

BIG COULEE: AN ATTEMPT TO THWART EXTINCTION

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Westslope cutthroat trout (WCT, *Oncorhynchus clarkii lewisi*), in Big Coulee Creek were first surveyed in 1995 after the USDA Forest Service received information from Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks. Other headwater tributaries of Highwood Creek were later inventoried and it was determined that the WCT in Big Coulee were the last extant population in the drainage. Information concerning Big Coulee showed that if action was not taken quickly, this small remnant population of native fish would likely become extinct. To prevent their loss, fishery managers faced many challenges: competition/predation by brook trout, habitat degradation, and illegal angler harvest. Habitat improvement and fishery projects have been implemented to protect these aboriginal westslope cutthroat. At the end of the 2006 field season, brook trout had almost been eradicated and a fish migration barrier was successfully stopping immigration of non-native fish. The WCT population is now rebounding with dramatic increases in juveniles and adults. Due to collaborative efforts of the USDA Forest Service, Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks, and a number of volunteers there are still WCT in the Highwood Basin.