

Grayling savior - science or politics?

By *PERRY BACKUS of the Missoulian*

The fluvial arctic grayling are one of Montana's rarest fish.

That wasn't always so.

At one time, the easily fooled grayling were caught by the basketfuls to feed hungry homesteaders, miners and cowboys all the way along the upper Missouri River drainage. Over-fishing, competition from introduced non-native trout, and habitat degradation slowly pushed the fish best known for its large dorsal fin back into the upper reaches of the Big Hole Basin.

Now there's perhaps a few thousand that survive in this last stronghold.

In this high mountain valley where cattle are more common than humankind, there's a debate being waged on what's the best way to save the last native river-dwelling arctic grayling population in the contiguous United States.

On one side stand the valley's ranchers, many of whom can trace their lineage back the first few who ventured into this place known for its nutritious mountain grass. Over the last few years, many of them have taken up the call to protect precious grayling habitat by fencing off their river and creek channels, building fish ladders and installing water measuring devices on their irrigation head gates. It's all part of an effort to protect themselves from the fallout that could occur if the fish were listed under federal government's Endangered Species Act.

On the other side are those who believe the federal law's umbrella of protection is the only sure way that Montana's population of fluvial arctic grayling has a chance to survive.

In April, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service decided the fluvial (river-dwelling) population of arctic grayling wasn't genetically different enough from the more common adfluvial (lake-dwelling) variety of the species in Montana and the large populations of grayling found north of the border to be considered unique under the ESA.

It was a major change of direction that caught many by surprise.

The agency took its first hard look at the Big Hole's arctic grayling back in 1982 when state biologists noticed a dramatic drop in the population. By 1994, the Fish and Wildlife Service concluded the situation was dire enough for river-dwelling grayling to warrant placing them on the federal endangered species list, but there were other species in worse shape that required more immediate attention.

In 2004, the Service considered the grayling's fate so tenuous it elevated its status to a "high-priority candidate."

"That's the closest you can get to being listed without actually being listed," said Doug Peterson, a FWS fisheries biologist.

Up until April, the agency considered the fluvial arctic grayling a "distinct population segment." Under the ESA, that classification allowed the population to be considered as a species capable of protection under the law.

The latest decision reversed that determination and after more than 25 years of consideration, the FWS withdrew the fluvial arctic grayling from its candidate list.

Ranchers in the basin called the decision a victory - but one they all knew might not stand.

Several groups and individuals promised to fight the decision in court.

The Center for Biological Diversity, Western Watersheds Project, Pat Munday and George Wuerthner said the FWS decision is a case of politics trumping science.

“As is the case with increasing numbers of species, the Bush administration is perfectly willing to let the Montana fluvial arctic grayling go extinct in the continental United States,” said Noah Greenwald, conservation biologist for the Center for Biological Diversity. “If it had been up to Bush, the bald eagle would never have been protected because of their numbers in Canada and Alaska.”

Greenwald said the decision to remove the arctic grayling from consideration was made in Washington, D.C., under the influence of Assistant Secretary of Fish, Wildlife and Parks Julie MacDonald and was another example of the Bush administration's unwillingness to list species under the federal Endangered Species Act.

MacDonald resigned in April following an investigation by the Department of Interior's inspector general that found she bullied agency scientists to change their conclusions and improperly released internal documents to industry lobbyists and attorneys.

“The Bush administration has closed the door on protection for the nation's endangered species,” Greenwald said. “It has listed fewer species under the Endangered Species Act than any other administration since the law was enacted in 1973, to date only listing 57 species compared to 512 under Clinton and 234 under the first Bush president.”

Munday, a Butte environmental activist, has spent a decade working for grayling restoration with a variety a groups.

“Personally, it feels like I've had a child sentenced to death,” Munday said of the decision. “It's like having a seriously sick kid and the doctor telling you that he's not going to do a thing to help ... they know very well what needs to be done.”

Munday and others insist that voluntary water management efforts haven't been enough to keep water flowing in the river and its tributaries especially during years of drought.

“For agriculture, it's a case of their bottom line versus grayling,” Munday said. “The bottom line will always win. Š Ten years from now we're going to be faced with doing the same thing with grayling that we had to do with wolves. We're going to have to go to Canada to get some after we let our own go extinct.”

“Failure to leave enough water in the Big Hole River to sustain the grayling and other wildlife dependent on the river is a classic example of the tragedy of the commons,” said Wuerthner, an author and longtime fishing guide. “This is about more than saving the grayling, this is about saving a national treasure - the Big Hole River.”

Many Big Hole ranchers would argue they're already stepping forward and working hard to improve habitat and save the grayling.

Over the past few years, a number of state and federal agencies have worked with ranchers to develop conservation plans for private lands in the valley. There's a growing list of conservation projects occurring there every year.

Peter Lamothe, FWP's grayling habitat biologist, said the recent FWS decision hasn't hindered that process.

“It actually seems to be helping it,” Lamothe said. “The day the listing decision was announced, we actually sat down and talked with some folks about some new projects ... landowners aren't changing their minds because of the decision. They're still at the table talking.”

Since the decision, Lamothe said three new landowners have stepped forward to develop conservation plans for their properties.

That willingness to work with the state marks a change from the past when people in the valley didn't seem anxious to address the issue of grayling and the potential listing.

Guy Peterson owns a ranch between Wisdom and Jackson. He said the wake-up call for many came in 1994 when the arctic grayling came so close to ending up on the federal list.

“That kind of scared us all a little bit,” Peterson said. “I think it was an awareness deal. People just weren't aware of

what was at stake ... since then people have stepped forward and there's more coming on board all the time.”

There are all kinds of different projects to improve habitat occurring on private land, he said.

For instance, Peterson worked with federal and state officials to reconnect Rock Creek back into the Big Hole River on his ranch between Wisdom and Jackson. Maybe a half century ago, the creek was diverted into a ditch for irrigation several miles away from its confluence with the river.

“It turned out to be a great project,” Peterson said. “It's completed. Within the next 10 years or so, that habitat will be fully restored. Ranchers in the valley have been doing a hell of a job and we're not done yet. Many of us are still working to improve riparian habitat and increase stream flows.”

Finding funding to get the work done is the hard part.

Some ranchers have gotten sideways with the Natural Resources and Conservation Service, which has funded some of the work in the valley, Peterson said.

“That's really been the biggest hurdle,” he said. “The NRCS wants to tell us how we should manage our cows. That doesn't go over very well with a lot of people here. It's something we're going to have work through.”

Big Hole rancher Cal Erb and his family have also invested a lot of time and effort putting together different conservation projects on their property.

Erb said protecting the watershed just makes sense.

“Our position isn't going to change whether the grayling are listed or not,” Erb said. “In the long run we know what we're doing will be better for the Big Hole River. We'd just as soon have a healthy river.

“We're going to continue to do what we've been doing for the last five or six years,” he said. “The fish and game meters our water. We essentially just share. That's the best we can do today.”

FWP's state grayling biologist, Jim Magee, has been working with ranchers in the Big Hole for years. A decade ago, he thought it was good progress when the state had one project to accomplish every year.

“I think we have over 30 projects to do this summer,” Magee said. “It's quite amazing to see how much we've got going on right now. I think it's just been building and building and building and now we're at the point that every time we go out someone comes up to us with a new idea for another project.”

“I think this thing has become bigger than just the grayling,” Lamothe said. “It seems like landowners are really excited about all the possibilities. They're excited about the health of the river. They're excited about improving the watershed.”