

House Bill 62
January 15, 2013
Presented by Bruce Rich
House Fish, Wildlife and Parks Committee

Mr. Chairman and committee members, I am Bruce Rich, Administrator, Fisheries Division of the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP). I am here in opposition to House Bill 62.

House Bill 62 is unnecessary for the reason that the FWP Commission already has the authority to require catch-and release fishing and/or barbless hook restrictions for waterbodies in Montana. HB 62 would, in statute, mandate that the commission require barbless hooks where catch-and-release is required, severely and unnecessarily restricting management flexibility, and requiring another mandate for law enforcement and the fishing community with which to comply.

Our primary concern is that HB 62 would result in unintended consequences and have a widespread negative impact on anglers. Virtually all waters in the Eastern and Western thirds of the state, and the majority of the streams and rivers in the Central third of the state, have catch-and-release regulations in place for Montana Species of Concern and/or federally designated endangered or threatened species. House Bill 62 suggests that ALL game fish captured while fishing in designated catch-and-release waters would have to be released, not just those species that warrant being released. Anglers would no longer be allowed to harvest other species that compete with, or hybridize with species of concern; for example, there are rivers where FWP has regulations in place to encourage the harvest of rainbow trout that impacting populations of catch-and-release protected cutthroat trout. Under HB 62, anglers would no longer be able to harvest rainbow trout.

Similarly, HB 62 would require barbless hooks on all waters with catch and release regulations, regardless of what fish species someone is fishing for. This would have a negative impact on anglers fishing in these waters for fish that are not a species of concern, and would hamper management objectives. On the Clearwater River, for example, we are trying to encourage harvest of northern pike to protect bull trout and cutthroat trout. Angler success with barbless hooks would diminish pike harvest compared to harvest with barbed hooks.

We are also questioning whether a barbless hook requirement would have any biological benefit at the fish population level because these hooks do little to reduce catch-and-release mortality.

In summary, based on the fact that the FWP Commission already has the authority proposed, and that this bill would have significant unintended consequences with questionable biological benefit, FWP stands in opposition of this bill as drafted.