



# TROUT LINE

Newsletter from the Montana Council of Trout Unlimited

**MTU 2022 Annual Report Inside!**



Yellowstone River, Paradise Valley, MT

**SPRING 2023**



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plus... Chapter News and more!

## MONTANA TU'S MISSION

is to conserve, protect and restore Montana's world-class coldwater fisheries and their watersheds.

Founded in 1964, Montana Trout Unlimited is a statewide grassroots organization comprised of 13 chapters and approximately 4,000 TU members.

[www.montanatu.org](http://www.montanatu.org)

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## FROM THE CHAIR: Brian Neilsen

Shoveling and tough road conditions aside, it's been a fantastic winter. All of us who care about the health of our streams, rivers and trout have been thankful for the snowpack since it started accumulating last October! Montana Trout Unlimited has been equally thankful for all you do as members and supporters in the past year.

MTU's fiscal year ended on March 31st and thanks to your generosity of time, talent and treasure, I'm happy to report we are healthy and moving into this next year with increased vigor. You've heard us talk about how education, advocacy and on-the-ground conservation are the core ways we achieve our mission and with your help, we have expanded our work in all three.

As a cost-savings measure, a nod to your overflowing mailboxes, and our small effort to use less paper, we've inserted our annual report into this Trout Line, so my letter today serves as an intro and highlights to both.

After a pandemic-induced hiatus, MTU reconvened our multi-day, overnight Youth Conservation and Fly Fishing Camp at Georgetown Lake, as well as brought our day clinics to far-flung coldwater basins across the state. In these settings, we engaged Montana kids in climate awareness and the conservation tools for building resilience into streams and rivers, along with a healthy dose of fly-tying, casting and angling fun.

Working with TU project managers and MTU's Jefferson Watershed Program, we ratcheted up stream restoration projects on public and private land in places like the Judith, Jefferson, Blackfoot, Bitterroot, Clark Fork and Gallatin Rivers. We continued to partner with Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks to restore native trout in southwest Montana and protect them statewide. Our longstanding priority of protecting Montana's treasured Smith River continued to meet with success, as we helped lead the legal effort that resulted in a district court victory to revoke the mine's permit. We are now preparing to defend that high-profile win in the Montana Supreme Court on June 21 thanks to the help of Smith River lovers across the state. Your help has also allowed us to move forward with the effort to protect the public lands within the Smith River watershed from future mining, such as the 50-year mining complex on public lands the company has envisioned.

The 2023 Montana Legislature recently adjourned and MTU has been hard at work



MTU State Council Chairman Brian Neilsen

every day of the session to ensure that policy on everything from water quality standards and water rights to mine permitting and natural resource agency budgets favor healthy streams, rivers and trout. We are one of the few non-profits whose staff moves to Helena full time during the session. Because of your voices, we defeated an effort early in the legislative session to undermine Montana's best-in-the-nation Stream Access Law!

As you read through the highlights of this past year in the Annual Report, know that what moves the needle for us and our work is having so many new and old friends keeping us healthy as an organization, inspiring us to work hard for trout every day, and raising your voices when we call on you. As the long winter of '22/'23 finally turns to spring and anglers dust off boats, waders and rods, all indicators are that more people will continue to love Montana's wild waters and wild trout just as drought is becoming the new norm. Thanks to everyone who understands that facing these impacts requires a personal effort to fish responsibly and a collective effort to support coldwater conservation. Thank you for helping Montana Trout Unlimited to conserve, protect and restore the places we love in the face of climate change and increased pressure. You matter now more than ever.

David Brooks  
Executive Director

Brian Neilsen  
Chair

## Water and budget battles dominate 2023 MT Legislature by Clayton Elliott

With historic budget surplus and a decisive Republican majority, a main focus of the 68th Montana Legislature has been state funding. With the session now behind us, we're proud of the work we completed. For Montana Trout Unlimited the session has meant both robust defense and measurable progress on key mission related objectives both in the world of state budgeting and policy.

Arguably MTU's top policy priority this session has been related to water quantity legislation. The worst water bill of the session, one dealing with revisions to the exempt well statute, was tabled in the House Natural Resources Committee. Thank you to all that sent comments and made phone calls to legislators on the committee to oppose HB 642 by Rep. Casey Knudsen (R-Malta). If passed, this legislation would have gutted the limited protections in Montana water law that prevent egregious use of wells without water right permits from adversely affecting other water users and instream flow. In short, it would have been a giveaway of water to developers.

We're celebrating passage of HB114, by Rep. Sue Vinton (R-Lockwood), which improves the process for acquiring or changing water right permits by reducing timelines and providing for increased efficiency in analyzing impacts, all while protecting senior water users. Unfortunately, another important water bill that we worked on through a collaborative interim stakeholder process was tabled late in the game. SB 72 by Sen. Steve Fitzpatrick (R-Great Falls) would have improved enforcement of water rights, while better protecting instream flow. We are committed to revisiting this effort after this session for future legislative consideration.

MTU continues to spend a tremendous amount of energy supporting smart state funding of our public agencies to carry out the work of managing Montana's fish, wildlife, water, and natural resources.

We are proud of the work that we have accomplished in the state budget. Some trout-friendly pieces of the funding pie that we worked on are:

- Support for Montana's fisheries managers at Fish, Wildlife, and Parks as well as a first-time allocation for instream flow leases. We also supported investment on nongame wildlife resources, which will have significant positive impacts to aquatic resources and habitat.
- Increases to important grant-making programs like the Future



Fisheries Improvement Program and Fish Connectivity that support restoration efforts from groups like Trout Unlimited of wild and native fish populations.

- Important investment in Montana's water resource infrastructure that increases the state's ability to manage water to protect stream flows, including a new grant-making program for reducing nonpoint source pollution.
- A nearly \$1.5 million investment in Montana's stream gauge network.

This session saw threats to Montana's best-in-the-nation public access law. Thanks

to the robust response from anglers and other outdoor enthusiasts across Montana, we were successful in scuttling those efforts. Most notably was SB 497, sponsored by Steve Fitzpatrick (R-Great Falls), which allowed for the closure of some traditional access routes, while making it harder and more expensive to defend stream access in the courts. That bill was resoundingly killed on the Senate floor with robust bipartisan opposition, mostly thanks to your voices. Once again Montana stream access law will remain intact.

We entered this session hearing lots of talk and concern about Constitutional amendments, some of which could have taken aim at bedrock protections for the health of Montana's streams and rivers. No Constitutional amendments will advance from the legislative process.

The legislature adjourned the first week of May. We started our full-time work at the Capitol facing thousands of possible bills. This recap only covers the highlights (or lowlights) of our legislative work. If you have questions or need additional information, reach out to Clayton at [clayton@montanatu.org](mailto:clayton@montanatu.org). For a full tally of the session visit [montanatu.org/legislature](http://montanatu.org/legislature).



## THANK YOU!

Every legislative session, we rely on your voices to help advance good wild and native trout policy and defend against threats to our coldwater fisheries. Without your calls, emails, and advocacy, none of this important work would be possible! Cheers!

## Recovering Native Westslope Cutthroat Trout by Chris Edgington

Last fall, as the aspens were turning brilliant yellow and orange, with elk bugling in the distance, MTU completed three projects to protect irreplaceable Westslope cutthroat trout (WCT) genetics in headwater streams southwest of Dillon. The expansive backdrop of the basin and range topography of the region provides not only the open space needed for herds of elk and pronghorn to wander freely but a place for reflection.

By 1999, I had caught a few bass and panfish with a fly rod but I was not yet an accomplished trout angler. It was then, as a student in fisheries biology at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, I was introduced to the stunning golden hues of the WCT and their vivid red slash. That introduction came as part of my research on native species conservation. I became fascinated with the cutting-edge WCT conservation in Yellowstone National Park and Montana. Removing an invasive fish population for the reintroduction of a native species was novel to me. It's been almost 25 years since my initial research on WCT, and I am still intrigued by, and enthused to be a part of MTU's role in this burgeoning success story.

In 1997, a petition was submitted to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to list WCT as "threatened" under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). At that time, status reviews found that WCT were "not warranted" for a listing, due in large part to the data gathered by Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) biologist, Brad Shepard (1952-2021). Knowing future efforts to list the WCT under the ESA were possible, a Memorandum of Understanding and Conservation Agreement for WCT in Montana (MOU) was developed in 1999 and updated in 2007. MTU is a signatory on the MOU, along with several federal and state agencies, tribes, NGOs, industry organizations, resource users, and private landowners.

FWP's most comprehensive recovery plan is the WCT Conservation Strategy for the Missouri Headwater of Southwest Montana. It is a four-part, iterative approach, intending to reestablish WCT to 20% of their native headwaters. The highest priority conservation action is to protect genetically unaltered populations like we

did last fall. Now that most of Southwest Montana's remnant WCT populations are secured, more resources are going towards reintroducing cutthroat, and where appropriate, Arctic grayling, into reclaimed streams like Selway Creek in the Red Rock watershed, or the more widely known French Creek in the Big Hole drainage on the Mount Haggin Wildlife Management Area. After three years of non-native fish

removal, French Creek will soon provide over 40 miles of publicly-accessible native fish habitat, where WCT will thrive.

native range. With a nod to the giants whose shoulders we stand on, we are grateful to continue our conservation efforts for Westslope cutthroat trout and all native coldwater species.



A perfect native male Westslope cutthroat that ate a dry fly on an April day.

removal, French Creek will soon provide over 40 miles of publicly-accessible native fish habitat, where WCT will thrive.

FWP is building on the success of the methodology established in the Upper Missouri conservation strategy. Following their hire of an additional Native Species Coordinator, whose focus is on salmonids, FWP organized a WCT conference in Missoula in February. This well-attended event attracted all-stars in the WCT conservation community, including MTU, multiple state and federal agencies, academics, private landowners, and NGOs. The desire to expand conservation efforts was palpable. Fostering the momentum at this meeting, David Brooks joined the first-ever North-Central Montana WCT conservation strategy meeting in Great Falls in April, reaffirming MTU's prominent role in native fish conservation in the state.

There is still significant progress to be made to reach the conservation strategy's goal of WCT swimming in 20% of their

## SMITH MINE UPDATE

The Montana Supreme Court will hear the appeal to our MEPA/MMRA victory on Wednesday, June 21, 2023 at 9:30am in the Montana Supreme Court, Joseph P. Mazurek Justice Building, Helena, Montana.

We have been awaiting this announcement and our ready to defend our case. The Court often provides remote options for viewing hearings to please stay tuned to your email for that information.

Thank you all for your support! We wouldn't be here without you.



2022  
Annual  
Report





# MTU IN 2022 BY THE NUMBERS

13 chapters

5,000+ members & supporters

10,000+ social media followers



7 Mini-grants  
\$19,303 in funding  
2 restoration projects  
3 youth programs  
2 monitoring projects  
in 7 Montana watersheds

## Jefferson Watershed



Helped water users meet emergency minimum flows for  
55 days of the 56-day drought plan (98%)

## Westslope Cutthroat Recovery



100% genetic  
preservation on

17.6 miles of  
3 headwater streams

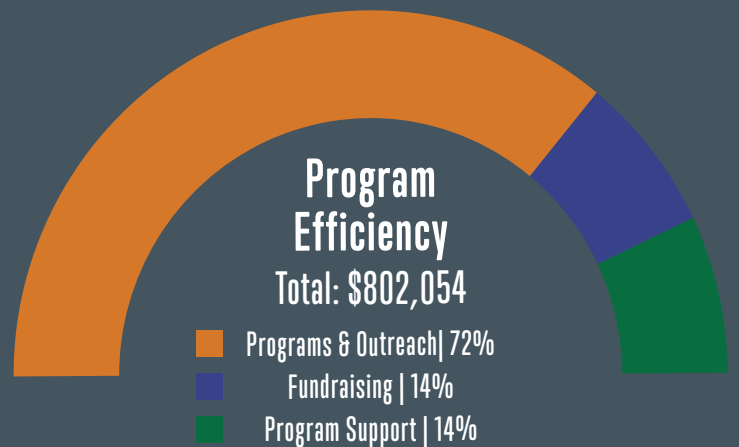
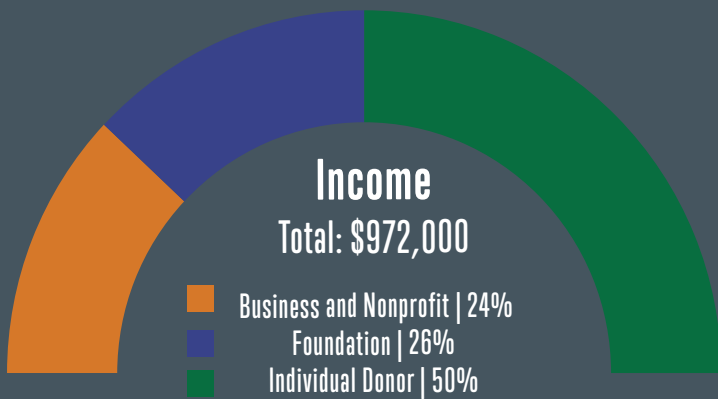
## Middle Fork of the Judith

3/4 mile of dirt road moved away from river  
313 feet of bank restored  
16 ATV crossings removed



# Montana Legislature

- 1 Full Time employee in Helena the entire 90-day session
- Over 100 bills tracked out of 1500+ introduced
- Secured over \$250 million to support fisheries stewardship
- Defeated MAJOR threats to stream access and instream flows
- Simplified instream flow application process
- Defended the Selenium Standard for Kootenai River



318% increase in number of annual donations since 2013

MTU Donors in 38 of 50 states

THANK YOU! Generous individuals, businesses, nonprofits, and foundations helped MTU stay healthy in our fiscal year that ended 3.31.23. You make our work possible!

MTU's financial statements are reviewed annually by Boyle, Deveny & Meyer PC, an independent CPA firm in Missoula.

## Youth Education



First overnight camp post-COVID

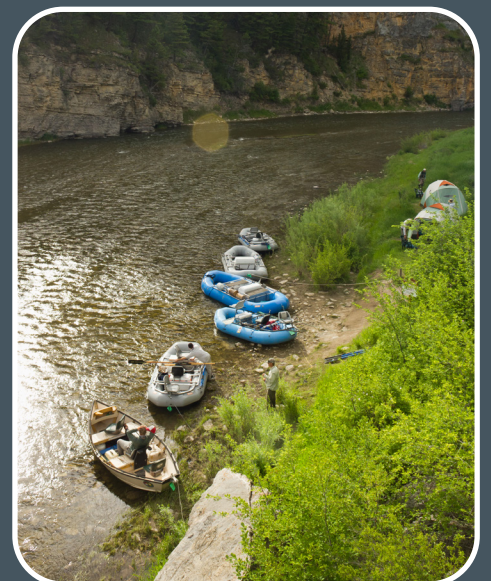
1:1 camper/volunteer ratio

Over 50 kids reached across Montana in 2022

## No Smith River Mine

Victorious in District Court on all claims resulting in revocation of mine permit.

Our opponents appeal will be heard by the Montana Supreme Court on June 21, 2023.





**CONSERVE**



**PROTECT**



**RESTORE**



## Caring for Confluences: Wild and Native Trout Refugia by David Brooks



Confluence of the Blackfoot and Clark Fork rivers, Milltown, MT

Last summer I spent some time snorkeling the confluence of Rattlesnake Creek and the Clark Fork River in the heart of downtown Missoula. Even on an 85° afternoon and wearing a 4mm wetsuit, I had to return to the bank to bask in the sun on warm rocks after less than half an hour in the water. The same cold creek water pouring into the mainstem that chilled me explained the healthy presence of native and wild trout finning in and out of the soft water behind rocks immediately downstream of the creek's mouth. And the abundance of those native fish, along with wild rainbows, is why that spot attracts anglers throughout the day, every day. Angling below the creek confluence is so common that it's been rumored for more than two decades that the hotel and restaurant adjacent to the spot pay someone to stand there casting a fly rod, the living version of a perfect Montana angling postcard.

Confluences, like where the Rattlesnake Creek pours into the Clark Fork River, are critical to river ecology because they often are where rivers experience the most change and, hence, have increased habitat variability. The year-round, as well as spring flushing of tributaries fills the river below them with nutrients, wood, and varying gravel sizes, and changing depths and flow velocities. Trout like them for all these reasons.

These tributary mouths literally feed mainstem rivers. Research on confluences shows that they support denser and more

diverse macroinvertebrate populations than similar reaches of the same rivers and, thus, attract greater diversity and higher population densities of fish than much of a mainstem river.

Even when their main focus isn't food, fish need confluences. During seasonal migrations, trout pause for hours or days at a confluence to rest in the cold water (relative to mainstem river temperatures) before venturing up the tributary to spawn. Or, like an ultra-marathon runner stopping at an aid station to eat, drink and rest, trout will "stage" (take breaks) along an upstream migration run in a mainstem river at multiple tributary mouths before reaching their natal spawning stream.

Confluences also help trout beat the summer heat. Outside of spawning runs, salmonids hang out at coldwater confluences, especially during periods of low, warm water to reduce metabolic stress and parasite infection. As thermal refugia, confluences will only continue to become more important to trout as global temperatures rise.

For all of these reasons, MTU is teaming up with MT Fish, Wildlife & Parks biologists and University of Montana fisheries staff to study the confluence of Rattlesnake Creek and its fishery and angling use in the service of managing this stretch of river and the creek for healthy native and wild trout. We will continue previous years' efforts to place

and monitor an array of temperature gauges in the confluence area to measure the plume of cold water throughout the summer, hence the extent of the trout refuge. This angler and temperature data will feed into future efforts to tag and track fish movement in the confluence, up Rattlesnake Creek or to other Clark Fork River tributaries. On-site angler surveys will be conducted during high-use angling periods. The survey will focus on angler characteristics (especially frequency of angling at this location), angling methods and catch rates for native and wild trout. MTU will also help to hire a UM intern to record data on angling behavior and methods to better estimate fishing pressure, ground truth catch rates for different species, quantify length of time anglers fight, handle, and expose fish to air, as well as other factors that cause or reduce fish stress such as using nets versus dragging them onto shore or taking photos of fish out of the water. While this specific work is aimed at evaluating the effectiveness of current management and inform future directions in this location, it will also serve as a pilot for evaluation and understanding of similar opportunities for more nuanced trout management at major stream confluences across the region and Montana coldwater fisheries.



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# Philanthropy Spotlight

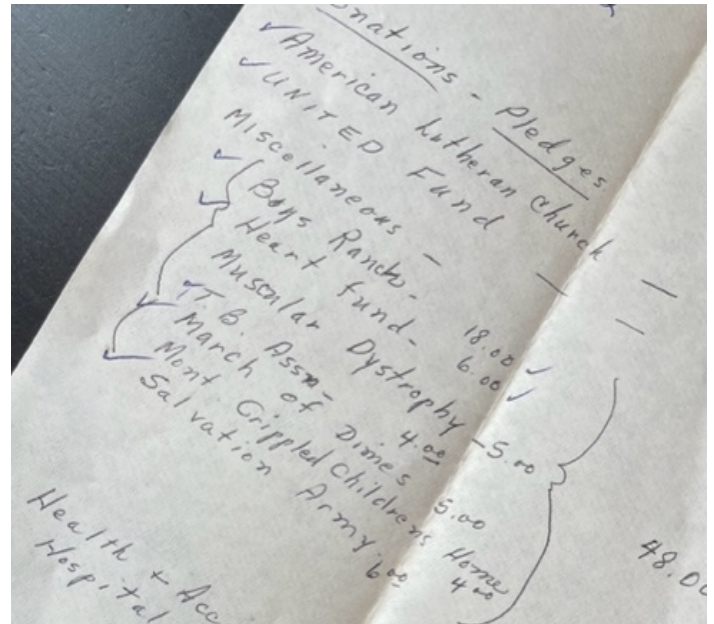
## Talking about your philanthropy inspires others by Kelley Willett

The archeology of cleaning out a loved one's home is frustrating and surprising and poignant all at once. When my favorite aunt died, one of the many boxes in her basement contained paperwork from my grandparents, who died decades ago. One sheet struck me: the wrinkled page in my Granddad's hand listing charitable contributions.

My granddad was a flour mill chemist in Billings, Montana. He worked hard, raising four kids on what I'd imagine was a middle-class salary in the 1940s and '50s. I don't know what that salary number was, but this found page reveals that he and my grandma made philanthropy a priority. Looks like their health insurance was \$90, and in that same period of time (a year, a quarter?) they gave \$393 to causes they cared about. I hope that I have inherited their desire to help people and causes I care about with contributions of my time or money.

Nearly 1,000 donations were made to Montana Trout Unlimited (MTU) in the fiscal year that ended 3.31.23. One thousand times people thought about something bigger than themselves, and maybe even made a list, and then gave money to MTU. This simple act over and over is what allows 6 dedicated staff (with the help of countless volunteers) to make sure Montana fisheries will be around and healthy for the next generation.

If the promise of future clean water is not enough, consider a 2008 study by Harvard



Business School professor, Michael Norton. He and his colleagues found that giving money lifted participants' happiness more than spending it on themselves. During this time when much of the news is negative, taking action that both makes me feel better and helps a cause I care about seems like a good move.

I don't know if my grandparents were motivated by warm fuzzies, or felt an obligation, or had seen their parents give. I wish I had asked them why they picked the non-profits they did, and how they decided how much to give. I can tell you what my Granddad's favorite fly was, and which reach of the Boulder he thought was the fishiest, but like many matters of money, his philanthropy wasn't something we talked about and now will always be a mystery to me. Maybe the next time you give, tell someone why - why that cause, that place, that campaign matters to you - could be just the inspiration that person needs to make her own list.



Do you have the original Monte Dolack-MTU license plate on your bumper?

Get the trout license plate that matters!  
(Montana Council of Trout Unlimited)

Ask for it at your local county treasurer's office when you renew your registration or if you purchase a new vehicle!

# Chapter News

## Big Blackfoot Chapter

BBCTU is pleased to announce that Ryen Neudecker (BBCTU Program Manager/Fisheries Biologist) will receive the 2023 Watershed Stewardship Award from the Montana Watershed Coordination Council. This award recognizes and honors individuals who exemplify excellence and commitment to watershed conservation, restoration and enhancement in Montana. In project news, we continue to work on 2023 restoration planning. We hope to implement additional projects on Nevada Creek, Poorman Creek, Douglas Creek and Benedict Creek this field season. Ryen is also working with BLM and USFS to access Federal Infra-structure funding for stream restoration work. Finally, the BBCTU 2023 Annual Meeting will be held at Double Arrow Resort on May 4th. All are welcome but please RSVP with Ryen Neudecker or Jim Stutzman if you plan to attend.

## Kootenai Chapter

The The Kootenai Chapter is busy monitoring water quality and sampling data on tributaries flowing into Lake Kocanusa and the Kootenai River surrounding the selenium issue. With help from a mini grant and hopefully continued help from mini-grants the project will continue this summer. At present we're seeking funding to help accessorize the probe which is critical in collecting more specific data.

## Joe Brooks Chapter

The Joe Brooks Chapter hosted the Fly Fishing Film Tour on April 15 in Livingston with great attendance. It was great seeing you all in person once again! The chapter is currently seeking new board members to guide our work and develop new programs and projects for our local area. If you're interested in getting more involved in the Livingston area, email Matt Swann at swannmatt@yahoo.com.

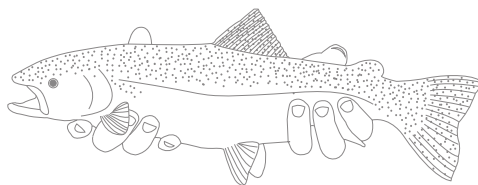
## Madison-Gallatin Chapter

Madison-Gallatin Trout Unlimited would like to extend a big "Thank You!" to all of the sponsors and donors who helped make our recently held 51st Annual TroutFest Banquet a great success. We are so grateful for the incredible support that keeps our conservation work going

here in SW Montana...for the fish! Our chapter is wrapping up our Spring General meeting season and is looking forward to summer events. MGTU is a sponsor for the upcoming Bozeman Sunrise Rotary Free Kids Fishing Day at Glen Lake Rotary Park. We are also happy to collaborate with the Gallatin Watershed Council to sponsor a Spring River Clean up that will target 12 sites in the Gallatin Valley. Both of these events will be held on Saturday, May 20th. We are also collaborating with the Gallatin Invasive Species Alliance to be a sponsor of the Annual Gallatin River Weed Pull & Clean Up on June 10th. MGTU is busy planning several fishing outings with local veterans and our Annual Lower Madison River Clean Up set for August 19th. Send us an e-mail if you'd like to get involved with one or more of these upcoming events.

## Missouri River Fly Fishers Chapter

The Missouri River Flyfishers Trout Unlimited Chapter 406 has a couple more events coming up before breaking for summer! On May 12, MRF will host the Montana Fishing Film Festival at Wedsworth Hall in Cascade. Doors open at 6, films at 6:30. There will be door prizes, and a no-host bar and food truck. Tickets are \$15; on sale on our website and Facebook page. On June 3, we will join Montana FWP and Walleyes Unlimited in hosting Kids Fishing Day at Wadsworth Pond - details to come. Volunteer fly-tyers needed! MRF is also currently selling raffle tickets for a Slipstream 96 raft - details are available on our website and Facebook page. Tickets are \$50 and we're only selling 200. Winner will be drawn at the May 12 event, unless not all tickets sell by then. We are also having a membership drive: at the May 12 event, we will draw from all active MRF members and give away a Tom Maguire trout carving, so renew your membership or join TU now!



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# TROUT LINE SPRING 2023

## UPCOMING EVENTS

[www.montanatu.org](http://www.montanatu.org)

**5/20/23** Gallatin Spring Clean Up and Kids Fishing Day  
Bozeman, MT

**6/3/23** Kids Fishing Day  
Great Falls, MT

**6/10/23** Gallatin River Annual Weed Pull  
Bozeman, MT

**6/19/23** Smith River Mine Appeal Hearing  
Helena, MT

**7/9/23** MTU Conservation Youth Camp  
Georgetown Lake, MT

**8/19/23** Lower Madison River Clean Up  
Dillon, MT

WANT 5,000 MONTANA TU MEMBERS TO HEAR ABOUT YOUR EVENT?

Please contact the Missoula office at 406-543-0054 or [info@montanatu.org](mailto:info@montanatu.org) to get the word out through Montana TU.



[www.facebook.com/montanatu](http://www.facebook.com/montanatu)



[@montanatroutunlimited](https://www.instagram.com/montanatroutunlimited)