



# TROUT LINE

NEWSLETTER FROM THE MONTANA COUNCIL OF TROUT UNLIMITED



**WINTER 2026**

**THIS ISSUE:**

MTU ON 60 MINUTES PG. 3  
SHEEP CREEK MINE PG. 4  
RESTORATION ROUNDUP PG. 5  
PLUS... CHAPTER REPORTS  
AND MORE!!!



Rattlesnake Creek,  
Missoula.

## 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.  
© 2026 Montana Council of Trout Unlimited.

## 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)

Over the past year, I've come to look forward to introducing each new issue of our quarterly newsletter. Regularly reviewing the diverse work of our talented staff and steadfast volunteers is uplifting and helps motivate me to continue doing all I can to help save wild trout and healthy rivers in our state. While these positive stories and good news can help reenergize all of us, even relishing in great accomplishments can still pale in comparison to quality time spent outside on our public lands and waters. So often in nature we discover our most profound insights.

The past 12 months have been challenging for lovers of public lands. Early this year, staffing cuts at federal agencies drastically reduced the number of employees available to steward our shared places, from forests and grazing areas, to national parks. Career biologists and other scientists took early retirement, representing an incredible "brain drain" from agency rosters. The Roadless Rule, an administrative law that helps protect 70% of the wild trout and salmon habitat from new road-building, is on the chopping block. The Clean Water Act's Waters of the United States (WOTUS) Rule, safeguarding seasonal streams and wetlands, many in the semi-arid west, is in line for a similar fate. Not only are these tools for resource managers in jeopardy, the opportunity for public input on these drastic changes in resource conservation has been minimal to nonexistent.

MTU members may come in all shapes and sizes but one common thread that unites us, even beyond fishing, is a connection with wild places. This issue of Trout Line is focused on federal public lands, our partnerships to conserve them, protect them from threats, as well as our work to restore and reconnect watersheds. You'll hear from Project Manager Chris Edgington about his 60 Minutes appearance, where the most important messages ended up on the cutting room floor. Executive Director David Brooks outlines the new mining push in Montana and calls upon our past challenges to point the way in an uncertain future. You'll see that many of our stream restoration projects simply cannot happen without our federal partnerships.

While all of these topics are about



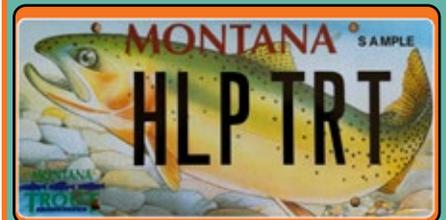
Lyle Courtnage  
MTU Council Chair

public lands challenges that can and do impact trout waters, I hope they also reflect the long-term successes this organization has had in meeting such challenges. I also encourage you to continue spending time on your favorite public lands and letting those experiences inspire you to stay in the fights we all face to ensure we pass such places on to future generations.

Lyle Courtnage  
Council Chair



## DO YOU DRIVE MTU?



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

## Tick, tick, tick, tick: 60 Minutes Misses on Public Lands by Chris Edgington.



Stock Photo

Tick, tick, tick, tick... An iconic sound of my childhood, the CBS News' *60 Minutes* intro stirs curiosity and anticipation. On a Sunday evening in November, I sat with friends and family in greater anticipation than ever before as that time-honored ticking announced the airing of the segment, "Inside Montana's fight to block the sale of federally owned land."

For almost 7 years, I've represented MTU as a part of an ever-increasing influential collaborative, the Ruby Valley Strategic Alliance (RVSA). Alliance members' shared values and thoughtfully produced comment letters to our elected officials have garnered respect and political weight - we are a microcosm of the makeup of Montanans. Over the past year, the group has weighed in on federal agency staff cuts and reorganization, the Roadless Rule, the Land and Water Conservation Fund, and, of course, the public lands sell-off budget reconciliation bill introduced into Congress.

Recently, the RVSA was approached by *60 Minutes* about our public land advocacy. The show's producers were intrigued by how such a diverse group could engage in healthy dialogue, disagree respectfully, and develop support letters that satisfied the member organizations, and more importantly, protect the places we care about. While these kinds of discussions and groups are common within the TU sphere, the idea can be foreign to many.

While I enjoyed the process and the interview with Jon Wertheim,

the story that aired focused more on affordable housing, rather than the ecological, social, and intrinsic benefits of keeping public lands intact that transcend the psyche of the American West. The story goes much deeper, as these places shape and guide our mission to conserve, protect, and restore Montana's coldwater fisheries and their watersheds.

Wild places are the heart and soul of American angling culture and conservation. Over 70% of native trout and salmon species rely on intact and healthy ecosystems on public lands. Lakes, streams, and rivers that flow from public lands are generally healthier than those far from them. Thanks to the pioneering research by legendary Montana Fish Wildlife & Parks biologist Dick Vincent and the support of MTU chapters, Montana is a wild trout state. Unlike other states, Montana doesn't stock its rivers. Fish need tributaries to complete their life history; most of those streams arise and flow through public land.

Lands held in stewardship by the Forest Service are sources of drinking water for tens of millions of Americans. Montana truly is a headwaters state, where snowmelt feeds rivers that terminate in the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans, including the Hudson Bay. It's vital to all downstream users that these lands

stay intact. Clean, connected, cold water is a finite resource, and it is worth protecting. Public lands are essential in maintaining that.

Growing up in central Nebraska, surrounded by cornfields, my journey on public lands in the West provided me the ultimate freedom to roam, hone traditional and recreational skills, and camp for weeks on end. I met interesting people, many of whom have become lifelong friends, and hundreds of others who share common values in these places. Those experiences led me to become a passionate angler and career conservationist.

Public lands enrich the lives of countless Montanans and Americans around the nation. MTU will continue to advocate for better policy, educate the next generation of conservationists, and defend against the sell-off of public lands to ensure that these critically important and special places remain a treasured and productive resource for fish and people alike. Public lands are a timeless treasure we inherited and should pass on to future generations. Any ticking they invoke should be the sound of their perpetuation, not a countdown to their disappearance.



Over 70% of native trout and salmon populations depend on public lands, such as in the South Fork of the Flathead River (pictured).



## Sheep Creek Mine plan ignores public for fast track by David Brooks

This fall it seemed like every week brought news of a new potential mine in one of Montana's trout headwaters. There were rumblings of an expansion of gold and silver operations in upper Warm Springs Creek, a tributary of the Clark Fork and home to bull trout. Talk turned to a first public meeting on similar expansion of a small abrasives mine in a Big Hole River tributary near Glen. Then an official Plan of Operations (POO) was submitted to the U.S. Forest Service for underground exploration of rare earth elements and critical minerals in Sheep Creek, a bull trout and westslope cutthroat trout stream, above where it meets the West Fork of the Bitterroot River.

All of these pose potential threats to Montana's native and wild trout, as well as to clean water that our communities rely on. At MTU, we take all such talk of new or expanded mining seriously. After meeting with MT Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) hardrock permitting staff, going to public meetings and coordinating with local partners regarding all of these cases, the Sheep Creek mine POO is the only one of these new mining situations in which an official proposal is moving through an agency permitting process.

On Dec. 1, hundreds of people packed the Hamilton fairgrounds for a Ravalli County Commission meeting about potential rare earth mining in Sheep Creek. A representative for U.S. Critical Materials described the company's interest in exploring for rare earth elements as a futuristic mine with zero water use or pollution and zero mine waste left behind, as well as being imperative for American national security and prosperity. It was the kind of boilerplate cheer-leading of new mining projects that you can find in newspaper stories going back to the Zortman-Landusky gold mine, the Beal Mountain mine, and the more recent Black Butte copper mine on another Sheep Creek (a headwater to the Smith River). The crowd groaned or snickered in knowing disbelief throughout the USCM spiel.

Bitterroot Water Partnership Executive Director Heather Barber captured the crowd's sentiment when she suggested that if USCM really wanted to work with the local community, properly address concerns and practice real transparency, the company would remove this project from the federal FAST-41 list (a listing that helps guarantee the project moves



**Bitterroot River tributaries provide essential habitat for native westslope cutthroat trout and bull trout.**

through the U.S. Forest Service permitting process expeditiously) and truly start meeting with local interest groups and leaders BEFORE submitting any plan for agency permitting. The Commissioners seconded that notion by unanimously agreeing to send a letter to the USFS and Montana's Congressmen asking for USCM's Sheep Creek project to come off the FAST-41 list. Within 24 hours, all four of those Congressmen released statements saying the company needed to slow down and fully engage the local community.

Instead, USCM delivered a draft POO to the USFS about a week before Christmas without another word to the public. The POO provides no detail on where or how many bore holes they'll be drilling or how ore will be sampled. Similarly, there is zero information on groundwater modeling, despite the POO referring to the capture and use of groundwater in the underground mine space. At the same time the POO states that if captured groundwater isn't sufficient, the company will simply use water out of Sheep Creek or the West Fork. No mention of the need for a water right.

The POO reiterates claims made by USCM representatives that zero waste will be left at the site. Instead, it says all mined material will be hauled to Idaho for processing, with waste rock being sold as fill material. Hauling everything away from the remote, mountainous location via dirt roads seems as unlikely as a mine that doesn't use any water or

create any water pollution. It would also be expensive. Waste rock from mining is rarely viable as salable fill material. In all likelihood, USCM is making these claims to avoid including ore processing and a waste rock disposal site in its plans. Doing so would bump the company footprint over the 5 acre max for a Small Mining Exclusion Act permit, which undergoes less scrutiny by MT DEQ than mine plans that exceed 5 acres.

There are also no details on access road expansion and maintenance, even though the current road runs right along the West Fork and Sheep Creek for most of its more than 10 miles. Any road work could risk damaging riparian habitat and increasing unnatural sediment in these native trout strongholds.

Bottom line: with a very poorly conceived draft Plan of Operations, USCM has already undermined its own claims

*Continued on next page.*

**JOIN THE SHEEP CREEK MINE ACTION LIST!**



**ADD YOUR NAME**

## Beartooth Restoration makes strides in 2025

**Our Beartooth Project Manager Katie Young has been hard at work at the Old Nye Fishing Access this fall. This project shows how incorporating a wood toe and willow plantings into a rip rap bank lowers some of the impact that hardened banks have on stream ecology.**



*Mining, continued from pg. 4*

about everything from engaging a robust, local citizenry to how protective it will be of natural resources. We are fortunate to be working with local partners, like the Bitterroot Water Partnership, Bitterroot Chapter of TU and others to keep a close watch on forthcoming public input opportunities. We are also able to lean on decades of advocacy and project success in this watershed, from winning public access challenges to securing instream flow rights from Painted Rocks dam, as well as the years of investments and improvements in habitat and water led by TU's Bitterroot project manager, Christine Brissette. Despite the weakness of USCM's pitch so far, the Bitterroot deserves our vigilance.



**OFFICERS**

**LYLE COURTNAGE**  
CHAIR, BILLINGS  
lyle.courttnage@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

**DAVE PERKINS & NANCY  
MACKINNON**  
Wolf Creek, 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

**Where your donation goes** by Kelley Willett

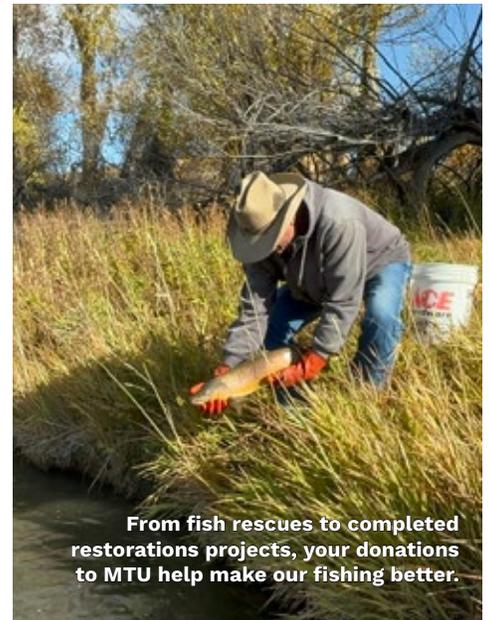
I was visiting with a friend who supports MTU, and the conversation went like this: “I liked your last Trout Line article. I get it. I give money. MTU does big things. But where does my money actually go?”

This made me think that for some supporters, a look at what your dollars literally buy might be welcome. While it is true that your generosity makes it possible for MTU to make large-scale conservation gains all across the state (dams come out and rivers run free; policies change—ensuring fishing for the next generation), we’re happy to share a more granular look at how your support makes that happen.

Some funds go directly to work on the ground, purchasing supplies like willow stakes at \$2 a piece (we use thousands annually) or step pool boulders for \$165 each, and expert services like excavation and earth moving that are reconnecting or improving tributaries in the Big Hole, Jefferson, Smith and dozens of other rivers and streams. Your donations make our education efforts possible and pay for the food, lodging, and supplies for 20 young people to spend a week at Georgetown Lake learning conservation and fly fishing. MTU writes checks for expert help as we review mining proposals, proposed gravel pits, and other threats to water quality. Hydrologists, geochemists, and engineers help us to interpret data and offer recommendations to agencies making decisions about the future of MT’s treasured waters.

We spend money advocating for policies with water quality and quantity in mind, which means our lobbyist moves to Helena for 4 months every other year, and your gifts make that move possible.

MTU prides itself on being a lean operation, so we are mindful of our overhead expenses, but they exist. You



**From fish rescues to completed restorations projects, your donations to MTU help make our fishing better.**

are investing in the humans who live and work in Missoula and Dillon, Butte and Red Lodge. Relationships are at the heart of our success and your largesse pays for us to collectively participate in hundreds of meetings where we build consensus, form partnerships, and cultivate relationships to solve the big problems we face. Your decision to put a check in an envelope allows us to meet with agency partners, landowners, businesses, donors, volunteers, the guide and outfitting community, legislators, scientists, ranchers and farmers and so many more.

Funding a tank of gas for a water quality meeting may have less sparkle than funding a dam removal, but the truth is that all of MTU’s big accomplishments are the result of many small investments. And dams don’t come out without lots of meetings and tanks of gas. That youth camper dinner you paid for... well, one of our youth camp counselors is now a ranger working in Montana. That Helena rent for our lobbyist made it possible for MTU to help secure the new \$100 million water storage trust; in coming years, the interest from that Trust will be available for improving flows statewide.

Thank you for making our work possible—from the coffee that fuels Youth Camp volunteers to the expert scientists we rely on to drive our work—we’re counting on you.

**SUPPORT OUR WORK**



## CHAPTER NEWS

### BITTERROOT CHAPTER

Entering 2026, Bitterroot Trout Unlimited is beginning its 50th anniversary. We have grown to approximately 260 members and are doing some very interesting projects. We will have events throughout the year to celebrate the anniversary. The Chapter's biggest priority right now is to protect our river from the proposed Sheep Creek Mine. We will be providing periodic updates to those efforts in our monthly newsletter. Visit [bitterroottu.org](http://bitterroottu.org) to sign up. In other news, our Trout in the Classroom (TIC) program has grown to eight classrooms. We are awaiting the results from the third year of our macroinvertebrate study on the Bitterroot River in association with the Salmonfly Project. The third year will allow us to begin to see some trends in these populations. As the project continues, the trends will become more defined.

### FLATHEAD VALLEY CHAPTER

After several months of work FVTU is proud to unveil our new website, [flatheadtu.org](http://flatheadtu.org). We partnered with Gecko Designs from Missoula and refreshed our look and our messages, consistent with the Montana TU website. We're looking forward to adding more current content and providing a snappier, more modernized look in support of native bull and westslope cutthroat trout in the Flathead. We are transitioning from a long-term spring banquet format and towards an all new family-oriented "Flathead Fin Fest" scheduled for May 16, 2026 at Snappy's Sports Senter. FVTU is also expanding our "Flybrary" program. It's a takeoff of the Little Free Library concept with kiosks established at Fishing Access sites on the Flathead River where anglers can grab a fly or leave a fly for the next participant.

### MADISON-GALLATIN CHAPTER

The Chapter is busy preparing for our 54th Annual Trout Fest Banquet and Fundraiser, Sat. Feb. 21 at Field and Stream Lodge. Tickets are on sale now at [mgtu.org](http://mgtu.org). Hot item this year is a boat raffle for a gorgeous classic wooden drift boat. Tickets are \$100/each and only 150 will be sold. Last month, we held a great Fly Tying Night at the GranTree for our

general meeting, with great flies on vices and great conversations. Hope to see you at our banquet.

### MISSOURI RIVER FLYFISHERS

Thanks to a mini-grant from MTU, Matt Wilhelm from Yellowstone Flyfishing will be leading multiple youth education programs in our local schools. MRF board member Ria French is working with Matt to select the classrooms and guide curriculum. The chapter had a pint night at Annie's Taphouse on January 22 to kick off our winter activity season. On February 5 we will host our annual FWP State of the Rivers & Reservoirs at The Do Bar, with prizes and some great information. MRF is also helping to raise funds for an AED at Craig with a pint night at Mighty Mo Brewery on April 13. From 5-8 pm, \$1 for each pint sold will be donated to MRF. We will also be raising funds with a 50/50 raffle and accepting donations at this event to support the AED, which will improve first response times for emergencies in the canyon. MRF's book club is still going strong, meeting the last Sunday of each month at Annie's Taphouse at 3 pm. Our February and March books are coordinated with author talks at the Great Falls Public Library by Dr. Kurt Fausch and Pete Fromm. Visit our Facebook or website for more information. Looking forward, House of Fly is hosting the F3T film tour on February 20 at the Newberry, with proceeds going to MRF. Join us for some great movies.

### WESTSLOPE CHAPTER

The Chapter is still buzzing from a successful banquet at the UC Ballroom on January 24. We sold out and raised a lot of funds for conservation. The regular Raise the Paddle portion of the program brought much needed attention and funds to the still unscreened Missoula Ditch Season. The Chapter is holding rotating meetings on the second Wednesday of each month at different businesses around Missoula. Follow us



## MONTANA TROUT UNLIMITED

# CHAPTERS & PRESIDENTS

### BITTERROOT CHAPTER #080

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

### BIG BLACKFOOT CHAPTER #544

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

### FLATHEAD VALLEY CHAPTER #085

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

### GEORGE GRANT CHAPTER #183

ALEX LEONE, ANACONDA  
[president@ggtu.org](mailto:president@ggtu.org)  
[www.georgegranttu.org](http://www.georgegranttu.org)

### JOE BROOKS CHAPTER #025

JOHN ROSEBERRY, LIVINGSTON  
[roseberry.j@gmail.com](mailto:roseberry.j@gmail.com)  
[www.jbtu.org](http://www.jbtu.org)

### KOOTENAI VALLEY CHAPTER #683

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

### CHUCK ROBBINS CHAPTER #656

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

### MADISON-GALLATIN CHAPTER #024

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

### MAGIC CITY FLY FISHERS #582

LYLE COURTENAGE, BILLINGS  
[lyle.courtnage@gmail.com](mailto:lyle.courtnage@gmail.com)  
[www.mcffonline.org](http://www.mcffonline.org)

### MISSOURI RIVER FLYFISHERS #406

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

### PAT BARNES-MISSOURI RIVER CHAPTER #055

KIEL MIDTLYNG, HELENA  
[patbarnestu@gmail.com](mailto:patbarnestu@gmail.com)

### SNOWY MOUNTAIN CHAPTER #610

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

### WESTSLOPE CHAPTER #056

SCOTT MYLNECHUK, MISSOULA  
[westslopechaptertu@gmail.com](mailto:westslopechaptertu@gmail.com)  
[www.westslope-trout.org](http://www.westslope-trout.org)



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

NON-PROFIT ORG.  
U.S. POSTAGE  
PAID  
MISSOULA, MT  
PERMIT NO. 569

# TROUT LINE WINTER 2026

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

- 02/21/26** **Madison-Gallatin Chapter Banquet**  
BOZEMAN, MT
- 03/06/26** **George Grant Chapter Banquet**  
BUTTE, MT
- 03/14/26** **State Council Meeting**  
BOZEMAN, MT
- 03/21/26** **Pat Barnes Chapter Banquet**  
HELENA, MT
- 04/17/26** **TU Western Regional Rendezvous**  
MISSOULA, MT
- 05/16/26** **Flathead Valley Chapter Banquet**  
KALISPELL, MT

**WANT 4,000 MTU SUPPORTERS 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.



@montanatu



@montanatroutunlimited