



# TROUT LINE

Newsletter from the Montana Council of Trout Unlimited



Floaters on the Smith River near Indian Springs  
PC: B.Pfeiffer

**SPRING 2022**



## THIS ISSUE:

- Smith River Wins In Court pgs. 4-5
- FWP Rewrites Fisheries Plan pg. 3
- Drought Management pg. 6
- Chat with Monte Dolack, Tracking Pike, Chapter News, and more!

# SPRING/22

## 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)

**TROUT LINE** is published quarterly by Montana Trout Unlimited.

Printed on recycled paper using eco-friendly inks.

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## FROM THE CHAIRMAN: Brian Neilsen

We've all hit the water at dawn with the expectation of a long, fish-filled day, only to find ourselves facing the fading light of dusk with nary a nibble to celebrate. Yet, we cast again and scan the surface for the frenzy of a late-evening bite. That's not unlike the patient, determined MTU efforts that have led to conservation victories featured in this newsletter edition.

First and foremost, congratulations to everyone from the grassroots on up who has stuck to our goal of defending the Smith River from the risks of a large, industrial copper mine in its trout spawning headwaters. The recent Meagher County District Court decision that upheld ALL of our legal challenges to the Black Butte Copper Mine project is a testament to nearly 8 years of tenacious work by MTU staff, partner organizations and everyone who loves this river and warrants some special attention herein.

This edition also features information about how you can help MTU defend Montana's gold standard of wild trout management by commenting on Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks's revision of the Statewide Fishery Plan. Upholding the wild trout management and ensuring that we protect and restore healthy habitat rather than stock our streams and rivers has been a nearly 50-year legacy, which we aim to carry forward to future generations. Similarly, MTU's efforts to create resiliency

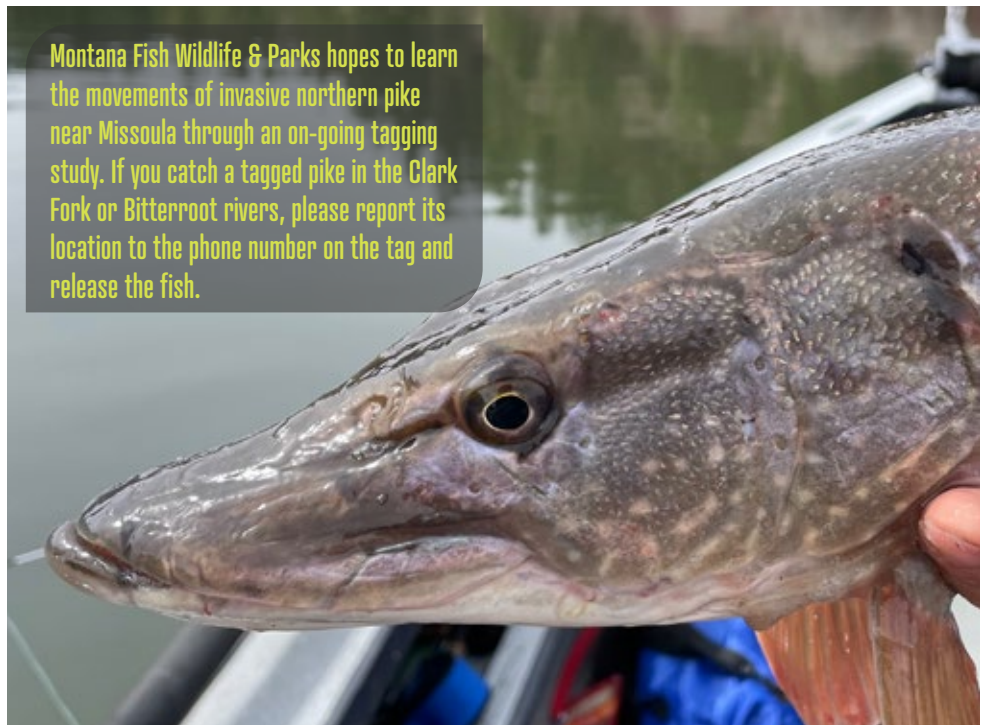


MTU State Council Chairman Brian Neilsen

in our streams in the face of climate change by helping implement long-term drought management plans, like in the Jefferson watershed, are works of endurance.

We are proud of our doggedness and trust that you share in these types of marathon efforts, as well as celebrate when they succeed. Not unlike hooking that trout with just enough light left in the sky to revel in its glistening colors and the drops of water it splashes skyward, like flinging up the night's first stars.

Montana Fish Wildlife & Parks hopes to learn the movements of invasive northern pike near Missoula through an on-going tagging study. If you catch a tagged pike in the Clark Fork or Bitterroot rivers, please report its location to the phone number on the tag and release the fish.



## FWP embarks on Statewide Fisheries Plan rewrite by David Brooks and Clayton Elliott

Sooner than anticipated, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) is revising the Statewide Fishery Management Program and Guide (the Plan). The stakes are high for coldwater conservation in this revision. MTU is tracking the latest information on how you can weigh in on behalf of our wild and native trout to ensure this document wisely guides the state's fishery management decisions for the next four years.

The Plan summarizes the major goals, challenges, and initiatives for the different statewide fisheries programs that FWP operates across the state. It articulates management priorities and approaches for fisheries management within 40 major watersheds across the state. For each drainage, the Plan describes the general geography and ecosystem, the historic and current fishery, fishing access, water quantity and quality dynamics, and management issues and priorities. For example, management priorities for the Big Hole River center on conservation of arctic grayling and westslope cutthroat, while monitoring and maintaining healthy populations of wild rainbow and brown trout. To manage for those priorities in the Big Hole, the Plan recommends continuing to focus on drought management plan implementation, increasing river flows, and developing spawning habitat.

If you're asking: did we not just adopt a new fish plan? The answer is yes. The current Plan was adopted in 2018 and was set to run for ten years. However, the last legislature passed a bill (SB 360) to require a review of that plan by January 1, 2023. FWP decided to rethink their overall approach and chose a new four-year review cycle to allow more prescriptive and adaptive management strategies.

MTU opposed revising the current Plan five years early, but it is critical that we now take the lead in this process to ensure coldwater conservation priorities are being maintained and strengthened, NOT weakened. Montana's wild trout management is unique, revered, and didn't happen by accident. Nearly 50 years ago, FWP biologists had the foresight to propose ending the expensive practice of stocking streams and rivers with hatchery-raised trout. By ending an expensive stocking program in favor of focusing on habitat protection and restoration, FWP invested in generations of healthy, resilient trout

populations and aquatic ecosystems, as well as cleaner, more abundant water for everyone. FWP's wild trout management policy became and continues to be the gold standard of scientific fisheries management nationwide, not to mention a fundamental part of Montana's iconic outdoor heritage and economy.

Managing for the impacts of climate

### HOW YOU CAN HELP

- **Develop priorities that you and your chapter want to see in the plan for your local watersheds.**
- **Invite your local fisheries biologist to attend a chapter meeting to talk about your watershed in the statewide fish plan.**
- **Attend public meetings (schedule forthcoming). Speak up about your priorities!**
- **Submit written comments on behalf of yourself and chapter.**
- **Ask your fishing partners and friends to submit written comments.**
- **Email us at [info@montanatu.org](mailto:info@montanatu.org).**

change, persistent drought, increasing development in our watersheds, and growing threats of invasive species are the modern-day challenges facing our fisheries managers. The Plan is where this wild trout management rubber hits the road and FWP commits to continuing its legacy of having the healthiest, most self-sustaining coldwater fisheries in the country. We aim to make sure the Plan provides guidelines for dealing with concerns like drought and climate change by setting scientifically sound angling restrictions such as Hoot Owl and flow enhancement strategies. We also will help ensure the Plan creates an efficient, well-vetted process for native fish restoration projects to be approved. Most importantly, we expect the Plan to manage for wild and native fish by suppressing invasive fish and species (especially illegal

introductions) as vigorously as possible, sets the stage for fishing regulations that value both fishery health and angler opportunity, and keeps our streams and rivers free of costly and dangerous hatchery stocked fish. This Plan must be about upholding FWP's legacy, not tearing it down.

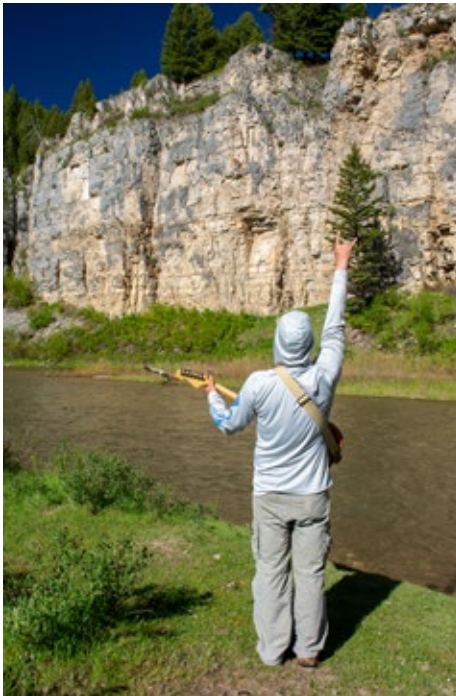
One goal that has been identified under FWP's new approach is to be more adaptive, nimble, and engaged with the public on how it manages fisheries across the state. As such, we understand that the Plan will be more prescriptive within each watershed than in the past. For example, in determining that a specific watershed will be managed as a wild and native cutthroat and bull trout priority stream, the Plan would set the stage for prioritizing habitat restoration, competitive species reductions, and drought restrictions for that watershed.

We expect the Department staff to begin a public scoping process in early summer of 2022. Most regional fisheries staff have already been completing the ideas, criteria and frameworks to guide their watersheds, which will be available for review and comment in community scoping sessions. The goal is to have the Fish and Wildlife Commission do another round of statewide scoping at its October meeting. A full draft plan would be released in December of 2022 with a vote on final approval at the April 2023 Commission meeting.

Check out the sidebar on how you can help us stand up for wild and native trout in the new Plan. There is a lot more information coming, and you can expect to hear from us early and often, including opportunities for you to weigh in with managers. In the meantime, visit [fwp.mt.gov](http://fwp.mt.gov) to look through the current plan to learn more and better prepare yourself and your chapter. Public engagement opportunities should also be posted on this website, and we will be calling on you to act this summer for our wild and native fish.



# The Smith River Wins In Court! by David Brooks, story map by Bill Pfeiffer



After more than 8 years, your efforts to protect Montana's Smith River earned a big win. The Smith River is now one step closer toward protection from the development of a large-scale industrial copper mine. On April 11, the Meagher County District Court ruled in favor of EVERY SINGLE legal claim we made under the Montana Environmental Protection Act and Metal Mine Reclamation Act against the Australian-owned Sandfire Resources Black Butte Copper Mine. In short, the court agreed that the mine's permit violates Montana law. Your dollars, letters, and hours of counsel have helped us achieve this victory. This marks a rare moment in Montana history that a mine permit has been deemed unlawful because of the serious environmental risks it poses. Thank you.

Montana Trout Unlimited, along with Trout Unlimited, MEIC, EarthWorks and American Rivers, with legal representation by Earth Justice, claimed that MT Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) did not properly or sufficiently evaluate the risks this mine poses to water quality, quantity and the Smith fishery. The proposed mine would produce roughly 12.9 million tons of acid-generating waste threatening the water quality and renowned trout in one of Montana's most treasured

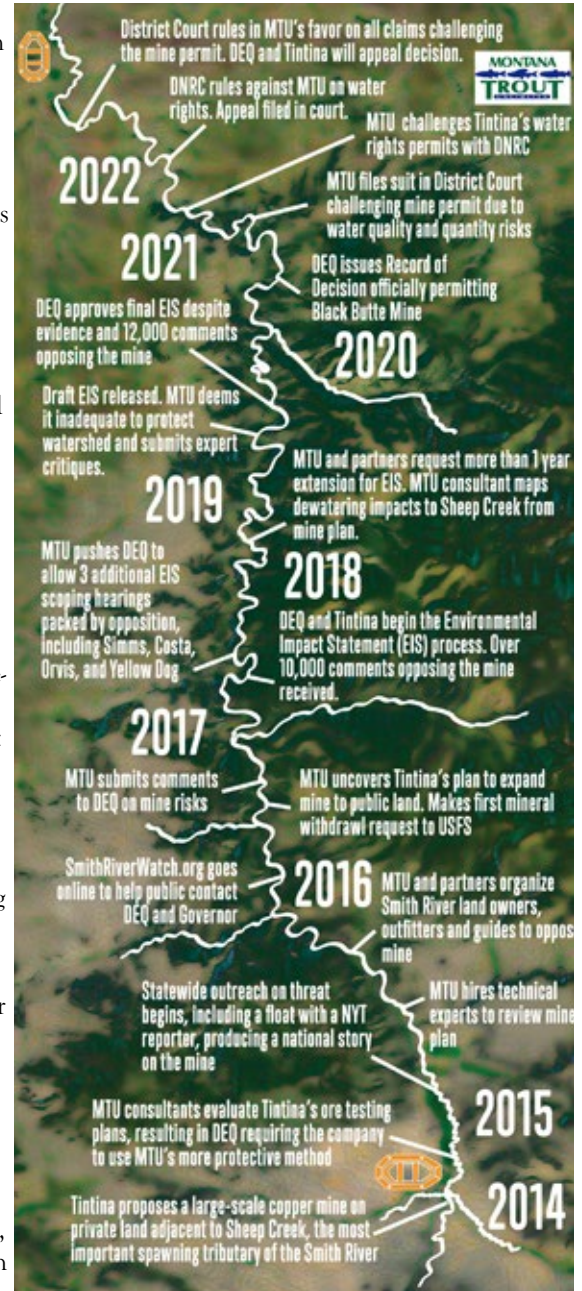
ivers. The first and only hearing was held on July 16th, 2021, and the decision came in our favor of all of our claims about the risks the mine poses.

In its ruling, the Court stated: "Plaintiffs claim that DEQ failed to ensure the safety and stability of Tintina's tailings storage facility, failed to prevent excessive nitrogen from entering Sheep Creek and contributing to algal blooms that choke out fish and other aquatic life, and failed to consider reasonable alternatives to alleviate or avoid potential environmental harms....This Court finds that DEQ's decision to permit the Black Butte Copper Mine was arbitrary, capricious, and unlawful."

The Smith River is the only permitted recreational river in Montana, featuring an unparalleled 59-mile stretch with only one public put-in and one take-out point for boaters. The Smith River and its tributaries provide crucial habitat and spawning grounds for regional trout fisheries and water for downstream agricultural lands. This river is at the heart of Montana's treasured trout fishing heritage and economy. Defending it has been one of our top priorities for years.

The facts of this case have been clear to us for the better part of a decade. We are glad to see that this court agreed that the Black Butte Copper Mine threatens to pollute and dewater Sheep Creek, the most important clean water source and trout spawning tributary of the Smith River. This is a win for trout, clean water, sacred Native American lands, and Smith River lovers for generations to come.

So what's next? If we've learned anything in this fight, it is that there are always more rounds, so while we are



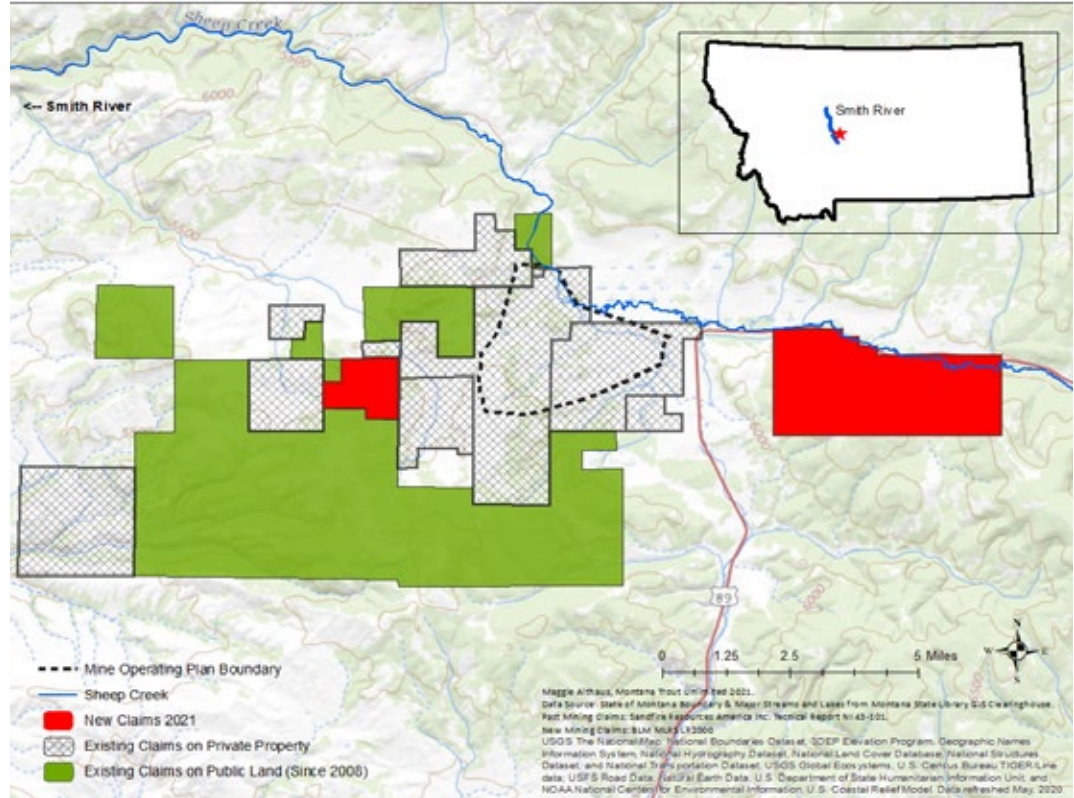
celebrating this win, we remain poised for our next action. Within 45 days of this ruling, our coalition will recommend to the court that it cancel the company's permit, since it has been deemed unlawful. DEQ and the company are in the process of appealing this decision to the MT Supreme Court. Thus, we will prepare to defend the district court's support of our claims.

We could NOT have accomplished this historic decision without your generous support. Please let us know anytime if you have questions or concerns. Cheers!



## Mineral Withdrawal in the Smith Watershed Map by Maggie Althaus

MTU remains committed to the mineral withdrawal on public lands that will provide an essential layer of protection for the Smith River against the more than 10,000 acres the company has already staked for potential mining. A quick review of the the mining claim map, reprinted from our Spring 2021 issue, shows our work is far from over.



## Stewardship Spotlight: Monte Dolack by Kelley Willett

River Steward and renowned artist, Monte Dolack's gift of art to Montana Trout Unlimited has generated more than \$2.4 million to conserve, protect and restore Montana's coldwater fisheries and watersheds. Since December 2002, when the now ubiquitous MTU license plate featuring a spotty cutthroat trout was first offered, thousands of people have chosen to support MTU by purchasing the plate. Thousands have also selected the plate for its simple beauty and colorful display of an iconic species - our state fish, which represents something special about Montana. Monte Dolack grew up in Great Falls and fondly remembers fishing the mighty Mo from the banks with his Dad. The fun of finding frogs and snakes and birds and turtles was as important as the fishing, now a sentiment he echoes many decades later.

"I don't fish as much as I used to and have even taken to fishing without a hook sometimes. It is about the interaction," Monte says. "You're as likely to find me

looking for rocks on the shore. Whether I have a fly rod, binoculars, or a paint brush,



the immersion in nature is what I seek."

From Montana to Geneva to Japan and beyond, it is Monte's immersion in nature with a paintbrush that has moved countless

collectors and art enthusiasts, who have enjoyed his exhibits across the globe. His love of nature does not just mean nature features prominently as a theme in his work, but also drives Monte's generous philanthropy to several environmental organizations, many of which have featured his work in important campaigns. Dolack has created more than 200 posters and prints for use in support of conservation and cultural organizations - from removing the Milltown Dam to a recent collaboration among ranchers, businesses and nonprofits working together to restore O'Dell Creek.

Dolack is hard pressed to pick a favorite river, saying that Rock Creek, the Blackfoot, the Big Hole and the Yellowstone are among his top picks. Each of these rivers and countless others in Montana are better thanks to Monte's gift 20 years ago - that fine image of a healthy cutthroat trout.



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# CONSERVE. PROTECT. RESTORE.

## Preparing for another dry summer by Chris Edgington

As I scan the current break for a trout sipping larger midges that are scattered among their appropriately named brethren, the barren foothills and sparsely snow-covered Madison Range gives me pause. Watching this scene reminds me of last year's historic drought and the severe fire season. 2021 was a tough year for trout, anglers, and folks who rely on abundant water to make a living. This winter's double-dip La Nina weather pattern has failed to deliver. But we are anglers, natural optimists.

Drought didn't start in 2021. Today's troubles began in 2020 when many areas of Montana saw record-low precipitation. For example, Dillon has received about 30% of normal precipitation over the last two years. Drought has cumulative effects on trout and their environment over time. Low flows on the Ruby River prompted a full closure in mid-May. The Jefferson and Big Hole water temperatures were reaching lethal levels for trout before the end of June. By the start of July, the Upper Big Hole was an abysmal 2-3 CFS, endangering years of voluntary collaborative conservation that has improved habitat for Arctic grayling.

Drought management is difficult, but manageable with good partnerships. Irrigators assured me, "No matter how bad it gets, we won't dry this river up." A testament to how far water conservation has come in Montana since the Jefferson and other rivers went dry in 1988, a year that had more water availability than in 2021. I measured flows in ditches, held weekly meetings, disseminated information and had more difficult conversations about sacrificing water for the river and trout than I can recall.

Since last summer, MTU has been engaged with irrigators, drought management committees, and policymakers. Last year's drought has prompted the development of a new state-wide drought plan led by the Montana Department of Natural Resource and Conservation. The current, 1995 Montana Drought Management Plan (DMP) is overdue for an update. The Plan revision meetings have included comprehensive water data and analysis, perspectives from diverse stakeholders, and public participation. MTU staff have joined regional stakeholder meetings to share novel ideas, support science-based decisions, and to be a resource for state agencies and elected officials to shape a Montana DMP that's useable and actionable.

Our top priority is for added capacity for watershed advocates to build locally-led DMPs where such plans don't exist, like the Smith River. That's where the rubber meets the road. DMPs are as unique and diverse as Montana's rivers themselves. In the Jefferson basin, we are coordinating with Conservation Districts and other partners to modernize tributary monitoring. We have developed a project on the Boulder River to reduce irrigation withdrawals by up to 10 cfs.

Unless Montana experiences a wet spring and summer, the 2022 season will be challenging. At every opportunity, MTU will be the leading voice for the protection of Montana's coldwater resources. We will look as closely for every drop of water we can keep in our streams and rivers as I scan for trout noses dimpling the water amid the midges.



## Support Our Work: Get the Original Trout Plate!



Do you have the original Monte Dolack-MTU license plate on the bumper of your car or truck? It's one of the easiest ways to support our important work, from defending the Smith, to instructing the next generation of anglers. Thank you for supporting MTU by having the original trout plate and if you don't and are renewing this year, please consider one!

# Chapter News

## Bitterroot Chapter

Bitterroot Trout Unlimited recently held a facilitated Strategic Planning session which we will be wrapping up in the next couple of weeks. This will guide our chapter's activities for the next three years.

We have lots of youth programs going on. This year's Buggers program will be wrapping up shortly with a fishing day in a local park. This program has been going on for many years and provides 25 youngsters with an introduction to stream entomology, the opportunity to tie several fly patterns under the guidance of expert instructors, and finishes with a fishing day.

We are currently taking signups for our annual Kids Fly Fishing Day Camp. The 11-14 year olds will receive an introduction to stream entomology, conservation, and fishing techniques.

We are also finishing up our second year of Trout in the Classroom and have four schools in the Valley participating. Next year thanks to a Mini-Grant from MTU we will be able to expand that to 6 schools. Starting this week, we will be releasing the trout into the Hieronymus Park pond with the help of MT FWP.

## Madison-Gallatin Chapter

Board Chair Sarah Clark worked with Connor Parrish - Gallatin Home Rivers Initiative Project Manager - to submit a grant application to Montana Trout Unlimited for the purchase of a hydraulic post-driver. The proposal was funded!!! MTU liked the project proposal and decided to provide funding to purchase the hydraulic post driver. MTU would like this piece of equipment to be available to all TU project managers in Montana and to our partners who implement projects that align with TU's goals. The post driver will stay in Bozeman and the Project Manager will be responsible for scheduling its use and maintaining it. The purchase of a hydraulic post driver will allow TU and its partners to implement process-based restoration projects that protect cold-water fisheries in this region for years to come.

## Missouri River Fly Fishers Chapter

MRF has had a busy spring! In February, we held our inaugural "Winter RiverFest" event at the Newberry, which was a huge success. MRF has already reserved The Newberry for February 18, 2023 save that date for the

2nd Annual Winter RiverFest: celebrating the Missouri and Sun Rivers! In March, we partnered with North 40 Fly Project to host FWP large carnivore biologists to present a workshop on being Bear Aware while angling and guiding. In April, we again partnered with North 40 and FWP for a State of the Rivers and Reservoirs update and screening of the IF4 films.

FWP's "Kids Fishing Day" returns on June 4 after a 2-year hiatus! MRF will again participate in this event, which will be at Wadsworth Pond in Great Falls. On June 10, MRF is sponsoring a Great Falls Voyagers baseball game. This event is still in the planning phases, but will include a fishing-related give-away item, plus angling education and fun.

## Westslope Trout Unlimited

In place of a winter banquet, the Chapter will be celebrating with a new event this spring, RiverFest 2022, featuring an on-line auction May 15-22 and an In-Person Celebration May 22 from 12pm-4pm at Fort Missoula. Designed for the fly fishing and conservation community, the event will feature food, beer and NA beverages, casting games, competitions, instruction, fly tying contests and demos, entomology for kids and anglers, fly fishing bingo, face painting, raffles, door prizes and more. If you're interested in donating an item to the auction, email westslopechapter.tu@gmail.com. Purchase your tickets today at www.westslope-trout.org. We're looking forward to seeing you there!



### Westslope Chapter Trout Unlimited RIVERFEST 2022

Let's celebrate spring, have fun, and raise money for coldwater conservation and fly fishing education. RiverFest will feature food, beer, casting games, fly tying contests and demonstrations, door prizes and more!

**Online Auction:**  
May 15th-May 22nd

**In-Person Celebration:**  
May 22nd noon-4pm, at Fort Missoula

Tickets are \$25 for adults,  
\$10 for students and 18  
and under are free!  
Includes food and a door  
prize raffle ticket.

To purchase tickets to RiverFest and view the auction items, visit:  
[bit.ly/riverfest2022](http://bit.ly/riverfest2022)

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# TROUT LINE SPRING 2022

## UPCOMING EVENTS

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

- 5/14/22** **MTU State Council Meeting**  
Billings, MT
- 5/15/22** **Virtual Auctions Begin - WSCTU and FVTU**  
Online. See Chapter Website for Details
- 5/22/22** **Missoula Riverfest - WSCTU**  
Fort Missoula, MT
- 6/11/22** **Bitterroot Kids Day Clinic**  
Hamilton, MT
- 6/21/22** **MTU Tip of The Hat Fundraiser**  
Across Montana
- 7/10/22** **MTU Youth Conservation Camp**  
July 10-14, Georgetown Lake, MT
- 10/7/22** **Memorial Float**  
For info contact Kelley Willett at [kelley@montanatu.org](mailto:kelley@montanatu.org)

**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.



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