Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
NEWS
1420 East Sixth Avenue, PO Box 200701, Helena, Montana 59620-0701

FWP PRESS PACKAGE

UPPER MADISON RIVER
WESTSLOPE CUTTHROAT TROUT RECOVERY PROJECT

DECEMBER 5, 1996

This Press Package includes the following information on FWP's proposed Upper Madison River Westslope Cutthroat Trout Recovery Project.

1) Press Release: **FWP Proposes Westslope Cutthroat Trout Recovery Effort in Upper Madison River**

2) FWP Quick Facts: **Who, What, When, Where, How, & Why**

3) FWP Fact Sheet: **Headwater Tributaries Proposed for Westslope Cutthroat Trout Recovery**

4) FWP Fact Sheet: **Questions & Answers**

5) Info Graphic: **Upper Madison River Drainage Map**

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7) Contacts for Comment

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE--DECEMBER 5, 1996

Contact: Tom Palmer--406-444-3051

FWP PROPOSES WESTSLOPE CUTTHROAT TROUT RECOVERY EFFORT IN UPPER MADISON RIVER

FWP Director Pat Graham announced today the agency is considering a wide-ranging proposal to recover Montana's state fish, the westslope cutthroat trout, in the whirling-disease plagued upper Madison River drainage.

The Upper Madison River Westslope Cutthroat Trout Recovery Project would seek to restore the native trout to headwater portions of tributaries with hopes of developing a fishable cutthroat trout population in the upper Madison River.

Graham said the project offers an opportunity to reestablish the westslope cutthroat trout to its native range. Some of these native, wild fish also would be expected to migrate downstream to the Madison River to fill a portion of the niche left by the decline in rainbow trout caused by whirling disease. Public meetings to discuss the project proposal are being arranged for January.

"We have identified headwater portions of 30 upper Madison River tributaries where we believe the risk of whirling disease transmission is low. We would work to bring back Montana's native westslope cutthroat trout in at least 10 of the streams by 2001 with a goal of completing the project by 2006." Graham said. "Ultimately, we believe native cutthroat trout should grow in the small streams past the stage where they are most susceptible to whirling disease and then naturally migrate downstream to the Madison River."

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Graham said the proposal calls for non-native fish to be removed from the headwater areas to reduce potential competition with newly stocked westslope cutthroat trout and for barriers to be placed in streams to attempt keep out both non-native fish and fish that may be carrying whirling disease.

The initial westslope cutthroat trout recovery effort would begin in the spring of 1997 and focus on the potential recovery of Soap and Gazelle creeks, both tributaries to the West Fork of the Madison River; and on Standard Creek and an unnamed spring creek. Standard Creek flows into the Madison River about two miles below the West Fork and the spring creek reaches the Madison about four miles above the West Fork. At this time, researchers believe whirling disease is not likely to be in these streams and that the streams are relatively free of tubifex worms. The streams will be examined before recovery work begins. Costs are projected at $216,000 for 1997-98, and about $200,000 for each of the following two years.

Whirling disease, a parasitic and potentially fatal infection of trout and salmon for which there is no known cure, has caused a 90 percent decline in the Madison River's rainbow trout population. The disease is caused by a microscopic, water-borne, protozoan parasite which has a complicated two-host lifesycle. The parasite attacks the cartilage of young trout, causing skeletal deformities that sometimes result in the characteristic tail-chasing in young, infected fish.

Under the proposal, tributaries selected for westslope cutthroat trout restoration must show a low incidence or be free of whirling disease. They similarly must show low or no tubifex worm populations. The thread-like tubifex worm is a linch-pin host in the whirling disease parasite's lifecycle.

The long-term goals of the westslope cutthroat recovery effort would be to: (1) protect or establish genetically pure populations of westslope cutthroat trout in headwater areas of tributaries of the upper Madison River by 2006; and (2) develop a fishable westslope cutthroat trout population in the Madison River. Officials emphasized that this project would be conducted in concert with FWP's on-going efforts to identify clues for rainbow survival in the Madison River.

With 30 streams in the upper Madison River drainage identified as potential candidates for westslope cutthroat trout restoration, Graham said the entire proposal is too big for FWP to carry out alone. He said FWP is presently seeking cooperation and support from the U.S. Forest Service, the federal Bureau of Land Management, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Montana Power Company, the Montana State University, private landowners, and conservation organizations. Graham said the need for multi-agency cooperation and citizen partnerships was one of the primary points raised during Gov. Marc Racicot's Westslope Cutthroat Trout Workshop, which was held in Helena in September.

The push to recover westslope cutts in the upper Madison River was in part prodded by information gathered by FWP researchers who, with the diminished rainbow trout population, have picked up increased numbers of catchable cutthroat trout in the river. These cutthroat trout were likely recruited from headwater tributaries. Electofishing data collected from the 3-mile-long Pine Butte section, which is open to catch-and-release fishing, show an incidental count of about 40 catchable cutthroat trout in 1996 where fewer than six were counted in years prior to 1991, when rainbow numbers began to decline.

That's a hopeful sign for Dick Vincent, FWP whirling disease coordinator. "I've always thought our way out of the whirling disease problem would be through the wild trout's life history," Vincent said. "We are still searching for a resistant strain of rainbow trout, but we might do best right now to follow the clues nature's providing. Because cutthroat trout spawn, hatch, and begin their lives in tributary streams they may simply avoid being infected at an early age when they are most vulnerable to whirling disease."

By comparison, Madison River rainbow trout generally spend their entire lives in the mainstem of the Madison where they can be immediately and continually exposed to whirling disease, Vincent said.

Vincent and other researchers surmise that the proposed recovery plan could produce a Madison River fishery composed of brown trout, westslope cutthroat trout, and rainbow trout survivors. "Under the proposal, the Madison could become a tri-level wild trout fishery," he explained. "Brown trout would continue to hold their own and perhaps expand, while the westslope cutthroat trout would pull in some of the slack left by the rainbow trout.

While we will continue our work on rainbow trout in both the upper and lower drainage, I don't think the rainbow can recover its former numbers in the near future. We're not expecting to see a one-for-one replacement of rainbow with cutts, but we would expect a partial replacement."

The westslope cutthroat trout shares the title of Montana's state fish with Yellowstone cutthroat trout. It was once widely distributed and abundant in the Clark Fork, Kootenai and upper Missouri river drainages of Montana. Today, the westslope is found in less than 5 percent of its historic range in the upper Missouri River drainage. While westslope cutthroats are doing better west of the Continental Divide they are still greatly reduced in both their numbers and their range.

Graham said before restoration work commences, each stream will undergo examinations and surveys to determine if they are truly capable of supporting wild populations of westslope cutthroat trout. Most projects will be evaluated in an environmental assessment.

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FWP QUICK FACTS

MADISON RIVER WESTSLOPE CUTTHROAT TROUT RECOVERY PROJECT

WHO?

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks--in cooperation with the U.S. Forest Service, the federal Bureau of Land Management, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Montana Power Company, Montana State University, private landowners, and conservation groups--is considering a proposal to recover Montana's state fish, the westslope cutthroat trout, in the whirling-disease plagued upper Madison River drainage.

WHAT?

The Madison River Westslope Cutthroat Trout Recovery Project would seek to restore westslope cutthroat trout in the headwater portions of the upper Madison River tributaries with hopes of developing a fishable population of westslope cutthroat trout in the Madison River. The long-term goals of the effort are to: (1) protect or establish genetically pure populations of westslope cutthroat trout in headwater areas of tributaries of the upper Madison River by 2006; and (2) develop a fishable westslope cutthroat trout population in the Madison River that would partially replace rainbow trout lost to whirling disease. Officials emphisized that this project would be conducted in concert with FWP's on-going efforts to determine if there are some possible clues for rainbow survival in other Madison River locales in both the upper and lower drainage.

WHEN & WHERE

The initial westslope cutthroat trout recovery effort would begin in the spring of 1997. Streams identified as candidates for restoration in 1997 include: Soap and Gazelle creeks, both tributaries to the West Fork of the Madison River; and on Standard Creek and an

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unnamed spring creek, both upper Madison River tributaries. At this time, researchers believe whirling disease is not likely to be in these streams and that the streams are relatively free of tubifex worms. The streams will be extensively examined before recovery work begins. Twenty-six additional upper Madison River tributaries have been identified as potential candidates for westslope cutthroat trout recovery. FWP hopes to reestablish westslope cutts to least 10 of the candidate streams by 2001.

HOW?

The project would seek to study, protect, and enhance westslope cutthroat trout in the headwater portions of upper Madison River tributaries in a number of ways including: habitat restoration, barrier construction, removal of non-native trout, and reintroduction of westslope cutts. Under the proposal, tributaries selected for westslope cutthroat trout restoration must show a low incidence or be free of whirling disease. They similarly must show low or no tubifex worm populations. The thread-like tubifex worm must be present in the system in order for the complicated whirling-disease parasite to complete its lifecycle. Before restoration work commences, each stream will undergo extensive examinations and surveys to determine if they are truly capable of supporting wild populations of westslope cutthroat trout. Most projects will be evaluated in an environmental assessment.

WHY?

For two primary reasons:

(1) The westslope cutthroat trout is Montana's state fish and an important part of Montana history, culture, and outdoor heritage. They evolved as aggressive feeders, a necessary adaptation for a species native to the cold, pristine, and relatively unproductive waters of Montana. Today, the range of westslope cutthroat trout is greatly reduced. This "species of special concern" is found in less than 5 percent of its historic range in the Missouri River drainage, and less than 10 percent of is historic range statewide. FWP is taking positive steps to preserve and expand the habitat and the populations of our state fish to keep the management of westslope

cutts in Montana's hands, and to ensure that the fish need not be listed under the federal Endangered Species Act.

(2) Whirling disease has caused a 90 percent decline in the Madison River's rainbow trout population. Researchers like FWP Whirling Disease Coordinator Dick Vincent believe that because cutthroat trout begin their lifesycle in tributary streams they may simply avoid being infected at an early age when trout are most vulnerable to whirling disease. While biologists are not expecting to see a one-for-one replacement of rainbow trout with cutthroat trout, they do expect a partial replacement, with cutts filling part of the niche left by the rainbow-trout decline. Biologists are already picking up increased numbers of catchable cutthroat trout in the upper Madison River, fish likely recruited from headwater tributaries. Electofishing data collected from the 3-mile-long Pine Butte section, which is open to catch-and-release fishing, show an incidental count of about 40 catchable cutthroat trout in 1996 where fewer than six were counted prior to 1991.

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FWP FACT SHEET
Upper Madison River
Westslope Cutthroat Trout Recovery Project

Headwater Tributaries Proposed for Westslope Cutthroat Trout Recovery

Thirty headwater portions of upper Madison River tributaries have been identified as potential candidates for westslope cutthroat trout restoration. Most of the headwater tributaries appear to provide ideal cutthroat trout habitat.

The proposal seeks to examine the streams and then, where appropriate, reestablish the westslope cutthroat trout and recruit the native fish to the Madison River to fill a portion of the niche left by the decline in rainbow trout. FWP would work to restore the westslope cutthroat to at least 10 of the streams by 2001 and complete the project by 2006.

Only one stream--Soap Creek--has been confirmed to still hold a limited population of westslope cutthroat trout. A second stream, Horse Creek, which flows in the Madison about a mile below Palisades, is suspected to support a small population of westslope cutts.

Initially identified as possible streams for immediate westslope cutthroat trout recovery are Soap and Gazelle creeks, both tributaries to the West Fork of the Madison River; and Standard Creek and a small, unnamed spring creek. Both streams flow into the Madison River in the West Fork vicinity. At this time, researchers believe whirling disease is not likely to be in these streams and that the streams are relatively free of tubifex worms. The streams will be extensively examined before recovery work begins.

Here is a rundown on the proposal for these four streams:

Soap Creek

The primary goal in **Soap Creek** would be to protect and enhance the existing genetically pure westslope cutthroat trout population in the stream's upper reaches. A waterfall-like barrier would be constructed on the stream that to allow young cutthroat trout--the progeny of the resident population--to migrate downstream into the Madison.
By impeding a trout's movement upstream, the barrier would attempt to ensure that the headwater population remains genetically pure and free from Madison River fish that may be carrying whirling disease. Soap Creek would also undergo some stream rehabilitation, including the removal of introduced fish species.

Gazelle Creek

In Gazelle Creek, which flows into the West Fork about 3 miles below Soap Creek, the project goal would be to establish a genetically pure population of westslope cutthroat trout. The creek contains a natural waterfall barrier. Previously introduced Yellowstone cutthroat trout and rainbow trout would be removed from the creek above the falls and the stream would be restocked with genetically pure westslope cutthroat trout.

Standard Creek and the unnamed spring creek

Standard Creek flows from the Gravelly Range and into the Madison River about two miles below the West Fork. The **spring creek** reaches the Madison about four miles above the West Fork. These waters contribute to the flows of FWP's 20-year-old Snoball study area that extends from the mouth of Squaw Creek to Windy Point. The goal would be to determine how well the headwater-spawned westslope cutthroat trout function in the mainstem of the Madison River. The proposal calls for the creeks to be stocked with genetically pure young-of-the year westslope cutts in August 1997. In a sense, these streams would serve as a project control to determine if stocking is successful and if the stocked fish contract whirling disease. The research would also focus on how many fish migrate downstream to the river and if the migrant fish survive in the river. These fish could return to the tributaries to spawn. Barriers to prevent spawners from returning to the upper reaches of Standard Creek could be constructed at a later date.

Other upper Madison River tributaries under consideration for westslope cutthroat trout restoration include the following creeks that flow into the west side of the river: Sheep, Mile, Meridian, Tepee, Freezeout, Lake, Bogus, Horse, Quaking Aspen, Wall, Bobcat, English George, Hyde, Ruby, Dry Hollow, Wigwam, and Eightmile. Candidate streams that flow into the river's east side include these creeks: Trout, Pine Butte, Papoose, Squaw, Moose, Wolf, Corral, Indian, and Jack.

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FWP FACT SHEET

Questions & Answers

UPPER MADISON RIVER
WESTSLOPE CUTTHROAT TROUT RECOVERY PROJECT

Q: ***Does this westslope cutthroat trout proposal mean that FWP fish managers have given up on rainbow trout in the Madison River.***

A: No. FWP is currently looking into other rainbow enhancement opportunities on the Madison River. For instance, in the "slide area" below Quake Lake, rainbow trout appear to be surviving well. FWP intends to establish a research site below Quake Lake to determine if there are some possible clues for rainbow survival in other Madison River locales in both the upper and lower drainage.

Q: ***Will this project replace the Madison River's lost rainbow trout numbers with cutthroat trout?***

A: While biologists are not expecting to see a one-for-one replacement of rainbow trout with cutthroat trout, they do expect a partial replacement. FWP researchers surmise that the proposed recovery plan could produce a Madison River fishery composed of brown trout, westslope cutthroat trout, and rainbow trout that manage to survive whirling disease infection. The Madison could become a tri-level wild trout fishery, where brown trout would continue to hold their own and perhaps expand, while the westslope cutthroat trout would fill part of the niche left by the rainbow-trout decline. It is doubtful that the rainbow trout will recover its former numbers in the Madison River in the near future.

Q: ***If rainbow trout managed to stage a comeback in the upper Madison River, would they eventually out compete westslope cutthroat trout?***

A: Yes. However, biologist believe that the current population of about 300 rainbow trout per mile could increase considerably without negatively affecting an associated westslope cutthroat trout population. With whirling disease present in the upper Madison River, biologist believe this is an unlikely scenario.

Q. ***Are westslope cutthroat trout native to the Madison River?***

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A: Yes. In fact, prior to 1920 the Madison River supported wild, native fish populations of westslope cutthroat trout, grayling, and mountain whitefish. By 1930, however, introduced rainbow trout and brown trout were well established in the Madison River.

Q: How large will these westslope cutthroat trout grow to be in the Madison River?

A: Westslope cutthroat trout have growth rates comparable to rainbow trout. Anglers could expect to see 16- to 18-inch cutthroat trout in the Madison River by the year 2000. Researchers are already seeing cutthroat trout of this size in the river.

Q: Will westslope cutthroat trout fishery produce a catch rate comparable to Madison rainbow trout?

A: We believe it could because: (1) cutts are generally easier to catch than rainbows so, one-for-one, a cutthroat trout should produce a better catch rate than a rainbow trout; and (2) Madison River catch-and-release studies show about a 15 percent mortality on released rainbow trout. The release mortality on cutthroat trout studied on other streams is less than 5 percent. This suggests, as far as catch-and-release anglers are concerned, that the Madison could support fewer cutthroat per mile than it did rainbow trout and yet still produce a very respectable sport fishery

Q: Does FWP intend to restore all 30 streams it has identified as potential candidates for westslope cutthroat trout restoration?

A: Not necessarily. The streams have been identified as *potential* candidates for restoration. Each stream will undergo extensive examinations and surveys to determine if they are truly capable of supporting wild populations of westslope cutthroat trout. Soap Creek, Gazelle Creek, Standard Creek, and an unnamed spring creek have been initially identified as candidates for restoration in 1997. FWP hopes to complete a total of at least 10 streams by 2001. Other prime candidate streams will be surveyed and subsequently accepted or rejected for restoration based on their ability to support westslope cutthroat trout. Most projects will be evaluated in an environmental assessment.

Q: What will this project cost?

A: Costs are projected at $216,000 for 1997-98, and about $200,000 for each of the following two years. These costs are projected for recovery efforts on Soap, Gazelle, Standard Creek, and the nearby spring creek.

Q: The project calls for stocking of genetically pure westslope cutthroat trout. Where will these fish be found?

A: FWP maintains a brood stock of wild westslope cutthroat trout at its hatchery in Anaconda. Wild westslope cutts may also be spawned from nearby "donor" populations.

Q: Why does this proposal focus on the upper Madison River drainage?

A: Most of the headwater portions of the upper river's tributaries appear to provide ideal cutthroat trout habitat and most of the streams are still connected to the mainstem river. Montanans have an opportunity to not only reestablish the westslope cutthroat trout to its native range, but to recruit these native, wild fish to the Madison River to fill a portion of the niche left by the decline in rainbow trout caused by whirling disease.

Q: How many upper Madison River headwater tributaries still hold westslope cutthroat trout?

A: Of the 30 tributaries identified as potential candidates for westslope cutthroat trout restoration, only one stream--Soap Creek--has been confirmed to still hold a limited population of westslope cutthroat trout. A second stream, Horse Creek, which flows in the Madison about a mile below Palisades, is suspected to support a small population of westslope cutts.

Q: Is this worth the effort?

A: We believe it is for several reasons: (1) The westslope cutthroat trout--Montana's state fish--is a "species of special concern" in Montana where it is found in less than 10 percent of its historic range. Westslope are an important part of Montana history, and culture, and outdoor heritage. They evolved as aggressive feeders, a necessary adaptation for a species native to the cold, pristine and relatively unproductive waters of Montana. FWP is taking positive steps to preserve and expand the habitat and the populations of our state fish to keep the management of westslope cutts in Montana's hands, and to keep the fish off of the Endangered Species list. (2) Whirling disease has caused a 90 percent decline in the Madison River's rainbow trout population. While a resistant strain of rainbow trout may yet be discovered, FWP biologists believe the westslope cutthroat trout's natural lifesycle may allow these fish to simply avoid being infected at critical early ages when they are most vulnerable to whirling disease. (3) While researchers doubt that the rainbow trout population will recover to pre-1991 numbers, biologists are already picking up increased numbers of catchable cutthroat trout in the upper Madison River, fish likely recruited from headwater tributaries.

Q: How many westslope cutthroat trout per mile is this project expected to produce?

A: While such projections are impossible to make at this point, we would anticipate that as more tributaries along the upper Madison produce westslope cutts, the river's westslope cutthroat trout population would improve accordingly.

Q: What is a westslope cutthroat trout?

A: The westslope cutthroat is one of a dozen subspecies of cutthroat trout found in the Columbia and Missouri drainage and the Rocky Mountains. The scientific name for westslope cutthroat trout is *Oncorhynchus clarki lewisi*. The North American trout share the genus name *Oncorhynchus* with the Pacific salmon. The species (*clarki*) and subspecies (*lewisi*) names for westslope are a reminder of the great explorers Lewis and Clark, the first Europeans to describe the subspecies.

Q: Are westslope cutthroat trout threatened or endangered?

A: No. Westslope cutthroat trout are not listed under the federal Endangered Species Act as threatened or endangered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. They are considered a "species of special concern" by the state of Montana. One reason for the state taking a proactive role in westslope cutthroat trout management is to ensure that it will not be necessary to list westslope cutthroat as threatened or endangered.

Q: Where are westslope cutthroat trout found?

A: Historically, westslope cutthroat were found in the Missouri River upstream of Fort Benton as well as its tributaries including the Judith, Milk and Marias rivers. West of the Continental Divide they were found in the Clark Fork and Kootenai river drainage in Montana and extending downstream into Alberta, Idaho and the extreme eastern portion of Washington. By far the majority of their historic distribution is in Montana.

Today, the range of westslope cutthroat trout is greatly reduced. They are found in less than 5 percent of their historic range in the Missouri River drainage. While they are faring better west of the Divide, they still inhabit less than 10 percent of their historic range. In most waters where they are found, it is believed their numbers are reduced from historic population levels.

Q: What has caused the decline of westslope cutthroat trout?

A: It is difficult to generalize about what has caused the decline of Montana's state fish. Several factors are believed to have contributed to its decline. The introduction of non-native fish, such as rainbow, brown, and brook trout is a significant factor. Rainbow trout hybridize with cutthroat trout and produce fertile offspring, which exacerbates the loss of the cutthroat species with replacement by hybrids. Brown trout

have commonly displaced cutthroat in larger rivers and brook trout have become the most common small-stream trout.

Because cutthroat trout are comparatively easy to catch, over-fishing has played a role in the species decline. But, perhaps most damaging to the fish has been habitat alterations caused by a variety of human activities that have changed the character of many streams. These changes combined with the competition from non-native trout are believed to be the major causes of the decline of westslope cutthroat trout.

Q: Where are westslope cutthroat currently found?

A: There are a few small populations still found in the Missouri River drainage, but there are not any strong populations found east of the Continental Divide. West of the Continental Divide, the strongest population is still found in the South Fork of the Flathead. There are other populations found scattered throughout the Clark Fork and Kootenai river drainages.

Q: Why should Montanans be concerned about westslope cutthroat trout?

A: As their scientific name indicates, westslope are an important part of Montana history and culture. Westslope are a great sportfish. They evolved as aggressive feeders, a necessary adaptation for a species native to the cold, pristine and relatively unproductive waters of Montana. Due to the aggressive nature of their feeding habits, many Montanan anglers--young and old alike--remember the cutthroat as their first catch. Today, the cutthroat remains a great fish for young anglers to pursue in our streams and high mountain lakes. More experienced anglers have come to admire the cutthroat for their beauty. The familiar flash of gold under the water surface when a cutthroat rises to a dry fly is one of the highlights of many Montana fishing trips.

Q: What is the state doing about the plight of the westslope cutthroat trout?

A: In September 1996, Gov. Marc Racicot sponsored the state's first Westslope Cutthroat Trout Workshop. The governor urged participants to develop special actions to preserve and expand the habitat and the populations of these special native trout. But even before that workshop Montana moved to establish in all streams and rivers catch-and-release regulations for westslope cutthroat trout in the central portion of Montana. This regulation was adopted to protect the upper Missouri River westslope cutthroat trout populations. FWP has taken a proactive approach to ensure that westslope will remain an important part of Montana's sportfishing future.

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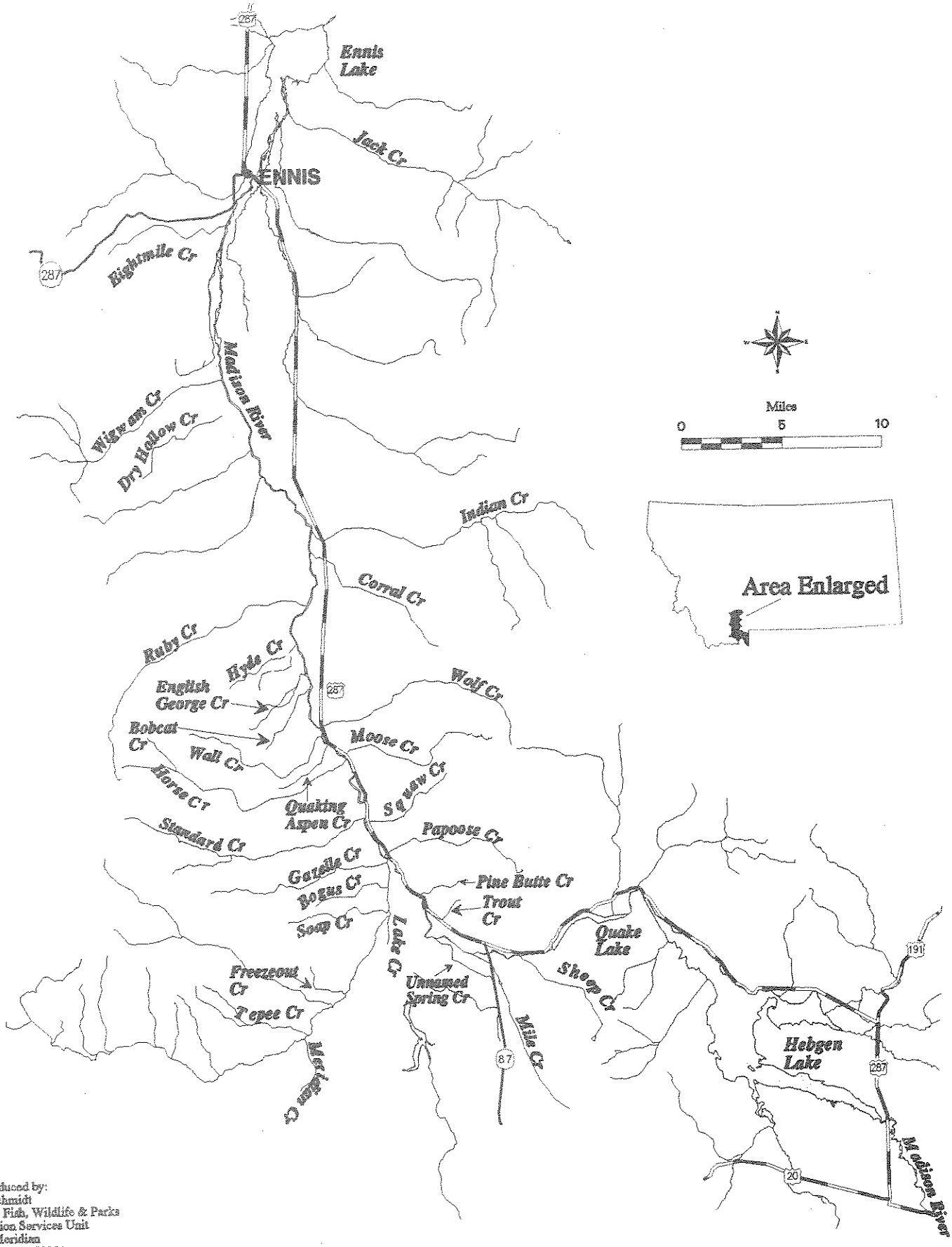
UPPER MADISON RIVER WESTSLOPE CUTTHROAT TROUT RECOVERY PROJECT



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UPPER MADISON RIVER
WESTSLOPE CUTTHROAT TROUT RECOVERY PROJECT

DECEMBER 5, 1995

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