X-Stream Fishing on upper Shell Creek

An up-close look at Wyoming’s Instream Flow Water Rights and what they mean to fishermen

The Setting
State law requires the State Engineer to hold a public hearing for every instream flow water right. These meetings can be interesting as they typically draw two fairly distinct groups of people – supporters and opponents. Few apathetic people bother to attend. In spite of the singular purpose of hearings, each one has its own unique issues.

At 10 a.m. on March 12, 1997, a small group of landowners and sportsmen gathered in the Bighorn County Courthouse in Basin in the presence of a slightly larger number of state agency employees to share their views on the proposed instream flow water rights on Shell Creek. This was one of the few hearings where strong opposition was not voiced.

However, some in attendance weren’t fully supportive of the proposal. Their concerns were largely rooted in a lack of trust as well as a lack of understanding of the kind of change the proposed new water right might cause.

They asked for an additional year to contemplate the issue versus the usual 30 days allowed by the State Engineer to submit comments after the hearing.

They were given an unprecedented 9 months to submit comments, though no additional comments were ever provided.

Other participants were supportive but worried that issuance might actually impede expansion of recreational fisheries opportunities if, for example, the right might somehow stop development of dams (none of which was or is planned) that could provide more recreation.

Others voiced their opinion that the filing was for too little water – especially for brown trout spawning habitat in the fall.

It’s been 14 years since this gathering. Though most of their concerns have yet to materialize, and may never, their motivation to get involved and be part of the decision-making process was important.

Wyoming is unique because of the many fervent views and voices that abound here, and the expression of those views benefits us all. To be sure, those who fish or frequent Shell Creek may never know of the impassioned discourses that went into protecting those waters for their personal use, but they will know the enjoyment and solace on Shell Creek that those discussions provided.

The Fishery
Upper Shell Creek is a highly productive mountain stream that flows off the west side of the Bighorn Mountain range. The stream flows swiftly through the narrow confines of Shell Canyon.

Large boulders provide abundant pocket and plunge pools that offer countless opportunities for casting a fly, spinner or worm.

The deep, dark waters yield rainbow trout with almost iridescent purple and red skin coloration – arguably some of the most colorful to be found. Fines grow right to the edge of the stream along with various willow species, creating a challenge to find the best place to cast a line into that perfect pool.

Flow can be swift and angling can be challenging until the winter snows are almost fully drained off the mountain toward the end of July in most years.

The last detailed fish survey in this segment was in July 2004. That study showed 85 percent of the trout were rainbows; the remainder being brookies. Most of the fish were between 7 and 10 inches, though larger fish are always a possibility. There are more than 1,000 trout per mile, which means you’re unlikely to ever run out of eager takers of your lures.

Area 2 flowing water fishery regulations apply. That means there is a limit of six trout per day or in possession, only two of which may be cutthroat and only one trout may exceed 16 inches. There are no special restrictions on terminal tackle.

How to Get There
From the town of Greybull, take Highway 14 east. After crossing the national forest boundary east of Shell, go about 5 miles to the Shell Falls tourist information center right along the highway. The best fishing access is found about 4 more miles east. Turn on Forest Service Road 17 that goes 1.5 miles to the Shell Creek ranger station and campground.

To get here from the east side of the Bighorns, go north from Sheridan on Interstate 25 and turn onto Interstate 25 heading west. Take the Highway 60 exit and turn north on Forest Service Road 17 that goes 1.5 miles to the Shell Creek ranger station and campground.