



# ONE-STOP SHOP

The new FishMT web application provides everything FWP knows about Montana's fish and fisheries in a single, easy-to-use online location. **BY TOM DICKSON**

**ANGLERS, SCIENTISTS,** students, educators, developers, and others interested in information about the state's fish populations can now access the data at what Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks is calling a "one-stop shop" for all things fisheries related. Found on the department's website, the new FishMT web application is "as user friendly as we can make it," says Adam Petersen, an FWP computer analyst who worked on the team that created the site.

FWP's website previously provided various fisheries information in two places: the Fishing Guide, aimed at anglers, and MFISH, which contained data for scientists, teachers, developers, and others interested in the nitty-gritty details of fisheries science. "We thought that made sense," says David

*Tom Dickson is editor of Montana Outdoors.*

Schmetterling, head of FWP fisheries research. "But we really had no idea what people actually wanted. We'd never asked."

## BLOWN AWAY

So they did. The FishMT team surveyed hundreds of anglers, tribal officials, university students, academics, developers, and others they knew were interested in fisheries information. As an incentive, those who completed the survey were entered into a weekly drawing for a free T-shirt. "We basically framed the questionnaire as, 'We have a lot of information that it seems you want. But what exactly do you want and how do you want it delivered?'" Schmetterling says. "It was all about public transparency and responsiveness."

Adam Strainer, an FWP fisheries technician in Helena, says the team predicted it would receive 150 to 200 completed ques-

tionnaires. Instead, they got more than 2,200. "We were just blown away," he says.

The most common comment from survey participants? "Thank you for asking for my opinion."

"People definitely appreciate it when a government agency asks them what they want," Strainer says.

One major finding from the survey is that anglers desire much of the same information that FWP had aimed at academics. "They wanted the scientific stuff and raw data as much as stocking rates, fishing pressure, and fish distribution," Schmetterling says.

Also, when asked where they go for information about Montana's fisheries, 86 percent of respondents said they turned to the FWP website. "It was great to know that most people consider us the authority," says Missy Erving, FWP webmaster. Unfortunately, 60 percent of those respondents said they didn't know FWP provided either the Fishing Guide or MFISH. "They were coming to us but not getting what they needed. That was the bad news," says Erving. "But we knew that we already had most of what they wanted, and because we were upgrading to new technology, we saw a tremendous opportunity to deliver that information more effectively."

## TAMING GODZILLA

Through FishMT, anyone can quickly access Montana's centralized fisheries information system (which fisheries biologists call "Godzilla" for its massiveness). "In Godzilla we have tens of thousands of fish surveys going back decades, hundreds of thousands of sampling events, and millions of fish records," Schmetterling says. "Montana has the world's longest-running electrofishing data sets, and you can also access information about the effects of climate change or aquatic invasive species on fisheries."

FishMT users can find the information by clicking fields like "Data" or "Stocking," or through what the FishMT team calls the Mega-Map. "You can go into the Mega-Map, start clicking and zooming, and have access to over 20,000 different waterbodies and a thousand access sites for fishing," Petersen says.

Because team members are themselves anglers, they know the types of information their fellow anglers need. "If you're like me,



**EVERYTHING THEY KNOW**  
Clockwise from top left: Electro-fishing survey data; fish telemetry reports; reservoir seining results; endangered species research; and hatchery stocking records are just part of the fisheries information available through FishMT. The new web application, available on the FWP website, was created to provide anglers, academics, and others with all the scientific and management fisheries information that FWP has acquired over the past century.



and you like to explore new areas, this is such a great resource," says Petersen. "You go into Mega-Map and quickly learn what a stream looks like, what fish are there, how many other anglers you can expect to see, and where the access is."

## A MAP APPEARS

Let's say you want to fish the Beaverhead River for the first time. Click on "Waterbodies" and a map appears. Either enter "Beaverhead" in the search screen or just find the Beaverhead River on the Mega-Map, click on the river, and up pops a detailed river map showing locations of each fishing access site, along with links to fish species, survey data, fishing pressure, regulations, and fisheries research reports (some dating to the 1940s). Click on a fishing access site icon to see a photograph of the site, a detailed map, and information about camping and other activities, plus locations of nearby access sites and state parks.

If you're a walleye angler and want information on, say, Fresno Reservoir near

Havre, a click on the Mega-Map takes you to pages of detailed stocking data and information on what FWP found in annual fish population surveys. Another bonus: Under "Additional Files," anglers can find detailed bathymetric (depth contour) maps for locating points, drop-offs, holes, and other underwater structures where fish hang out.

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If you're a developer, you could use FishMT to see if a river near a proposed housing subdivision contains federally protected species such as bull trout.

If you're a student, instructor, or researcher, the academic possibilities of the web application are nearly endless.

A "Support" button on FishMT lets users ask questions and post comments. "We

check it every day," Strainer says. "People are amazed we respond right away."

The FishMT team continues to improve the site with new technology and suggestions offered by anglers and others. This summer, the department will be adding names, contact information, biographies, and photographs of biologists in charge of every fishery across Montana. "We biologists welcome that opportunity for public interaction," Schmetterling says. The team is also working on a mobile app for Montana's fishing regulations.

"We have all this incredible fisheries information, but it's not our data, it's the public's," Schmetterling says. "We want this to be a one-stop shop for getting it to people as easily as possible."

Petersen acknowledges that, even with its vast storehouse of data, FishMT has some limitations. "It can't tell you what insects are hatching on a river, what lure to use, or where the fish are actually located," he says. "But other than that, it's pretty much all here."

*Find FishMT at [fwp.mt.gov](http://fwp.mt.gov). Look for the tab at the top of the home page.*

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