



TROUT LINE

NEWSLETTER FROM THE MONTANA COUNCIL OF TROUT UNLIMITED

MTU Youth Camper Hugo Constanti lands a rainbow with help from Roxy.

SUMMER 2025

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PLUS..., CHAPTER REPORTS 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

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MONTANA TU STAFF

DAVID BROOKS
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
david@montanatu.org

MAGGIE ALTHAUS
OFFICE MANAGER & GIS TECHNICIAN
maggie@montanatu.org

CHRIS EDGINGTON
JEFFERSON WATERSHED PROJECT
MANAGER
chris@montanatu.org

CLAYTON ELLIOTT
CONSERVATION & GOVERNMENT AFFAIRS
DIRECTOR
clayton@montanatu.org

BILL PFEIFFER
OUTREACH COORDINATOR
bill@montanatu.org

KELLEY WILLETT
DEVELOPMENT DIRECTOR
kelly@montanatu.org

KATIE YOUNG
BEARTOOTH PROJECT MANAGER
katie@montanatu.org

One of my favorite Montana fishing access sites is just off our main interstate highway. It's a convenient stop whenever traveling on I-90 and I have some spare time to wet a line. This small stream has provided me with good fishing and a quick recharge on the long drive between Billings and Missoula more than once.

Not every day on this little gem has been perfect. I've also learned a few serious lessons here, too. It's the only place I've ever buried a hook in my hand. Plus, I am embarrassed to admit, the barb was not pinched. In addition, I was surprised at how much it hurt when I tried to back it out. As I wondered if I was going to have to leave and seek help, another fisherman pulled into the parking lot. After observing my predicament, he stated he knew exactly what to do as he pulled off some 3x from his tippet spools. He looped it over the hook eye, put a bit of pressure on the bend, pushed on the hook eye, and yanked, the fly coming out painlessly.

"Anyone wearing a MTU cap should know how to do that," the stranger said and I agreed. We shook hands and he introduced himself as Casey Hackathorn, from Missoula. This was the first time I had met one of Trout Unlimited's Montana leaders.

On another warm July day, around 2 o'clock, I calculated I could fish for a couple of hours and still have time to make a meeting in Missoula. I am not much for cold feet, so I pulled on some waders, strung up my 4-weight, and headed for the creek. I couldn't wait to find a quiet pool to cast my dry fly after that long drive from Billings. It was then I barely noticed a freshly stapled announcement at the gate: "Hoot Owl regulations start today at 2:00 PM. No fishing from 2:00 pm to midnight".

Sad news for this weary traveler! I dutifully trudged back to my car, got out of the waders, and stored my fishing rod. While disappointed, I knew these regulations existed to protect our fishing into the future and I needed to make sure I knew the restrictions like any angler. While this trip was cut short, the next one will come, and the trout will be waiting.

So, what is the message? Hoot Owl is here again, earlier than ever (I am writing this in June, and Hoot Owl just went into effect on the Madison near Yellowstone National Park). All anglers in Montana need to be very familiar with Hoot Owl and fishing closures and carry a stream thermometer. We



Art by Lyle Courtnage

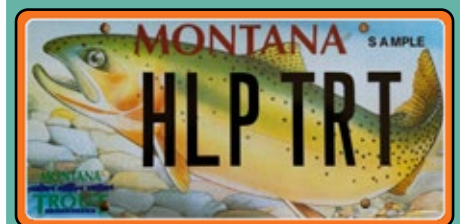
should all know that "happy trout" like water temperatures between 55 and 65 degrees. Trout are stressed at 66 degrees. At 69 degrees, they feel the heat and likely try to find cooler water.

We're in the middle of a very warm summer. Please check water temperatures frequently as you fish. Play fish quickly, avoid using light tippet, and release fish as soon as possible. Check the FWP website, fwp.mt.gov, to see if restrictions or closures are in place for waters you plan to fish. Even if Hoot Owl is not in place, but you find water temperature higher than 65 degrees, consider a different activity. You could even practice learning how to remove a hook if some goofball forgets to crimp the barb! Let's work together to protect our fisheries.

Lyle Courtnage

Lyle Courtnage
Council Chair

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MTU Focuses on Increasing Cold Water by David Brooks

By mid-June, the upper Madison (above Hebgen Reservoir) hit 74 degrees prompting the first Hoot Owl restrictions of the year; the upper Clark Fork and Blackfoot Rivers lagged at 30% of average annual flows in mid-June (levels usually seen in late July); and the Smith River's flow plummeted downward after its basin was well above average annual winter snowpack. In short, by Summer Solstice grim water forecasts for most of Montana's trout streams were already raising concerns..

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) regional fishery staff detailed unhappy news about expected river flows on a virtual Town Hall (recording available at fwp.mt.gov). Current and impending low flows will likely affect our angling, with Hoot Owl restrictions or full river closures in place or looming across the state.

More importantly, tough summer stream conditions impact trout health, survival and populations. As FWP fishery staff summarized: low, warm summer flows, especially extending into fall, stress fish. While flow stressors can cause fish kills, the more common detrimental result is poor spawning and recruitment, effects that show up in fish surveys a year or two later. Thus, Hoot Owl and river closures are largely about protecting future trout populations. When we practice fish-friendly angling, we're looking out for the next generation of trout, rather than only the fish we might hook on a given day.

Ensuring future generations of healthy trout populations depends on more than just abiding by Hoot Owl or ethical fishing habits like not overplaying fish, releasing them quickly, pinching barbs, and reduced handling. We have to work toward keeping more water in streams during both drought and good water years, especially as an increasing body of evidence (led by U.S. Geological Survey scientists) shows us that to recover or boost trout populations, streams and rivers need robust flow years extending through summer and fall at least once every 4-5 years. It's not just about combating historically dry years. When snowpack is good, we need to preserve its benefits through fall spawning.

That is why we will continue to share stories about MTU's project and policy work focused on instream flow improvements. Removing fish barriers, such as the Shaw diversion on the lower Boulder River tributary to the Jefferson River will include increasing flows (and decreasing water temps) in that system, while also opening fish passage to many miles of coldwater refugia, spawning and rearing habitat. Similarly, a suite of projects we are prioritizing in the Big Hole will remove fish barriers, along with securing



With the frequency of summer drought and heat, MTU projects often seek to include a streamflow component.

instream flow and opening long stretches of cold, clean tributaries to native and wild trout.

While projects that improve flows and fish passage are very important singular efforts, they all depend on fish- and flow-friendly policy. In our last Trout Line, you read about policy wins we helped achieve at the MT State Legislature, like establishing a new state fund for maintaining and improving existing state water storage facilities, along with exploring new natural and built water storage that benefit stream flows. We backed a new law that protects water users who contribute instream flow as part of a local drought plan from claims of abandonment. We also helped pass a bill that streamlines the process for doing barrier removal and habitat improvement work.

Similarly, we are strongly supporting S.1564, a bill moving through the U.S.

Congress sponsored by Montana Senator Steve Daines, which would make floodplain permitting for legitimate restoration work, including efforts that improve flows, less expensive and more efficient. We are engaging MT's Representative Troy Downing about the prospect of sponsoring a companion bill in the U.S. House. These are just a few samples of how our policy emphasis is to improve and protect flows in our trout streams. We are also advocating for proposed changes to how the Army Corps of Engineers permits stream work to streamline the process for restoration efforts. We have supported this rule change during the public review process this summer and anticipate its adoption.

With both state and federal agencies, we continue to advocate for increased streamflow monitoring, such as the funding for dozens of new stream gages we helped secure in the 2025 Legislature. Accurately measuring flows throughout coldwater basins, especially in tributaries, is the first, next step in better statewide enforcement of water use and prioritizing where fish passage work leads to the most bang for our conservation dollars.

To bring together the project and policy focuses, this spring MTU's Jefferson Watershed Project Manager, Chris Edgington, spearheaded the inaugural Southwest Montana Flow Strategy work group meeting. The gathering of state and federal fishery, hydrology and science staff, along with key partner organizations was the start of our effort to better prioritize and plan future restoration efforts that include increasing instream flow, off-stream water storage potential, and new water policy informed by on-the-ground work.

While we look to the skies and our weather apps for rain this summer, MTU will also set our sights on securing and improving stream flows in every way we can. Future generations of trout and trout anglers depend on it.



Keep Fish Wet: Next Steps for Catch and Release by Bill Pfeiffer

Many of us know the feeling. You're standing in the shallows, looking at the biggest fish of your life, finning gently before you and you want something to remember the moment by. We spend so much time, effort, and sometimes money to achieve many various milestones on our path to angling excellence. Usually, these special moments only happen when all the conditions come together perfectly, along with a little bit of luck. It's no small wonder why these encounters capture our imaginations and dreams. It's a key part of the angling experience that keeps us coming back.

In our digital age, social media adds increased pressures, fanning the desire to get the right photo of our trophy for our families, friends, and online followers. Many studies examine the effects these virtual communities have on our mental health, but as conservation-minded anglers, we should also recognize the impact social media has on our sport and fish health.

Most anglers who frequent the digital sphere are familiar with the #keep-fishwet movement, so recently I spoke with Sascha Clark Danylchuk, Executive Director of Keep Fish Wet (KFW), to learn more about the new science behind the organization's promotion of fish-friendly angling, and how MTU could help further our shared goals of healthy wild fish populations.

"We started as a social media movement launched by a small group of anglers and photographers who were concerned after seeing so many photos of fish being handled in ways that were not the best for their health or survival after release," she says. "So, the organization actually grew out of that movement."

Clark Danylchuk's background is in fisheries biology, specifically research on the impacts of catch and release angling (CNR) on fish survival. Before running KFW, she volunteered to help translate complex scientific papers on CNR impacts into messaging for the everyday angler. After four years of organic engagement, in 2019 KFW made the jump from a hashtag to an incorporated nonprofit organization with a big mission: to change CNR fishing culture.

In addition to sharing MTU's reliance on the best available fishery science, KFW continues to be grassroots focused, using education and outreach



A wild Missouri River rainbow, safely unhooked and quickly photographed without leaving the water.

to anglers and guides to achieve better outcomes for fish and establish a new conservation ethic for CNR anglers. At one time, even asking anglers to release their catch seemed difficult to achieve, but it's now well accepted, even in competitive fishing. The same seachange can happen when it comes to caring for our catch at the end of the fight.

"Biologists have been using CNR as a management tool to help conserve fish populations for over 100 years," Clark Danylchuk added, "but we really didn't have much science on how released fish are affected until the last 30 years or so." While we may watch a fish swim away, that doesn't necessarily mean it will survive the encounter. Now there's good science that shows that following a few simple rules increases the odds our trophy will be healthier and live to fight another day.

The movement to Keep Fish Wet abides by a few very simple principles. First, minimize air exposure. Fish need water to breathe, and even 10-20 seconds of air time can be harmful to some species, especially if they are already facing high water temperatures. Second, eliminate contact with dry surfaces, like hands, boat decks, or the ground. The slime coat on a fish is their main defense against pathogens and disease, and leaving it intact helps ensure their survival. Third, reduce handling time, and that means photos and grip and grins. In many cases, there's no need to handle a fish at all.

Using a barbless hook, a rubber landing net, and hook removal device can make this interaction mere seconds long. (For more responsible angling tips, visit montanatu.org/angling-in-montana)

To increase awareness even more, for the past five years KFW has promoted No Fish Dry July to encourage anglers to be even more conscious of best practices for CNR as temperatures climb with the heat of summer. The month of awareness challenges anglers to go a whole month without posting a fish photo. It seems simple, but we all know it's not as easy as it sounds. With this summer's projected low water and fishing restrictions, it's a great time to be extra conscious of our impact.

At MTU, we strive to lead by example on our own fishing trips by minimizing handling and keeping fish wet - even for photos. While some fisheries science requires biologists to handle the fish, it's not something that most of us need to do. As anglers, we can - and should - take every opportunity to reduce our impact wherever possible and help protect the fish we love to chase. For more great content on #No-FishDryJuly, follow @keep.fish.wet.



Reducing Sediment Boosts Shields River Cutthroat by Ashley Brubaker

Winding between Montana's island ranges, the Shields River is a unique and essential tributary to the mighty Yellowstone. The headwaters of the Shields start in the Crazy Mountains, and the river flows 65 miles to its confluence with the Yellowstone just downstream of Livingston. Eighty-one percent of land in the basin is in private ownership, and agriculture is still the primary economic driver. The Shields basin is also one of the last remaining strongholds for native Yellowstone cutthroat trout (YCT) in Montana, and while they still face the common challenges of warming water temperatures, dewatered streams, degraded habitat, and pressure from and introgression with non-native trout, YCT distribution in the Shields basin remains relatively intact.

For over a decade, Trout Unlimited has been leasing water rights in Shields tributaries to increase instream flow during the hottest and driest periods of the summer. Relationships formed through water leases are now leading to additional project work on the same streams – work including re-sloping eroding stream banks so the stream can access the floodplain during spring runoff, removing or replacing old culverts that have created downstream impairments and impeded upstream fish passage, and adding structure to streams such as beaver dam analogs and log jams to increase floodplain access and improve habitat for fish, beavers, birds, bats, and numerous other species.

The timing of this increased project load coincides perfectly with the Montana Department of Environmental



Fisheries managers hike into the Shields for fall fish population surveys in 2024.

Quality's decision to designate the lower Shields subbasin as its focus watershed for the 319 grant program – dedicating \$500,000 of the annual \$1 million available for nonpoint source pollution reduction towards the Lower Shields and its tributaries. This program is part of the Clean Water Act's solution to decrease nonpoint source pollution for the goal of providing "a clean and healthy environment by protecting and restoring water quality from the harmful effects of nonpoint source pollution....through voluntary implementation of land, soil, and water conservation practices (<https://deq.mt.gov/water/Programs/nonpoint>)."

In the Shields Basin, this translates to

decreasing fine sediment input into the stream – something which also happens to benefit trout.

Since the inception of the program, MT DEQ has funded over 180 nonpoint source pollution reduction projects across the state. Project descriptions are diverse, ranging from septic system improvements, and abandoned mine clean-up, to beaver mimicry and livestock fencing projects. The program also includes funding for education and outreach projects in local communities, and staff support for development of new projects.

TU has made good use of this funding elsewhere in the state to benefit water quality, water quantity and trout, but before the latest grant cycle, the Shields basin had never received 319 funding. This changed dramatically in March, when TU and other conservation partners secured almost \$300,000 for sediment reduction and project development in the Shields Watershed. Receiving the focus watershed designation and securing 319 funding is a major achievement, and is the first step towards improved stream conditions – and improved fishing – on a watershed scale in the Shields Basin.

Ashley Brubaker is Trout Unlimited's Upper Yellowstone-Shields Project Manager.



A native Shields River Yellowstone cutthroat trout from a recent fish sampling effort.



OFFICERS

LYLE COURTNAGE
CHAIR, BILLINGS
lyle.courtamage@gmail.com

WILL TRIMBATH
VICE CHAIR, HELENA
trimbath.will@gmail.com

MARK PETERSON
TREASURER, RED LODGE
markpeterson1939@gmail.com

BECKIE WILLIAMS
SECRETARY, LEWISTOWN
beckie@beckiewilliams.com

BRIAN NEILSEN
PAST CHAIR, GREAT FALLS
mt_troutco@msn.com

RIVER STEWARDS

DR. MARSHALL BLOOM
Hamilton, MT

MONTE DOLACK
Missoula, MT

CASEY & LEISHA FOLLEY
Big Sky, MT

JOHN & RENEE KOWALSKI
Helena, MT

TIM & JOANNE LINEHAN
Troy, MT

PAUL MOSELEY
Missoula, MT

ROY O'CONNOR
Clinton, MT

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MACKINNON**
Wolf Creek, MT

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Hamilton, MT

DAN & KIM SHORT
Kalispell, MT

PAUL STANLEY
Bozeman, MT/Piedmont, CA

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



Finding Hope Through Generosity by Kelley Willett

A familiar chorus rings through the zeitgeist at this moment— in the coffee shop line, the queue at the hardware store, even amid the hustle at a fishing access put in... I keep hearing, “I don’t know what I can do.” Folks young and old are grappling with the political shifts at home, violent conflicts abroad, and in Montana, low water in nearly every basin. Feeling powerless compounds our anxiety and for some, paralyzes us, and prevents us from engaging at all.

The small staff at Montana Trout Unlimited wants to remind you that you are definitely doing something when you make a gift to our conservation efforts. Your dollars are put to work in Montana and together we are accomplishing so much. Sometimes we write a check or make a credit card donation online and forget what happens next, just what that money can do. If you are feeling helpless about all of the big events you may not be able to control, please remember that by virtue of a gift to MTU you are helping. Maybe even say the affirmation below out loud.









We know people are busy, so when you donate to MTU, we understand that is your activism, your change-making, your conservation muscle and we take that obligation seriously.

You may hear from other organizations that the ‘sky is falling,’ and ‘we need your donation to stay afloat.’ That’s not our message to you. Thanks to the generosity of many, and our vigilance in growing a diverse revenue stream, federal cuts will not hurt our general operating budget this year. The cuts could impact some of our on-the-ground project work, and we may look to you for help. But for today, we are hopeful; we are grateful; and together we are making a difference.

**SUPPORT
OUR
WORK**



As an MTU Donor, I help:

-  **Remove dams, improve fish passage and ensure rivers are safe.**
-  **Restore damaged streams and increase cold, clean, water for fish, anglers, boaters, and river lovers of all kinds.**
-  **Protect the places that are dear to me and my family and ensure there will be access for future generations.**
-  **Teach a young person about conservation at the MTU Conservation Youth Camp and maybe catch her very first fish.**
-  **Safeguard the last adfluvial population of Arctic grayling in the lower 48 States.**
-  **Educate decision makers in Montana who then prioritize fish and water-friendly policy.**
-  **Recover the struggling population of bull trout in Swan Lake.**
-  **Return native westslope cutthroat, MT’s state fish, to at least 20% of its home range.**

CHAPTER NEWS

BIG BLACKFOOT CHAPTER

In May, Montana FWP provided their Blackfoot River Watershed fisheries monitoring data from 2024. Westslope cutthroat trout populations continue to improve throughout the watershed. Rainbow and brown trout populations are steady in the lower Blackfoot. Unfortunately, bull trout redd counts continue to decline in key spawning tributaries, which shows we still have lots of work to do. On May 3, we hosted the quarterly MTU Council meeting in Seeley Lake. The afternoon field tour included a number of fish passage and habitat restoration projects completed by BBCTU and our partners. On June 23, BBCTU board members and staff participated in the a field tour with local, regional and national staff from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program. We spent the afternoon on Nevada Creek meeting with landowners and talking about our 15 year effort to restore and improve Westslope cutthroat trout habitat in this key tributary.

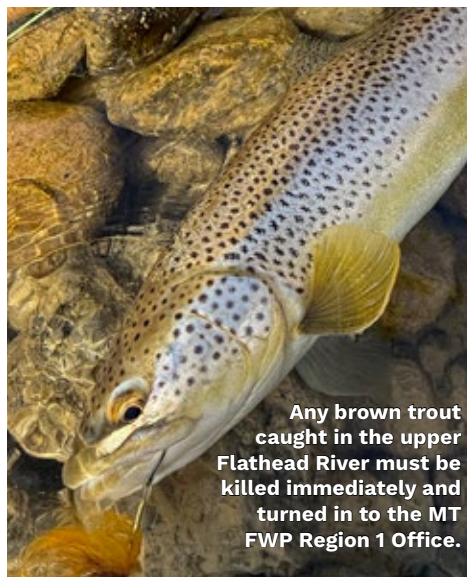
BITTERROOT CHAPTER

The Chapter has had a busy spring. We completed the 29th year of the Buggers program, with 39 kids. Each participant gets a tying kit and a rod. We also completed our fifth year of the Trout in the Classroom program. We held a release event for each school, sometimes with ice cream cones. We also received some results from a research project we have been supporting for the past two years. Masters student Megan Ahern studied the potential environmental impacts of the proposed Sheep Creek Mine at the headwaters of the West Fork south of Darby. This project was supported in part by a mini grant from MTU.

FLATHEAD CHAPTER

Thanks to everyone who donated to our Spring Fundraiser and Auction on May 17. We were able to raise some needed funds for cold water conservation in the Flathead. The Chapter is closely monitoring the recent reports of brown trout in the upper Flathead River. Anglers should kill any brown trout caught above Flathead Lake immediately and submit the fish to the Montana FWP

Region 1 Office. We continue to promote our Bull Trout Belong in Montana campaign and will be assisting with gillnetting efforts in Swan Lake.



Any brown trout caught in the upper Flathead River must be killed immediately and turned in to the MT FWP Region 1 Office.

GEORGE GRANT CHAPTER

The Chapter recently elected Alex Leone as President and Mark Mariano as Vice President. Thanks to Forrest Jay for all his service to the chapter and the State Council over the last two years, and for remaining on the board. Several chapter members attended and volunteered at MTU's Conservation Youth Camp at Gerogetown Lake. We also sponsored two campers from the area. We always enjoy this opportunity to get more kids outdoors. Chapter meetings will resume in October.

WESTSLOPE CHAPTER

The Chapter held a successful banquet on May 16 in the University of Montana Ballroom, raising funds to support the many conservation projects MTU and TU spearhead in the Missoula area. The Chapter also elected a new president, Scott Mylnechuk. Thanks to outgoing president Brandon Dwyer for all his service to WSCTU. Chapter meetings are on hiatus for the summer, but will resume in October. Please fish responsibly this summer and keep fish wet!



MONTANA TROUT UNLIMITED

CHAPTERS & PRESIDENTS

BITTERROOT CHAPTER #080

DAVID WARD, HAMILTON
dward0451@gmail.com
www.bitterroottu.org

BIG BLACKFOOT CHAPTER #544

JIM STUTZMAN, MISSOULA
stutz292@hotmail.com
www.bbctu.org

FLATHEAD VALLEY CHAPTER #085

WADE FREDENBERG, KALISPELL
gocatswf1956@gmail.com
www.flatheadtu.org

GEORGE GRANT CHAPTER #183

ALEX LEONE, ANACONDA
president@ggtu.org
www.georgegranttu.org

JOE BROOKS CHAPTER #025

JOHN ROSEBERRY, LIVINGSTON
roseberry.j@gmail.com
www.jbtu.org

KOOTENAI VALLEY CHAPTER #683

ALAN GERSTNECKER, LIBBY
libbymt406.tu@gmail.com

CHUCK ROBBINS CHAPTER #656

MIKE GEARY, DILLON
seedofzeus@gmail.com

MADISON-GALLATIN CHAPTER #024

ANDY MOORE, BOZEMAN
mgttroutunlimited@gmail.com
www.mgtu.org

MAGIC CITY FLY FISHERS #582

LYLE COURTENAGE, BILLINGS
lyle.courtnage@gmail.com
www.mcffonline.org

MISSOURI RIVER FLYFISHERS #406

TRACY WENDT, GREAT FALLS
flyfishersmissouririver@gmail.com
www.missouririverflyfishers.org

PAT BARNES-MISSOURI RIVER CHAPTER #055

TOM CAFFERY, HELENA
patbarnestu@gmail.com

SNOWY MOUNTAIN CHAPTER #610

BECKIE WILLIAMS, LEWISTOWN
beckie@beckiewilliams.com
www.snowymountaintu.org

WESTSLOPE CHAPTER #056

SCOTT MYLNECHUK, MISSOULA
westslopechaptertu@gmail.com
www.westslope-trout.org



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

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TROUT LINE SUMMER 2025

UPCOMING EVENTS www.montanatu.org

8/16/25 **MTU Memorial Float**
MISSOULA, MT

8/16/25 **Chuck Robbins Chapter Fundraiser**
DILLON, MT

8/24/25 **Lower Madison River Clean Up**
NORRIS, MT

9/13/25 **Yellowstone River Clean Up**
LIVINGSTON, MT

10/03/25 **MTU State Council Retreat**
RED LODGE, MT

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Please contact the Missoula office at 406-543-0054 or bill@montanatu.org to get the word out through Montana TU.



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