Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks

ADDENDUM TO THE CLARKS FORK OF THE YELLOWSTONE EA

Fisheries and flow information on the Clarks Fork River near the proposed Meinhardt Access Montana project

The upper end of the Clarks Fork from the Wyoming state line downstream to around Belfry supports a popular trout fishery for both rainbow and brown trout. A few Yellowstone cutthroat trout and grayling have also been captured in this section of the river. These fish were from plants made in the river upstream in Wyoming. In the past, the upper Clarks Fork has been a very popular whitefish fishery, especially in the winter. In recent years whitefish numbers have been down and it is expected that this may be due to whirling disease that has been found in this section of river.

Fisheries data is limited for the section of river near the Meinhardt property. The section of the Clarks Fork between the Highway 310 Bridge, just downstream of this property, and the Walker or Schwen Bridge, upstream of the property was electrofished in the past, although it is not a section that we regularly sample. Sampling reports the presence of rainbow trout (ranging from 8 to 19 in), brown trout (ranging from 9.4 to 13.6 in), and whitefish (ranging from 4.9 to 18.2 in) in this section of the river. A few Yellowstone cutthroat trout were also caught during this survey.

The Orchard Canal irrigation diversion structure between the Meinhardt property and the town of Bridger appears to be a total fish barrier to fish moving up the Clarks Fork from the Yellowstone River. A four-mile section of river just downstream of the Orchard Canal Diversion was electrofished in the mid 1990s with mountain whitefish being the most abundant species captured (with a total of 92 fish captured ranging from 5.4 in to 19.7 in length). This same sampling also caught 10 burbot from 17.3 to 27.1 in long and 5 brown trout from 10.1 to 12.6 in.

There is a USGS flow gauge on the Clarks Fork upstream of Belfry. A review of historic flow records for this gauge between 1979 and 2007 shows that the average low flow recorded during the irrigation season was about 200 cfs. Looking at this same gauge for the recent drought period (between 2001 and 2007) average flows dropped to as low as 123 cfs during September. There are several irrigation diversions between this gauge and the Meinhardt property, and this section of river can suffer from dewatering some years. Based on the limited fish data we have, it appears there is enough water and temperatures remain low enough to maintain a limited trout population in the vicinity of the Meinhardt property.