

PRAIRIE FISH COMMUNITY ASSESSMENTS: SCIENTIFIC USES WITH IMPLICATIONS FOR CONSERVATION^{AFS}

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Aquatic ecosystems of Montana's prairie region have only recently been intensively inventoried for fish and macroinvertebrate communities. Recent surveys from Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks, USDI Bureau of Land Management, Montana State University, and Montana Natural Heritage Program have identified Montana SOC fish species within these communities, as well as "species on review" that need additional information. Since comprehensive data on these prairie aquatic communities remains limited, the Montana Natural Heritage's goal is to compile reliable information on the distribution and diversity of these assemblages with the ultimate goal of tracking unique communities across watersheds and predicting additional locations of these communities containing SOC fish and other aquatic organisms. We began by documenting the stream types where the characteristic aquatic community clusters with indicator species occur in the landscape, and overlay these on TNC's Stream Classification System to determine if they consistently and predicatively align with similar classified stream reaches. Eight statistically valid prairie fish community groups were identified from the data. These were linked on NHD reach codes in a GIS to produce maps of occurrences and potential reach habitat for the fish community types considered potential conservation targets or priorities.