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Blackfoot Drought Committee Recommends Voluntary Fishing Techniques During Drought

August 18, 2016 – The impacts of this summer’s drought have resulted in extremely low flows in Western Montana rivers, with the Blackfoot flowing at record lows for the second year in a row. Even though river water temperatures have cooled – prompting Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks to lift hoot owl fishing hour restrictions – fishing may still stress our native fish. The Blackfoot Drought Response Committee encourages anglers to consider voluntary measures that can reduce the stress on native trout during these extremely low river flows.

In 2000, the Blackfoot Drought Response Committee was formed to coordinate a voluntary drought response effort in the Blackfoot watershed. Drought response is intended to minimize the adverse impacts of drought on fisheries and to aid in the equitable distribution of water during low flow summers. The Blackfoot Drought Response Plan is based on the premise of “shared sacrifice” with the goal that all Blackfoot water users – agricultural users and anglers alike – voluntarily agree to take actions that will result in water savings and/or the reduction of stress on fish during critical low flow periods. Since late July, Blackfoot irrigators have been operating under individual drought plans that require them to conserve water and reduce use.

During low river flows and high water temperatures, anglers play an important role in protecting our fisheries. The first step is always staying aware of the current habitat conditions. When drought hits, consider fishing less drought-affected waters, using cooler stretches of river or starting earlier to avoid rising temperatures. As drought conditions stress native fish, a few changes in technique can also make a big difference.

Anglers should consider the following in order to give fish the best possible chance to survive:

- Artificial lures are preferred over bait to reduce deep hooking and catch and release mortality;
- Single hooks are preferred over treble or multiple hooks because they are easier and quicker to remove;
- Barbless hooks are recommended over barbed hooks because they are easier to remove and reduce release time;
- Heavier gear is preferred over lighter gear because it makes it easier to land fish;
- Rubber or neoprene nets are preferable because they are less likely than nylon nets to catch hooks, which increases release time.

To ensure a released fish has the best chance for survival:

- Play the fish as rapidly as possible. Do not play it to total exhaustion.
- Keep the fish in water as much as possible when handling and removing the hook.
- Remove the hook gently. Do not squeeze the fish or put your fingers in its gills. There are release devices available from most sporting/fishing stores to assist you.

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- Set the hook quickly to avoid deep hooking the fish. If the fish is deeply hooked and must be released by regulation, cut the line inside the mouth opening. Do not yank the hook out, as some fish will survive with hooks in them. Anglers should strongly consider keeping fish deeply hooked in the throat or gills if allowed by regulations on that water body.
- Release the fish only after it has gained its equilibrium. If necessary, gently hold the fish upright in the current facing upstream and move it slowly back and forth.
- Release the fish in quiet water close to the area where it was hooked.

Anglers can follow announcements and information from the Blackfoot Drought Response Committee at www.blackfootchallenge.org.

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The **Blackfoot Challenge** is a collaborative community-based organization that coordinates management of the Blackfoot River, its tributaries, and adjacent lands. Assuming this “ridge-top to ridge-top” approach, the Challenge’s mission is *to coordinate efforts to conserve and enhance the natural resources and rural way of life in the Blackfoot watershed for present and future generations*. We address rural values through community-driven process that coordinates voluntary, incentive-based private land conservation, collaborative processes for public land management, and partner cooperation.