

TROUT LINE

NEWSLETTER FROM THE MONTANA COUNCIL OF TROUT UNLIMITED



SPRING/25

FROM THE CHAIR: Lyle Courtnage

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

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As spring arrives, rivers swell with snowmelt and trout prepare for another season of hatches. It's a perfect time to reflect on our accomplishments and look forward to the fishing adventures that await. While this issue highlights many of MTU's achievements, I'd like to focus on three areas that demonstrate the impact of our collective work.

MINI-GRANTS, MEGA RESULTS

For more than twenty years, our Mini-Grant program has been a powerful tool to advance MTU's mission. Established through generous contributions from the estate of Bud Morris, the Steve Bryant Wild Trout Stewardship Fund, and support from the Connell Family Foundation, this program empowers our thirteen local chapters to implement projects that make a real difference.

Two recent awards exemplify how modest funding can yield substantial outcomes. The Flathead Valley TU chapter received support to bring Matt Wilhelm's REAL (Ripple Effect of Aquatic Learning) watershed education to Kalispell schools. This program blends virtual learning with hands-on classroom clinics, and has seen success with the Joe Brooks chapter in Livingston and Magic City Fly Fishers in Billings.

Meanwhile, the Joe Brooks chapter was awarded a grant to complete research and lab analysis in support of Montana Fish, Wildlife, & Parks' efforts to remove nonnative fish in the Shields and Yellowstone watersheds and help restore native Yellowstone cutthroat. Investments in sciencedriven restoration are at the heart of TU projects, especially when it comes to restoring native trout to their home waters.

веаттоотн restoration

Another exciting development is our collaboration with the Custer Gallatin National Forest on restoration projects addressing 2022 flood damage. This effort emphasizes natural solutions like large wood placement instead of traditional riprap, focusing on stabilizing streambanks, improving fish passage, and enhancing riparian vegetation, all while protecting downstream infrastructure and communities.

I'm particularly proud to see Katie Young, a Red Lodge native, grow MTU's Beartooth Program over the last year, prioritizing numerous restoration proj-



ects that are now in the works. Katie brings exceptional biological expertise to our work on Rock Creek, East Rosebud, Soda Butte Creek, and the Stillwater. She's also an outstanding ambassador, enthusiastically presenting these projects to TU chapters, conservation groups, and community leaders.

ментог тне Next Generation

This fishing season, I'd like to challenge each of us to do more than just enjoy our own time on the water. Invite a young angler along on your next outing. Nothing compares to the experience of watching someone land their first wild trout.

Programs like MTU's Conservation Youth Camp are about more than fishing. They teach sound ethics, instilling a sense of stewardship, and fostering a long-lasting connection with the natural world. Consider volunteering your time to help shape the next generation of conservation-minded anglers.

This summer, I'm looking forward to spending time with my two grand-children- exploring the waters of Yellowstone National Park. These experiences create memories that last a lifetime - and help inspire the conservation advocates of tomorrow.Will you join me in this effort? Even one day sharing your passion with a young person can make all the difference in preserving our coldwater fishing heritage.

Lyle Courtnage Council Chair



CONSERVE. PROTECT. RESTORE.

2025 Montana Legislative Wrap Up by David Brooks & Clayton Elliott

The 2025 Montana Legislature has wrapped. Our staff worked at the Capitol for every day of the 90-day session. Of the more than 5,000 bills that were on tap in early January, we were tracking a few hundred for their potential impacts on water, fish and access. The half dozen bills we prioritized for their broad fishery and water benefits progressed through the half-way point of the session, transitioning from the House to the Senate, or vice versa. Those bills were the result of at least two years of work with myriad partners to better protect and improve streamflow across Montana. We helped move a few over the finish line and lost a few by close

Our first win of the session was passing HB74, a bill that revises private fish pond law. This bill is the result of two years of study prompted by the previous legislature with our strong support. The new law raises permit fees from \$10 to \$600 for new private fish ponds, so that Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) can do the work of reviewing, regulating and enforcing these ponds without tapping into fishing license account funds intended for habitat and conservation work, our hunting and fishing license fees. The bill also helps FWP's efforts to prevent the spread of invasive species into Montana's world-class trout streams through better inspections and better accounting by the sellers of eggs and fish to private pond owners. Finally, the bill improves requirements for water rights and pond design. Montana's natural waters are too valuable to be put at risk by water use and invasive species associated with private ponds. This bill helps protect those values.

House Bill 441, a bill that adds efficiency and accuracy to the state's process of clarifying and documenting all legitimate post-1973 water rights into final decrees, is now law. By moving forward the decades-long process of clarifying water rights, this bill will allow for better enforcement of legal water use and protect senior water rights. That will include protection of dedicated instream flow rights for fishery health. Additionally, Senate Bill 190 which reinstates the ability for water users to waive adverse effects in a change or permit process is on the Governor's desk. This provision has been used numerous times with FWP-owned water rights for instream flow changes.

Another bill we championed for direct benefits to trout is HB580, which also passed. HB580 protects water right holders from claims that they have abandoned their water right if they voluntarily let some or all of their water stay instream as part of a drought management plan in their watershed when drought triggers are met. This is great peace of mind for water users who voluntarily give up cold, clean water during times when the fish need it most.

You have likely heard or read about the efforts to clamp down on the egregious use of exempt wells for more than a decade. We entered this session focused on passing SB358, a multi-year collaborative effort by conservation, agriculture, state agency and development stakeholders. SB358 would have more strictly regulated loopholes in the existing exempt well law that allowed developers to use increasing amounts of 'free' water without a water right. Making new water is impossible, so SB358 aimed to reduce water use that falls outside of and threatens established water rights by prohibiting new exempt wells in five of Montana's over-appropriated, fastest growing and most threatened watersheds - the Gallatin, Missoula, Bitterroot, Flathead and Helena valleys. Rigorous study of hydrology shows that continuing to allow more and more exempt wells in these areas will begin to drain groundwater supplies that are directly and legally connected to surface water. This bill failed with uniquely bipartisan 'yes' and 'no' votes. The status quo, with this bill's failure, means that the giveaway of water to developers will continue in places like the Gallatin River, where streamflow and water quality are already suffering the effects of rapid growth. While unchecked exempt well use continues for the next two years, we will redouble our efforts to build support for the scientifically-sound, durable solution that was SB358.

R.I.P. HB886, a common sense bill that would have put future water rights disputes in front of water law-trained judges in water courts, rather than the catch-all district courts where water law cases currently go to flounder behind a docket of everything from personal injury to felony hearings. We supported this bill because the move to water division courts for water rights cases would have ensured they were tried more efficiently and legitimately,

resulting in better decisions on illegal water use or things like legal changes to instream flow. Dying by a 50-50 draw in the House was hard to see, but provides motivation to work harder to get it done next time.

Back on the win side is an appropriation to benefit streamflow. Because maintaining healthy flows in Montana rivers is a top priority, one of the most important bills we supported this session was HB256. It would have created a \$100M water storage trust using general fund dollars. Ninety-percent of the interest from that trust would be dedicated to improving state-owned water storage facilities, like Painted Rocks dam in the Bitterroot watershed, which includes stored water dedicated to late summer instream flows that are critical to the downstream wild trout fishery. The other 10% would go to the Department of Natural Resources and Conservation's (DNRC) well-established Reclamation Development Grant Program, which has, and can continue to fund natural water storage, like beaver dam analogs, wetland improvements, or floodplain restoration. HB256 was tabled in committee in favor of moving the purpose and language of the bill into HB924 that creates a larger Growth and Opportunity Trust. The "GO Trust" bill contains the same stipulations for interest being available for the same reasons as HB256 articulated. Same good idea for trout, folded into a larger funding pot. This bill passed on the final day of the session.

As always, things moved fast throughout the 2025 session, especially near the end. One silent win of the session for the people of Montana who care about rivers was the fact that not a single bill to diminish our stream access law had so much as a hearing. If you have questions or thoughts about any of the gains we made for trout and coldwater habitats this session. we welcome the feedback. Without your encouragement and support we could not continue to do the work of defending and promoting policy that benefits water, fish and the people who love those things.

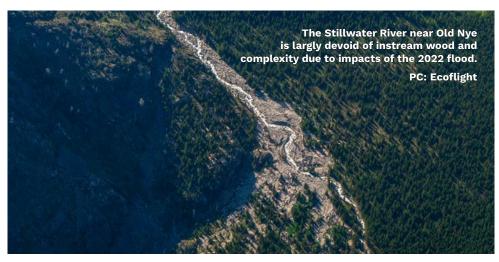


Using Wood for Good in the Beartooth Basin by Katie Young

There are common misconceptions that river restoration and trout habitat improvement come at the expense of human interests. For example, using habitat-degrading riprap is not the only way to stabilize a stream back and protect infrastructure, like houses or bridges. One of my main goals as a project manager is to implement on-the-ground solutions that benefit people and fish. Late last summer, one such project at the Old Nye Fishing Access Site on the Stillwater River started moving forward.

The Stillwater spans nearly 70 miles as it flows from its headwaters near Cooke City to its confluence with the Yellowstone in Columbus. As is the case with most Montana rivers, it is a valuable component of the local economy. Tourism-based jobs rely on the scenic waterway to attract campers and hikers accessing the Absaroka-Beartooth Wilderness, thrill seekers running whitewater, and anglers pursuing wild brown and rainbow trout. It also supports the only platinum mining operations in the United States and abundant multigenerational ranching operations. It is paralleled by numerous roadways and faces increasing real estate development along its banks. It is truly challenging to balance all of these demands with the needs of a healthy ecosystem, but without balance, the system falls apart for all uses.

Since moving into this geography one year ago, the Stillwater captured MTU's attention due to serious concerns for the river's fishery. Unfortunately, wild trout populations are on the decline in this iconic water way. Since 2000, Montana Fish, Wildlife, & Parks (FWP) has seen brown trout population estimates drop from 1,350 to 175 trout per mile. While it's difficult to definitively determine the cause of this decline, FWP has noted that it has coincided with reductions of complex side channel habitat. Side channels not only provide the shallow gravel bars trout use for spawning but also function as nurseries for juvenile fish. As spawning gravels and large woody material in side channels disappear, the result is an unbalanced fish population with a number of large mature trout and poor recruitment for younger generations of fish.



On a sunny day in early April, I met with Clint Sestrich, the Custer Gallatin National Forest (CGNF) fisheries biologist, at the Old Nye Fishing Access site just downstream of the Stillwater Mine to tackle this issue. Our goal for the day was to collect field measurements on the side channel flowing past the day-use site to both inform the design of a habitat enhancement/bank stabilization project being implemented this fall and to provide baseline data to measure the impacts after restoration. With laser level and leveling rod in hand, Clint and I made our way down the steeply eroded bank to measure the gradient and shape of the channel.

This site was heavily affected by the 2022 Yellowstone Flood, a 500-year event, which took out parking spaces, a boat ramp, and a vault toilet. Three years later, the bank remains a bare slope of steep unconsolidated gravels and cobbles. CGNF plans to revamp the site this fall by installing a new boat ramp and a parking area that better accommodates boat trailer traffic. They also need to stabilize the eroding bank to ensure that all of that work doesn't unravel in a future flooding event.

The unassuming little side channel where all of this is taking place is exactly the kind of habitat that Stillwater trout need more of. FWP found large numbers of juvenile and mature trout in this channel, so it is important to make sure that the work to improve stream access doesn't have a negative impact on the site.

Cue MTU's Beartooth Project Manager! Through our agreement with the CGNF I've been involved in a bank stabilization project using trees with

root balls and extensive willow planting instead of rocky riprap. Uprooted trees will be buried horizontally in the eroding bank with their root balls facing out into the stream and willows will be planted along the entire bank. The root balls of the trees absorb the force of the stream flow while the roots of the willows glue the loose material of the bank together. As they break down, they provide food for the aquatic insects that then feed the fish. They also create plenty of nooks and crannies where juveniles can hide from predators while they snack on bugs and grow into big trout. As opposed to rock, which can stabilize the bank, woody materials also actively enhance trout habitat by supporting the entire food web while providing essential cover.

Opportunities for additional habitat improvement include installing channel-spanning logs that increase pool-riffle sequences and building several "post-assisted log structures" (think mini-log jams) that provide more woody cover while coaxing stream flows away from the stream hank

As a project that improves trout habitat, infrastructure resilience, and angler access, the work at Old Nye is a triple win! Stay tuned for implementation this fall!



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2024 ANNUAL REPORT





HEALTHY RIVERS & WILD TROUT - BY THE NUMBERS

- 7 STAFF IN 4 CITIES
- 2 PROJECT MANAGERS
- 2 BIG SKY WATERSHED CORPS INTERNS
- 13 LOCAL CHAPTERS
- 5,000+ MEMBERS AND SUPPORTERS
- 11,000+ SOCIAL MEDIA FOLLOWERS

MINI GRANTS



JEFFERSON WATERSHED

5 CHAPTERS DONATED \$92,000
FOR SHAW DIVERSION REMOVAL

5 NEW WATER QUANTITY PROJECTS
PLANNED FOR 2025

MAINTAINED MINIMUM FLOWS 20%
ABOVE DROUGHT PLAN TARGET

NATIVE TROUT

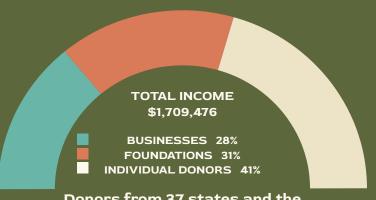


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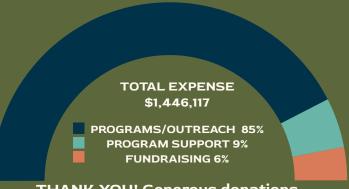
PROGRAM HEALTH

PROGRAM EFFICIENCY



Donors from 37 states and the District of Columbia support MTU!

*MTU financial statements are reviewed annually by Boyle, Deveny & Meyer PC, an independent CPA



THANK YOU! Generous donations helped MTU continue to grow in FY2024.

BEARTOOTH PROJECT AREA

700 WILLOWS PLANTED ON ROCK CREEK

4 watersheds & 62 sites evaluated

21 POTENTIAL POST-FLOOD PROJECTS IDENTIFIED

6 COMMUNITY OUTREACH EVENTS

14 POST-FLOOD PHOTO MONITORING SITES ESTABLISHED ON EAST ROSEBUD CREEK TO TRACK POST-FLOOD SIDE CHANNEL RECOVERY



MIDDLE FORK JUDITH RESTORATION FILM



YOUTH EDUCATION



CONSERVE. PROTECT. RESTORE.







"Conservation is a positive exercise of skill and insight, not merely a negative exercise of abstinence and caution."

— Aldo Leopold







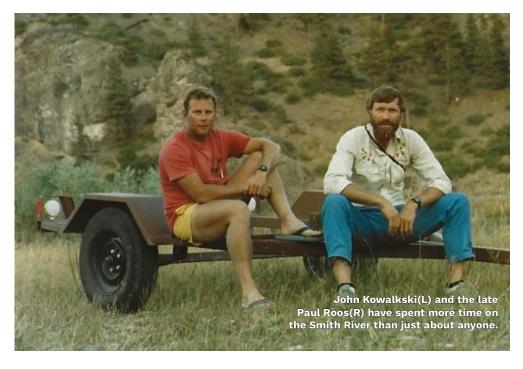
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More than Three Years on the Smith: John Kowalski by David Brooks

In 1980, John Kowalski, along with his neighbor, friend and regular fishing and hunting partner, Paul Roos (past MTU River Steward), loaded two rafts with a few pots and pans, a coffee pot and plates, along with ragtag camping gear. They forgot silverware, so ended up whittling sticks into rudimentary tools so that the family of clients they were guiding down the Smith River for the first time could eat. John was tasked with guiding the two teenage boys, who, from the first bend, were full of questions about the river. Asking things like, "where's camp?" or "what's this spot called?" John, as new to the river as the clients, "figured out my new guide role, and started making up stories." With an early August spruce moth hatch in full swing and the wild trout eating voraciously, John immediately fell in love with the place and all it had to offer from the scenery and remoteness of the canyon to the fish and wildlife.

John grew up fishing the upper tributaries of the Smith but knew next to nothing about the main river. For most people, floating Montana's Smith River is a trip of a lifetime. For the fortunate folks who have rowed or paddled the river's permitted 59 miles of mixed limestone canyons, pine forests and slanting alpine meadows multiple times, each trip likely evokes clear memories. While that is certainly true for John, he's less clear on exactly how many Smith trips he's done since he first rowed it in 1980. More than the number of hash marks you could reasonably etch into an oar-250 by his estimation!

After that first trip, John began floating the Smith "every chance we got," whether guiding anglers or doing personal trips with his wife, Renee, and a few friends. By the late '80s, there were enough private parties floating the river, in addition to new outfitters who were taking much larger groups, up to 24 people at a time with a dozen boats(!), camping became a "free-for-all" that was damaging the riparian habitat and impacting the experience of a wild, remote float. So, John joined with U.S. Forest Service and MT Fish, Wildlife & Parks staff, as well as other concerned stakeholders to form the Smith River Advisory Group, which led to the current permitting system, instituted in 1993.



Other than the continuous growth in the number of people applying for floats, John says many things about the Smith River have remained as variable as ever. Pre-runoff, the weather ranges from blizzards to sunny days that beckon t-shirts and shorts. The salmon fly hatch can make for "lights out" fishing, balanced by the days when nobody touches a fish. While irrigation withdrawals determine flow levels. winter snowpack and summer rain play a heavy hand in late season floatability, and sometimes after peak flows, the river can quickly get too bony to float a loaded raft.

One thing that has improved, according to John, is the attitude toward protecting the river. He remembers years when the first task after landing at camp was cleaning up busted whiskey bottles, food trash, and human waste. The permit system helped alert people to being more conscientious about taking care of the Smith, from cleaner camping to more catch-andrelease fishing, and now, to people being very aware and concerned about all the challenges the river faces, from low flows and increased algae blooms to a major hard rock mine in its headwaters.

John learned from Paul Roos long ago that guides have to talk to clients about conservation, from catch-and-release to keeping fish wet rather than taking photos of fish out of the water. When temperatures rise, John and his fellow guides explain to clients the importance of abiding by Hoot Owl restrictions or simply reeling up and stopping altogether. John also talks about the bigger world of conservation, the need to protect water quality and quantity and resisting the pressure to overexploit natural resources.

Asked what the Smith has taught him, John's first answer is, "that we have to give back to the river. We have to give back to the things that give us so much."



SUPPORT OUR WORK



Whether you prefer to donate online or through the included remit envelope, we appreciate your support of our vital mission: to conserve, protect, and restore Montana's coldwater fisheries and their watersheds.

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Hamilton, MT/Redwood City, CA

MTU BIG SKY WATERSHED CORPS MEMBERS



My name is Ellie Ross and I am serving MTU in Dillon with Jefferson Watershed Project Manager, Chris Edgington, for my second term with the Big Sky Watershed Corps.

I grew up exploring the creeks of northern Virginia, where I gained an appreciation and fascination with all the different pockets of life that streams hold. After graduating from Brandeis University with a B.A. in Anthropology and Environmental Studies with a focus on climate science. I worked as a trail crew member on the Continental Divide Trail and later as a Forest Service ranger in the Weminuche Wilderness where I discovered a love for the wild, open mountains of the West. I also gained a greater understanding of how crucial water resource management is, especially in the drier regions of the Rocky Mountains away from the constant humidity of the East Coast.

I am looking forward to contributing to the development of a Watershed Restoration Plan draft for the Upper Jefferson and Lower Boulder. My focus will be helping with outreach aimed at landowners, ranchers, water users, federal and state agencies, and the general public. This plan will allow the Jefferson River Watershed Council to unlock special DEQ funding, identify key areas and problems impeding watershed health and propose solutions that support a healthy future for the people and fish!

I am also looking forward to getting into the field and on the water to take flow measurements on the Big Hole, assisting with rotenone and electrofishing treatments to promote native trout reintroduction, and collaborating with irrigators along the Jefferson to uphold the Drought Management Plan. I'll also be collecting important baseline data on riparian conditions and trout populations along both the Jefferson and Boulder, helping to inform future restoration efforts and track our progress over time.



My name is Sara Hill, I'm a Big Sky Watershed Corps member working with MTU in Missoula this year. I grew up in Oregon, learning to fish on the springfed blue waters of the Metolius and in the canyons carved out by the mighty Deschutes River. I attended the University of British Columbia, graduating in 2021 with a B.A. in Geography with a focus on Environment & Sustainability. After graduating, I spent several years living in Squamish, BC, working in outdoor education, and spending as much time as possible playing in the mountains.

With my Canadian visa ending, I was searching for meaningful work and discovered the Big Sky Watershed Corps program – a few months later I packed my bags and headed to Montana. I am so excited to use my love for wild rivers and fish to contribute to the important work being done here to fight for a future of clean, cold water and streams teeming with native trout.

My position is split between the U.S. Forest Service Region 1 and MTU. With the Forest Service, I'm working with the Water Right's team, and the focus is instream flows – applying for, collecting data, making maps about USFS instream flow rights For TU, I'll be helping with a range of projects. Currently I'm working on a grant for willow planting on Flint Creek and gathering volunteers for our lake trout suppression program on Swan Lake to benefit bull trout, which will take place this July.

When not wading through streams, I can usually be found chasing snow on my skis or exploring the trails on my mountain bike with my dog, Koda.



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The Chapter recently completed our 29th annual Buggers program. Each year 35 middle school students spend 7 evenings learning fish ID, stream ecology and fundemental fly tying skills. Also, for the past two years we have been supporting a research project by Megan Ahern, a graduate student at Salish College to establish a baseline of macroinvertebrates and environmental conditions at Sheep Creek, a stream adjacent to the proposed rare earth mine on the upper reaches of the West Fork. We are also completing our fifth year of Trout in the Classroom.

CHUCK ROBBINS CHAPTER

The Beaverhead River Cleanup was a great success due to the extra hard work and organizational skills of MTU Big Sky Watershed Corps member Ellie Ross and volunteer Blakely Hay. Blakely coordinated the cleanup with energy and enthusiasm. Afterwards, Anderson & Platt Fly Shop hosted an awards ceremony and BBQ for volunteers. Looking forward, we are planning a chapter fundraiser with music, food, raffles and more fun than most mortals can handle for August 16 at Anderson & Platt. We will have a limited amount of tickets available. Check our social media soon for more info.

FLATHEAD CHAPTER

FVTU continued our "Bull Trout Belong In Montana" initiative, passing out bumper stickers, acquiring some new logo coffee mugs, and sending out bull trout themed postcards to a list of 400+ new Flathead homeowners. The FVTU Board also met with Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes Fisheries staff to gain further insight into the science and policy behind their lake trout suppression efforts on Flathead Lake, which we fully support. FVTU is partnering with the Tribes with the aim of producing a video in 2026 that will highlight the historical and current values of bull trout in the Flathead Ecosystem and further explore the challenges to their recovery. Also, FVTU is gearing up for our Annual Spring Banquet and Fundraiser on May 17!

JOE Brooks CHAPTER

Our March chapter meeting was the annual State of the Yellowstone meeting and was well attended with over 60 people. In April we screened the Montana Fishing Film Festival as a fundraiser with 60-70 people attending. Thank you to all who donated in the silent auctions and raffles. We raised over \$1,000 more than last year. We also received a MTU Mini Grant for Yellowstone Cutthroat Trout sampling and DNA study. We're currently planning the Yellowstone River clean up with Montana Freshwater Partners, Saturday, September 13th in Livingston and Gardiner.

Madison-Gallatin Chapter

Upper Yellowstone and Shields Project manager Ashley Brubaker has been busy with project planning and implementation on Mill Creek, Brackett Creek, Canyon Creek, and several projects in the Madison watershed, as well as lending a hand to FWP, USFS, TU Gallatin projects, and other partners. Her main priority is the Mill Creek project moving forward this summer. Our Service Partnership continues to be successful and we are in the process of expanding the program to first responders in addition to veterans. Our Trout in the Classroom program is now at 9 tanks and we are funding a 10th classroom in Ennis. We had a successful banquet in March. Two of our board members recently retired but we added 2 new board members this spring and also added a non-board outreach position in the Ennis area.

MISSOURI RIVER FLY FISHERS CHAPTER

Our work to upgrade Wadsworth Pond with the Wadsworth Pond Community Coalition is up and running. We are raising funds for 2 new picnic pavillions and another outhouse, as well as more trash cans and amenities. Our next Kids Fishing Day is set for June 7. We also recently participated in Give Great Falls and raised funds for the upcoming North Fork of the Smith restoration project. We will be attending the MTU Tip of the Hat party on June 23 in Craig. See you there!

MONTANA TROUT UNLIMITED

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TROUT LINE SPRING 2025

UPCOMING EVENTS www.montanatu.org

5/16/25	Westslope Chapter Banquet

MISSOULA, MT

Flathead Valley Chapter Banquet

KALISPELL, MT

Wadsworth Pond Fishing Day 6/23/25

great falls, MT

Tip of the Hat Guide Fundraiser

MTU Conservation Youth Camp

PHILLIPSBURG, MT

MTU Memorial Float 8/16/25

MISSOULA, MT

Chuck Robbins Chapter Fundraiser 8/16/25

DILLON, MT



