

HB 277—OPPOSE

Mr. Chairman, members of the committee, my name is Derek Goldman.

Today, I am representing the Montana Chapter of the American Fisheries Society—a professional society for fisheries biologists, with a mission to improve the conservation and sustainability of fishery resources and aquatic ecosystems by advancing fisheries and aquatic science and promoting the development of fisheries professionals.

You may be wondering why an organization of fisheries biologists is opposed to a bill that purports to assist with bull trout recovery. Well, that's because, although it does a lot for the irrigators, there is nothing in this bill to help bull trout. If the bill contained provisions that tied the funding appropriation to specific actions that would actually help the bull trout, (such as an instream flow lease) then we could support the use of public funds for the ditch repair. In fact, however, section 1, sub-section 2 of the bill does the exact opposite, by prohibiting the conditioning or expenditure of any of the grant money.

Our concern that this appropriation will do nothing for bull trout recovery was also expressed by Rep Milburn, when he opposed the bill during executive action in House FW&P committee. Speaking from his experience as an irrigator, he stated that the water saved from these types of projects usually is NOT returned to the stream—that irrigators usually propose to fix their ditches because they need the extra water to irrigate with.

Furthermore, a lot of public money has already been expended for the Glen Lake irrigation district, including resources from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Partners for Fish and Wildlife program. According to our members, some of the irrigators (not all) have been less than cooperative toward bull trout restoration efforts in the drainage, including at least one case of hostility and obstinacy toward efforts to restore bull trout habitat.

In sum, we think this is an appropriation to irrigators with a bull trout title. In order to support the bill, we would need to see a commitment by the irrigators to maintain critical flows in the stream to benefit bull trout recovery. So, I'd urge the committee to oppose this bill. While I would not go so far to say that this is a wolf in sheep's clothing, its sure seems like a porky-pig wearing fish scales. Thank you.

--Derek Goldman, on behalf of the Montana Chapter of the American Fisheries Society.