



Tom Annear makes good use of the instream flow on the Big Horn River. Photo by WGFD staff

X-Stream Fishing

Battling browns on the Big Horn

Centuries ago, high atop the Bighorn Mountains near the headwaters of the Little Bighorn River, Native Americans were so inspired by the landscape, they laid out a Medicine Wheel—an important religious site where they sought guidance and spiritual enrichment. The lower portion of the river is witness to significant events, too. Notably, George Custer's infamous encounter with overwhelming numbers of Native Americans occurred along the Little Bighorn River in 1876 a few short miles into Montana. Today, you can still see why the state's first residents found spiritual enlightenment here and fought so fiercely for the lands and waters of this part of the world. The Little Horn, as locals call it, passes through some of the most ruggedly picturesque mountains in the entire West. It's without question one of the riverine treasures of the state and is as wild and scenic today as ever. In fact, portions of the river are still being considered for designation as a wild and scenic river under the national Wild and Scenic Rivers Act.

The Fishery

Official records are scant, but based on what we know of nearby streams like the Tongue River, it's a near certainty the Little Bighorn historically supported a healthy population of Yellowstone cutthroat trout. Small populations of genetically pure Yellowstone cutts still reside in a few of the small tributaries of the Little Horn today, but the main stem reflects the influence of early day fish stocking efforts by private individuals who spread brook, rainbow and brown trout wherever suitable habitat seemed to exist. As in many mountain streams, browns tend to be more abundant lower down, while rainbows are more populous up high. In the very upper end of the river above Dayton Gulch, brook trout are common. In recent years, the department reintroduced native cutts, and they seem to be holding their own.

How to Get There

To reach the upper end of the river, go about 18 miles west of Burgess Junction on Highway 14A and turn north on Forest Road 14 (if you're coming from the west, this is about 2 1/2 miles east of the Medicine Wheel turnout). Take the first right (about 1/2 mile from the blacktop) onto Forest Road 125 and follow it to Half Ounce Meadows. After leaving Highway 14A, the road

is a reasonably good two-track when it's dry. It grows progressively less sedan-friendly as you go, before dead-ending after several miles. To access the bottom end of the river, take exit 9 on Interstate 25 at Ranchester. Just before reaching town (less than a mile), take highway 345 north to Parkman. Look for a sign along the road about 2 1/2 miles north of the town that directs you to turn left to the Game and Fish's Kerns Big Game Winter Range. Follow this good gravel road about 16 miles (go past the Kerns Unit) until you reach a bridge over the Little Horn. You'll actually be in Montana here, but turn left just before the bridge and follow the very rough two-track road until it dead-ends at the trailhead on state land—in Wyoming. The foot trail parallels the entire length of the river and offers many great places to drop off and start fishing. There are no developed campgrounds, but backpackers have found numerous places to pitch their tents as they work up or down the river.

The Instream Flow

Permit Number: 8 I.F.

Priority Date: March 6, 1989

Status of the filing: A public hearing was held on Oct. 3, 1991, in Sheridan. The state engineer approved the water right without any reduction of the recommended amounts on Sept. 19, 1996. The Board of Control formally adjudicated the water right on Oct. 30, 2002.

Quantity: 60 cubic feet per second from Oct. 1 to Nov. 15; 50 cfs from Nov. 16 to March 31, 60 cfs from April 1 to June 30 and 62 cfs from July 1 to September.

Location and length: The segment extends approximately 4.4 miles from the confluence with the Dry Fork of the Little Bighorn downstream to where the stream leaves public-owned lands in section 20 of township 57 north, range 90 west.

Land ownership: All lands crossed by the segment are owned by the State of Wyoming or the U. S. Forest Service.

Rationale: Recommended flows are designed to maintain 1) habitat for brown trout spawning in the fall, 2) over-winter survival of all ages of trout, 3) habitat for rainbow trout spawning in the spring and 4) habitat for growth and survival of adult and juvenile trout in the summer.

Related details: Instream flows to flush sediment from riffles and maintain long-term habitat are not protected by this filing.

Clearing the Air on Water

Instream flow is a use of water

Picture yourself standing along the banks of the Snake River. The snow hasn't yet melted from the mountaintops, the leaves are just starting to bud, geese are honking in the distance and the river's noisily rolling past. Then imagine yourself turning to the person next to you (pick anyone you like—it's your imagination) and say something like "this is pretty enough, but it's too bad we aren't using all our water."

Or perhaps it's easier to envision yourself on the North Platte River just downstream from Alcova. The evening air drifts lightly across the current as you hold the boat in an eddy below a deep run in the renowned Grey Reef section of the river. Your buddy's tied into something big that's running and jerking and bending his rod right to the water surface. Just then, something in the back of your mind makes you ask your comrade, "doesn't it just break your heart to see all this water going to Nebraska without getting used?" Even imaginary friends are quick to see that the water in both of these examples is most definitely being used in very important ways.

These situations are really no different than those enacted by long-ago settlers when the state was first being settled. Agricultural opportunity was one of the first things that brought people to Wyoming in the late 1880s, and without the ability to divert water from streams and use it to produce crops, that sector of our state simply wouldn't have made it. But it did, and agriculture was so successful that it now accounts for more than 90 percent of the water used in the state today. With that portion of water going to one specific use, it's really not hard to understand the deeply ingrained sentiment among some folks that the best use of our water requires taking it out of the stream and growing something.

The historic paradigm didn't have much room for leaving any water in the creek, and agriculture still needs water today. But things can change a lot in 120 years, and the "we" part of the equation now includes a lot of other people. What's more, some of these people have ideas for what constitutes a good use based on their own unique values and perspectives and today's economy and culture.

One of those new uses involves voluntarily leaving water in the stream sometimes. The fact is, instream flow is a legal use of water on a par with most other uses, which affords all manner of benefits to the state. Things like supporting the tourism and recreation industry that's a major component of our economy, maintaining clean water, or providing habitat to keep populations of some aquatic organisms from being listed as threatened or endangered. These and other functions of instream flow are very real and very important uses to the state. And the best part? They don't deprive any existing users of their water rights, and every drop of every instream flow is available for another use once the water leaves designated segments.

Deciding how we're going to use our water today has changed from the early years of statehood. "We" includes every one of us who has an interest in water. "Use" has a much broader definition than it did in the past. And "our water" affirms that decisions must consider everyone, especially you, because the water in this state is in fact owned by all of us. There are a lot of demands for the waters of Wyoming, but figuring out what's best for everyone begins with understanding and appreciating