



July 6, 2011

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Trout Unlimited's Statement on the ExxonMobil Oil Spill in the Yellowstone River near Billings, Mont.

Trout Unlimited deplores the spill of oil, equal to at least 1,000 barrels, into one of America's most treasured rivers, the Yellowstone.

On July 1, an ExxonMobil pipeline running underneath the Yellowstone River outside of Laurel, Mont., burst, spewing a reported 1,000 barrels of oil into one of the nation's favorite free-flowing rivers. Staff from the Montana state resource agencies are now trying to assess the damages to people living near the river, communities such as Laurel adjacent to it, as well as the fish and wildlife populations sustained by it. So far, we do not know the extent of the damage to this internationally revered river, known for its origins in Yellowstone National Park, beautiful scenic vistas, and blue-ribbon quality trout fishing. As stewards of cold, clean, fishable water, Trout Unlimited and especially staff from its state council, Montana Trout Unlimited, are monitoring the situation and will do so as long as there is oil in the river.

We call on ExxonMobil, owner of the damaged pipeline, to work with the State of Montana and the EPA to fully assess all damages to individuals, communities and fish and wildlife in the watershed. Once a full and complete assessment is finished, we urge ExxonMobil to fully compensate all damaged parties and make every possible effort to restore fish and wildlife resources destroyed by the spill. We further recommend that ExxonMobil work with the state to assess and improve the safety of all the company's pipeline crossings in Montana. TU believes it is reasonable to ensure that all gas and oil pipelines in the state be designed using the best available technology. This accident proves that we cannot be too diligent when it comes to protecting our water resources and all that depend on them.

The stretch of river between Laurel and Billings, which appears to have experienced the worst impacts of the spill, is downstream of the famed blue-ribbon trout reach of the upper Yellowstone River. While this may provide limited comfort, this stretch of water is a transition zone from cold to warm-water fish species, meaning it contains some rainbow and brown trout populations as well as additional sportfish that are important to Montana anglers, including native sauger, goldeye and channel catfish. Likewise, this stretch is home to locally important non-native game fish such as smallmouth bass and walleye.

While the most well-known stretch of the Yellowstone has escaped this catastrophe, Montana's anglers are not without concern for what is a well-utilized fishery. Of particular interest to TU and other conservation-minded sportsmen and women is a population of one of North America's rarest fishes, the pallid sturgeon, which occurs downstream in the Yellowstone River below Miles City. Potential effects of the spill on this endangered native will be influenced by the spread and persistence of the oil plume. On July 5, the river was running at 55,000 cubic feet per second, just below flood stage. TU volunteers discovered that oil is now evident in wheat fields at least 40 miles downriver near a state wildlife management area and the Pompey's Pillar National Monument, a landmark of the Lewis and Clark Expedition.

It is too early to tell, however, what impacts the spill will have on the Yellowstone's fishery. Owing to intense flooding, both impact monitoring and the clean-up response have been significantly hampered by dangerous river conditions. Aerial observations and anecdotal reports suggest that back channels and flooded fields are seeing the largest quantities of oil, causing a pungent stench reported by many landowners. As the flooding recedes, this toxic oil could easily be deposited in important shallow-water spawning and rearing habitat.

There are also concerns of bio-accumulation for predators that feed on fish such as eagles, osprey, and kingfishers. Toxic components of oil, such as benzene, could also threaten macro invertebrates and larval fish. Oil deposition may harm other wildlife such as amphibians, turtles, waterfowl, mink, muskrats and beavers. The extent and severity of these impacts depends largely on where and when the oil is deposited, and how extensive the clean-up efforts are. Both Trout Unlimited and Montana Trout Unlimited will continue to hold ExxonMobil accountable for the damage it caused and for cleaning up the spill.

What has happened in the Yellowstone River demonstrates the significant risks of allowing energy development and pipeline infrastructure so close to America's treasured places to hunt and fish. The type of crossing technique used for this pipeline did not employ the best and safest technology available. The pipeline, according to ExxonMobil sources, was buried in depositional material in the riverbed. This rendered the site prone to hydraulic scouring, thereby potentially exposing the pipe to material moving down the river in the high flows Montana is experiencing this summer. The company has stated it still has not determined what went wrong with this pipeline. However, company spokesmen said that safer alternatives could have been deployed at this site.

This week's events come as Congress gears up to debate funding for the nation's natural resource agencies, and during a year where we have seen some elected officials in Congress move to weaken our country's fundamental natural resource protections such as the Clean Water Act. This spill highlights the need to maintain these vital resource protections, as well as the need for effective conservation programs that protect fish habitat and restore streams that have been damaged through years of irresponsible use. We call on Congress to recognize these important protections and conservation investments as essential to ensure that plentiful fishing and hunting opportunities in the nation's most treasured landscapes and watersheds remain pristine for future generations.

Trout Unlimited is a private, non-profit organization with more than 140,000 members dedicated to conserving, protecting and restoring North America's trout and salmon fisheries and their watersheds.