest opportunity throughout the remainder of Hungry Horse Reservoir. It is a direct and readily enforceable measure addressing a plausible source of mortality where bull trout are particularly concentrated and vulnerable. Prohibiting dead bait would further reduce deep-hooking risk and help support an expanded catch-and-release bull trout season from the third Saturday in May through July 31.

Providing catch-and-release opportunity during May and June, when water temperatures are generally colder, would also give anglers greater flexibility and help distribute fishing pressure over a longer period. Historically, many bull-trout-specific trips occurred in June. Restricting intentional angling to July concentrates that activity later in the summer, when water temperatures are higher and released fish may be more susceptible to handling stress. Beginning the season on the third Saturday in May should reduce the concentration of effort during July while preserving meaningful recreational opportunity.

More broadly, recent South Fork regulation changes have attempted to reduce angling impacts on bull trout through shorter seasons and localized area closures. This amendment represents another effort to achieve that objective through clear, reach-based restrictions. Those prior efforts are appreciated, but local reports indicate that compliance has been inconsistent outside commercially outfitted trips. Because the South Fork is remote and largely within wilderness, enforcement will always be difficult. That makes simple, clearly defined, and readily enforceable regulations especially important. If the Department intends to rely on closures and gear restrictions as conservation measures, it must prioritize enforcement and public education; otherwise, those restrictions should be reconsidered in light of their limited practical



effectiveness and the angling opportunity they displace.

Department Response:

The proposed amendment describes moving the regulatory boundary between what is considered Hungry Horse Reservoir and what is considered the South Fork Flathead River. The proposed amendment would move the line approximately 4 miles downstream. The Crossover boat ramp has been that boundary since the inception of the bull trout catch card fishery in 2004. While FWP staff do not oppose moving the line, it will require significant education and outreach, as the current boundary has been in place for over 20 years.

The proposed amendment also includes an addition prohibiting live or dead bait. The proposal describes the difficulty bait anglers may have releasing deeply hooked fish. While FWP does not dispute that statement, the proposed amendment is based on anecdotal information, and we have no data to support this claim. FWP believes the concern was addressed by the 2020 regulation change that required anglers to use single-pointed hooks only. The goal of that regulation change was to reduce handling stress on released fish, while retaining fishing opportunity to use any type of preferred gear (flies, lures, bait, etc.). The proposed amendment would eliminate the ability of anglers to use bait, including worms, which are often used by novice anglers and/or kids. FWP can commit to further evaluating preferred gear angling tactics throughout the drainage to better inform potential management implications; however, the Agency supports continuing with the current fishing regulation to allow for angling with dead bait.

Lastly, a regulation change in 2024 was made to shorten the catch-and-release bull trout season for the South Fork Flathead River in response to a declining trend in adult bull trout abundance. Adult bull trout numbers are monitored by counting the redds (spawning nests) and the 2024 survey revealed the lowest number of redds on record. This represented the second consecutive year of lowest redd counts and a downward trend since 2006. During this same period, participation in the Hungry Horse/South Fork bull trout catch-card fishery has been increasing steadily. Estimated bull trout angling pressure in the South Fork Flathead River has tripled since 2014, and FWP suspects that angling could be partially responsible for the decline in redd numbers. Angling for bull trout during the months of May and June is primarily in the non-wilderness portions of the South Fork Flathead that are easily accessible. Annual catch card surveys reveal that 44% of bull trout caught in the South Fork are caught in the months of May and June. Additionally, 59% of the bull trout caught in the South Fork are caught in the lowest portion of the permitted river. Migrating bull trout in this lower portion of the drainage are vulnerable to angling, and by shortening the season in 2024, fish can now migrate to their natal streams without being targeted by anglers. Reducing the amount of angler-induced handling stress is intended to help stabilize the downward trend in adult bull trout numbers. FWP continues to support the timing of the current bull trout fishing regulation approved by the Commission.