

On behalf of the Bitterroot Trout Unlimited Chapter Board of Directors, we submit these comments in support of the Department of Fish Wildlife and Parks proposal to restrict motorized use on the Mitchell Slough channels of the Bitterroot River. Bitterroot Trout Unlimited is devoted to conserving, protecting and restoring the Bitterroot River's cold water fishery and watershed. Our mission includes advocating for clean water and wild fish. Our members have invested time and resources in advocating for these resources and access to those resources.

The Mitchell Slough channels are unique, small, channels of the Bitterroot River, a highly valued fishery and aquatic ecosystem. The channels provide exceptional opportunities for wade fishing, wildlife observation, waterfowl hunting, floating and other non mechanized recreational use. The increasing use of motorized watercraft on the Mitchell Slough channels threatens these values through increased user and land owner conflict, decreased public safety, and habitat degradation.

Mitchell Slough is no stranger to user-related conflicts and protracted stream access battles. We believe that the proposal before the Commission will protect public safety, reduce user and landowner conflict, protect the resource and safeguard recreational opportunities for future generations.

1.Public Safety, User and Landowner Conflict

The Slough's confined channel character, variable flows, and growing recreational use create safety concerns where motorized and non-motorized users share limited space. Conflicts between motorized users and other recreationists have been reported and observed on the Slough. Restricting motorized craft would also reduce potential conflicts between motorized users and landowners, many whose homes are within 150 yards of the Slough.

2.Protection of Fish and Aquatic Habitat

Motorized watercraft can disturb aquatic habitat, increase sedimentation, damage sensitive banks and vegetation, and negatively affect fish populations and aquatic invertebrates. Mitchell Slough's relatively narrow channels and sensitive habitat make it particularly vulnerable to these impacts. If localized studies or ecological assessments are needed to monitor conditions in the Slough over time, FWP should spearhead that research. Affected landowners and local advocacy groups such as BRTU would be available to assist in such efforts.

3.Preservation of Recreational Characteristics

Mitchell Slough has long been used primarily for wade fishing, floating by non-motorized craft, bird watching, and other unobtrusive recreational activities. Motorized use is incompatible with the peaceful character of the Slough and diminishes the experience for the vast majority of users. Local landowners have observed motorized craft users moving up the Slough at high speed, producing large wakes, illuminating the entire river bottom with large lights, moving large stream bed material, removing small diameter stream bank vegetation and gravels being displaced.

4.Consistency with Conservation and Management Goals

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks has a longstanding responsibility to protect public safety and safeguard recreational opportunities. This proposed motorized closure would be consistent with precautionary management principles and with similar protections applied to sensitive waterways throughout Montana.

While we are pleased that the original proposal has been refined to the Mitchell Slough channels, we request that the Department assess the entire Bitterroot River above Stevensville where similar user and landowner conflict, public safety and resource values may be at stake.

We appreciate the opportunity to comment.

David Ward, President

Bitterroot Chapter of Trout Unlimited

September 22,2026



September 24, 2026

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

Montana Fish and Wildlife Commission
ATTN: Final Adoption of Bitterroot River Motorized Closure
P.O. Box 200701
Helena, Montana 59620-0701

Submitted via online form at fwp.mt.gov

Re: Montana Trout Unlimited written comments on *Final Adoption of Bitterroot River Motorized Closure*

To Whom It May Concern:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments on the *Final Adoption of Bitterroot River Motorized Closure* item before the Montana Fish and Wildlife Commission (Commission) at their October meeting. We appreciated the opportunity to be involved in the rulemaking process associated with this proposal as well as discussions with state and regional Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP) staff, public meetings, and stakeholder discussions. We wish to continue our participation in the regulation development process by offering formal written feedback as requested by the Commission on this proposal. Thank you in advance for your consideration of these comments.

Founded in 1964, Montana Trout Unlimited (MTU) 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 and represents more than five thousand Trout Unlimited members and supporters. Several of our chapter leaders and local members, particularly those in the Bitterroot Chapter of Trout Unlimited, helped inform the comments on the proposed changes that are found below.

MTU supports the final adoption of this rule to prohibit motorized use in the Mitchell Slough channels while maintaining motorized use, twenty horsepower or less, in the main river during the fall waterfowl season. We do believe that there would be benefit to including a map and a written description of the proposed area where motorized use would be prohibited that is made available to the public prior to

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implementation.

The Mitchell slough side channels are important side channels of the Bitterroot River and provide unique habitat to the main river system fishery. These channels provide important spawning and rearing habitat, unique wade angling opportunities, as well as wildlife habitat for game and nongame species alike. The increase in motorized watercraft is not congruent with these values and threatens public safety as well as creates user conflict. Motorized watercraft also degrade the channels, increase sedimentation, and damage the important fish and wildlife habitat.

While we offer our full support for the proposal in front of you for final adoption, we do hope that this creates the opportunity to continue the dialogue about impacts of increased access to other important channels and tributaries of the Bitterroot made possible by technological advancements. These also create similar issues of user conflict, public safety, and resource degradation. MTU appreciates the careful balance here in maintaining and enhancing public access and the use of our public waterways with necessary restrictions.

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 kelly@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 Department to make these changes through the rulemaking process.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Kelley Willett". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Kelley" being more prominent than the last name "Willett".

Kelley Willett
Acting Executive Director
Montana Trout Unlimited