

VOICE OF THE RIVER

Summer Newsletter 2021

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A Message from the Executive Director

Well, the Upper Snake rolled from a pandemic right into a drought! With your help, HFF navigated the epidemic while maintaining mission accomplishment. In fact we thrived through the past year and continued to build our programs. And the silver lining is that the wild trout population is in fantastic shape in local waterways due to four years of decent water conditions and our work to take advantage of those conditions. But now we have to face new challenges, the challenge of communicating just how unique this current drought is and the challenge of giving the wild trout of the Henry's Fork and South Fork the best possible water conditions.



Let's start out with the communication part of the drought equation. Simply put, current water supply in the Henry's Fork watershed is very low. See the drought article in this newsletter for all of the details. The South Fork is not in much better shape. I read early spring fishing reports that indicated the water situation in the Intermountain West was solid and that anglers could expect decent water conditions this summer. As a staff we began to worry. That was not at all what we were seeing in the data or our models for eastern Idaho. April and early May only brought a deterioration of the situation. Once again though, a strong wild trout population already in place will provide good fishing when river and weather conditions cooperate.

Now on to giving wild trout the best chance at maintaining strong populations. The most impactful way for me to consider our work is to think about an alternate dimension in which HFF does not exist. What would that look like? What would be expected for wild trout in a drought without our presence? First off, there would not be a set of professionals sitting at the table discussing how to manage water in a manner that meets water rights obligations yet finds solutions for fish. It is difficult to convey to our members how important our mere presence is to keeping wild trout on the radar. It is half the battle. The other half is having nationally recognized programs that provide data, monitoring, models, and projects aimed at informing collaborative processes (the proverbial table). These programs, which would not exist without HFF and the support of our members, allow our time at the table with river stakeholders to be more productive. Based on what we learn from all of our efforts, including our conversations with water rights holders, HFF staff starts to turn over rocks large and small looking for new methods to positively impact our wild trout fisheries. I guarantee you that HFF staff are working on innovative water projects as you read this, including securing the necessary funding to make projects go. Enjoy the fishing this summer - especially since you had a large role in making it possible!

Brandon Hoffner, HFF Executive Director



The Economic Value of Fishing in the Henry's Fork Watershed

Anglers travel from around the country to fish the waters of the Henry's Fork watershed, spending tens of millions of dollars within the region. Assessing changes in angler preferences and spending can help managers develop conservation strategies and prioritize access improvements. This study is the first since 2004 to assess angler effort and demographics, and net economic contribution of angling in the watershed. Surveys were distributed to anglers on Henrys Lake (2016), Henry's Fork and tributaries (2017), and the upper Teton River (2018). Idaho Department of Fish and Game and other partners estimated angler effort from 2017-2019. HFF then estimated the economic contribution of nonresident-angler spending to the economy in Fremont, Madison, Teton, Clark, Jefferson, and Bonneville counties in Idaho.

This study is one of the first to assess the additional economic contributions of part-year residents.

A few of the key findings include:

- Angler effort and spending on Henrys Lake and Henry's Fork changed relatively little between 2003-04 and 2017-19, averaging around 150,000 angler days and \$50 million (inflation-adjusted).
- In 2017, 64 percent of angling effort on the Henry's Fork occurred downstream of Riverside Campground, compared with only 38 percent in 2004.
- Part-year resident anglers pay an estimated \$14 million in annual property taxes within the region.
- Henrys Lake and Henry's Fork anglers place the highest value on catching trophy-sized fish, whereas Teton River anglers value catching native Cutthroat Trout.

To read the full economic value report, click [here](#). 



South Fork Rainey Creek Restoration Phase One Complete

Left: Bridge-to-Bridge: Phase 1 pre-restoration photo looking upstream towards pedestrian bridge. Right: Post-restoration looking upstream towards pedestrian bridge.

Over the past few years, the HFF South Fork Initiative has collaborated with state and federal agencies and local landowners on an effort to restore lower Rainey Creek, and improve habitat for native species like Yellowstone Cutthroat Trout (YCT). The South Fork Snake River is home to the largest population of native YCT in Idaho and tributaries of the South Fork provide critical spawning and rearing habitat. While Rainey Creek is the largest South Fork tributary, of the four major tributaries, it is the least

productive for YCT.

From December 2020 - January 2021, the collaborative group implemented Phase 1 "Bridge-to-Bridge", a 0.3-mile restoration along Rainey Creek. Located about 2.5 miles upstream from the confluence of Rainey Creek and the South Fork, the Phase 1 project aimed to restore natural stream function by restructuring 1,390 feet of stream channel to increase water velocity, habitat complexity,

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stream cover, and reduce fine sediments in the substrate. During construction, shallow channels were narrowed, fine sediment was removed from the streambed, gravels and cobbles were introduced, and the restructured reach incorporated deep pools, spawning-pool tail outs, riffles, and glides. Additionally, large woody debris and riparian vegetation were placed and planted throughout reach to provide cover and decrease solar loading.

The group, led by the Forest Service, also conducted restoration work on 1,840 feet of Rainey Creek one mile upstream of the Phase 1 project. In-stream work was completed in April 2021 and construction of riparian fence on one side of the creek was completed in May to keep Forest Service horses out of the creek. Significant volunteer support was provided by the Trout Unlimited-Snake River Cutthroats.

The rest of the year, the collaborative group plans to implement three additional projects along lower Rainey Creek for an added 0.7 miles of restored habitat.

This work is truly a collaborative effort between the South Fork Initiative, Idaho Department of Fish and Game, U.S. Forest Service and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Additionally, we owe a great debt of gratitude to the other project partners and supporters including, Jackson Hole One - Fly, Patagonia, Anheuser-Busch, [Rivernet.org](https://www.rivernet.org/), Caterpillar, Jackson Hole Fly Fishing Film Tour, WorldCast Anglers, Trout and Salmon Foundation, National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, Wild Waters Restoration, TU - Snake River Cutthroats, our supporters, and numerous volunteers. Follow us on social media for updates on these and other restoration efforts. 🐟



Photo credit: Harold Rose

South Fork Initiative Expands Education and Outreach

As HFF's South Fork Initiative continues to grow, SFI staff have had the opportunity to expand education and outreach efforts. HFF recently hired Dave Weskamp as the new SFI Program Manager, with Bryce Oldemeyer transitioning into a new role as Conservation Program Manager, assisting with HFF's programmatic work across both watersheds. In recent weeks, Dave has been able to increase the SFI's local education and outreach opportunities. These include volunteer days building fence and cutting willows to be planted as part of restoration efforts on Rainey Creek.

The SFI has also had the opportunity to collaborate with the Madison High School Future Farmers of America (FFA). The FFA is working with the Madison High School horticulture class to propagate native plants for Rainey

Creek restoration. The class is propagating approximately 100 cottonwoods, 50 Redosier Dogwoods, and 50 Coyote Willow cuttings that will be planted in the fall of 2021 at restored reaches on Rainey Creek.

The SFI is also hosting a Swan Valley outreach event on June 12th to share information with the community about ongoing projects and programs to conserve the South Fork. HFF and Idaho Department of Fish and Game staff will lead stations on various topics, from aquatic insect monitoring to Yellowstone Cutthroat Trout conservation projects. We hope to continue these efforts to connect and share information with the local South Fork community throughout the summer and fall. Email david@henrysfork.org or follow the HFF South Fork Initiative on social media to learn more. 🐟

Ongoing Projects for 2021

HFF staff and interns are hitting the ground running with a full suite of projects and programs in 2021

- Weekly water samples
- Water quality monitoring network and real-time data website maintenance (Henry's Fork and South Fork)
- Installing new water quality monitoring site at Big Springs
- Weekly Acoustic Doppler Current Profiler (ADCP) flow measurements below Island Park Dam
- Buffalo and Chester Fish ladder monitoring and maintenance
- Macroinvertebrate (aquatic insect) monitoring (Henry's Fork and South Fork)
- Profiles of Island Park Reservoir to see how fish habitat changes throughout the summer
- Upper Henry's Fork fish habitat PhD research
- Lower Henry's Fork groundwater analysis PhD research
- Lower river thermal imaging drone project
- South Fork Initiative Rainey Creek restoration
- Box Canyon and Stone Bridge recreational use survey
- GIS remote-sensing data analysis of flood irrigation
- Upper Snake River Collaborative Farms and Fish Program, including irrigation deferment, modeling software, and soil health initiatives
- Maintaining and installing real-time stream gaging for predictive water management
- Voice of the River work, including monitoring cleanup at Ora Bridge
- Riparian fencing repair, maintenance, and monitoring
- New Interpretive Center exhibit
- River clean up
- Education and Outreach (Henry's Fork and South Fork)
- Participation in Henry's Fork Watershed Council and Drought Management Planning Committee





Official Drought Designation and First “Dry” Year Since 2016

After enjoying four years of average or slightly above average water supply, plus near record trout populations, we knew a dry year would be around the corner. Remembering the four-year record drought from 2013-2016, we hoped our next dry year wouldn't be quite so bad. This is where the good news, bad news comes in.

The bad news is this year is looking a lot like 2016. As of April 1st, precipitation and snow-water equivalent (SWE) for the water year (Oct 1, 2020 – present) were both only 83 percent of average. Now, if you're thinking in terms of school grades, that doesn't seem so bad. But when we consider that 100 percent of average is just average, and anything below 100 percent is below average, the true picture of our water situation starts to come into view. The 83 percent of average SWE (snowpack) puts us in the 25th percentile; only seven of the last 33 years had lower snowpack than this year. We see this reflected in reservoir outflow this spring, as flows out of Island Park Reservoir had to be reduced to a near record low of 200 cfs because the reservoir wasn't filling fast enough to reach full pool before draft would be needed to meet irrigation demand. Also, on several days this spring, streamflow at gages throughout the watershed was in the bottom 10th percentile of all years on record, even in the Henry's Fork at Rexburg, which has a 111-year record. Natural streamflow has been in the bottom 10th percentile for extended periods this spring in Henry's Lake Outlet, Henry's Fork at Island Park, and the upper Teton River.

After April, water-supply conditions continued to deteriorate. By early May, much of the Snake River

headwaters area, including parts of the Centennial Range west of Island Park, was classified in severe drought (D2). By the middle of the summer, it's expected that nearly all of the western half of the conterminous U.S. will be in some level of designated drought. In the Henry's Fork watershed, dry conditions set in last July, so within a few months we will have experienced a full year of below-average precipitation. Since July 1, 2020, the watershed has received only 73 percent of average precipitation.

Regarding summer flows, our low snowpack compared to recent years means that delivery from Island Park Reservoir will be needed earlier and at higher flows than we've experienced recently. Draft of Island Park Reservoir is expected to begin in early-mid June, compared to July 4 last year, and outflow is likely to increase from about 600 cfs to 1,000 cfs by early July, and stay around 1,500 cfs (or higher) until mid-August. There is a 5 percent chance of outflow near 2,000 cfs depending on summer precipitation, or lack thereof. Unfortunately, we can also expect turbidity downstream of the reservoir to be higher than average most of the summer due to these higher flows. In the lower river, mid-summer, low-flow conditions are expected to begin as early as mid-June and last until September.

Also, to put things into historical context, although the past four years (2017-2020) were much wetter than the previous four (2013-2016), natural streamflow in the Henry's Fork watershed over the past four years was 111, 104, 99, and 93 percent of the 1978-2020 average, respectively. The four-year total streamflow was only 102 percent of average. Plus, natural streamflow has only

been above the 1978-2020 average in seven of the past 21 years. And only one of those seven—2011—was truly a big water year, at 126 percent of average. For comparison, water supply ranged from 112 to 131 percent of average in the five consecutive years from 1982-86 and from 117 to 154 percent of average in 1995-99.

We are in a drought and it's significant. That's the bad news. But the good news is, we are still anticipating better fishing conditions than in 2016 thanks to high trout populations, a much cooler spring, and four near-average water years coming into 2021. Remember, 2016 followed three dry years. The previous four years of good water supply and very good winter flows means that fish populations are expected to be high watershed-wide. This is true for populations ranging from Cutthroat Trout and Hybrids in Henrys Lake to Kokanee runs in the upper Henry's Fork to Rainbow Trout downstream of Island Park Reservoir to Brown Trout downstream of St. Anthony. Also, cool temperatures in late winter will keep hatch timing watershed-wide near average if not even a little later between Stone Bridge and St. Anthony, and provide a good chance of favorable fishing conditions on Henrys Lake and mainstem Henry's Fork into the summer. Normal hatch timing and strong trout populations are certainly a bright spot this year.

We still can't control the weather, we still don't have water rights, and we still can't buy water in the sense that those



with water rights can. But, 2016 was a turning point. We took stock of our programs and developed new, even more effective programs. We are significantly more prepared for the next drought year, which is now upon us, and whatever the future might bring.

HFF will continue to work with partners in pioneering efforts to conserve water and benefit trout populations, water quality, and the health of the fishery. From the Farms and Fish Program, precision water management partnerships, infrastructure improvements, predictive modeling and communications, to research and monitoring that has improved our understanding of water quality, and how Island Park Reservoir functions and impacts fisheries. We now have the capacity to save thousands of acre-feet of water in Island Park Reservoir and make noticeable, meaningful improvements to the fishery and fishing experience in years where drought and natural supply have us heading towards much worse conditions.

To read the full report of expected fishing conditions as of April 1, click [here](#). To receive daily water supply updates, email rob@henrysfork.org or check HFF's social media for updates. 🐟



South Fork Water and Weather Outlook




Photo credit: Michelle Bliss Photography

The South Fork watershed has been blessed with average to above-average water supply the last four years – blessed in the sense that eastern Idaho finally emerged from the 2013-2016 drought – which has likely played a significant role in improvements in aquatic insect compositions and trout abundances over the last three years. While the South Fork has fared marginally better than the Henry’s Fork this year (slightly higher peak snow pack and natural flow, but still just 46 percent of median SWE as of May 21), nearly all of the South Fork headwaters have been designated in “moderate” to “severe” drought, and long-term weather forecasts show no signs of improvement.

Ideally, the South Fork Initiative (SFI) would have the capacity to provide extensive water supply predictions and analysis of impacts on water quality, similar to those for the Henry’s Fork. However, water-supply modeling and water-quality data collection programs on the South Fork are only one to two years old (the Henry’s Fork programs were established 5-7 years ago). That being said, 2021 will provide a great opportunity to collect the data necessary to understand and quantify the dynamic relationship between Palisades Reservoir management and downstream river conditions, thanks to the South Fork water quality monitoring instruments (sondes). The data collected this year will be key for future South Fork predictions and forecasts. To support the SFI’s capacity to conduct this kind of work in the future, please consider donating at henrysfork.org/donate.

With the SFI’s current capacity and data, there are several aspects of summer conditions on the South Fork that can be described with some certainty. First, it is extremely unlikely there will be increases in flows due to flood control the rest of the spring. Second, summer and fall flows will be driven by irrigation demand, which will require outflow from Palisades in the range of 13,000-15,000 cfs until irrigation demand begins to recede in late August. Third, Palisades Reservoir is likely to be drawn to very low levels by the end of September. If water year 2016 is any indication of what is to come, Palisades Reservoir is likely to drop below 20 percent capacity by the end of September. Last, as Palisades Reservoir gets lower later in the summer, it is likely turbidity in the river will start to increase as sediment gets mobilized from Palisades Reservoir and transported downstream.

One silver lining to the situation is that high abundances of aquatic macroinvertebrates and high abundances of trout will likely provide good to excellent fishing opportunities this summer, similar to the last few years on the South Fork. The bad news is the impacts of the forecasted drought this summer will still be realized in upcoming years, particularly if the drought continues into next winter and spring.

To view real-time water quality data on the South Fork, click [here](#). 

A fisherman wearing a white cap, a green t-shirt, and waders is standing in a river, casting a fishing line. He has a fishing net on his back. The background is a dense forest of evergreen trees.

Did You Know?

As of April 1, watershed total snow-water equivalent (SWE) was 83% of average, which is in the 25th percentile with only seven of the last 33 years having lower snowpack.

Dry conditions set in last July, so within a few months we will have experienced a full year of below-average precipitation.

Natural streamflow has been above the 1978-2020 average in only 7 of the past 21 years, with only 2011 being a truly big water year at 126% of average.

Natural streamflow in the Henry's Fork watershed over the past four years was 111%, 104%, 99%, and 93% of the 1978-2020 average (averaging only 102% of average over those four years).

For comparison, water supply ranged from 112 – 131% of average in the 5 years from 1982-86 and from 117-154% of average in 1995-99.

The Buffalo River spawning run produces 8,000 – 30,000 fry annually, providing recruitment insurance in years with low spawning success in the Henry's Fork.

Contributions: October 1, 2020 - March 31, 2021

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