

A conservation alert from Montana Trout Unlimited and Friends of the Bighorn River

January 20, 2011

Tell the Bureau of Reclamation TODAY to provide more protection for the Bighorn River's wild trout

What

The federal Bureau of Reclamation is taking public comments until January 28 on its proposed draft operating criteria for Yellowtail Dam on the Bighorn River. The criteria spell out how the bureau plans to manage the pool in Bighorn Lake purportedly to better balance reservoir recreation, flood control, hydropower production and the fishery and recreation in the famed tailwater of Montana's Bighorn River.

IT IS ESSENTIAL THAT ANGLERS WEIGH IN TODAY TO THE BUREAU, TELLING IT TO IMPROVE ITS PROPOSAL TO BETTER PROTECT THE BIGHORN RIVER'S FISHERY.

The proposed operating criteria do not recognize that the ideal flow target to maintain a healthy fishery in the river, according to Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks' research, is 3,500 cfs. The Bureau wrongly claims 2,500 cfs is the "optimum flow." The Bureau's criteria further allow it to reduce river flows to as low as 1,500 cfs in drought years, without seeking a corresponding reduction in the reservoir pool. The primary problem with the proposed criteria is that it subordinates flows in the river to the Bureau's desire to fill the reservoir every year. The objective to fill Bighorn Lake, ostensibly to benefit negligible recreation use on the southern portion of the reservoir, increases the risk that spring storms could cause the agency to have to evacuate water from behind the dam rapidly, causing flooding downstream and harming angling opportunities. This happened in 2009 and 2010. Further, this increase in flood risk actually reduces recreational opportunities on the northern half of the reservoir because it floods campgrounds. Moreover, it reduces the ability of the bureau to produce hydropower because spilled water does not go through turbines. TU and Friends of the Bighorn seek a better balance in the operations.

What to say

Please tell the bureau in your own words to:

- Better balance the reservoir pool with healthy flows in the Bighorn, an objective that helps protect the river fishery, which generates an estimated \$50 million a year to Montana's economy.
- Acknowledge that 3,500 cfs is the optimum flows for a healthy fishery, and that 2,500 cfs is a minimum target to shoot for only during drought years when the higher objective is unobtainable.
- Draw down the reservoir lower in the spring than called for in the draft criteria – to an elevation of about 3,614 feet in April -- thereby reducing the need to rapidly evacuate the reservoir should spring storms become a problem. This will secure more water for hydro protection and reduce flooding risk to public campgrounds and marinas on the north side of the reservoir, as well as to Montana landowners along the river. It will also better secure the fishery and fishing in the Bighorn River.

Submit your comments by January 28 to:

Lenny Duberstein, Bureau of Reclamation at lduberstein@usbr.gov

or

Lenny Duberstein
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Bureau of Reclamation
P.O. Box 30137
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For more information, contact Doug Haacke at dhaacke@gmail.com, or Bruce Farling at bruce@montanatu.org.

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