



TROUT LINE

NEWSLETTER FROM THE MONTANA COUNCIL OF TROUT UNLIMITED



SUMMER 2026

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NINEMILE RESTORATION PG. 5
PLUS...STEWARDSHIP SPOTLIGHT,
CHAPTER REPORTS, FALL
EVENTS AND MORE!

MTU Youth Campers learn how to build beaver
dam analogues on Cable Creek near Anaconda.



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

TROUT LINE is published quarterly by Montana Trout Unlimited.

**Printed on recycled paper using eco-friendly inks.
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Montana Trout Unlimited doesn't sit on the sidelines when mining threatens our rivers. Nearly thirty years ago, our members backed I-137, the ballot measure that made Montana the first state to ban new cyanide heap-leach gold mines — a fight that began because someone wanted to dig a massive pit half a mile from the Blackfoot River. Around the same time, MTU joined the coalition that stopped the New World Mine at Yellowstone National Park's back door, protecting the Lamar, the Stillwater, and the Clark's Fork of the Yellowstone rivers. We're not anti-mining. We just insist it be done — or not done — with our trout streams front and center in the conversation.

We stay engaged because we've seen what happens when nobody's watching. The Upper Clark Fork is still the largest Superfund complex in the country, a legacy of over a century of mining in Butte and Anaconda that left Silver Bow Creek fishless for decades. Soda Butte Creek was so poisoned by old tailings that trout couldn't survive in it for a day — it took years of cleanup just to get it off the state's impaired waters list, in 2019. And our own Trout Line readers know the Ninemile story: Paul Parson and TU spent more than a decade fixing what historic mining broke on that Clark Fork tributary (see this issue). That's not ancient history — that's the bill that comes due when mining isn't done correctly.

Which is why I'm writing about this now. We're seeing a real uptick in mining interest across Montana's trout country — gold exploration in the Blackfoot headwaters near Lincoln, a rare-earth proposal at the head of the Bitterroot's Sheep Creek, copper exploration along the Little Blackfoot. Some of that's riding record gold prices. Some of it's tied to real concerns about rare earth supply chains and China. Those are legitimate pressures. But they deserve to be weighed against this: Montana's cold-water fisheries brought in an estimated \$1.1 billion in angler spending last year, supporting thousands of jobs in our small towns — every year, for as long as the water stays clean and cold. That's not a one-time construction bump. It's a renewable asset, and it only pays out if we get the water right, every time, before anyone breaks ground.



Mining, or any industrial use that can impact our streams and rivers, should also be weighed against the intrinsic values we hold for native and wild trout in Montana (see, for example, Kelley Willett's piece in this issue). Thank you for helping us keep track of new mining threats; thank you for diligently engaging in the public review and comment process; and thank you for prioritizing trout as an economic, social and personal value in MT.

Lyle Courtnage
Council Chair

Lyle Courtnage

SUPPORT OUR WORK



Your gift helps us to sustain our vital mission:

To conserve, protect, and restore Montana's coldwater fisheries and their watersheds.

Conservation Youth Camp Grows New Leaders by Bill Pfeiffer



MTU Volunteer Ed Scranton and his daughter Nora getting up close and personal with the Four Cs, high in the Sapphire Mountains. Photo by Chase Walker

For the past five years I have been fortunate to direct MTU's annual Conservation Youth Camp, held for 5 days each summer on beautiful Georgetown Lake in the shadow of the Pintlers. The camp is an amazing opportunity for 20 young anglers from across Montana and the country to learn how to flyfish, and also what it means to be a steward and champion of wild trout and healthy rivers. We say we are training the next generation of conservation-minded leaders. But what does that really mean?

The foundational principle of our program answers a simple question and it applies to young people and adults alike: what creates great wild trout habitat? If you learn what trout need to survive and where to find them, it not only helps you become a better angler, it teaches you how to conserve, protect, and restore wild trout waters. It echoes our favorite quote from Trout Unlimited cofounder Art Neumann, "Take care of the fish, and the fishing takes care of itself."

Wild trout require systems that are Clean, Cold, Complex, and Connected, also known as the Four Cs. Before stringing up their fly rod or tying a knot, our campers learn that without these essential elements, trout fishing is not sustainable, or even possible. Wild trout need clean water and gravel to rear their young. That water has to remain cold to maintain the high dissolved oxygen levels fish require to breathe. They also depend on complex, natural and functioning stream environments and

watersheds unfettered from barriers like dams and culverts. With this foundation, the campers explore many wild places while fishing, and also impacted areas in need of our help: proposed, completed, and active stream restoration projects.

This summer, our campers teamed up with TU Project Manager Ben Laporte to build beaver dam analogues on Cable Creek outside of Anaconda (cover photo). This type of hands-on, service-based learning is a great team-building exercise for young people and our volunteers. It shows them up close how beavers contribute to the Four C's, through water storage and other benefits (for more on how beavers help trout, see Katie Young's piece in the Spring, 2026 Trout Line). Even with small stream excursions every afternoon and evenings stripping dry flies on the lake, our stream restoration day is often the campers' favorite part of the entire camp. Few things are as magical as playing in a creek for a few hours and seeing how that work benefits fish in real time.

"Rock-rolling" projects are only one part of our conservation program. This summer, with the help of volunteer David Baumgartner of the Madison-Gallatin Chapter, the kids got their hands dirty pulling apart willow root systems, to see exactly how vegetation helps stabilize stream banks, filter out pollutants, and anchor riparian plant communities. Our partners at Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks offer instruction beyond basic fish biology. For example, when you understand the differences

between wild trout management and fish culture, it brings a sense of gratitude for being able to angle in a place that supports all wild fish, and also encourages sound conservation ethics.

All of these experiences introduce young people to careers in conservation, from environmental engineering to biology, hydrogeology to fisheries, forestry and beyond. Many 11 year-olds haven't thought too deeply about "what they want to be when they grow up." For camp attendees drawn to the outdoors and interested in protecting our shared resources, they're exposed to professionals from multiple disciplines working together towards a common goal.

Our camp program also plants a seed that for some attendees will grow into becoming a TU chapter member, volunteer, or board member. The 2026 camp was special for that very reason. For the first time in my tenure, one of our former campers returned to camp as a volunteer. A boy we first met at age 12 is now paying it forward to other young people. In the future, he could be in my shoes working as a Camp Director, or maybe a future Project Manager or Chapter President. The leadership ladder needs a first rung and our camp helps kids take their first step.

None of this would be possible without volunteer support. Some volunteers have been helping at camp for over 20 years! Their commitment is truly special and inspiring. MTU's goal is to have a 1:1 camper/instructor ratio whenever possible. Behind the scenes, these amazing folks also help with things like getting the morning coffee brewing, finding a lost piece of clothing or gear, or simply offering an ear to a young person dealing with a challenge. We need people like YOU to ensure camp continues to be all that it can be. The next generation of conservation anglers are counting on it.

MTU's next Conservation Youth Camp will take place at Campfire Lodge on Georgetown Lake July 11-15, 2027. Camper and Volunteer applications open Feb. 1, 2027 at <http://montanatu.org/youthcamp>.



Montana Mine Watch: Our Top Priorities by David Brooks



One primary concern of any mining project is how it could negatively impact native fish, like westslope cutthroat.

If the stories in the last few Trout Lines about the numerous hard rock mine exploration efforts afoot in Montana watersheds have made your head spin, you're not alone. The pace of new exploration proposals and the permitting processes make it hard to stay focused on how best to protect trout waters from these threats. We continue to commit significant time and effort to do just that and to keep you informed and ready to act. Here is the latest summary of mine development that we are most heavily invested in tracking:

UPPER BLACKFOOT RIVER

MT DEQ approved the Columbia Gold Project, an exploratory drilling operation by Sentinel Metals. The company posted a reclamation bond and began drilling up to 21 exploration holes above the Hogum and Seven-Up Pete tributaries of the Blackfoot River (upstream of Lincoln) in June. We will monitor activities and rolling reclamation efforts, as well as any required water and resource monitoring.

We are also awaiting an exploration permit environmental assessment by MT DEQ for up to four drill pads/holes at the Copper Cliff gold project site near Potomac in Missoula County, being proposed by Mogote Copper in a joint venture with global mining Rio Tinto's Kennecott exploration division. We will keep you posted when the DEQ issues its environmental assessment.

LITTLE BLACKFOOT RIVER

The Helena and Lewis & Clark National Forest denied our coalition's request for a longer public comment period on the draft Environmental Assessment for a gold, copper, silver, and tungsten exploration effort by Falcon Copper. Called the Blue Copper Project, this exploration would last up to 5 years of full-time, year-round drilling and hauling in headwaters of the Little Blackfoot River between Avon and Elliston. Thank you to everyone who submitted comments asking for a more thorough analysis of risks to water and fish. Because this project is on the controversial FAST-41 list to expedite Forest projects, we expect a decision by the USFS soon.

SHEEP CREEK - TRIBUTARY OF W. FORK BITTERROOT

After revoking an earlier Plan of Operations, US Critical Materials Corp (USCM) has submitted a revised Plan to the Bitterroot National Forest for exploration drilling at 4 sites in the Sheep Creek tributary of the West Fork, home to one of Montana's most important and valuable westslope cutthroat and bull trout populations. The current Plan remains short on details about potential impacts.

The USFS has decided to permit the exploration as a Categorical Exclusion with a public comment period starting

in early August. Because of the potential impacts, we are strongly recommending that the USFS reconsider and undertake a full environmental assessment of the mining plan, especially given the potential for radioactive or other toxins to be associated with rare earth elements. We continue to help maintain www.dontpollutetheroot.com to provide updates, including how you can comment right now. Meanwhile USCM asked the state of Montana to forego evaluation of this exploration mining under MT's fundamental mining laws. Fortunately, the MT DEQ rejected the company's effort to operate outside the law.

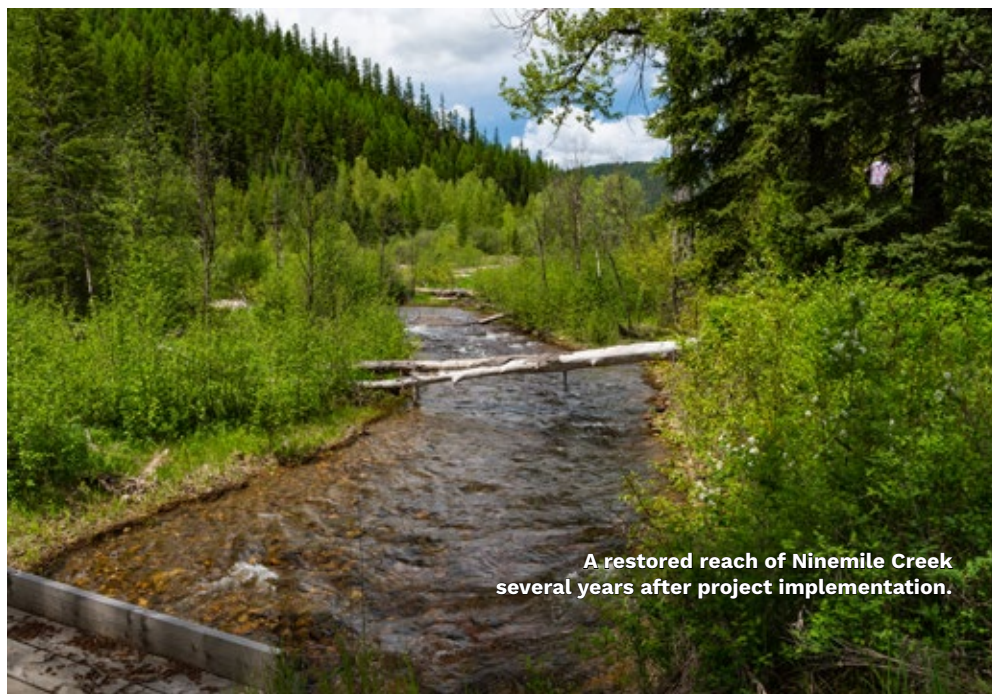


ACTION ALERT



**ADD YOUR NAME TO OUR
MINEWATCH ACTION
ALERT LIST!**

Restoring Ninemile: A Legacy of Mining Left Behind by Paul Parson



A restored reach of Ninemile Creek several years after project implementation.

Old mining activity has left a lasting mark on the Ninemile Creek watershed. Today, the landscape still shows the scars: towering piles of leftover placer mine waste (some as tall as a three-story building), a creek channel cut off from its natural floodplain, and heavy erosion. Large, stagnant settling ponds sit scattered across the area, and there isn't enough streamside vegetation to hold the banks together, shade the water, or filter out sediment and pollution before it reaches the creek.

The good news? Trout Unlimited and a wide coalition of partners have been working hard to turn this around. As the TU project manager for this work, I have helped lead restoration of six reaches of Ninemile Creek and 11 mining sites on its tributary streams. These restored reaches now provide important spawning and rearing habitat for cutthroat and rainbow trout — large spawners travel up from the Clark Fork River, journeying some 20 miles up Ninemile Creek to reach the now-abundant spawning gravels in the restored sections. In short, this work isn't just healing Ninemile Creek and its tributaries — it's helping produce more fish for the Clark Fork River.

This effort has brought together an impressive group of collaborators: local landowners, the Lolo National Forest, Missoula County, Montana DEQ, Montana DNRC, Montana FWP, Montana DES, FEMA, the National Forest Foun-

dation, the National Wildlife Federation, the Westslope Chapter of Trout Unlimited, Warriors and Quiet Waters, the University of Montana, and Big Sky Brewing. Altogether, over the past twenty years, more than \$6 million has gone into cleaning up this abandoned mining legacy.

WHAT'S HAPPENING NOW

This July marks the start of the seventh and final phase of restoration along the main stem of Ninemile



Paul Parson has dedicated much of his career to restoring Ninemile Creek.

Creek. The work is taking place on Lolo National Forest land and the Houseman placer mining claim, about 17 miles upstream from where Ninemile Creek flows into the Clark Fork River. Montana-based crews are currently using excavators, bulldozers, and large haul trucks to clear timber and remove the last remnants of old mine piles. Over the next few months, work will shift to shaping an entirely new stream channel for Ninemile Creek — one that sits roughly eight feet above the creek's current downcut, degraded path.

The goal is straightforward: clean up the damage from mining, improve water quality, and reconnect tributary streams that have been cut off for decades. By the time the snow flies this fall, crews will have removed and regraded about 40,000 cubic yards of old mine debris, carved out 3,500 feet of new stream channel, and restored 15 acres of floodplain and wetland habitat. To help nature recover, around 30,000 willow cuttings, native plants, and tree seedlings will be planted throughout the restored areas. The site will take a few years to recover, but for now, Ninemile Creek is on a great trajectory and with any luck, we will see some big spawning Clark Fork fish hanging out next spring.

None of this would have been possible without the many partners and volunteers that have invested time and treasure to literally bring this important Clark Fork tributary to life.

Paul Parson serves as Montana Restoration Director for Trout Unlimited and is based in Missoula, MT.



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Jeffery and Jack Raines sharing a father-son moment on Rock Creek.

How Memories Can Inspire Us by Kelley Willett

When I was a little girl and my family piled into the faux wood-paneled station wagon to drive from Wisconsin to visit grandparents in Montana, I was most excited about fishing with my dad. He'd fly fish and rig up a bobber pole for me and my little brother, and we'd walk the banks of the Smith, Belt Creek and the Boulder, almost always arriving home with a stringer full of trout that my grandma would dredge in flour and fry up in bacon grease. In all my childhood, I never heard the words "Hoot Owl Restrictions" or "closures due to high water temperatures." Those pre-dawn July mornings were chilly and smelled of pine and dew; I needed a sweatshirt, and sometimes we had the car's heater warming our toes.

This first month of summer 2026, I smelled that same pine and moisture in the air. If I felt like it, I could fish almost anywhere, and it was still a fair fight—fish were not battling high temps and low flows—and I could even fish some afternoons. June was a reminder of what we are all working for... a welcome reversal of the last several years, which have been a pummeling of hot, dry days... lessons in what we are all trying to avoid. MTU has never been a "the sky is falling" organization, but we have invited folks to look out their windows in summers past and see what happens to watersheds and wild and native fish when temps rise and flows drop. This year is different.

The sweet reminder of what Montana's fishing culture once was and can be when the rivers sustain healthy flows and the temps are not breaking records every day has been just the

inspiration I need to work even harder. The feel of the cool night air, the smoke-free skies, the dog-eared gazetteer full of countless tiny blue lines, all on offer because there is enough water in most systems, have reminded me of the Montana of my youth, the Montana I want for my nieces.

MTU's work to ensure in-stream flow on systems from the Yaak to the Bighorn is critical. More water is the way to ensure we have summers when anglers are not at the mercy of restrictions because our beloved rivers are running dry.

I'm not confused; I understand that the megadrought impacting the Western U.S. is here to stay. However, the lovely cool days of early summer 2026 motivate me and I hope might motivate you too. With your continued support MTU can keep making a difference in watersheds across the state.

A dear friend uses the phrase, 'gift received,' when an unexpected happiness comes her way. This acknowledgment feels like a prayer of gratitude to the universe and reminds me to stop and be thankful. So, to you all, who make MTU's water work possible (for more than 60 years), and for the crisp mornings and late afternoon fishing that were highlights of my June, "gift received."



CHAPTER NEWS

BITTERROOT CHAPTER

The Chapter is currently celebrating our 50th anniversary with a special commemorative logo by artist Bobbi Dye. Our main priority is carefully monitoring the most recent Plan of Operations from the Sheep Creek Mine. We have worked closely with MTU to provide some detailed comments to the area ranger on this important project. We are opposed to having a mine at the headwaters of our most valued stream in the Bitterroot Valley. To stay connected on this issue, visit our coalition's website at <http://donthepollutethe-root.com>.

BLACKFOOT CHAPTER

The 2026 construction season is underway and BBCTU is working with several state, federal and private partners on stream restoration, grazing management and fish passage projects. The Clearwater River fish passage project has started, and the first phase of the Cottonwood Creek restoration will begin later this fall. MFWP recently approved \$74,500 in Future Fisheries funding for Cottonwood Creek. Partners, including National TU, The Wilderness Society and Wild Montana, attended the July Board Meeting to discuss the "A River Runs Through It" proposal. This proposal meshes the former Blackfoot Clearwater Stewardship project with the Lincoln Prosperity project into one legislative act. It has support from diverse user groups and it would protect critical habitat for Westslope cutthroat and Bull trout. BBCTU submitted a letter of support for the proposal.

GEORGE GRANT CHAPTER

The Chapter's annual membership meeting featured seven fisheries biologists and experts who provided a big-picture look at the health of our region's fisheries and the challenges ahead. The chapter also continues to support restoration projects on the Jefferson, Big Hole, and Boulder rivers, along with several spring creek restoration efforts. We are especially excited to celebrate the completion of one of our legacy projects, Fifer Gulch near Anaconda. The project reconnected and restored a spring creek and a section of Fifer Gulch to Warm

Springs Creek, improving fish habitat and passage. If you're traveling this summer, stop by the site along Highway 1, across from the Haufbrau. GGTU also awarded \$10,000 in Upper Classman Scholarships to four outstanding students: Maddie Wilson (\$5,000), Beau Milton (\$2,500), Nicholas Hudson (\$1,200), and Max Rubino (\$1,200).

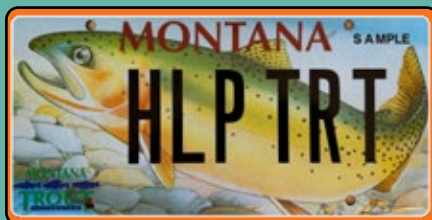
WESTSLOPE CHAPTER

Join the WestSlope Chapter of Trout Unlimited for a family-friendly fish fry celebrating community, conservation, and cold, clean water. Enjoy fresh fish & chips, live music, and local brews while connecting with conservation organizations working to protect places like the Blackfoot River. With games for all ages and a chance to win an unforgettable Alaska fishing trip, it's an afternoon of fun that supports the future of our fisheries. Sunday, August 16th from 3PM to 7PM at Big Sky Brewery. Tickets include food and entertainment: \$25 for adults, \$15 for kids 12 & under. Adult entry includes: a chance to win a 5-day/5 night Alaska fishing trip for two on the Copper River! Extra raffle tickets available for purchase. No need to be present to win. Hope to see you there! Our regular chapter meetings resume in October.



Most Montana Chapters hold monthly chapter meetings from October through May of each year and focus on field work and fishing during the summer months. Check chapter websites and social media pages for updated events listings.

SUPPORT OUR WORK



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MONTANA TROUT UNLIMITED

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TROUT LINE SUMMER 2026

UPCOMING EVENTS www.montanatu.org

- 8/15/26** **MGTU Lower Madison Clean-Up**
WARM SPRINGS FAS
- 8/15/26** **CHUCK ROBBINS BBQ**
DILLON, MT
- 8/16/26** **WSCTU FISH FRY**
BIG SKY BREWING, MISSOULA, MT
- 9/19/26** **Bitterroot TU 50th Anniversary Banquet**
HAMILTON, MT
- 9/26/26** **MTU State Council Meeting**
BILLINGS, MT

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