

# Big Hole



Watershed Committee

## Big Hole Watershed Committee

Monthly Meeting Minutes

October 15, 2014 – 7:00 pm

Divide Grange

### In Attendance

Jennifer Downing, BHWC; Tana Nulph, BHWC; Kim Snodgrass, Water and Environmental Technologies; Russ Riebe, USFS; Scott Reynolds, GGTU; Jim Hagenbarth, Vice Chairman/Rancher; Garth Haugland, Beaverhead County; Mike Roberts, DNRC; Bryan Gartland, DNRC; Doug Finnicum, BSB Water; Roy Morris, GGTU; Emma Cayer Cayer, MWFP; Linda Lennen, MFWP; Dan Downing, USFS; Jim Boyd, USFWS; Doug Clark, ADLC; Jennifer Boyer, Future West; Phil Ralston, Rancher; Kirwan Webb, WET; Ben Fennelly, RESPEC; Jeff Dunn, RESPEC; Mike Bias, BHRF; Don Reese, Rancher; Peter Frick, Rancher.

**Introductions**      *Attendees introduced themselves.*

**Meeting Minutes**      *September meeting minutes were reviewed, no additions or corrections.*

### Reports

#### *Streamflow Report - Mike Roberts, DNRC*

- *Streamflow:* Most sites are reporting above average river flows due to late September rains, cooler temperatures, and ET shutdown.
- *Snowpack:* Very little snow has accumulated this year thus far.
  - This time last year, the snowpack was well above average, due to late September, high elevation snows and cooler October temperatures.
- *CCAA Report:* Very few days dropped below flow targets.
  - CCAA planning kept flows above targets during most of the summer's low flow periods, despite a dry July and early August.
- *Predictions:* A weak El Nino in the northern hemisphere, beginning in the next two months and lasting through Spring 2015. In Montana, this could mean:
  - Above average winter temperatures. Below average winter precipitation

#### *Directors Report - Jennifer Downing*

- *New Staff:* Tana Nulph hired as the Conservation Programs Coordinator. Big Sky Watershed Corps member to start January 2015
- Attended the Beaverhead Interagency Coordinating Meeting
- Carcass composting is being planned for Beaverhead County
- *Coming up:* Fall newsletter, annual appeal. Anniversary of the BHWC

#### *Steering Committee - Jim Hagenbarth*

- Steering Committee is happy with progress BHWC is making.

#### *Wildlife Committee – Jim Hagenbarth*

- Carcass composting – Kris Inman/Wildlife Conservation Society is trying for carcass composting facility, possibly on DNRC land.
- Range Rider contract finished September 30<sup>th</sup>, no livestock kills and only one documented conflict with wolves. The landowner was notified, the livestock were moved, and no problems resulted.
- January 7<sup>th</sup>: There is an all-day predator workshop at 4H building in Dillon, several speakers will be present and will discuss using dogs to protect livestock from predators.
- *Sage grouse:* Pay attention to wording of new laws/regulations and participate in public comment sessions. Things to consider:

- Core habitat (leks and diameter of area around leks), possible impacts on grazing standards and burning practices
- Sagebrush regulations in Montana are very restrictive. It will be difficult to uphold a big sagebrush ecosystem without being able to use vegetative treatments.

#### *Land Use Planning Committee - Jennifer Boyer*

- The State has adopted a new floodplain map on October 7. The map encompasses the greatest amount of miles ever accepted by the State as a single floodplain.
- Letters were sent to everyone who signed petition concerning Wisdom Market and impact on that property and to everyone who offered comments, explaining the decision and who to contact for more information. Only one person responded, showing that outreach and education was sufficient.
- *Incentive program:* Resubmitting design grant that was submitted last year. Won't hear anything until early next year.
- *Next month:* We will discuss ways for the BHWC to support communities in adopting the floodplain map:
  - Do we want to issue a news release to inform communities about the floodplain adoption process. (What has been done, what does it mean, what will we do next?)
  - As BHWC members, we can explain the process and the positive and negative aspects of it.
  - Timing of a news release (it's election time).

#### *Weed Committee – Jennifer Downing*

- Weed Whacker Ball Review Meeting is coming up

#### *Other Comments*

- There has been a sizable brown trout kill, due to fungus. Anglers have commented. It seems to be a natural fungus, it's just a bad year for it. Jim Olsen is looking into it.

### **Presentation: USFWS Decision to Not List Arctic Grayling Under ESA: Why, How, and Now What?**

*Presented by Jim Boyd, US Fish & Wildlife Service, Helena, MT*

August 19, 2014, the US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) announced that after years of status review, restoration, and pending listing decision, the Arctic grayling did not warrant listing under the Endangered Species Act due to effective conservation and partnerships. This marks a landmark decision and success story sparked in the early 1990's with the Arctic Grayling Recovery Program and Big Hole Watershed Committee and precipitated by the expansive Conservation Candidate Agreement with Assurances (CCAA). For more than 20 years, ranchers, conservation groups, agencies, and others worked together. Many individuals dedicated their careers or a large part of their time and energy to the benefit of the Big Hole River and its grayling. The Arctic grayling were the genesis of the Big Hole Watershed Committee in 1995 and central to its mission. With more than 20 years behind this efforts, the recent USFWS decision leaves us wondering – what happens next now that the Arctic grayling are not listed under the Endangered Species Act?

#### *Background:*

- *In 2010:* A 12-month finding was produced showing that the Distinct Population Segment (DPS) of Arctic grayling in the upper Missouri River should be listed under the Endangered Species Act, as they are genetically distinct from other grayling and their numbers were dwindling. However, higher priority species were listed first.
  - The finding also showed that there were 5 DPS of native grayling
- *In 2014:* Grayling were reconsidered for listing.
  - 26 additional DPS of native grayling were identified
  - The discovery of these DPS indicated high conservation value.

## *Role of the Big Hole CCAA in the Arctic Grayling Listing Determination*

- “From the Fish and Wildlife Service’s viewpoint, we think what the CCAA has done is nothing short of amazing.” – Jim Boyd
- Of the 4 fluvial populations considered for listing, the Big Hole River population received the most attention and conservation effort
- In-stream flows, water temperatures improved.
- Fish ladders installed
- Grayling numbers have increased (and continue to increase) in the Big Hole River
- 98% of the core habitat in the Big Hole River is now accessible to arctic grayling
- CCAA original goal was to meet flow targets 75% of the time (in an average year after 10 years), targets are being met 78% of the time
- Monitoring activities related to entrainment in irrigation ditch, found to be not as impactful as assumed in 2010

## *Other Stressors Considered in Arctic Grayling Listing Determination*

- Predation and competition from non-native fish species
  - It is now known that grayling and trout segregate within habitat, selecting for different habitat features. There *is* competition, but having higher quality habitat decreases the impacts of competition with non-native species.
- Streams are becoming narrower (more in-line with historic dimensions), riparian habitat is improving, willow growth is increasing.
  - Riparian restoration will continue to be a key factor in ensuring the success of arctic grayling.
- Big Hole River DPS has been transplanted to the Ruby River. The Ruby is now in its 7<sup>th</sup> year of natural reproduction (for arctic grayling).
- Grayling seem to be more adaptable to changing conditions than previously thought.
  - Arctic grayling can go back and forth from river-dwelling to lake-dwelling.
  - Both life histories included in both 2010 and 2014 assessments.
  - There are no significant genetic differences between fluvial and lake-dwelling grayling.

## *What’s happening now?*

- Habitat improvements continue to be seen in both rivers and lakes
- Mechanisms for conserving Federal and private habitat areas
- 25 populations are stable, increasing. Madison/Ennis Reservoir population still very low, it is not known why

## *Upper Missouri River Arctic Grayling Future*

- What happens to CCAA now?
  - Still voluntary, flexible, site-specific
  - USFWS hopes that enrollment will continue, due to the success of previous efforts
  - Same CCAA team working on projects
  - Enrollment is still open
  - USFWS is still committed to grayling conservation. A non-warranted finding does not mean the landscape or grayling population/distribution is perfect or that the finding will not be challenged.
    - USFWS will continue to provide collaboration, funding

## *Can Grayling Still be Listed in the Future?*

- Yes, a new status review could be initiated in the case of:
  - Population declines
  - Habitat deterioration

- Litigation
  - Continued efforts for grayling conservation will be helpful if litigation occurs
  - So far there has been no litigation. Typically, if litigation is going to occur, it occurs fairly soon after a decision is reached (usually within 8-12 months). However, there is no statute of limitations – if someone feels they have cause to litigate, they can do so at any time, even though this is an official agency action.
- For now:
  - Keep up the great work!
  - Communication
  - Continue to build partnerships
  - Don't lose the momentum

*Discussion: How should BHWC proceed post-listing determination? What do you think is important?*

- Supporting the listing decision, ensuring that USFWS and MFWP (and other agencies) are still behind the enhancement of grayling, and remembering that there is still work to be done.
- The grayling decision is a milestone in a larger goal. BHWC's work in the future will be to continue to provide:
  - funding and support with gages
  - education and outreach to the public
  - advocacy for agencies to provide funding
- Comments:
  - *Emma Cayer*: "The state's commitment to grayling has not changed. Funding and assistance provided by BHWC for flow gages has been essential and should continue. In my mind, the watershed committee's goal to prevent listing of grayling has been awesome, and I'd like to see the committee continue to work on improving grayling in the Big Hole."
  - *Scott Reynolds*: "BHWC was not founded primarily for the grayling issue. The grayling issue is just one of the projects or issues that has come along during the life of the watershed. It was a big project, and still is a big project. It's on-going, and this listing determination is just one of the components of the grayling and of the watershed and the river. I don't see it as a big game changer. If we can do things for the betterment of the river and the watershed that we can all agree upon, we should still do it."
  - *Don Reese*: "This isn't the end, this is a beginning. Just because a listing decision didn't happen doesn't mean we're done. We're in this for the long-haul, we signed up and made an agreement, and we need to stick to our site plans and make this thing work. I think everyone that is enrolled is ready to do that."
  - *Russ Riebe*: "There are many other drainages that grayling need to be introduced into. Everyone in this room has resources and constituencies that they can reach out to, to promote the improvement of grayling in other areas and to show this as a shining example of the capabilities of the CCAA and the watershed."
  - *Jim Hagenbarth*: "We need to emphasize that this is a wonderful place because of the efforts that have been put into it." "These agency people have stepped-up and put in a lot of effort that many bureaucrats wouldn't do, and we really appreciate it. We'd like to thank each and every one of you for all the effort that you've put into it."
  - *Roy Morris*: "Maintaining water gages will continue to be very important, especially in the case of a low water year."

### **Upcoming Meetings**

- Novemer 19, 2014, 6pm @ Divide Grange. Topic: MSU State of the College Report – Programs and Projects of Interest to BHWC. Presented by MSU.
- No December 2014 Meeting

### **Adjourn**