# U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Mountain-Prairie Region Fisheries Program Strategic Plan

This Mountain-Prairie Regional Fisheries Strategic Plan outlines where, within our Federal role, we will focus our efforts. It provides guidance to partners and the public about our priorities, mandates, and opportunities and to Congress and the Administration on future budgeting decisions.

## Introduction

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) Mountain-Prairie Region (Region) administers 8 states: Colorado, Kansas, Montana, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota, Utah, and Wyoming. Major river systems of the northern Great Plains, including the Missouri, the Kansas, and the Arkansas, and the Colorado, as well as the Rocky Mountain headwaters of the Rio Grande, and Platte Rivers, in large part define the geography of the Region (*Figure 1*). The Region's Fisheries Program operates 12 National Fish Hatcheries, a Fish Technology Center, a Fish Health Center, and 9 Fish and Wildlife Management Assistance Offices. In all of these activities, we are committed to implementing, at a regional level, the Service's newly-developed national Vision of *working with partners to restore and maintain fish and other aquatic resources at self-sustaining levels and support Federal mitigation programs for the benefit of the American public.* Working closely with States, Tribes, other Federal agencies, other Service Programs, and the public, the Fisheries Program is striving to:

- Protect the health of habitats;
- Restore aquatic and wildlife resources; and,
- Provide opportunities for enjoyment of healthy aquatic resources.

The challenges facing fisheries conservation in the Region are significant: habitat degradation and hydrologic alteration due to water development and urban development; forest management practices; mining; agriculture; and, invasive species. For example, water development on the Colorado River - for agricultural and municipal water supply and hydroelectric power - has radically altered historic habitats and flows, leading to the listing, under the Endangered Species Act, of the River's four primary large fish species. Further, numerous species of native cutthroat trout have declined to extremely low levels due in part to competition from introduced, non-native species. Lastly, the Missouri River Basin and its native fauna, including the endangered pallid sturgeon, have been adversely affects by a series of major mainstem impoundments created for flood protection, power generation, and municipal and agricultural water needs.

Despite existing challenges, there is tremendous opportunity to affect positive change in fisheries conservation and create sustainable, healthy habitats for our aquatic resources. Leveraging these opportunities, however, is entirely dependent on partnerships; simply put, the Service cannot "go it alone" and must work collaboratively to minimize overlap while maximizing synergy. For example, there are 26,000,000 acres of Tribal lands in the Region. The Service's unique Tribal Trust relationship is an excellent vehicle through which the Service can support Tribal efforts to conserve a wide variety of fish and wildlife resources including fish, waterfowl, and big game.

Many entities work to conserve our nation's aquatic resources. They all have unique roles. State agencies and Tribes conserve and manage aquatic species and habitats to maintain diversity and regulate hunting and fishing within their geographic boundaries. Federal land management agencies have varying missions and focus on different levels to conserve aquatic resources. Private land owners and non-governmental groups work at the grass-roots level to address aquatic use and habitat issues.



## The Service's Role

As the Nation's primary Federal fish and wildlife agency, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's mission is working with others, to conserve, protect, and enhance fish and wildlife and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. For the Region's Fisheries Program, this means working primarily with Federal trust species and their habitats, such as threatened and endangered species and interjurisdictional populations that cross more than one state; and, fulfilling Federal Trust obligations such as mitigation for Federal water projects and tribal assistance. To meet these objectives, the Fisheries Program also works with other Service programs:

Figure 1. Map of Mountain-Prairie Fisheries Stations

- Endangered Species Program: administers activities under the Endangered Species Act including consulting and coordinating with federal, State and private landowners to prevent listing; protect and list species and designate critical habitats; and plan and coordinate actions to recover them. The Fisheries Program provides technical assistance in the pre-listing and recovery process and consultation with Federal agencies on their actions that may affect listed species. We often serve as Recovery Team leaders and implements Recovery Plan actions to de-list species, such as the pallid sturgeon and greenback cutthroat trout. We also conduct population and habitat assessments, genetic and disease analyses and research, refugia and propagation of species.
- <u>Habitat Conservation Program</u>: provides technical assistance regarding fish and wildlife management and habitat restoration to other federal agencies, states, industry, and the public. The Fisheries Program works with Habitat Conservation to restore habitats on privately owned lands, improve water quality, and assist in federal project reviews.
- <u>Law Enforcement</u>: protects fish, wildlife, and plants by addressing potentially devastating threats to wildlife resources, including illegal trade, unlawful commercial exploitation, habitat destruction, and environmental contaminants. The Fisheries Program provides law enforcement and conservation training to Tribal members nationwide.
- The National Wildlife Refuge System: has more than 69 refuges in the Mountain-Prairie Region and 70 waterfowl production areas managed by experts in wildlife and habitat management and restoration. The Fisheries Program helps the National Wildlife Refuge System develop and implement aquatic components in their Comprehensive Conservation Plans to ensure conservation of native fishes and their habitats and provide fishing opportunities.

# **Core Criteria for Vision Activities**

Adaptive management is a concept that entails employing a continuous loop that uses the best information available to plan and implement actions, evaluate results, and then modify tactics accordingly. General aquatic resource conservation adaptive management activities include: 1) assessing and determining the status of populations and their habitats (e.g., are they increasing, stable, or declining? are they in balance with their associated communities? is there adequate healthy habitat available?); 2) planning and implementing actions to change or protect the populations and their habitats (i.e., restoring habitats, improving connectivity with fish

passage, providing species with refugia until habitat issues are resolved, developing ways to propagate healthy genetically diverse fish to stock, decrease or remove unwanted competing species, etc.); 3) monitoring results (i.e., re- surveying populations and their habitats to determine if goals are met); and, 4) make changes if necessary. We will address seven Focus Areas with our partners to restore our aquatic resource,s using adaptive management techniques:

From the nearly unlimited opportunities for fish and wildlife conservation activities, we will concentrate our efforts on supporting the Focus Areas outlined in this Strategic Plan, based on the following core criteria:

- The strength of Federal authority and responsibility;
- The extent to which our efforts will complement others in the fisheries and aquatic resource conservation community;
- The extent to which our tribal wildlife conservation efforts will address the Federal government's trust responsibilities;
- The likelihood that our efforts will produce measurable resource results;
- The likelihood that our efforts will produce significant economic or social benefits; and,
- The extent of partner support.

# **R6 Mountain-Prairie Fisheries Focus Areas Activities and opportunities**

<u>Partnerships and Accountability:</u> Collaboration, open and honest communication, and synergistic cooperation between the Fisheries Program, States, other Federal agencies, Tribes, other Service Programs, and the public is absolutely essential in this era of unlimited conservation needs and limited budgets and manpower. With effective reporting of the benefits of our work, the efforts of the Fisheries Program and our partners will become increasingly important to the Congress, the Administration, and the public. Our current activities in focus area include:

- We are committed to sharing any new knowledge, so we and others may avoid mistakes already made.
- We communicate with partners beginning at early planning phases and continuing throughout implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of actions.
- Through adaptive management principles, we continuously refine our efforts to maximize effectiveness.
- We implement outreach and education that is compatible and complimentary to our partners' efforts.

Select Mountain-Prairie Fishery Program Partnership and Accountability Opportunities

(	K	N	M	N	S	U	$\mathbf{W}$	Partnership Activity Description
C	S	E	T	D	D	T	Y	
*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	Improve and develop collaborative conservation strategies for aquatic resources through annual meetings with States, Tribes and others. With our partners, we review our accomplishments and modify efforts accordingly.
*			*	*	*	*	*	Complement watershed coordination efforts in the Missouri, Yellowstone, Platte, and Colorado Rivers to benefit native fish.
*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	Expand and share our informational databases, such as the Fish Health Database with partners and the public to improve recovery and restoration.
*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	Expand public understanding and support for the Mountain-Prairie Region Fisheries Program through informational brochures, displays and outreach events.
					*			Protect DC Booth Historic National Fish Hatchery and archive and catalog museum property artifacts.

Aquatic Species Conservation and Management: The strategic objective is to reach self-sustaining populations of native fish and other aquatic resources that maintain species diversity, provide recreational opportunities for the American public, and meet the needs of Tribal communities. A primary focus will be on actions to recover and ultimately de-list threatened or endangered species. Concurrently efforts will also focus on declining populations to stabilize them at levels that will preclude the need to list them as threatened or endangered. Primary species on which we work include native cutthroat trout, Colorado River endangered fish, and Missouri River fish such as the pallid sturgeon. We work on both fish and wildlife species with 32 Federally-recognized tribes, including sauger, burbot and chubs, antelope, sage grouse, deer, elk, and grizzly bears. Our current activities in focus area include:

- •Our NFHS has refocused its role from solely providing sport fish to a more diversified and balanced mission of restoring native species, recovering T&E species, and while still supporting mitigation programs.
- We provide technical assistance and coordination services to our partners, focusing on federal trust species and providing habitat evaluation and restoration, stock assessments, genetic analysis, stocked fish and hatchery product evaluation.
- We work to stop the spread of aquatic nuisance species, including the prevention, detection, and control of existing invasive non-native aquatic species populations, and continue to educate the public and decision-makers about the impacts.

Select Mountain-Prairie Fishery Program <u>Native Species Conservation and Management Focus Area</u> Opportunities

C	K	N	M	N	S	U	W	Conserving Species Description
<u>o</u>	S	E	T	D	D	T	Y	
*			*	*	*	*	*	Use population size, health conditions, and habitat needs data to guide restoration efforts of watersheds and native aquatic species on interjurisdictional waters.
*								Assess other declining Colorado River fishes population status and health and habitats, develop guidelines to restore habitat improvement and improve recruitment, if necessary develop broodstock to supplement populations and reintroduce fish, reduce nonnative predators to improve recruitment, and monitor results to restore or preclude further listings
*								Develop guidelines on restoring habitats and improving survival and implementing them, and monitoring success; these include removing nonnative predators of humpback chub and razorback sucker to recover these endangered fishes.
*			*	*	*	*	*	Remove competing species or predators and placing barriers to prevent reinfestations of undesired species to preclude listing of Westslope and Yellowstone cutthroat trouts, fluvial and lacustrine Arctic grayling.
	*	*	*			*		Conserve declining cyprinids though assessment of populations, developing and implementing conservation actions, and evaluating efforts. Examples include roundtail chub, Least chubs on Fish Spring National Wildlife Refuge and on Hill Air Force Base, and candidate wild sicklefin and sturgeon chubs, and Topeka shiner on the Little Missouri River
*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	Maintain broodstocks of Federally listed species to help in reaching Recovery Plan goals towards maintaining the genetic diversity of reintroduced fish. We currently maintain broodstocks for Pallid sturgeon, Wyoming toad, Arctic grayling,
							*	Propagate Boreal toads held in refugia and reintroducing to habitats to prevent endangered species listing.
				*				Stock paddlefish in Tribal waters of Lake Francis Case to prevent listing as endangered.
*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	100th Meridian Initiative project - We will survey recreational boaters waters to determine waterbodies at risk for zebra mussel infestation; develop a training module on ANS transport by commercially hauled vehicles; Determine whether barges are a significant pathway for zebra mussel transport; and provide guidance for cost-effect investments to prevent establishment of zebra mussels.
			*					Monitor the spread of established populations of New Zealand Mud Snails in Yellowstone National Park, and determining their impact on fish and other animals.

$\overline{\mathbf{C}}$	K	N	M	N	S	U	W	Conserving Species Description
<b>O</b>	S	E	T	D	D	T	Y	
	*	*	*	*	*			Under the ANS Strategic Plan, assess the impacts of nonnative fish and developing biological means for controlling their abundance and impacts on native species of fish and mussels in the Missouri River. This includes research, surveying, and monitoring Asian Carp spawning and juvenile behavior and habitats.
*			*	*	*	*	*	Update or provide fish isolation and quarantine capabilities to improve incubation, rearing, water quantity and quality to allow NFHS to start native fish restoration programs or hold declining species brought in from the wild while maintaining their ongoing recovery, restoration or public use missions.
*			*	*	*	*	*	Develop brood stocks to preserve wild strains of declining native trout and other species to ensure success for future restoration efforts in maintaining genetic diversity and reintroduction of fish. Specific strains may include Westslope cutthroat for Flathead basin, Fluvial Arctic Grayling of Big Hole River.
			*	*	*			Expand pallid sturgeon production, preserve genetics and meet annual stocking goals, identify survival rates of stocked pallid sturgeon, fish health, fish technology, and management to meet endangered pallid sturgeon Recovery Plan.

<u>Public Use:</u> The strategic objective is to provide quality opportunities for angling and other related recreational enjoyment of aquatic resources on Service lands, on Tribal and military lands and on other waters where the Service has a role. Our current activities in focus area include:

- •We maintain long-standing fish stocking programs in reservoirs created by Federal dams to fulfill federal mitigation obligations to the public.
- We continue to work with our Refuge Program to assist them in identifying compatible recreational fishing programs on Refuge managed waters.
- We work with Tribes to suggest ways to augment Tribal revenues and concomitantly providing other Americans with excellent angling opportunities.

Select Mountain-Prairie Fishery Program Public Use Opportunities

C	K	N	M	N	S	U	W	Public Use Activity Description
O	S	E	T	D	D	T	Y	·
*			*	*	*	*	*	Continue mitigation stocking including providing fish for Colorado River Storage Project
								Reservoirs, Flaming Gorge Reservoir, and Missouri River to improve fishing and stimulate
								economies.
*			*	*	*	*	*	Annually evaluate NFHS capability to meet approved management plans.
*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	Work within our agency to increase the amount of public use and recreational opportunity on
								National Fish Hatchery and National Wildlife Refuge Service lands.
*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	Implement National Broodstock policy by maintaining healthy, genetically pure broodstock used
								for egg and fish production and distributed Nationally.
*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	Use Waterworks package to increase stewardship and appreciation of our Nation's aquatic
								resources and recreational opportunities.
*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	Through cost reimbursement, work with other Federal lands agencies and others to increase
								recreation opportunities.

<u>Cooperation with Native Americans</u>: The strategic objective is to provide assistance to Tribes that results in the effective management, protection, and conservation of their treaty-reserved or statutorily defined trust resources, and helps Tribes develop their own capabilities. Treaties, executive orders and court decisions influence our unique relationship with Tribal governments. Our trust responsibility relationship and the Tribes self-governance actions along with the sovereign nature of the political interaction creates a conducive environment to creative and opportunistic cooperation and collaboration. Our current activities in focus area include:

- •We assist in restoring wetland, instream, upland habitats, and fish passage.
- We provide training and educational opportunities in basic law enforcement programs to manage tribal hunting and fishing programs.
- We assist in assessing, planning, and implementing species conservation for recovery, restoration, and public use activities.
- In addition to restoring and maintaining fisheries, we also cooperate and collaborate in managing waterfowl, migratory birds, and big game herds on Tribal lands.

Select Mountain-Prairie Fishery Program Cooperation with Native Americans Opportunities K N M N S U **Native American Assistance Activity Description** T Y  $\mathbf{S}$  $\mathbf{E}$ D  $\mathbf{D}$ T Improve managing big game, waterfowl and fisheries to provide recreational opportunities to tribal membership and public on Tribal lands Expand training and education of Tribal members about fish and wildlife management and law enforcement topics to improve progress in meeting self-determination. Expand technical assistance to restore and recover native species and their habitats on Tribal reservations.. Start native trout culture, production, and restoration program at the Ute Tribe's Big Springs Provide fish passage, restore habitats, remove nonnatives, develop broodstocks, and evaluate efforts to restore native trout. Species restored will include Bonneville, Colorado River located on Northern Ute, Goshute, Uintah and Ouray Indian Reservations Assess the quality and quantity of crucial seasonal ranges for elk, mule deer, moose, bighorn sheep, antelope, and wintering sage grouse. Use survey data to model populations & recommend hunting seasons for sustainable management. Develop Management Plans to protect and enhance newly establishing gray wolves and grizzly bears on the Wind River Reservation. Determine the populations' statuses and habitat needs of the mountain plover, piping plover and bald eagle, Canada lynx and their habitats to develop and implement management plans on the Wind River Reservation. Recover black footed ferrets on Four Indian Reservations. Assess distribution and habitat use of Black Bears to develop management plan on the Crow Indian Reservation. Plan, stock, and evaluate tribal fish stocking for Seven Indian Reservations to provide for the restoration of native species, enhance recreation, promote cultural heritage and support improved tribal economies. Evaluate the economic values of all resources associated with fish and wildlife populations to assist the tribes in identifying sources of funds to enhance natural resource management. Restore habitats on Tribal lands through programs such as Tribal Wildlife Grants/Landowner Incentive Programs and technical assistance.

<u>Leadership in Science and Technology:</u> The strategic objective is to ensure that science developed and used by Service employees for aquatic resource restoration and management is state-of-the-art, statistically and technically sound and legally defensible, and technological advances in fisheries science developed by Service employees are available to partners. Sharing information in a timely manner is crucial to make sure we and others are benefiting from what we are learning about methods, techniques, and procedures. Our current activities in focus area include:

- We conduct field investigations to determine population distribution, survival and habitat use or condition to improve restoration and recovery goals.
- We provide "research" fish to help determine habitat requirements and water quality limits of various imperiled species; provide tagged "explorer" fish to help locate wild habitats.
- We develop new methods of fish culture and diets to improve restoration and recovery plan goals.
- Our National Wild Fish Health Survey provides information about wild fish diseases that depicts an important
  aspect of the overall health/fitness of an ecosystem and its potential to provide suitable habitat for restoration
  or recovery.

Select Mountain-Prairie Fishery Program Leadership in Science and Technology Opportunities K N M Ν S W Science and Technology Activity Description U  $\mathbf{S}$  $\mathbf{Y}$  $\mathbf{E}$  $\mathbf{T}$ D D  $\mathbf{T}$ O \* \* Ensure information transfer of databases and research findings to partners and the public to support conservation efforts. \* \* Research pallid sturgeon iridovirus for management of cultured sturgeon, facilitate the recovery plan stocking goals, and ensure pallid sturgeon survival. \* \* \* \* \* Develop, operate, and maintain a relational database to assimilate and use genetic profiles of fish for assessment and monitoring of hatchery and wild fish populations. \* Expand fish health monitoring to provide health certifications for cultured populations and facilitate transfer of free-ranging fish such as cutthroat trout; arctic grayling; razorback suckers, and paddlefish. Develop cryopreservation technology and establish a repository for pallid sturgeon sperm. Expand number of imperiled species' diet formulations and improvements for the endangered Wyoming toad tadpoles, Boreal toads, cyprinids and cutthroat trout. \* Develop methods maintain broodstocks and raise federally listed species to implement Recovery Plan goals of maintaining genetic diversity and reintroducing fish with lower costs of drugs, safer working conditions, improved effluent quality, fewer chemical storage concerns, and reduced fish toxins. Species would include native trout, and cyprinids. Develop a non-lethal genetic tagging method as an alternative fish tagging system for pallid sturgeon based on microsatellite DNA markers \* Develop a non-lethal method of sampling for the Fish Health Survey. Determine the status of Chronic Wasting Disease in deer and elk and migration patterns of these

species to document potential routes of infection from off-Reservation sites.

Aquatic Habitat Conservation and Management: The strategic objective is to ensure that America's streams, lakes, estuaries, and wetlands are functional ecosystems that support self-sustaining communities of fish and other aquatic resources. Fish are on the receiving end of everything that occurs throughout a watershed. We pledge to work with partners to improve conditions and to minimize impacts of logging, mining, and grazing. Within this Focus Area, we focus on tribal lands where Tribes are engaged in restoring wetlands and rivers for fish, waterfowl and shorebirds, and prairies for upland birds and large game. Our current activities in focus area include:

- We work with others to develop landscape and watershed-level habitat restoration plans and to prioritize restoration efforts to avoid, minimize or mitigate the impacts of habitat alteration on fish and other aquatic species.
- We use assessment data to document aquatic species and their habitats, and provide managers with information needed to make sound resource management decisions. Assessment activities include determining habitat needs of listed and depleted species, influencing flow rates on large river systems, and identifying priority habitat restoration needs.
- We manage habitats through activities such as protecting fish habitat, planting riparian vegetation to stabilize stream banks and prevent erosion, constructing fences to reduce stream damage from livestock, constructing wetlands.
- Through the Fisheries Restoration Irrigation and Mitigation Act and National Fish Passage Programs, we address flow issues to improve and protect instream flows, provide fish passage at manmade obstructions and protect fish from entrainment at irrigation canals and power plant intakes.
- We also protect and restore the environment by using best management practices of water conservation and water treatment at our National Fish Hatcheries.

Select Mountain-Prairie Fishery Program Aquatic Habitat Conservation and Management Opportunities K N M N S U **Habitat Conservation Activity Description**  $\mathbf{C}$  $\mathbf{T}$  $\mathbf{o}$  $\mathbf{S}$  $\mathbf{E}$ T D D Protect and monitor warm water riffle habitats of two rare beetle species and cooperative research to prevent their extinction. Expand National Fish Passage Program and the Fisheries Restoration Irrigation and Mitigation Act (FRIMA) efforts to reconnect fish to their habitats by removing a unnecessary dams, providing a bypass or ladder, renovating culverts to prevent overhangs, and screening diversion and intakes. \* Increase the amount of upland, wetlands, riparian and instream habitats restored and improved through cooperative programs. \* \* \* \* Expand identification of important habitats (spawning, nursery, rearing) and inflow needs to recommend best management practices for protection and enhancement of species such as the sauger, burbot, flathead chub, pallid sturgeon, paddlefish, June sucker, prairie fish species, and Colorado River species. \* Determine impact of water quality from coalbed methane mining on fish downstream. Improve the water quality of Lake Fork of the Arkansas River by dredging effluent ponds to comply with state and federal laws pertaining to discharge water quality. \* Restore target reaches of stream within the Shields River watershed to improve habitat essential for Yellowstone cutthroat trout.

<u>Workforce Management:</u> None of the above Focus Areas can be accomplished unless we strive to have well prepared and motivated staff. Our objective is to maintain and support an adequately sized, strategically positioned workforce with state-of-the-art training, equipment, and technologies in their career fields. Biologists, technicians, maintenance workers, statisticians, geneticists, and computer and administrative support all work to ensure our Program's main functions are at their best. Our current activities in focus area include:

- Our National Fish Hatcheries produce millions of coldwater, coolwater, and warmwater fish to meet mandated requirements to compensate for fish losses caused by federal water projects; help restore native fish and other aquatic wildlife populations in the wild; and to support recovery of threatened and endangered species. In addition, as part of the National Broodstock Program, we provide disease-free and genetically sound eggs to states, tribes, and research facilities.
- Our Fish Technology Center and Fish Health Center improve aquatic species conservation techniques and methods. The Centers' work also includes fish nutrition studies and diet development, wild fish health surveys, and managing environmental threats like whirling disease for the benefit of state and federal agencies and tribes throughout the nation.
- Our Fish & Wildlife Management Assistance Offices survey and monitor habitats and aquatic populations, and recommend and implement improvements including control of invasive aquatic species, and fish passage to support tribal fish and wildlife management programs, native species conservation, endangered species recovery.

Select Mountain-Prairie Fishery Program Workforce Management Opportunities

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C	K	N	M	N	S	U	W	Workforce Activity Description				
O	S	E	T	D	D	T	Y					
*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	Improve knowledge, capabilities, and cooperation between state and federal agencies by				
								providing training and exchanging management and culture personnel in the field.				

### Mountain-Prairie Fisheries Program Field Station Addresses

#### REGIONAL OFFICE

Mountain-Prairie Fisheries Denver Federal Center PO BOX 25486 Denver, C0 80225 303-236-7862

### **COLORADO**

Hotchkiss NFH 8342 Hatchery Road Hotchkiss, CO 81419-9242 970-872-3170

Leadville NFH 2844 Highway 300 Leadville, CO 80461 719-486-0189

Colorado FWMAO 755 Parfet, Room 496 Lakewood, CO 80215 303-275-2392

Colorado River Fishery Project – Grand Junction 764 Horizon Drive, South Annex A Grand Junction, CO 81506-8721 970-245-9319

#### MONTANA

Bozeman Fish Health Center 920 Technology Blvd., Suite G. Nopper Center Bozeman, MT 59718-4001 406-587-9265

Bozeman Fish Tech Center 4050 Bridger Canyon Road Bozeman, MT 59715-8713 406-587-9265

Creston NFH 780 Creston Hatchery Road Kalispell, MT 59901 406-758-6868

Ennis NFH 180 Fish Hatchery Rd Ennis, MT 59729-9113 406-682-4847

Montana FWMAO 4052 Bridger Canyon Road Bozeman, MT 59715-8433 406-585-9010 Montana Native Fishes Mgmt 4052 Bridger Canyon Road Bozeman, MT 59715-8433 406-582-0717

Yellowstone River Coordinator James Federal Bldg, Room 301 2900 4<sup>th</sup> Ave. North Billings, MT 59101 406-247-7365

#### NORTH DAKOTA

Garrison Dam NFH Box 530, Fish Hatchery Road Riverdale, ND 58565-0530 701-654-7451

Missouri River FWMAO 3425 Miriam Avenue Bismarck, ND 58501-7926 701-845-3464

Valley City NFH 11515 River Road Valley City, ND 58072 701-845-3464

## SOUTH DAKOTA

D.C. Booth Historic NFH 423 Hatchery Circle Spearfish, SD 57783-2643 605-642-7730

Gavins Point NFH & Aquarium 31227 436<sup>th</sup> Avenue Yankton, SD 57078-6364 605-665-3352

Great Plains FWMAO 420 South Garfield Ave, Suite 400 Pierre, SD 57501-5408 605-224-6455

### **UTAH**

Jones Hole NFH 1380 South 2350 West Vernal, UT 84078-4548 435-789-0354 Utah FWMAO 1380 South 2350 West Vernal, UT 84078 435-789-0354

Ouray NFH 1380 South 2350 West Vernal, UT 84078-4538 435-789-4078

Colorado River Fishery Project - Vernal 1380 South 2350 West Vernal, UT 84078-4538 435-789-0351

### **WYOMING**

Jackson NFH 1500 Fish Hatchery Road Jackson, WY 83001-9371 307-733-2510

Lander FWMAO 170 North First Street Lander, WY 82520 307-332-2159

Saratoga NFH P.O. Box 665 (County Road 207) Saratoga, WY 82331-0665 307-326-5662