

Title: From Native Trout Conservation to Watershed Collaboration: Trout Unlimited and Grand Teton National Park

Abstract:

Trout Unlimited (TU) and Grand Teton National Park (GTNP) have worked together as partners for over a decade to improve habitat connectivity and resiliency for native Snake River cutthroat trout in the Snake River Headwaters watershed. Their efforts, including successful fish passage projects on the Gros Ventre River and Spread Creek, have reconnected over 150 miles of stream, benefiting the ecological integrity of the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem (GYE). However, as the watershed faces increasingly complex challenges, including prolonged drought, water management impacts, water quality degradation, development and visitation pressure, and climate change, TU and GTNP have adopted new collaborative strategies to meet these challenges.

The Snake River Headwaters watershed, at the heart of the GYE, spans Grand Teton and Yellowstone National Parks, Gros Ventre and Teton Wilderness areas, and over 400 miles of federally-designated Wild and Scenic rivers and streams. It is a core economic driver regionally and its health is critical to the area's wildlife, ecosystems, and community. It supports a relatively intact aquatic ecosystem that is home to native Snake River cutthroat trout, the only subspecies of cutthroat trout that still dominates in its home range.

While conventional fisheries conservation techniques like river restoration and fish passage projects continue to be incredibly important for ensuring the persistence of native fish populations into the future, new issues have emerged that are challenging the health of the watershed. For example, the spring 2023 flow crisis, in which flows from Jackson Lake Dam into the Snake River through GTNP were nearly reduced to well below the minimum flow rate determined by the Wyoming Game and Fish Department, as well as the fall 2021 rapid ramp down of flows, which resulted in relatively high levels of fish stranding, represent emerging threats that may become more common in future years.

In an effort to be proactive and collaborative, TU, GTNP, and other community partners have established a new community-based watershed group, the Snake River Headwaters Watershed Group (SRHWG), at an important point in time where partners and community members are calling for more action and innovative solutions, as well as more and increasingly diverse stakeholders at the table. The SRHWG's formation has brought together over 85 federal, state, and local agencies, private landowners, conservation nonprofits, scientists, and business leaders, that together are seeking to address these challenges collaboratively. Regular watershed group meetings and 4 working groups seek to build relationships and trust and share knowledge to pave the way for future collaborative actions and solutions.

Results expected from this collaboration include: 1) increased community engagement and stewardship; 2) transparency and shared awareness across a complex jurisdictional landscape; 3) opportunities for partnerships and leverage on priority habitat restoration and water quality improvement projects. In addition, the SRHWG is likely to create trusted relationships and a legacy of stewardship amplified beyond what any one partner can accomplish. By uniting stakeholders and leveraging community-driven initiatives at a pivotal moment in the watershed's conservation, this partnership aims to safeguard its health and resilience for generations to come.