



Blackfoot Drought Committee Prepares for Another Low Water Summer Amid Changes in Water Rights

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July 1, 2025 – Despite a marked improvement in snowpack this winter compared to last, the Blackfoot River is already experiencing severe low flows heading into the summer ahead. This comes amid a significant change in water rights that protect in-stream flows in the Blackfoot River this year. Ahead of these realities, the Blackfoot Drought Committee is continuing its 25-year effort to minimize the adverse effects of drought on fisheries, agriculture, communities and recreational opportunities through the Blackfoot Drought Response Plan.

Collaborative Implementation of the Milltown Water Right

This year marks 10 years since the Montana Water Rights Compact with the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes was signed into law. As part of the negotiated Compact, [the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes](#) became co-owners, along with [Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks](#), of the Milltown Water Right, which was formerly associated with hydropower production at the Milltown Dam. The purpose of the Milltown Water Right is to protect in-stream flows in the Blackfoot and Clark Fork Rivers for the benefit of fisheries in those rivers. In the Compact, CSKT and the State agreed to defer enforcement of the Milltown Water Right for 10 years, meaning this summer will be the first year that call could be made on junior water users.

Fortunately, water users in the Blackfoot have taken actions to support river health for more than two decades under the “shared sacrifice for shared benefit” model of the Blackfoot Drought Response Plan. Recognizing this history of collaborative drought management, the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes and Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks see the continuation and expansion of voluntary participation in the community Drought Response Plan as the best way to achieve their goals with the Milltown Water Right in the Blackfoot watershed. While in-stream flow rights are not new in the Blackfoot, the 1904 priority date of the Milltown Water Right puts in-stream flows in a much higher place in the line (more senior) than the 1971 priority date of the so-called Murphy Right that has been at the center of the Blackfoot Drought Response Plan since 2000. Thus, the addition of the Milltown Water Right in the Blackfoot means many more water users have water rights that are junior, or further back in the line and thus susceptible to being curtailed by in-stream flow water rights than under the Murphy Right alone.

Continuing a community-driven, collaborative and voluntary approach to managing water scarcity remains our best opportunity to ensure a resilient future for our fisheries, our agricultural communities,

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and the river that supports it all. In order to promote greater participation in voluntary drought response and foster a collaborative approach to managing in-stream flow water rights, the Blackfoot Drought Response Committee has taken and is taking the following steps leading up to this summer:

- Adopted a [revised Drought Response Plan](#) that updates and clarifies language to align with the Water Compact
- Expanded individual drought planning to more explicitly include opportunities for long-term water conservation and fisheries improvement through stream habitat restoration.
- Increasing communication and collaboration among the Drought Committee, Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes, and Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks.
- Increasing communication and outreach to Blackfoot water users and recreators to inform them on the changes and encourage further participation in Drought Response

Exceptional Drought Expected to Return this Summer

Following the worst drought conditions that the Blackfoot had seen in several decades last summer, drought conditions and well-below normal stream flows have already taken hold in the Blackfoot watershed and are only expected to worsen through the summer. This prolonged period of extreme drought is putting significant stress on the fisheries, agricultural communities, and all who depend on the vital water resources of the Blackfoot watershed. From perennial streams that are lower than anyone can remember, to stock water sources that are dry, to elevated stream temperatures and domestic wells drying up, residents and visitors alike face a challenging summer ahead.

“The Blackfoot River is the lifeblood for the people, wildlife and economy of the Blackfoot watershed,” says Blackfoot Challenge Executive Director Seth Wilson. “In coordinating drought response for the last 25 years, we recognize the hardship that extreme drought creates for people who depend on the land and water resources. The Blackfoot Challenge is here to support our communities through a particularly challenging time as we pull together to ensure a resilient future for the river, for agriculture and for rural communities.”

The Blackfoot Drought Committee encourages all water users including irrigators, anglers, and river recreators to consider voluntary measures that can reduce the stress on native trout during what could be extremely low river flows again this summer.

Irrigators

During times of drought, Blackfoot irrigators are asked to voluntarily participate in water conservation efforts that reduce the demand on water resources. Since the year 2000, nearly 90 irrigators have participated in this effort to minimize the adverse impacts of drought on fisheries and to aid in the equitable distribution of water during low flow summers. The Blackfoot Drought Response Plan is based on the premise of “shared sacrifice for shared benefit” with the goal that all Blackfoot water users – agricultural users and recreators alike – voluntarily agree to take actions that will result in water savings and/or the reduction of stress on fish during critical low flow periods. Some of the actions taken by irrigators during drought include:

- Shutting down irrigation pumps or diversions completely once drought conditions are triggered.
- Irrigating crops and pastures in a rotation so that demand is reduced at any given time.
- Irrigating less often and only at night when less water is lost to evaporation.
- Trading water rights by shutting down certain rights in exchange for continuing to use other more efficient rights.

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- Participating in habitat and/or riparian restoration projects and soil health practices that lead to long-term water conservation and drought resiliency.

Anglers

During low river flows and high water temperatures, anglers play an important role in protecting our fisheries. The first step is always staying aware of the current habitat conditions. When drought hits, anglers are asked to consider fishing less drought-affected waters, using cooler stretches of river or starting earlier to avoid rising temperatures. As drought conditions stress native fish, a few changes in technique can also make a big difference.

Anglers should consider the following to give fish the best possible chance to survive:

- Artificial lures are preferred over bait to reduce deep hooking and catch and release mortality.
- Single hooks are preferred over treble or multiple hooks because they are easier and quicker to remove.
- Barbless hooks are recommended over barbed hooks because they are easier to remove and reduce release time.
- Heavier gear is preferred over lighter gear because it makes it easier to land fish.
- Rubber or neoprene nets are preferable because they are less likely than nylon nets to catch hooks, which increases release time.

To ensure a released fish has the best chance for survival:

- Land the fish quickly and do not play it to total exhaustion.
- Keep the fish in water as much as possible when handling and removing the hook.
- Remove the hook gently. Do not squeeze the fish or put your fingers in its gills. There are release devices available from most sporting goods / fishing stores to assist you.
- Set the hook quickly to avoid deep hooking the fish. If the fish is deeply hooked and must be released by regulation, cut the line inside the mouth opening. Do not yank the hook out, as some fish will survive with hooks in them. Anglers should strongly consider keeping fish deeply hooked if allowed by regulations on that water body.
- Release the fish only after it has gained its equilibrium. If necessary, gently hold the fish upright in the current facing upstream and move it slowly back and forth.
- Release the fish in quiet water close to the area where it was hooked.

Non-angling Recreators

It may be easy to think that the non-angling public does not have a role to play in times of drought, but drought impacts us all and it takes the cooperation of all to lessen its burden. Being well-informed on the impacts of drought and the actions that are being taken to lessen those impacts, being a courteous and respectful recreator as others (people and wildlife) seek the refuge of the river, and considering ways to give back to the river are all important roles for everyone to play during these times of need. More specific actions you can take include:

- Consider donating your time or financial support to organizations or events that work to improve the Blackfoot River for all, including, but not limited to:
 - The [22nd Annual Blackfoot River Cleanup](#) happening on July 26th, Johnsrud Park.
 - The [27th Annual Russell Gates FAS Weed Pull](#) on August 16th.
 - The [Blackfoot Challenge](#), which coordinates drought response with a mission is to *coordinate efforts to conserve and enhance the natural resources and rural way of life*

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- in the Blackfoot watershed for present and future generations.*
- The [Big Blackfoot Chapter of Trout Unlimited](#), whose mission is to *restore and conserve the cold-water fishery of the Blackfoot River and its tributaries.*
 - Recreate with respect and responsibility to other users and to the resource.
 - Educate friends and family on the importance of water conservation and on the sacrifices that producers, neighbors, anglers, and other recreators are contributing.

The public can follow announcements and information from the Blackfoot Drought Response Committee at www.blackfootchallenge.org.

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The **Blackfoot Challenge** is a collaborative community-based organization that coordinates stewardship of the Blackfoot River, its tributaries, and adjacent lands. Assuming a “ridgetop to ridgetop” approach, the Challenge’s mission is *to coordinate efforts to conserve and enhance the natural resources and rural way of life in the Blackfoot watershed for present and future generations.* The Challenge and partners address rural and natural resource values through community-driven process that facilitates voluntary, incentive-based private land conservation, collaborative processes for public land management, and partner cooperation.