

FISH AND WILDLIFE COMMISSION AMENDMENT

FWP proposal to be amended: 2025-2026 Fishing Regulations/South Fork Flathead River
Upstream from Hungry Horse Reservoir

Commissioner: Vice Chair Pat Tabor (Commissioner, Region 1)

Date Received by Commission: October 15, 2024

Proposed amendment:

I move the Commission amend the 2025-2026 Fishing Regulations for the South Fork of the Flathead River upstream from Hungry Horse Reservoir (from Crossover Boat Ramp south and upstream to the confluence of Youngs and Danaher creeks) to read as follows:

• *Bull trout: No intentional angling for bull trout except catch-and-release from July 1 through July 31. Angling is prohibited from the mouths of Gordon Creek and Little Salmon Creek downstream 300 yards from June 15 to September 30. A Hungry Horse/South Fork Flathead bull trout Catch Card must be in possession when fishing for bull trout. See bull trout under "What do I Need to Fish in Montana" (page 15) for application information. All bull trout must be released promptly, with little or no delay. It is unlawful to possess a live bull trout for any reason. Angling for bull trout is not allowed in South Fork Flathead River tributaries or Big Salmon Lake.*

Requested by FWP (YES/NO): YES

If YES, then FWP's Rationale: See proposal below.

If NO, then FWP Response: NA



FISHING REGULATIONS PROPOSAL FORM

Waterbody or Fishing District: South Fork Flathead River

Proposed change, addition, or deletion (for existing regs, include District Standard or Exception to the District Standard. Indicate new language in *italics*, deleted language with a ~~strikethrough~~):

Page 44 add/**change**/delete:

South Fork Flathead River upstream from Hungry Horse Reservoir
(from Crossover Boat Ramp south and upstream to the confluence of
Youngs and Danaher creeks)

- Bull trout: *No intentional angling for bull trout except* catch-and-release from ~~the third Saturday in May~~ *July 1* through July 31. *Angling is prohibited from the mouths of Gordon Creek and Little Salmon Creek downstream 300 yards from June 15 to September 30.* A Hungry Horse/South Fork Flathead bull trout Catch Card must be in possession when fishing for bull trout. See bull trout under ~~obtain a license~~ *"What do I Need to Fish in Montana"* (page 15) for application information. All bull trout must be released promptly, with little or no delay. It is unlawful to possess a live bull trout for any reason. Angling for bull trout is not allowed in South Fork Flathead River tributaries or Big Salmon Lake.

Rationale (biological justification for proposing this change. Include how this change addresses a fisheries management problem): Adult bull trout numbers are monitored by counting the redds (spawning nests) in 8 tributaries to the South Fork Flathead River (4 direct tributaries to Hungry Horse Reservoir and 4 tributaries to the South Fork Flathead River). Redd counts in 2024 revealed the lowest number of redds on record (Figure 1). This is the second consecutive year of lowest redd counts and a trend since 2006. Redd count totals in 2024 were 48% of the long-term average. During this same time period, participation in the Hungry Horse/South Fork bull trout catch-card fishery have been increasing since its inception in 2004. Estimated bull trout angling pressure in the South Fork Flathead River has tripled since 2014 (Figure 2), and FWP suspects that angling could be partially responsible for the decline in redd numbers. Angling for bull trout during the months of May and June is primarily in the non-wilderness portions of the South Fork Flathead that are easily accessible. Annual catch card surveys reveal that 44% of bull trout caught in the South Fork are caught in the months of May and June. Additionally, 59% of the bull trout caught in the South Fork are caught in the lowest portion of the permitted river. Migrating bull trout in this lower portion of the drainage are vulnerable, and by shortening the season, fish would be able to migrate to their natal streams without being targeted by anglers. Additionally, bull trout are known to congregate near the mouths of key spawning tributaries

like Little Salmon Creek and Gordon Creek. These confluence areas have well-defined holes and are known areas to target concentrations of staging bull trout. Reducing the amount of angler-induced handling stress may help stabilize the downward trend in adult bull trout numbers.

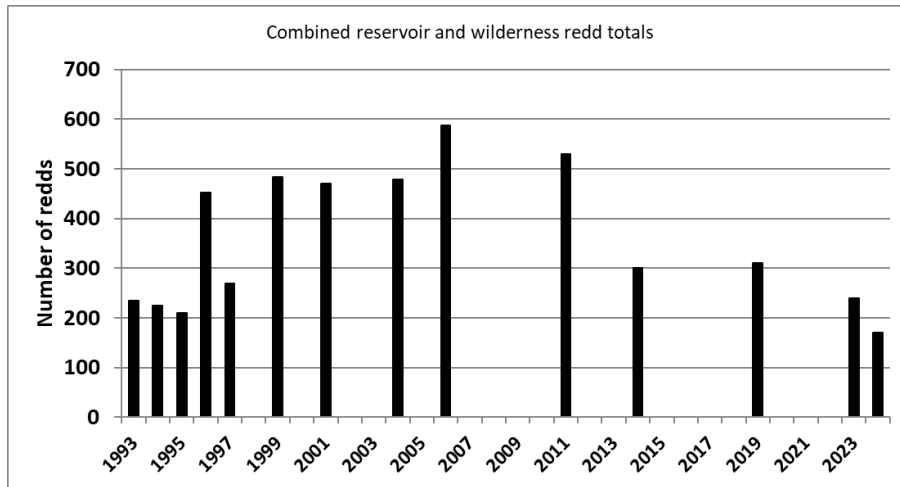


Figure 1: Bull trout redd numbers for the Hungry Horse/South Fork population 1993-2024.

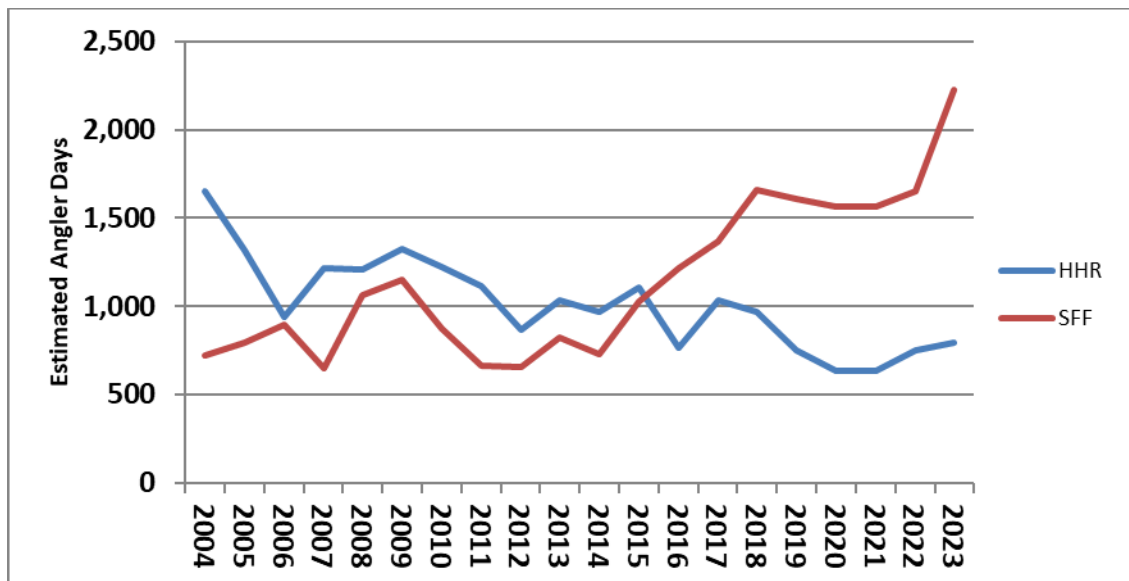


Figure 2: Estimated bull trout angling pressure for Hungry Horse Reservoir and the South Fork Flathead River 2004-2024.

Management Plan Reference (drainage, waterbody, language directly from the plan):

South Fork Flathead River drainage, section 2.02, page 5 under “South Fork Flathead Bull Trout Fishery”.

Regulation Type (clarification, enforcement, conservation, relevancy, management plan, other):

Conservation

Public Engagement (summary of any public scoping or outreach that has been completed as it relates to this change. Includes public meetings, sporting group meetings, surveys, etc.):

Interdivisional Review (most likely input from Enforcement, but input from Com Ed, Legal, Wildlife may also be appropriate. Multiple divisions will review in Helena via RRAM):

R-1 Enforcement has reviewed and concurred with the proposal.

Nonbiological Information (is there an organized advocacy for this change, controversy, other information that decision makers should be aware, relevant MCA or ARM to justify this change):