
Westslope Cutthroat Trout Listed... How Long Until Recovery?

The recent federal designation of Alberta's population of westslope cutthroat trout as a *threatened* species is one of those good news/bad stories at which Alberta excels. The bad news, of course, is that populations of this charismatic fish species have reached such desperate levels that even the slow-moving federal *Species at Risk Act* has finally acknowledged their perilous plight. But the good news may be that, now this legal hurdle has finally been cleared, then maybe, just maybe, we will see some of the essential management changes desperately needed to improve this species' prospects in its foothills landscape.

Designating westslope cutthroat trout as a threatened species was recommended by the Committee on the Status of Endan-

gered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC) in 2006. It took the federal government seven years to accept that recommendation. The designation was made, according to a March 2013 issue of the *Canada Gazette*, because native populations of this fish have been "drastically reduced, by almost 80%, due to over-exploitation, habitat degradation and hybridization/competition with non-native trout." The *Gazette* added: "Forestry, hydroelectric development, mining, urbanization and agriculture have all contributed to the loss of habitat."

Though once a widespread species throughout southern Alberta, pure strain westslope cutthroat trout are now found only in the Bow and Oldman drainages; although it's been recorded in the Milk River the trout's current status there is unknown. Whether official *threatened* sta-

tus will make any difference to the trout themselves remains to be seen of course. Recovery of the species needs to be more than just a paper exercise; it will require significant changes to how Alberta's forested headwaters are managed. Forest management practices will need to be greatly improved if this species is ever to stand a chance of recovering.

A joint federal-provincial westslope cutthroat trout recovery team was established in 2009 and presented a draft recovery plan in November 2011. Now it is important that the recovery plan should be ratified and implemented as soon as possible. The westslope cutthroat cannot afford another seven year delay.

- Nigel Douglas