



# TROUT LINE

NEWSLETTER FROM THE MONTANA COUNCIL OF TROUT UNLIMITED



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

**FALL 2025**

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PLUS...COUNCIL AWARDS, 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](http://www.montanatu.org)**

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Many years back, I was an eager MBA student, absorbing lessons that still resonate with me today. One afternoon, our professor posed a deceptively simple question: "What makes organizations succeed, year after year?" We debated everything from innovative products to strong leadership, but the term that stuck was critical success factors—the essentials that make or break an organization's mission. I realized early that for nonprofits like Trout Unlimited, these factors aren't just important—they're everything.

Over the years, I've seen one critical success factor rise above the rest: partnerships. Our mission—conserving, protecting and restoring Montana's cold-water fisheries depends on collaboration. Alone, we are a passionate group of anglers and conservationists. Together, with local chapters, councils, government agencies, landowners, and other stakeholders, we become a force for lasting change. Partnerships allow us to reach further, act smarter, and accomplish goals that no single entity could tackle alone.

Let me share a story that exemplifies the power of working together. In 2005, the Bighorn River faced a severe challenge. Several years of drought threatened the health of the fishery, and diverse interests—from local anglers to irrigation groups—were worried about the river's future. Our local TU chapter, Magic City Fly Fishers knew that protecting this iconic trout stream would require more than advocacy; it needed true collaboration.

That year, we joined forces with the Bighorn River Alliance, Bureau of Reclamation, tribal officials, local watershed organizations, and regional conservation groups. The process wasn't always easy. We participated in government hearings, navigated conflicting priorities, and worked to build consensus among folks whose views didn't always align. Yet, by keeping our focus on the river and its trout, we found common ground.



Art by Lyle Courtnage



Lyle Courtnage  
MTU Council Chair

The outcome? Together, we developed a new management plan that balanced water needs, protected critical trout habitat, and set the Bighorn on a course for recovery. Today, the river continues to thrive as one of Montana's premier fisheries—a testament to what partnership can achieve when we put mission above ego and solution above stalemate.

This edition of the Troutline celebrates MTU partnerships and collaboration. We're delighted to have several guest pieces from a few of our many allies. I encourage every chapter and council to celebrate the alliances—big and small—that have moved our mission forward. Whether it's a local rancher allowing access for restoration work, a classroom project with a local school, or a coalition effort for legislative change, these stories deserve to be told. Let's inspire one another by sharing our successes and learning from our challenges.

As we head into fall and then a new year, I want to thank each of you for the energy, ideas, and commitment you bring to Montana Trout Unlimited. Our work is possible because we join hands, pool resources, and build relationships that last. I urge you to keep seeking new partnerships and to share your stories—they are the foundation of our future success.

Tight lines and thank you for all you do for Montana's trout and the waters they call home.

*Lyle Courtnage*

Lyle Courtnage  
Council Chair

## Water Policy Again the Focus for Legislative Interim by Clayton Elliott



Historically low flows this summer in the Blackfoot watershed reinforce the urgency of our streamflow policy work

Over the last five years, MTU has increasingly focused on changes to Montana's water law that enhance coldwater fisheries and their habitats. Those efforts have resulted in meaningful policy changes in the past two legislative sessions. From reforms to the water right permitting and change process, to transformational investments in water storage, to short term water leasing and abandonment protections, our success is tremendous. We believe that there is room for more wins in the future to meet the challenges of changing patterns of drought and water availability, especially for Montana's prized trout waters.

Our work during the legislative session is the most visible part of our water policy advocacy, but each session's work is supported by months of reviewing data, modeling and the most recent science on everything from weather to trout populations. We then bring our understanding of and care for wild and native fish into negotiations and countless meetings with other water stakeholders. Sometimes this leads to drafting new potential laws and rules around water management and use. In fact, most of this interim period work is the meat of our recipe to success in the legislative session. That work includes engaging with legislative interim committees, participation in stakeholder

discussions and workgroups, and directly engaging with state agencies. While technical and time-consuming, we always bring it back to our goal of improving flows and cold, clean water for trout.

This year, various interim committees are tackling water policy questions. Most notably, the Water Policy Interim Committee (WPIC) is focused on priorities that align with our mission. Those studies include water reuse policies, implementation of water storage investments, measurement and enforcement of water rights, and continued discussions about exempt wells. Similarly, we continue to engage with the Environmental Quality Council (EQC) on topics related to forestry and fire policy as it relates to watershed health. We are also working with the Local Government Interim Committee (LGIC) on policy related to the subdivision permitting process and water use.

MTU also continues to partner closely with our state natural resource agencies to advance policy reforms that support effective water resource management and instream flow. At the Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC) we continue to work with partners on commonsense reforms to the permitting process for securing instream flow water rights, targeting investments related to

water storage to projects that move the needle on flow in southwest Montana, and support implementation of recently passed laws in regard to administrative rules. At Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP) we are continuing to work on better implementation of angling drought restrictions and prioritization of smart flow restoration projects on the ground that move the needle on species conservation.

To put it bluntly, water policy reform is the top priority of our advocacy efforts at MTU. We will continue to work with anyone who shares an interest in making proactive changes to water law that helps support our mission. If you, your chapter, or local partner organization, has an interest in updates this winter, please reach out and we would be happy to join you for a monthly meeting discussion or presentation.

### ACTION ALERT

Repealing the Roadless Rule will threaten millions of acres of wild trout habitat.



Tell Congress to protect wild places today.



### DO YOU DRIVE MTU?



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

## Making Room for a Native Fishery by Ellie Ross & Sara Hill, Big Sky Watershed Corps

It is already hot at 8 am, as our truck bumps along a dirt road just south of Helena. We are joining Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP) for their second year of treatments on Dutchman Creek to remove invasive brook trout and restore the native westslope cutthroat fishery to this historic spawning tributary.

Dutchman Creek is a tributary to the upper Missouri and historically home to a thriving native population of westslope cutthroat trout. However, the introduction of invasives brought in by anglers and agencies looking to stock their favorite trout has been devastating to native species like the cutthroat, which possess a narrow range of habitat requirements. Treatments like this one on Dutchman Creek are one of many that aim to stop the spread of invasives and move Montana closer to MTU and FWP's shared goal of restoring westslope cutthroat to 20% of their historic range in the upper tributaries of the Missouri.

This kind of work requires careful planning and a multi-year strategy to succeed, as well as the volunteer labor from a range of partners, including us, MTU's Big Sky Watershed Corps members. It began several years ago, when FWP electroshocked the creek to stun the fish and selectively remove the native cutthroats to another stream for safekeeping. Last year, FWP returned to treat the creek, now teeming with brook trout, with the first round of rotenone, a natural chemical piscicide derived from plants in the pea family. When rotenone enters the water, it is absorbed through the gills, where it interrupts the cellular



**Beautiful, but invasive, brook trout outcompete native cutthroat species and overpopulate in many Montana headwaters.**

respiratory process of the fish.

After a successful first effort, eDNA samples found no signs of brook trout remaining in the creek. However, protocol requires a second rotenone treatment to be thorough and assure biologists that the stream is ready for cutthroat reintroduction. Brook trout are highly invasive, so if there are even a few remaining in the creek, they will likely outcompete the native fish, again, and all this work could be for nothing.

Today, about fifteen people joined up to help with the effort, sweating under the July sun as we are given instructions for the day. We are sent out to predetermined spots up the creek, each about a half mile apart, loaded with a jug of rotenone and a bag of personal protective equipment, including gloves, a KN95 mask, and a tool to flush out our eyes in case we come into contact with the rotenone. At the same designated time, each person turns their jug over at their site, so the rotenone starts dripping into the water, slowly emptying over the next four hours. The piscicide mixture is dyed a bright, almost neon green, so it is easily visible as it moves through the water.

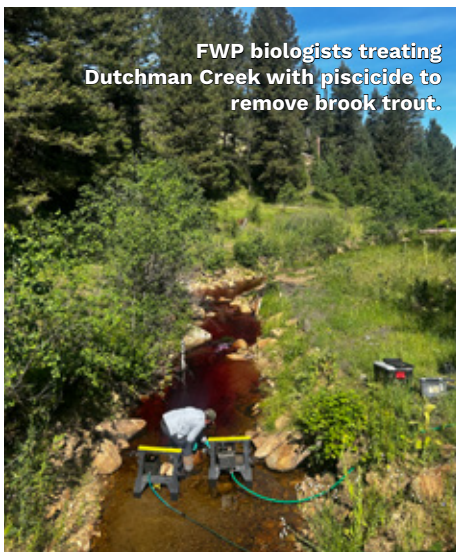
Further downstream below the targeted area, FWP has constructed a barrier to stop fish from moving upstream into this protected reach. Here, they are also ensuring that the rotenone is neutralized instead of continuing down the creek.

Though I know the goal is to get rid of the brook trout, which can drastically

reduce native cutthroat populations, I am glad when my four-hour shift passes without seeing any dead fish float by. The veteran members of the crew share my thoughts – though the result is incredibly important in safeguarding our native fish, watching fish die is never pleasant. It's a reminder that conservation, while more important than ever, can be hard in many ways. No one in the treatment team is here because they enjoy killing fish, but everyone knows that in the end, the system will be better for it.

Walking back down the trail, carrying my empty rotenone canister, I admire the creek – it is well shaded and complex, far from the road, in a beautiful ponderosa forest. It is the perfect habitat for a healthy, native fishery and I know that despite the difficulty of treatments like this, it will benefit this ecosystem in the end.

Next year, the team will be back to reintroduce the state fish, native westslope cutthroats, into the creek. This time, we have helped eliminate the risk of brook trout taking over. From the vividly green reach of this treated stream, a vibrant, native westslope cutthroat trout fishery will once again begin to thrive in the clear, cold waters of Dutchman Creek.



**FWP biologists treating Dutchman Creek with piscicide to remove brook trout.**



## More Eggs, Better Baskets: Restoring Arctic Grayling by Morgan Jacobsen

Arctic grayling populations in southwestern Montana continue to benefit from a variety of collaborative, longstanding projects involving fisheries managers and partner organizations.

This year's efforts for grayling include ongoing partnerships with irrigators to maintain stream flows; notching beaver dams during the spring spawning season to open an additional 36 miles of habitat; introducing more than a million eggs in creeks and thousands of fish in lakes and reservoirs; and conducting habitat and population monitoring surveys, to name a few.

A particularly bright spot in this work comes from French Creek in the Big Hole drainage, where grayling are being re-established as part of a native fish restoration project. Annual grayling stocking in French Creek began in 2022 with a mix of eggs and live fish. This spring, fisheries managers found all three year classes of grayling stocked so far to be present in French Creek.

"That's a really good sign," said Ryan Kreiner, a native fish biologist for Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks who focuses on grayling conservation in southwestern Montana. "It doesn't mean we're done, it just means, as of now, we're where we want to be."

French Creek is an example of a recent approach fish managers are taking to aim for more successful Arctic grayling introductions. This entails stocking grayling in conjunction with large-scale restoration projects for other native fish that involve removing non-native species upstream



Arctic grayling continue to persist in SW Montana thanks to collaborative conservation efforts.  
Photo Morgan Jacobsen

from a fish barrier.

While these kinds of restoration projects are common for species like westslope cutthroat trout, they also present opportunities for expanding grayling into new areas with quality habitat free of competition with nonnative species. It also provides a more selective list of waterbodies that hold greater chances for success.

So instead of stocking 10,000 eggs in many smaller locations with less promising conditions, fisheries managers can stock 100,000 eggs in fewer, larger areas with excellent conditions.

"We're putting more eggs in fewer places, and we're looking at

introduction sites where grayling are more likely to take hold," Kreiner said.

Other such drainages include the upper Gibbon River, which includes Grebe Lake in Yellowstone National Park, and the Selway drainage, where the second year of grayling stocking happened in September.

The road to success in these efforts is long but well defined: Fisheries managers hope to see stocking-assisted grayling populations reproducing naturally for at least 10 years before calling them a success. That's one of many metrics that support an overarching mission to protect the abundance and genetic health of indigenous grayling populations in the Big Hole and Centennial Valley drainages.

Putting more eggs in fewer, better baskets is one promising way to get there.

"I'm pretty hopeful that we're going to start seeing good results, especially in French Creek, Selway, and the upper Gibbon," Kreiner said.

*Morgan Jacobsen is the Communication and Education Program Manager for Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks in Region 3. In addition to his work for FWP, Morgan enjoys writing photography, hunting, and fishing. He lives in Bozeman, MT.*



French Creek is an example of successful Arctic grayling reintroduction in the upper Big Hole.  
Photo Morgan Jacobsen.



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Tracy Wendt, President of Missouri River Flyfishers accepts the 2025 Montana Chapter of the Year Award from MTU's David Brooks and Chair Lyle Courtamage.

The Montana Council of Trout Unlimited met in Red Lodge in late September and conferred the 2025 Council Awards. The Missouri River Flyfishers received the Chapter of the Year for excellent community engagement. The Outstanding Volunteer Award went to Travis Thurmond of Ovando for over 25 years of service to the Big Blackfoot Chapter's many restoration projects. Lastly, the Council awarded the Champion of Montana Trout Unlimited to the Rahr Family for continuing to support our many programs and restoration efforts.

**Congratulations to all our recipients!**

**SUPPORT OUR WORK**



## CHAPTER NEWS

### BIG BLACKFOOT CHAPTER

The Chapter was delighted to hear that the State Council accepted our nomination for Travis Thurmond for Volunteer of the Year. We've been able to accomplish a lot of restoration over the past 2 decades and as Chapter Treasurer, Travis helped manage the complex funding details needed for this important work. In addition, Travis promotes conservation in angling through his business, The Blackfoot Angler in Ovando. Congratulations, Travis on this award and THANK YOU!

### BITTERROOT CHAPTER

Avery Stevens, the Chapter's student board member, recently accepted an appointment to the Future Fisheries Board of Montana. This group manages a pot of grant funding that is awarded twice each year to worthy fisheries restoration projects around the State. Many MTU and TU initiatives have been recipients of this support and we're happy to have Avery representing the Chapter. Join us this winter for our regular meetings at the Elks Club with interesting speakers, beer, brats, and good conversation.

### CHUCK ROBBINS CHAPTER

Chuck Robbins had our largest fundraiser of the year, hosted by Anderson & Platt Fly Shop in Dillon on August 16. Over 200 people attended to celebrate Trout, Water, & Habitat. Thanks to our hosts and to our many supporters. We also recently held our first meeting of the fall season, focused on how we can continue to improve our grassroots efforts. Our Chapter will remain focused on water quantity and instream flow for the foreseeable future, beginning with the Water Forever meeting Nov. 19.

### MAGIC CITY FLYFISHERS

The Chapter's annual Youth Fishing Camp was a big success, with 16 young people joining us this year for instruction in fly tying, casting, conservation, entomology, and fish biology. The Camp culminated with a fishing trip to Wild Bill Lake in the Beartooths for a day of fishing. Thanks to MT FWP and MTU's Katie Young for their help! This winter, we will once again be leading fly tying in local schools. Contact the chapter to get involved!

### MADISON-GALLATIN CHAPTER

The annual Lower Madison Cleanup occurred Aug. 24 and was very well attended with help from our partners at the Bureau of Land Management, Montana FWP, and Meateater. On Sept. 9 members of the board joined TU project managers at Mandeville Creek north of Bozeman to install multiple structures and beaver dam analogs (BDAs) on one of the restoration projects we have been supporting. Our Trout in the Classroom (TiC) program now includes 9 active tanks in 7 area schools. We also approved a grant request at our May board meeting, to support Matt Wilhelm and Ripple Effect Aquatic Learning to provide additional educational resources and presentations to our current TiC locations and expanding the program to additional local locations through spring of 2026. Regular Chapter meetings started again on Oct. 8. Check our website and social media for upcoming programs.

### MISSOURI RIVER FLYFISHERS

The Chapter would like to thank the Montana State Council for the 2025 Chapter of the Year Award! All of our work is only possible thanks to the hard work of dedicated board members and volunteers. We share this honor with all of you. In other news, we'll be hosting our annual Holiday Party on Dec. 21 at the Do Bar in Great Falls. It's always a great time so we hope you can make it and celebrate this great recognition. Follow our social media for upcoming chapter meetings and events through out the winter.

### WESTSLOPE CHAPTER

We recently held our first meeting of the fall season at Blackfoot River Outfitters on Oct. 9 with presentations on public lands policy and fly fishing in Argentina. We'll be once again hosting regular meeting through April 2026. The Chapter recently elected a new president, Scott Mylnechuk and is looking for new volunteers to join our board. We'll be hosting our annual banquet on January 24. Tickets go fast so be ready to get yours soon!



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# TROUT LINE FALL 2025

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

- 11/19/25** **Chuck Robbins Water Forum**  
DILLON, MT
- 12/05/25** **MTU State Council Meeting**  
VIRTUAL
- 12/21/25** **Missouri River Flyfishers Holiday Party**  
GREAT FALLS, MT
- 01/25/26** **Westslope Chapter Banquet**  
MISSOULA, MT
- 02/21/26** **Madison-Gallatin Chapter Banquet**  
BOZEMAN, MT
- 03/06/26** **George Grant Chapter Banquet**  
BUTTE, MT
- 04/17/26** **TU Western Regional Rendezvous**  
MISSOULA, MT

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