

RECENT EFFORTS BY MONTANA FISH WILDLIFE AND PARKS TO ELIMINATE INTRODUCED FISH SPECIES IN PRIVATE PONDS IN THE FLATHEAD RIVER DRAINAGE^{AFS}

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Introduced fish species are one of the greatest threats to and reasons for declines in native fish populations across Montana. Such decline is evident in the Flathead River Drainage where, for over a century, government agencies and private individuals have intentionally and unintentionally introduced fish species. In recent decades as agencies have reduced introductions of new species, illegal introductions continue to occur along with a rapid proliferation of private fish ponds. Currently there are over 5300 permitted private ponds across Montana and likely thousands of others that are not permitted. Although Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (MFWP) restricts use of some fish species, private pond owners have illegally introduced species that may escape into state waters and threaten persistence of native or existing fisheries. A question facing fisheries managers is whether or not the expansion of introduced species can be stopped and if existing introduced populations can be eliminated. In the Flathead River Drainage, MFWP has begun projects to suppress introduced fish species in conjunction with habitat improvement and other types of native fish conservation projects. These suppression efforts include applying fish toxicant to private ponds and small lakes to remove non-native species. As example to the potential danger of illegal introductions, in 2001 MFWP treated a small private pond adjacent to the Flathead River that contained a self-sustaining population of brown trout, a species not established in the Flathead River Drainage. Current state law requiring a stocking license for a private landowner to stock fish provides limited enforcement and regulatory capacity. Presently, it is largely up to fisheries professionals to be aware of the law and risks associated with private ponds, pass this information along to pond owners, build ponds that prevent fish escapement, and inform MFWP of illegal introductions.