

Cutthroat could get endangered species listing

Range-wide, populations must show rebound soon

By Ken Levy

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One of Idaho's iconic and most beloved river sport fish could land on the Endangered Species List if its decline in population isn't reversed.

Amy Verbeten, executive director of the Friends of the Teton River, said Yellowstone cutthroat trout populations continue to decline range-wide, although some improvements have been seen in local habitats.

The Idaho Department of Fish and Game's annual fish report indicates that, unless populations begin to rebound range-wide, the YCT could be a candidate for Endangered Species listing. The fish is currently on the state's "species of greatest concern" list.

Working with the IDFG, FTR studies have shown some local increases of YCT populations in the past few years.

"That was based on a huge decline, and we're inching back up," she said. "Nowhere near historic levels, but we're starting to see some response."

Harvesting of the fish is strictly prohibited, Anglers must release YCT after catching them.

Verbeten said studies by the Idaho Department of Fish and Game have found catch and release on YCT is relatively safe for the fish, and "anglers have a great experience with them, as long as everyone knows the regulations."

Fishermen frequently report catching 20 inch and larger YCT on all parts of the Teton River.

The species is exactly what the fly fisherman loves, because they tend to rise to a dry fly on the surface.

"They're very well coveted," she said. "People will travel from around the world to catch this fish that you can't catch anywhere else."

Verbeten lauded the proactive work of the Office of Species Conservation. That agency is "really trying to prevent this fish from becoming endangered."

That benefits not only the species but also everyone who uses the river, streams, and the land around it, from



An Idaho Department of Fish and Game official holds a Yellowstone Cutthroat Trout.

TVN Photo/Ken Levy

an ecological and economic standpoint.

"We see that when a species becomes endangered and comes under federal control, there tend to be very strict regulations placed on anything that could harm that fish," Verbeten said.

For example, in Washington State, when salmon and steelhead were listed, water was shut off to some agricultural irrigators for three years until they could come up with a plan that would provide enough flow for those fish.

Funding is available for voluntary water transactions, for agricultural producers who can find ways to use less water can turn some of that water downstream and get paid for it. The city of Teton and several individu-

als using its canal recently signed such an agreement, Verbeten said.

Other informal agreements find users agreeing to use less water, making it more available in the streams. "We've seen great success in Trail Creek," and they're not paying as much for storage water if they use their water more efficiently, she said.

Nitrogen and sediment are the biggest culprits when it comes to problems in the upper Teton River itself. Sources include agricultural runoff and releases from poorly-maintained, older septic systems.

Properly sited, maintained and used, septic systems can prevent releases into the ground- and surface water.