



Blackfoot Drought Committee Urges Public Cooperation in Drought Response this Summer

Contact: Clancy Jandreau, clancy@blackfootchallenge.org; 406-304-5423

June 17, 2024 – Ahead of what is shaping up to be an extremely low water year for the Blackfoot and other Western Montana rivers, the Blackfoot Drought Committee is urging the public's cooperation in limiting the burden of a drought year and its impacts on fisheries, agriculture, communities and recreational opportunities. Following a near record low snowpack this past winter, drought conditions and well-below normal stream flows have already taken hold in the Blackfoot watershed and are only expected to worsen through the summer. The Blackfoot Drought Committee encourages all water users including irrigators, anglers, and river recreators to consider voluntary measures that can reduce the stress on native trout during extremely low river flows this summer.

Irrigators

During times of drought, Blackfoot irrigators are asked to voluntarily participate in water conservation efforts that reduce the demand on water resources. Since the year 2000, nearly 90 irrigators have participated in this effort 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 for shared benefit" with the goal that all Blackfoot water users – agricultural users and recreators 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. Some of the actions taken by irrigators during drought include:

- Shutting down irrigation pumps or diversions completely once drought conditions are triggered.
- Irrigating crops and pastures in a rotation so that demand is reduced at any given time.
- Irrigating less often and only at night when less water is lost to evaporation.
- Trading water rights by shutting down certain rights in exchange for continuing to use other more efficient rights.
- Participating in habitat and/or riparian restoration projects and soil health practices that lead to long-term water conservation and drought resiliency.

Anglers

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 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.

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- 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:

- Land the fish quickly and 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 goods / fishing stores to assist you.
- 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 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.

Non-angling Recreators

It may be easy to think that the non-angling public does not have a role to play in times of drought, but drought impacts us all and it takes the cooperation of all to lessen its burden. Being well-informed on the impacts of drought and the actions that are being taken to lessen those impacts, being a courteous and respectful recreator as other people and wildlife seek the refuge of the river, and considering ways to give back to the river are all important roles for everyone to play during these times of need. More specific actions you can take include:

- Consider donating your time or financial support to organizations or events that work to improve the Blackfoot River for all, including, but not limited to:
 - The [21st Annual Blackfoot River Cleanup](#) happening on July 27th, Johnsrud Park.
 - The [Blackfoot Challenge](#), which coordinates drought response with a 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.*
 - The [Big Blackfoot Chapter of Trout Unlimited](#), whose mission is to *restore and conserve the cold-water fishery of the Blackfoot River and its tributaries.*
- Recreate with respect and responsibility to other users and to the resource.
- Educate friends and family on the importance of water conservation and on the sacrifices that producers, neighbors, anglers, and other recreators are contributing.

The public 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 stewardship of the Blackfoot River, its tributaries, and adjacent lands. Assuming a “ridgetop to ridgetop” 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.* The Challenge and partners address rural values through community-driven process that facilitates voluntary, incentive-based private land conservation, collaborative processes for public land management, and partner cooperation.