

FISH AND WILDLIFE COMMISSION AMENDMENT

FWP proposal to be amended: 2025-2026 Fishing Regulations

Commissioner: K.C. Walsh

Date Received by Commission: 10/20/2024

Proposed Amendment:

I move the Fish and Wildlife Commission change the Daily and Possession Limits for Combined Trout in the Western District and the Central District for Rivers/Streams to “3 daily and in possession.” No other changes to the existing standard daily limits, and Cutthroat Trout are not included in Combined Trout in the Western District.

Requested by FWP: **NO**

Rationale and Background:

The Daily and Possession Limits for the Western and Central Districts were established in the early 1980’s. In the mid-seventies, Montana moved to wild trout management on all our rivers and streams. Fishing pressure has increased dramatically across the state since that time. Efforts to manage responsible use on the Madison and other major streams have not been successful in achieving any reduction of angling pressure. Over the past three decades the perception of “opportunity” among a majority of Montana’s anglers has also become more focused on the quality of the fishing experience, rather than bagging fish for the frying pan. While evidence suggests that a majority of Montana’s anglers practice catch & release fishing for trout, Montana is enjoying significant population growth and newcomers are likely to bring different angling values. Two fish bag and possession limits are already in regulation for many rivers and streams in Idaho, Washington and Oregon.

Montana’s lakes and reservoirs, many of which are stocked, offer ample opportunity for anglers who wish to catch and keep up to five fish for the table.

Department Response:

The philosophy of wild fish management began in Montana in 1974 when FWP stopped releasing hatchery fish in rivers and streams. In the early 1980’s, after monitoring the effects of the new philosophy in different locations and on different species, FWP established a modest 5 fish standard trout harvest regulation. Standard harvest is used with individual exceptions as identified to control localized population fluctuations. The continued use of this philosophy is consistent with the current statewide fish management plan and gives biologists an opportunity to react to changing conditions over time.

Using standard creel and fish population survey tools to monitor populations, FWP has determined that an overwhelming majority of anglers throughout Montana are already utilizing catch and release. For example, recent data from a longstanding creel survey on the Missouri River below Hauser Dam showed that of the 16,000-rainbow trout caught by surveyed anglers from 2019-2023, catch and release rates averaged 87% (range 79% to 90%). Additionally, preliminary data from FWP’s 2023 Angler Pressure Survey identifies that 97% of anglers surveyed while fishing the Madison River practiced catch and release. Similar

catch and release rates by anglers have been observed or documented for streams and rivers across Montana where the current district standard applies. FWP has no biological concerns with the current standard limits. Reducing limit amounts would restrict opportunity for the few harvest-oriented anglers and not result in population level effects.