

Clearing the Air on Water

Mixed messages cause nothing but confusion

Those on both sides of the issue often support the root idea of instream flow

By Tom Annear
Instream flow supervisor

The odds are good that most of us have been a victim of a mixed message in one way or another. Who hasn't thanked someone for saying "Hey, you know you're smarter than you look!"

Sometimes it just takes a while to figure out that maybe there was more than one message in the statement. When we hit that point, we all of a sudden have a choice of deciding just what part of the jab we want to focus on. Am I really smart or do I really look that dense? I'm not aware of any studies on the matter, but my inclination is to suspect that most folks tend to be a bit defensive and spend way too much time focusing on the negative aspect of these types of comments. But the fact is that we always have the privilege of choosing which part of the statement we want to dwell on, and there's more to be gained by focusing on the positive element.

Looking back over the nearly 40 years of instream flow discussion in Wyoming, it's noteworthy that these kinds of mixed messages are actually pretty common.

"Instream flow is OK, but the best way to get more water in the creek (below my ranch or farm) is to irrigate more, because you'll get a lot of return flow later in the summer (e.g. water that naturally seeps back to the stream from an irrigated field)."

Folks who liked the idea of leaving water in a stream or river for fish and all the other plants and animals tended to just hear the last part of comments like this. While there is some truth to that statement about return flows, the concept is so variable from stream to stream and segment to segment that you can easily argue the flip-side, too. Debates on this concept and many others have raged for years without resolution, because both views are often technically correct. But by focusing on the technical debate, folks often tend to overlook their shared views in support of instream flow.

I recently had the pleasure of being one of the panelists at an instream flow forum. As things played out, I wound up following a couple of other speakers who did a great job of showcasing this business of mixed messages on instream flow. First up was a rancher whose introductory comments included the words "I'm against instream flow." He then proceeded to describe how great the fishing was on his place in the parts of the stream where he got some return flow. The fact is this rancher

actually makes a pretty good income from the fees he charges to fish that part of his stream. He went on to say that while he valued his water rights highly, as well he should, he'd be willing to do more for improving the fishery in the stream if he could somehow keep control of his water rights and get some type of compensation or credit.

The next speaker was a long-time cautionary voice (usually against instream flow). He observed right up front that he thought instream flow was probably OK,

but the only way to get more water in the creek was from storage— either from a new dam or from temporary storage in irrigated soils along the stream (the return flow concept noted above). It'd be real easy to focus on the "I'm against instream flows . . ." and ". . . but it has to come from a dam" portions of these statements, but the fact is both of these speakers seemed to speak fairly favorably about the basic concept of instream flow. At least neither one said they thought leaving more water in the stream for fish and wildlife was a bad thing.

When you think about it, should we really get hung up on where the water for instream flow comes from if maintaining existing flows or restoring more water doesn't hurt anyone else and is an overall benefit to the state or its citizens?

There are several ways to get more water in the stream, only one of which is "don't take it out." So if you really like some of the things associated with instream flow, it shouldn't matter how that happens.

If farmers and ranchers feel they can make more income or add to the value of their property by leaving water in the stream without affecting their neighbors' water rights, it seems like we should have laws that provide the opportunity. At this writing, we don't have those kinds of laws, though the 2007 Wyoming Legislature considered two proposed laws that would allow private landowners to temporarily change the use of an existing water right to instream flow and keep ownership of the water right. That way, if their goals or ranch management needs change in the future, they can return that water right to its original use.

I'm not sure if I look smarter than I am or if I'm smarter than I look. But either way, the challenge is to focus on the positive side of the coin— whether it pertains to intelligence or instream flow. When that happens, there's a lot better chance of working together to find benefits for everyone.

When you think about it, should we really get hung up on where the water for instream flow comes from if maintaining existing flows or restoring more water doesn't hurt anyone else and is an overall benefit to the state or its citizens?

Getting to know Game and Fish

Headquarters Mailroom— Services Division

By Ty Stockton
Editor

CHEYENNE— Jack Thompson often sees more mail in a day than a lot of people see in an entire year. Thompson is the mailroom supervisor at the Wyoming Game and Fish headquarters building in Cheyenne.

"We process close to 400,000 (hunting license) applications during the year," he says. "There are four months when we have either resident or nonresident application periods, and then there's a few more busy times when folks are applying for leftover licenses."

License applications are a big part of the incoming mail, but there's also a lot of mail to send out. Thompson

says at the end of June or the beginning of July each year, he mails about 110,000 licenses to hunters who were successful in the drawings.

But that's just a fraction of the mail Thompson sends out. When the application booklets are available, he says he sends roughly 200 booklets a day to people who want to enter the drawings.



Jack Thompson

The months when license applications are due may be the busiest for Thompson, but that doesn't mean he gets to relax the rest of the year. All told, between the incoming and outgoing mail Thompson handles, he estimates more than a million pieces go through his mailroom each year.

The quantity of mail that comes into or goes out of the Game and Fish headquarters is enough to qualify the building for its own zip code.

Other facilities with their own zip codes, like the University of Wyoming, have large staffs to handle the mail. That institution, which handles more than two million pieces of mail a year, employs five full-time staffers and four to five part-time student workers. Thompson may only see half as much mail, but he processes it by himself, with help from office volunteers from time to time.

Because his mailroom is a one-man show, Thompson has to be a Jack-of-all-mail-related-trades. He orders supplies, pays bills, sorts mail and does anything else he needs to do to keep the letters and packages moving smoothly. But that's part of the job's appeal, he says.

"I think I'd go nuts if I had to sit behind a desk eight hours a day," he says.

And once in a while, Thompson says, he gets to do something truly crucial. "This scale," he says, pointing to the machine on his desk, "is extremely accurate. It goes to the half-ounce. Once in a while, it serves as the official fish-weighing scale when a person brings in a fish that could be a new state record. It not only weighs the UPS packages, but also all the important stuff, like fish records."

To get more information about instream flow, visit the Wyoming Game and Fish Department's Web site at <http://gf.state.wy.us/fish/instreamflow>