



# TROUT LINE

NEWSLETTER FROM THE MONTANA COUNCIL OF TROUT UNLIMITED



**WINTER 2025**

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## 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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## MONTANA TU STAFF

**DAVID BROOKS**  
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR  
[david@montanatu.org](mailto:david@montanatu.org)

**MAGGIE ALTHAUS**  
OFFICE MANAGER & GIS TECHNICIAN  
[maggie@montanatu.org](mailto:maggie@montanatu.org)

**CHRIS EDGINGTON**  
JEFFERSON WATERSHED PROJECT MANAGER  
[chris@montanatu.org](mailto:chris@montanatu.org)

**CLAYTON ELLIOTT**  
CONSERVATION & GOVERNMENT AFFAIRS DIRECTOR  
[clayton@montanatu.org](mailto:clayton@montanatu.org)

**BILL PFEIFFER**  
OUTREACH COORDINATOR  
[bill@montanatu.org](mailto:bill@montanatu.org)

**KELLEY WILLET**  
DEVELOPMENT DIRECTOR  
[kelley@montanatu.org](mailto:kelley@montanatu.org)

**KATIE YOUNG**  
BEARTOOTH PROJECT MANAGER  
[katie@montanatu.org](mailto:katie@montanatu.org)

To begin my term as the new MTU State Council Chair, a message to the outgoing Chair. Brian, members and fellow Council leaders owe you a big "thank you" for leading the organization through four dynamic years, from shutdowns through Zoom meetings and finally a return to in-person meetings in fun, fishy places. Through it all, Brian Nielsen led MTU to new heights including the further development of a highly qualified, professional staff, increased financial stability, development of multiple major conservation projects, significant habitat restoration and preserving in-flow stream work. Some of my favorite accomplishments during your term included adding the Beartooth Project Manager in Red Lodge, the restoration of the Middle Fork Judith River watershed and the never-ending work to protect the Smith River. The Council hopes Brian will stay involved. Meetings will not be the same without him.

Unlike many of you, I came to fly fishing late. Growing up in Fort Benton, my angling consisted of a red and white Dare Devil cast to Missouri River golden eye. I spent more time playing rock 'n roll and football than fishing. It wasn't until I returned to Great Falls to pursue a broadcasting career that I discovered fly fishing. Like Brian, my introduction to TU came through Kirk Evenson and Mike Bushly and the Missouri River Fly Fishers. I moved to Billings to teach at Rocky Mountain College and joined Magic City Fly Fishers. Doug Haacke turned me on to the many conservation accomplishments of MTU and soon had me attending State Council meetings.

Now, as I consider the many challenges ahead, I look back to the leaders who brought MTU to where we are today, including Bruce Farling, David Brooks, and past presidents Doug Haacke, Chris Schustrom, Sharon Sweeny-Fee, Brian Nielsen, and the many friends I made on the Council.



Council Chair Lyle Courtnage

I know we have a solid foundation to build upon. The conservation issues are still there, the Smith is still threatened, water is scarce, drought persists, and wild fish still need protection.

In the short term, please pay attention to MTU's work in the Montana legislature. Our success and future are well represented by Clayton Elliot, MTU's Conservation and Government affairs Director, along with TU National's state policy staff, Jeff Lukas. They work hard to keep legislators focused on passing strong budgets for water and fish and to direct policy that improves water resources. Visit MTU's webpage to track legislation MTU supports and bills that could threaten Montana resources in real time. Remember, there is nothing as persuasive to a legislator than a note from home letting them know how you feel about an issue.

As the new Chair, I am pleased to point out that this winter edition of the newsletter features MTU's refreshed brand which you can read more about on pg.5.

Fresh look, same great organization. I also encourage you to stay engaged with your local chapters and their projects. However, please also consider attending one or more of our Council meetings. These gatherings move throughout the year to local chapter communities. You will find them fun and rewarding. They have kept me inspired for more than a decade and I am honored to now serve as Chair. You, too, can make a difference.

## SUPPORT OUR WORK

**Help us continue to be the voice for healthy rivers and wild trout in Montana for another 60 years. DONATE today!**



## 69th Montana Legislature Convenes in Helena by Clayton Elliott

Legislators from across the state convened in Helena in early January to begin the ninety-day legislative session. As in past sessions, I was there to greet them and begin working with them on fish- and river-friendly policy and budgets. This year will be a busy one with major policy questions like property taxes and healthcare dominating the news every day. Amidst those debates, MTU is prepared to tackle issues ranging from water policy to stream restoration to public access. We have spent the last two-year interim working behind-the-scenes on policy related to water quantity issues especially and will be in the Capitol full-time once again to make sure that our state's coldwater fisheries have a voice.

MTU's primary focus this session will be on advancing a package of proactive, collaborative water policy bills. These bills resulted from a two-year, diverse work group convened by the Department of Natural Resources and Conservation and Governor's Office. MTU served on that work group along with our partners in industry, agriculture, development, and municipalities. The legislative package the group brings to this session includes solutions for exempt wells, an efficient and equitable water court process, water permitting, and water storage funding and policy. All told, there are five policy bills and two funding packages that will be considered by the legislature.

The package of water bills falls into two broad categories – future planning and growth, and the transition from adjudication (determining legal water rights) to the long-term administration of water rights in the state. Montana is in a water supply and demand crash course. We have a growing population and needs for water, as well as changes in timing and volume of water supply as a result of more persistent droughts and climate change. As such, the work group has recommended policy for common sense changes to water use, making transformational investments in water storage, and easing regulations for mitigating water uses. The working group also negotiated a pragmatic compromise bill to address the growing reliance on exempt wells in our fastest growing communities and provide



MTU's Clayton Elliott and TU's Jeff Lukas at the Capitol .

greater certainty to water users across the state in the face of recent court decisions.

Secondly, the work group tackled how the state transitions from the decades-long work of adjudicating pre-1973, Constitutionally protected water uses to the long-term administration of those water rights into the future. Two bills will deal with this topic. One maintains the expertise of a specialized court in water law, ensuring that water users have a one-stop shop for resolving water conflicts in the future. The second provides a clear process for incorporating post-1973 water permits and changes into the final decrees. MTU will be working diligently with our partners to pass this common sense package to help deal with some of the pressing water challenges Montana is facing today.

In addition to water policy, work on the state's biennial budget and appropriations represent the other cornerstone of MTU's efforts this legislative session. We have reviewed proposals put forward by the Governor to fund all agencies in state government. We are pleased with the strong investments Governor Gianforte has recommended for water, fish and wildlife, and natural resources. Further, critical programs that support our work to restore impaired waterways and fisheries are funded at robust levels. We look forward to working together with legislators in both chambers,

partner groups, the agencies, and the Governor's office over the next months to finalize these investments.

As with every session, we expect proposed legislation to roll back protections for clean, cold water and public access. As with most sessions, many bills that get introduced fail to make it across the finish line. MTU remains committed to protecting the laws and funding that make our coldwater fisheries the envy of the world.

While we have a full-time team in the Capitol, we rely on your voices throughout the session to help ensure success. Reaching out directly to your legislators and talking about support for Montana's coldwater fisheries is incredibly impactful. Please take time to reach out to your individual members of the Legislature, and we will be sure to reach out when your voice is needed ahead of critical votes on priority issues. The MTU website will serve as a valuable tool for you to stay up to date in real time on what is happening in the Capitol.

Thank you in advance for being engaged in the legislative process. This work is central to our mission and directly impacts our fish and rivers. We could not do it without you.



### WHICH BILLS COULD AFFECT WILD TROUT?

With BillTrack50, you can see the status of the bills we're tracking in real time. Learn our position, read bill text, contact legislators, and join our mailing list.

SCAN BELOW FOR INFO

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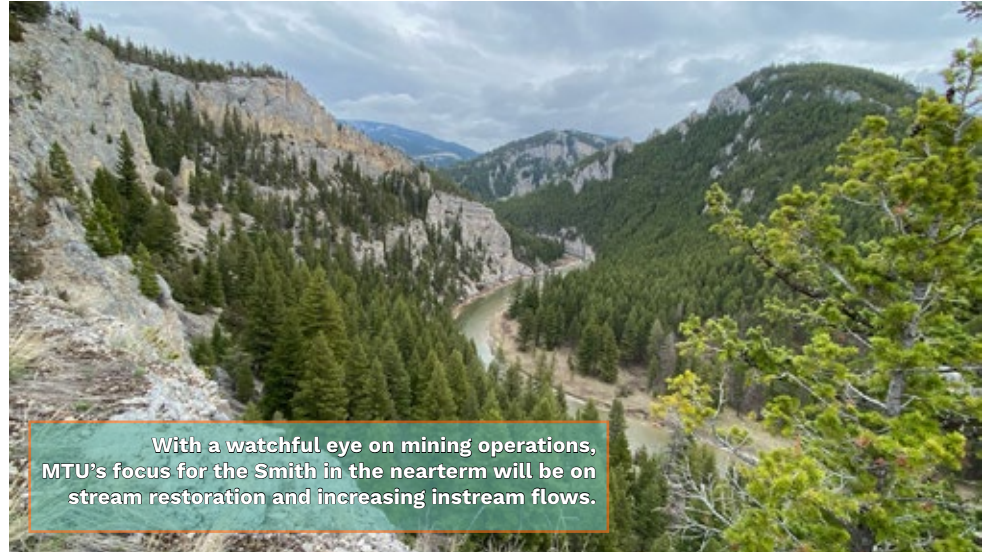
## MT Supreme Court (Again) Fails to Protect the Smith by David Brooks

Thank you for the hours, dollars and heart that you have given Montana Trout Unlimited in our decade-long fight to stop a mine from being built in the Smith River watershed. January 2nd marked the end of this campaign.

In a blow to the Smith River and future generations, the Montana Supreme Court upheld the water-use permit granted by the Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC) to Sandfire Resources, which plans to pump and impound large volumes of groundwater at its proposed Black Butte Copper Mine. Our coalition of conservation groups had argued that the permit did not address up to 457 acre-feet of the groundwater that will be removed from the mine each year in order to facilitate mining operations. That's roughly the amount of water in more than 500 Olympic-size swimming pools or the household water an average American would use in about 7000 years(!) that the company can pump, treat, store and control for much of the year without a permit or having to mitigate for the surface water losses it causes. While we work for and worry about low flows across the state, the mining industry gets a free pass on the majority of the precious water it will handle and use.

The Court ruled that the mining company is not obligated to apply for a permit for the full amount of groundwater that it will have to pump at its mining operations adjacent to Sheep Creek, a major tributary of the Smith River. Given the value of water to all people and uses, including fish, wildlife, family homes and agriculture, this ruling is incredibly disappointing. Allowing mining companies a handout on massive water use threatens the lives and livelihoods of all downstream water users, not to mention the health of the treasured Smith River. As the two dissenting justices put it: "If, because of agency policy, mine dewatering is not considered a beneficial use, then potentially unlimited amounts of groundwater can be withdrawn--even from closed basins--and discharged without any consideration and state oversight of how it will affect senior water rights holders or Montana's waters."

MTU helped lead a coalition of conservation groups in defending the Smith River's water by challenging the



lack of a permit at the DNRC level, then through district and, finally, Montana's highest court. In the 5-2 decision, the majority of justices deferred to the DNRC's practice (not codified in statute or rules) of not requiring a permit for mine dewatering. So, as it has been with mine permitting for decades, here we go again.

What do we do now that we've exhausted all administrative and legal challenges to stop the Black Butte mine, and the company has the green light to mine copper in the Smith River headwaters?

We transition from stopping the mine to monitoring the mine. In bringing this challenge, we negotiated better monitoring of water at the mine, including adding flow gauges on impacted waterbodies, tracking groundwater diversions, and adding mitigation flows to tributaries of Sheep Creek. We will be closely monitoring how mine operations impact any flows. We will continue to keep sharp eyes on fishery and aquatic health sampling.

We will keep pushing to bring Montana's water policies into the 21st century and we'll look for your continued support to help us do that. Other mining states, such as Alaska, Arizona, Colorado, Nevada and New Mexico all have grappled with how to better regulate dewatering of hard rock mines to protect streams, fish, recreation, and downstream senior water users. Having raised this issue in Montana, we will keep fighting to bring our state laws and regulations up to the standard being set by other western states that

care about the future of their water quality and quantity. And, we aim to ensure that a relatively new Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks restoration plan for the Smith watershed gets implemented, starting with two pilot habitat restoration and flow improvement projects in the North and South Forks of the Smith in 2025.

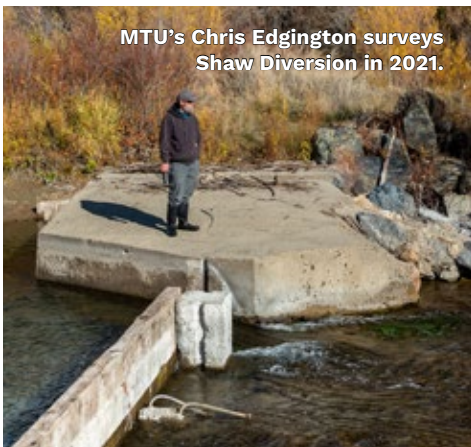
The long story of protecting water in Montana looks more like the silhouette of a jagged Rocky Mountain range than a smooth arc. While this court decision is definitely a downslope reflecting the stronghold that hard rock mining has had on the laws and regulations of this state, we know that more and more people share our concerns about protecting and restoring clean water in Montana. From other nearby states, we know that mining can be done better, especially when it comes to water use and pollution. We will keep seeking opportunities to raise the bar in Montana. None of this would be possible without the energy, time and treasure of thousands of MTU supporters. Thank you for being with us through all the ups and downs. We are proud of the work we have done, and aim to keep doing, to take care of the Smith River. Thank you for continuing to put your love of this place into action.



## Five in '25: Streamflow Projects to Benefit the Jefferson by Chris Edgington

The mid-afternoon sun barely warms my cheek through my office window as 2024 wanes. I am reviewing the year's streamflow and precipitation trends – it was another challenging season in the Jefferson Basin. The current drought cycle is increasing in similarity to the 2000-2007 drought that ravaged the region. While this winter is still young, the bare foothills leading up to the sparsely snow-covered Pioneer Mountains warrant concern. Predictions of a weak La Niña through March are worrisome as snowpack in the southwest corner of the state lags woefully behind the long-term average.

While the data is grim, it serves to strengthen our resolve to develop and implement projects that result in quantifiable contributions to streamflow. We are working on five projects to bolster in-stream flow and reconnect coldwater for trout and grayling. In the 2023 legislative session, MTU secured significant funding to support a water lease on two spring creeks in the Jefferson watershed that will increase coldwater by moving the irrigator's water diversion to the much warmer Jefferson River. We are currently planning and fundraising for three others. First, the Shaw Dam removal in the Boulder watershed near Cardwell (see Trout Line, Winter 2024). In November, we began working on two projects in the middle Big Hole watershed, approximately 2.5 miles downstream of Dickie Bridge, where an increase in use by adult grayling has been documented.



MTU's Chris Edgington surveys Shaw Diversion in 2021.

These two, similar projects on Johnson and Alder Creeks are unique. The confluence of these two tributaries should connect to the river just 400 yards apart on opposite streambanks, but they are



MTU is working on a project to move two irrigation withdrawals from cold water spring creeks to warmer water from the main river, helping to cool water temperatures.

both intercepted by active irrigation ditches within a stone's throw of the Big Hole. Recognizing the immediate benefits of reconnecting tributaries, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) is funding the design. MTU has agreed to raise the project implementation funding and manage the restoration.

The project includes building a flume to convey irrigation water over Johnson Creek along with a water right change that will keep more cold tributary water instream. Engineers are working on a design for Alder Creek that will similarly keep cold creek water flowing into the Big Hole, while providing irrigation from warmer Big Hole water. Once reconnected, these tributaries will boost the streamflow by several cubic feet per second in this reach of the Big Hole. They will add cold, clean water, and restore access for grayling and trout to more than 40 miles of these two tributaries. Data collected last summer on Johnson Creek showed the average daily temperature was up to 7°F colder than the main river.

We're excited to complete these win-win projects, the type of projects that exemplify MTU's work across the state, but we need your support. The Chuck Robbin's TU chapter in Dillon has committed \$5,000 to these projects and secured an additional \$5,000 through an

MTU mini-grant. We just completed the first-of-its-kind Shared Services Agreement between MTU and TU National to support our work in the Big Hole. This will allow us to spend more money on the ground by utilizing funding from a multi-year national agreement with the Bureau of Land Management. While we hope the rest of the winter snowfall fills our streams, lakes, and aquifers for the summer, we will continue to work with our partners to develop projects that better manage watershed yield. Because streamflow is our top priority in this part of Montana, our new Dillon-based Big Sky Watershed Corp member, Ellie Ross, will focus much of her time on collecting data to inform future trout- and water-friendly projects.

Regardless of the moisture winter and spring bring, I am proud to be leading MTU's efforts to keep more water in SW MT rivers in 2025.



Check out a new short film about our recently completed project in the Middle Fork of the Judith here!





# Volunteer Spotlight: Matt Huntington

## MONTANA COUNCIL OF TROUT UNLIMITED

### OFFICERS

**LYLE COURTNAGE**  
CHAIR, GREAT FALLS  
lyle.courtamage@gmail.com

**WILL TRIMBATH**  
VICE CHAIR, BILLINGS  
trinbath.will@gmail.com

**MARK PETERSON**  
TREASURER, HELENA  
markpeterson1939@gmail.com

**MARK PETERSON**  
ACTING SECRETARY, BOZEMAN  
markpeterson1939@gmail.com

**BRIAN NEILSEN**  
NLC DIRECTOR & PAST CHAIR  
LIVINGSTON  
ssfee123@yahoo.com

### RIVER STEWARDS

**DR. MARSHALL BLOOM**  
Hamilton, MT

**MONTE DOLACK**  
Missoula, MT

**CASEY & LEISHA FOLLEY**  
Big Sky, MT

**JOHN & RENE KOWALSKI**  
Helena, MT

**TIM & JOANNE LINEHAN**  
Troy, MT

**PAUL MOSELEY**  
Missoula, MT

**ROY O'CONNOR**  
Clinton, MT

**DR. ROBERT RATCHESON**  
Hamilton, MT

**DAN & KIM SHORT**  
Kalispell, MT

**PAUL STANLEY**  
Bozeman, MT/Piedmont, CA

**DR. IRVING WEISSMAN & ANN  
TSUKAMOTO WEISSMAN**  
Hamilton, MT/Redwood City, CA

Some volunteers go the extra mile or in this case, extra lightyears. MTU thanks Matt Huntington, the marketing leader and brand builder who helped us through a collaborative process resulting in our new brand, which you're seeing for the first time in this issue of Trout Line. Matt, who is based in the Bay Area, has worked with and helped companies from Intel to the Olympics, and currently leads a full-scale production team for an international marketing company, as well as having his own firm, Mischief Maker, and volunteering for causes he cares about. MTU could not afford one hour of Matt's expertise, let alone the 100+ hours that he gave pro bono, thanks to his love of our mission and his generous philanthropic spirit.

He and his family also have a rich history of fishing in Montana and around the world, so he immediately spoke our language and knew how to connect with anglers and conservationists. This project was born when we asked if he might give an hour or two to look at our current materials and he offered to drive an entire



Brand builder, marketing leader, and "mischief maker" Matt Huntington.

rebrand. From focus groups to the design team he engaged, MTU got world-class know-how and learned so much about the importance of how to position ourselves visually in all kinds of spaces. We can't thank Matt enough for his time, expertise, patience, and the delivery of a product we are proud to introduce to you. Learn more about Matt and his work at mischiefmaker.org. Thank you, Matt!



## Introducing MTU's New Look for 2025!



### WELCOME NEW RIVER STEWARDS

We are delighted to announce **John and Rene Kowalski of Helena and Casey and Leisha Folley of Big Sky** as the latest MTU River Stewards. Stay tuned for profiles of all the new Stewards in upcoming editions of Trout Line.

### Need MTU's new brand assets?

Contact **Bill Pfeiffer** at [bill@montanatu.org](mailto:bill@montanatu.org) for the new logo suite and our branding guidelines.

# CHAPTER NEWS

## BITTERROOT CHAPTER

The next BRTU Meeting of 2025 will be Thursday, February 16 at the Hamilton Elks Club. Brandi Langum and colleagues from Bitterroot National Forest Fisheries and Watershed Management Program Manager will present a program *New directions in Fisheries and Watershed programs for the Bitterroot National Forest*. The main event will start at 7:00 PM, but come join us starting at 5:45 for a 'brat and a brew, featuring the Elks Club's famous beer cooked bratwurst for just \$10! BRTU Logo PFDs will be on sale at the meeting. Pick one up so you can stay safe on the water in time for spring fishing,

## GEORGE GRANT CHAPTER

GGTU continues to make progress on our Fifer Gulch project. The project will restore a spring creek in the city of Anaconda and create a kid's fishing opportunity while improving cold water inputs to Warm Springs Creek and ultimately the upper Clark Fork River. The chapter received the final engineering designs in November and the project will go out to bid in January with an anticipated late summer construction start. Our annual banquet will be held on March 7th. Last year we sold all 400 tickets in two days and we anticipate this happening again in 2025, so if you want to attend, please order your tickets early. See [georgegranttu.org](http://georgegranttu.org) for info.

## MADISON-GALLATIN CHAPTER

The Madison-Gallatin Chapter's 53rd Annual TroutFest Banquet will be held Saturday, March 1st at MSU SUB Ballroom, a change of venue for this year. We always enjoy this opportunity to raise money in support of conservation. Get your tickets early at [mgtu.org](http://mgtu.org). In other big news, Andy Moore has taken over as President at our October meeting and Sarah Spartas has taken on the Vice President role. Paul White joined the board as the new Service Partnership Chair, and David Baumbauer joined the board in a floater position in December. The board is currently at 9 members. We're still looking for a few more board members so please reach out if you are interested.

## MISSOURI RIVER FLY FISHERS

Thanks to all who attended our holiday party. In case you missed it, we announced some new faces on the MRF Board of Directors. Please join us in welcoming Ria French, Darren Wood, Jordan Perrego, Jeff Stoopes, and Oscar Minks! Our Winter RiverFest is coming up February 15 at the Great Falls Airport and tickets are on sale now. Visit our website [missouririverflyfishers.org](http://missouririverflyfishers.org) for more info. And don't forget, MRF is starting a book club this January. Our first book is "Fishing Bamboo - An Angler's Passion for the Traditional Fly Rod" by John Gierach, hosted by Mark Ozog. Book club meetings will be the last Sunday of each month at Annie's Taphouse at 3 pm. Contact [MRFTU406@gmail.com](mailto:MRFTU406@gmail.com) to choose a future book!

## WESTSLOPE CHAPTER

In 2024 WSCTU raised \$150,000 from events and its banquet. The Chapter recently played Santa with these funds at the end of 2024. Here a few of the highlight gifts: \$25,000 for Rock and Flint Creek projects with Tess Scanlon, the Rock Creek coordinator; \$35,000 for projects on the Clark Fork Near Missoula and Dam removal on McKinley Lake in the Rattlesnake Wilderness; \$20,000 for projects on tributaries feeding lower Clark Fork and continued work on Ninemile Creek; Began the Kuipers Legacy Trout Unlimited Graduate Scholarship program; and many more smaller ongoing projects we support, from Trout In the Classroom, to citizen science. Our chapter meetings are underway for the winter, second Wednesday of the month at 6:30pm at the Stillroom in Missoula. All are welcome to attend. Stay tuned for a 2025 fundraiser coming this May in Missoula!

## DRIVE WITH MTU



Ask for the original Montana Council of Trout Unlimited Plate when you purchase a new vehicle or renew your registration.

## MONTANA TROUT UNLIMITED

# CHAPTERS & PRESIDENTS

### BITTERROOT CHAPTER #080

DAVID WARD, HAMILTON  
[dward0451@gmail.com](mailto:dward0451@gmail.com)  
[bitterroottu.org](http://bitterroottu.org)

### BIG BLACKFOOT CHAPTER #544

JIM STUTZMAN, MISSOULA  
[stutz292@hotmail.com](mailto:stutz292@hotmail.com)  
[bbctu.org](http://bbctu.org)

### FLATHEAD VALLEY CHAPTER #085

WADE FREDENBERG, KALISPELL  
[gocatswf1956@gmail.com](mailto:gocatswf1956@gmail.com)  
[flatheadtu.org](http://flatheadtu.org)

### GEORGE GRANT CHAPTER #183

FORREST JAY, ANACONDA  
[president@ggtu.org](mailto:president@ggtu.org)  
[georgegranttu.org](http://georgegranttu.org)

### JOE BROOKS CHAPTER #025

JOHN ROSEBERRY, LIVINGSTON  
[roseberry.j@gmail.com](mailto:roseberry.j@gmail.com)

### KOOTENAI VALLEY CHAPTER #683

ALAN GERSTNECKER, LIBBY  
[libbymt406.tuh@gmail.com](mailto:libbymt406.tuh@gmail.com)

### CHUCK ROBBINS CHAPTER #656

MIKE GEARY, DILLON  
[seedofzues@gmail.com](mailto:seedofzues@gmail.com)

### MADISON-GALLATIN CHAPTER #024

ANDY MOORE, BOZEMAN  
[mgtoutunlimited@gmail.com](mailto:mgtoutunlimited@gmail.com)  
[mgtu.org](http://mgtu.org)

### MAGIC CITY FLY FISHERS #582

LYLE COURTENAGE, BILLINGS  
[lyle.courtamage@gmail.com](mailto:lyle.courtamage@gmail.com)  
[mccffonline.org](http://mccffonline.org)

### MISSOURI RIVER FLYFISHERS #406

TRACY WENDT, GREAT FALLS  
[flyfishersmissouririver@gmail.com](mailto:flyfishersmissouririver@gmail.com)  
[missouririverflyfishers.org](http://missouririverflyfishers.org)

### PAT BARNES-MISSOURI RIVER CHAPTER #055

TOM CAFFERY, HELENA  
[patbarnestu@gmail.com](mailto:patbarnestu@gmail.com)

### SNOWY MOUNTAIN CHAPTER #610

BECKIE WILLIAMS, LEWISTOWN  
[beckie@beckiewilliams.com](mailto:beckie@beckiewilliams.com)  
[snowymountaintu.org](http://snowymountaintu.org)

### WESTSLOPE CHAPTER #056

BRANDON DWYER, MISSOULA  
[westslopechaptertu@gmail.com](mailto:westslopechaptertu@gmail.com)  
[westslope-trout.org](http://westslope-trout.org)





Montana Council of Trout Unlimited  
PO BOX 7186 MISSOULA, MT 59807

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# TROUT LINE WINTER 2024

## UPCOMING EVENTS [www.montanatu.org](http://www.montanatu.org)

**2/1/25** **PBTU Ice Bowl**  
HELENA, MT

**2/15/25** **MRF Winter Riverfest**  
GREAT FALLS, MT

**3/01/25** **Madison-Gallatin Fundraiser**  
BOZEMAN, MT

**3/07/25** **George Grant Chapter Banquet**  
BUTTE, MT

**3/08/25** **Spring State Council Meeting**  
HELENA, MT

**WANT 4,000+ MONTANA TU MEMBERS TO HEAR ABOUT YOUR EVENT?**

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



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