Montana Department
of
Fish, Wildlife & Parks

DRAFT
BLACKFOOT RIVER
FISHERIES MANAGEMENT PLAN

January, 1987
Prepared by
Dennis L. Workman
Regional Fisheries Manager

Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife & Parks

January 20, 1987

TO: Reviewers of the Blackfoot River Fisheries Management Plan

Included with this letter is a copy of the Blackfoot River Fisheries Management Plan. Please take a few minutes to read and comment on it. The last three pages (salmon colored) are to be used for your response to the plan. They can be detached and returned to us.

In addition to receiving written comments, between now and the March 31, we plan to have three public meetings in the region during the month of March. The dates and locations of those meetings are as follows:

March 11, 7:30 p.m., Hamilton, Montana Power Company Office. In conjunction with Bitterroot Trout Unlimited meeting.

March 5, 7:30 p.m., Leisure Lodge, Seeley Lake. In conjunction with Seeley Lake Sportsmans Club.

March 19, 7:30 p.m., Missoula Elks Club. In conjunction with West Slope Trout Unlimited meeting.

Comments will be accepted on the plan until March 31, 1987. Thank you in advance for your participation in management of the Blackfoot River fisheries.

Sincerely yours,

Dennis L. Workman

Dennis L. Workman
Fisheries Manager

DRAFT
BLACKFOOT RIVER
FISHERIES MANAGEMENT PLAN

January, 1987

INTRODUCTION

It is difficult, when managing a public resource like the Blackfoot River fishery, to know what the "average angler" thinks of your program and whether or not it is providing the maximum satisfaction within the capabilities of the resource. The Blackfoot River seems to have the reputation of being a great place to fish but you see about as many big fish as you do Edsels. At the same time there seems to be an increasing desire among anglers to catch fish 14 inches and larger. Fishing equipment, techniques and the present state of angler knowledge make that a realistic goal. That leaves the question, is fisheries management doing its part?

Your Department of Fish Wildlife and Parks needs to know the answer to that question on the Blackfoot. This report will give you background, management history, current status, perceived problems, strategies and future management plans in hopes that you will evaluate our performance to date, share your thoughts with us and let us know how you think we can improve our performance and your fishing.

The Blackfoot River is only one of many important fishing waters in Region 2 (Clark Fork River Basin above the Flathead River confluence). If this report serves its intended purpose

the department will produce similar reports on other specific Region 2 waters in the future.

BACKGROUND

The Blackfoot River begins its course near the Continental Divide east of Lincoln, Montana and flows more than 120 miles to the Clark Fork River in Bonner, Montana. Water enters the Blackfoot from the north through its major tributaries, Alice Creek, Landers Fork, North Fork, Monture Creek,Clearwater River, Blanchard Creek, Belmont, Twin and Gold Creeks. From the south, Nevada Creek, Bear, Elk and Union Creeks are the main tributaries. The elevation drops from 5,360 feet at the river's origin to 3,296 feet at Bonner. The river is free flowing throughout its length to Bonner where there is a low dam maintained by Champion International at their plywood plant. The Blackfoot drainage area is 2,320 square miles and delivers an average of 1,645 cubic feet per second or 1,192,000 acre feet of water to the Clark Fork River annually, according to U. S. Geological Survey Records.

Placer gold mining was one of the first commercial activities in the basin beginning in 1865. Lead, silver and copper were also mined in the upper basin. Logging, cattle ranching and recreation are economically important in the basin today.

The beauty of the basin and the many appealing attributes of the river attract a large number of recreationists. A potential for conflict exists because a majority of the land bordering the

Blackfoot River is in private ownership. Landowners along a 26 mile section of the river, from the Missoula/Powell county line to Johnsrud Park, adopted a Recreation Management Agreement in 1976. The agreement helps protect the river and private property from crowding, overuse and abuse by recreationists while providing many recreational opportunities. Through the agreement, access to the river is provided for boating, swimming, fishing, camping, picnicking and other river oriented recreation.

The Blackfoot River is rated "Class One" in the Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks statewide Fisheries Rating System. The classification was based on high ratings in fish production, fish habitat, fish species present, aesthetics and public access. It is one of two streams in the region on which the Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks presently has an instream water right. A special act of the Montana Legislature in 1969 gave the department authority to reserve instream flows on the states' 12 best trout streams. Blackfoot Instream flows were reserved in 1971 from the Clearwater River confluence to the mouth of the Blackfoot near Bonner.

Fisheries management in the Blackfoot River has a 55-year recorded history. Westslope cutthroat trout, bull trout, and mountain whitefish were the only native sport fish in this region before white settlers came. Early in the century, although exact dates are not known, rainbow, brown and brook trout were introduced in the region and are present in the Blackfoot River system today.

Early fisheries management consisted mostly of hatchery planting. Beginning in 1931, the Blackfoot River in Missoula County was planted with small (2 inch) rainbow trout. Cutthroat trout were planted in River sections in Powell county with occasional rainbow plants. Cutthroat trout planting in the Blackfoot was gradually phased out and by 1957 rainbow were used exclusively. The size of hatchery fish used in the river was gradually increased over the years with nearly all fish after 1956 being 7 inches and larger.

The use of catchable-size fish to provide the fishery was known as "put and take" management. In 1979 all hatchery stocking of streams in the Blackfoot Basin was stopped. This decision was based on research from the Madison River which showed that hatchery stocking decreased wild trout populations. The cessation of hatchery stocking marked the beginning of "wild trout" management. Put and take management relied on the hatchery to provide the fish that anglers would catch. And since restocking was carried on annually survival and growth was not a concern. Wild trout management depends upon nature to produce and grow the trout anglers will utilize. Under "wild trout" management fish must survive longer in order to grow to a desirable size.

Throughout the years of heavy stocking with hatchery fish, creel limits were either nonexistent or liberal with no restrictions on gear type or bait. In 1982 the creel limit was changed from 10 fish or 10 pounds plus one fish to 5 fish with

only one over 14 inches in possession. The goal was to increase angler opportunities to catch large trout by protecting the large trout segment of the population from overharvest.

Public Interest

The Blackfoot River provides an interesting array of recreational opportunities. Public interest runs the gamut of river recreation sports. It provides for white water rafting and kayaking, smooth water floating, fishing, swimming both from floating craft as well as from the banks. Camping and day use areas scattered along the river are available for public use. The Blackfoot River is an aquatic environment of near pristine quality which provides an outdoor laboratory for the study of aquatic ecosystems. Public interest is high in maintaining all of these qualities and opportunities and enhancing desirable characteristics wherever possible.

Current Status - Fishery

Trout population estimates have been conducted on one section of the river in the Johnsrud area for the past six years. The population was comprised of about 86 percent rainbow, 9% cutthroat with brown and bull trout comprising 5% together. Mountain whitefish were numerous, however, population estimates were not made on that species.

The rainbow trout population was healthy with a good base of small, young fish indicating the presence of good spawning and rearing habitats. Rainbows 12 inches and larger were only 1 to

4% of the total rainbow population until after the regulations were changed in 1982 to protect those trout 14 inches and larger. Since then, the percentage of large trout has risen to 17 percent. Total rainbow numbers in the section near Johnsrud Park ranged from 1,000 to 3,000 trout per mile of stream during the years 1980 through 1985 (Figure 1).

Rainbows dominated angler catch in the river below the Clearwater confluence with cutthroat and brown trout more important in the upper reaches. Certain sections of the river above Nevada Creek were dominated by brown trout, and this was reflected in angler catches. Mountain whitefish were also important in the angler's creel. Catch rate was generally between one and two trout per hour of fishing.

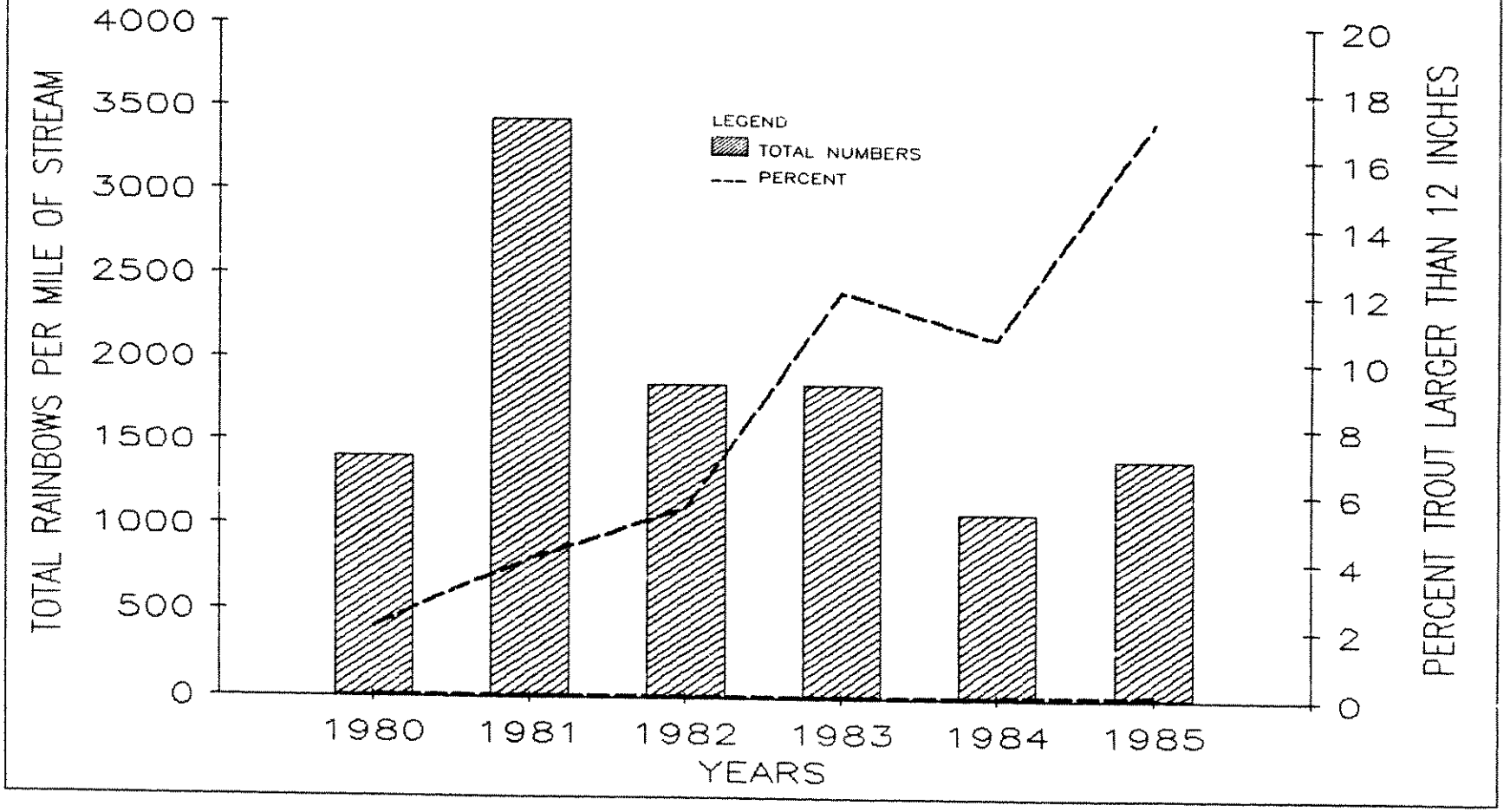
Three years of fishing pressure estimates showed pressure at between 20,000 and 30,000 man-days per year. The data indicate a gradual upward trend in fishing pressure on the river as a whole. Differences between years for specific river sections was variable.

Current Management

The objective of our current fishery management is to increase the opportunity to catch trout over 14 inches long. Since neither recruitment nor habitat quality seem to be limiting, we assume fishing mortality is what limits the number of large fish in the Blackfoot. The fishing regulation change in 1982, from 10 fish or 10 pounds plus one fish to 5 fish with only one over 14 inches, was aimed at reducing the harvest of larger

FIGURE 1. RAINBOWS PER MILE OF RIVER PERCENT OF TOTAL LARGER THAN 12 INCHES

JOHNSRUD SECTION, BLACKFOOT RIVER
1980 THRU 1985



fish. Our data from the Johnsrud section indicate the regulation is working in that section of river.

Habitat protection is a key element in our management. We administer the Stream Protection Act and assist the Soil and Water Conservation Districts in administering the Natural Streambed and Land Preservation Act. These laws plus the Montana Water Quality Standards help protect trout habitat from destruction.

Blackfoot recreation corridor management is aimed at preserving the character of the Blackfoot while allowing as much public use as possible. That program has been effective in reducing landowner/sportsman conflicts and providing more legal access to the river than was previously available.

Problems and Strategies

Department perceptions of problems with the fishery and some possible solutions to those problems are listed below. Do our perceptions match yours, do you favor one or more of the possible solutions listed or do you see a better way which is not listed?

Problem 1. Average and maximum size of rainbows caught is too small.

Strategies

1. Determine the need for restrictive regulations through population studies.
2. Increase restriction on angler harvest of larger fish on

the entire river.

3. Establish a special experimental large trout management area on a small portion (10 miles) of the river and monitor population response for 3 years.

4. Conduct creel census on a heavily fished section of the river to evaluate the harvest.

Problem 2. The Blackfoot River system is the last stronghold for bull trout in Region 2 and its numbers seem to be low. Without proper management its future may be in jeopardy.

Strategies

1. Survey and inventory the drainage to determine the actual status of bull trout populations, habitat conditions and life cycle needs. 2. Use restrictive fishing regulations to protect bull trout in known spawning areas during spawning season.

Problem 3. The number of genetically pure west slope cutthroat trout in the Blackfoot seems to be low. Its future may be in jeopardy without special management.

Strategies

1. Survey and inventory the drainage to determine the actual status of cutthroat populations and habitat conditions.

2. Establish special cutthroat management areas where feasible using restrictive regulations and/or restricted

access to protect them from overharvest and monitor the results for 3 years.

Problem 4. Floaters interfere with fishermen.

Strategies

1. Eliminate floating from certain sections of the river. (This would require legislative action).
2. Eliminate fishing from certain sections of the river.
3. Educate floaters and fishermen in river etiquette.
4. Survey fishermen to determine if a real problem exists.

Future Management

Based on our perceptions of the problems we have developed goals and objectives for the next 5 years. Your opinions could change the course of our work and future management of the Blackfoot fisheries. Please let us hear from you.

Our goal for the next five years is to maintain wild trout fisheries consisting of both native and introduced species and increase angler opportunities to catch trout 14 inches and larger. Specific objectives which will help us meet our goals they are as follows:

1. Review stream projects under the Natural Streambed and Land Preservation Act, The Stream Protection Act and assist in enforcement of Montana Water Quality Standards to protect trout habitat in the Blackfoot River drainage.
2. Conduct trout population studies to assess population

conditions in 2 sections of the Blackfoot downstream from the mouth of Nevada Creek.

3. Conduct trout population studies to assess current conditions on 2 river sections, upstream from Nevada Creek, for which there are population data from the 1970's.

4. Inventory pure-strain west slope cutthroat trout and bull trout populations to determine their distribution and numbers in the drainage.

5. Interview anglers to determine size and species composition of their catches from the drainage and to determine if conflicts between floater and fishermen do occur.

This is your opportunity to get involved in the management of the Blackfoot River fisheries. Attached is a form designed to make it easier for you to get back to us.

Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife & Parks

BLACKFOOT RIVER
FISHERIES MANAGEMENT
SURVEY AND RESPONSE FORM

NAME _____

ADDRESS _____

CITY _____ STATE _____ ZIP _____

I have fished the Blackfoot River for _____ years.
I normally fish it _____ times per year.
I quit fishing the Blackfoot for the following reason _____
_____

Please indicate the degree to which you agree or disagree with the problems and strategies identified on pages 7, 8 and 9 of the Draft Management Plan using a scale of 1 to 5 where 1 = strongly agree and 5 = strongly disagree.

_____ Problem 1. Average and maximum size of rainbows caught is too small.
STRATEGIES
_____ 1. Determine management needs through trout population studies.
_____ 2. Increase restriction on angler harvest of larger fish on the entire river.
_____ 3. Establish a special experimental large trout management area on a small portion (10 miles) of the river and monitor population response for 3 years.
_____ 4. Conduct creel census on a heavily fished section of the river to evaluate the harvest.
Other strategies _____
_____

_____ Problem 2. The Blackfoot River system is the last stronghold for bull trout in Region 2 and its numbers seem low. Without proper management its future may be in jeopardy.
STRATEGIES
_____ 1. Survey and inventory the drainage to determine the actual status of bull trout populations, habitat conditions and its life cycle needs.
_____ 2. Restrict bull trout harvest in spawning season, in known spawning streams.
Other strategies _____
_____

_____ Problem 3. The number of genetically pure west slope cutthroat trout in the Blackfoot seems to be low. Its future may be in jeopardy without special management.
STRATEGIES
_____ 1. Survey and inventory the drainage to determine the actual status of cutthroat populations and habitat conditions.

_____ 2. Establish special cutthroat management areas where feasible. Protect them from overharvest using restrictive regulations and/or restricted access and monitor the results for 3 years.

Other strategies _____

_____

_____ Problem 4. Floaters interfere with fishermen.

STRATEGIES

_____ 1. Eliminate floating from certain sections of river.
_____ 2. Eliminate fishing from certain sections of river.
_____ 3. Educate floaters and fishermen in river etiquette.
_____ 4. Survey fishermen to determine if a real problem exists.

Other strategies _____

_____

Other problems _____

_____

When you have completed your response please fold in thirds and mail it back to us.

COMMENTS: