Tuesday, May 30, 2023

Emergency Request

Dear Governor Gianforte,

As business owners, guides, and concerned community members we are requesting your help and immediate assistance in addressing the dire, emergency situation occurring within the rivers of SW Montana's Jefferson Basin.

According to Fish, Wildlife, and Parks (FWP), trout population numbers have reached historic lows, including little to no young-of-year recruitment. For our businesses to survive, we need the full engagement and all available resources under your authority as Governor to both investigate this crash and help us develop solutions, before it's too late. As impacted business owners that provide critical jobs and support communities in the region, we respectfully request an emergency meeting and response from your office by Friday, June 2, 2023.

Trout counts in the Jefferson Basin – which includes the Big Hole, Ruby, Jefferson, and Beaverhead Rivers – have steadily declined for the last seven years, with rapidly declining recruitment numbers of young trout confirming that it's only going to get worse. This year's fish count numbers presented by FWP confirmed our worst fears: we have an emergency in SW Montana's rivers, and we need to act immediately to avoid a total collapse of those trout fisheries. We believe severe economic harm, business closures, and job losses in the region and throughout Montana are imminent if we don't take action to both understand the causes, and to develop solutions.

Clean, healthy rivers and vibrant wild fisheries are part of our unique Montana way of life. They are also critical to Montana's outdoor economy, which accounts for $7.1 billion in consumer spending and supports more than 71,000 jobs. In Beaverhead County alone, fly fishing, hunting and the outdoor economy generates more than $167 million each year for Montana's economy while creating over 1,400 jobs. Much of that critical economic infusion into this area, and the businesses and jobs it supports, will dry up if wild trout populations dwindle further.

We are respectfully requesting your response by Friday, June 2, 2023 to:

1. Coordinate an emergency meeting between businesses, lodges, guides, outfitters, and community members either in-person in Wise River, virtually, or in Helena at your earliest convenience, to hear from impacted constituents in order to better understand the State's planned response to this emergency and to start addressing this ecological and economic emergency before it's too late.
2. Use your authority as the Governor to authorize state expert agencies to access the necessary resources to conduct scientific analysis to determine the cause(s) of the trout population collapse in the Jefferson Basin, and potential solutions.

3. Identify emergency funding to support any river-based business interruptions or temporary closures caused by the declining health of Montana's cold water fisheries in the Jefferson Basin.

We believe the only way to preserve one of the last intact cold-water fisheries in the lower 48 states is to act boldly and decisively to protect our Montana way of life, much like you did in response to the historic flooding on the Yellowstone River last year.

This is an all hands-on-deck moment.

We look forward to working with you, your office, and respectfully request an immediate response. As fellow outdoor advocates, we agree Montana is open for business, but in order to keep our businesses open we must, collectively, confront the collapsing cold water fisheries in SW Montana's Jefferson Basin.

Sincerely,

Craig & Wade Fellin
Big Hole Lodge, Wise River

Paul Moseley
Complete Fly Fisher, Wise River
Ruby Springs, Sheridan

Brian McGeehan
Montana Angler, Bozeman

Kelly Galloup
Slide Inn, Cameron/Ennis

Mike Geary
Healing Waters Lodge, Sheridan

Shaun Jaszenka
Frontier Anglers, Dillon

Craig & Lia Jones
Great Divide Outfitters & Fly Shop, Divide

Brad Platt and John Anderson
Anderson & Platt Outfitters, Dillon

Ryan Barba
Sunrise Flyshop, Melrose
Cody Benzel
Montana Trout Fishers, Dillon

Seth McLean
4 Rivers Fishing Company, Twin Bridges

John McKinnie
John McKinnie Outfitters, Philipsburg

Rudy Ketchum
Big Hole River Enterprises, LLC, Wise River

Mark Lane
Great Waters Inn, Melrose

Brandi Bartscher
H-J Saloon & Cafe, Wise River

Cooper Ketchum
Ketchum Adventures, Wise River

Hunter Dixon
The Rod Shop, Wise River

David Thompson
Montana Trout Foundation

Brian Wheeler
Big Hole River Foundation

Guides:
Gary Tilton, Travis Thompson, Al Lefor, Mike Skiba, Tallen Miller, Ikaika Flagg, Keith McGlothlin, Jacob Cleverly, Connor Dwyer, Alex Rundella