



# SCUDDLEBUTT

## Please Release Me

### Colorado Water Trust helps Yampa ecosystem weather the drought

By Eugene Buchanan

THE ODDS WEREN'T EXACTLY IN THE FISH'S FAVOR IN COLORADO'S Yampa River this summer. Trout were sent straight to the Hunger Games after one of the worst droughts on record.

By June 19, flows had dropped below 85 cfs, forcing Colorado Parks and Wildlife to enact a voluntary ban on river recreation, including angling, to protect the river's fish and ecosystem. By June 27, the river was flowing 40 cfs, just five percent of average.

But then the cavalry came, in the form of a non-profit called the Colorado Water Trust (CWT). Realizing the effect the drought was having on the state's waterways, and taking advantage of a statute on the books since the last major drought in 2002, CWT sent out an all-points bulletin to entities willing to temporarily sell or lease water.

That's where the Yampa got lucky. The Steamboat Springs Upper Yampa Water Conservancy District had 4,000 acre-feet (1.3 billion gallons) of unclaimed water in Stagecoach Reservoir due to the recent expiration of a long-term lease with Tri-State Generation. So it leased its surplus to CWT at a cost of \$140,000, or \$35 per acre-foot, resulting in additional flows of 26 cfs throughout the summer. With help from entities like the city of Steamboat, which kicked in \$10,000, CWT shook hands on the deal and the water started flowing. By June 29, the river had risen to 70 cfs and never dropped lower than that through September 15. While the six-mile town corridor stayed closed to fishing, rain in July—combined with enhanced CWT flows—temporarily pushed the Yampa above the 85 cfs threshold, allowing for other recreation.

"Since the Yampa was a storage project and not a direct-flow right, it was easy to fast-track it," says CWT Executive Director Amy Beatie. "Watching the river drop, we knew this was the best way to respond. It looked like a system that was ecologically going to crash."

Setting a precedent in Colorado, the drought-lease marked the first use of HB03-1320, a 2003 state law passed after the 2002 drought that allows farmers, ranchers, water districts and other entities to loan water to rivers for in-stream flow when needed (both direct flow and storage rights can be leased). In short, the loans provide a legal mechanism to quickly add water to a stream when needed. CWT's follow-through was unique enough that *National Geographic* magazine ran a story on it.

"It's the first time anyone had ever orchestrated something like this in the entire state," says Beatie. "The statute had been on the books for 10 years, but had never been used."

While the extra water generated additional hydropower at Stagecoach and enhanced recreation and agricultural uses, the river's ecosystem was the ultimate winner. And no one was more excited for it than the fish,

which include rainbows, brown, Snake River cutthroat and brook trout, as well as native mountain whitefish. "The Yampa's native fish component created a lot of interest in the project for us," says Beatie. "It made it that much more important to move it forward."

In 2002, says Colorado Parks and Wildlife aquatic biologist Billy Atkinson, low flows that bottomed out at 17 cfs on July 16 led to unbridled vegetation growth. This caused massive dissolved oxygen level swings, leaving the fish in a state of constant flux and survival. The CWT release, he says, kept vegetation in check and did wonders in protecting the fish—especially the whitefish, whose population declined substantially after the 2002 drought. It also helped save the fishing season for the sections such as the tailwaters that remained open.

CWT hopes to use its success on the Yampa to convince other water-rights holders to take a similar path during future droughts.

"The fish are in great shape right now, largely because of that release," says Keith Hale, a guide at Steamboat Flyfisher. "And once the downtown section opened up again, it fished as good as it ever has."



What water on the Yampa can get you.

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