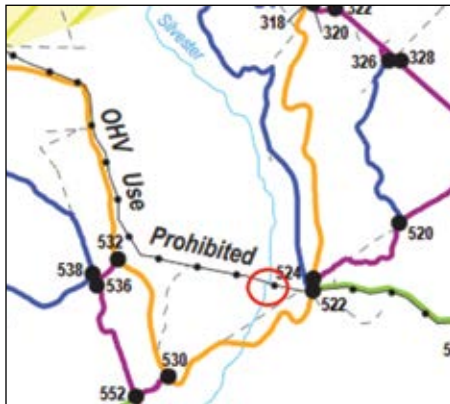


## Westslope Cutthroat Trout Action by Feds is Floundering

I recently had the opportunity to tour the McLean Creek area. While many of you may know McLean Creek as the Mecca for mud boggers, you may not know that it also contains what biologists consider to be one of the last remaining populations of genetically-pure westslope cutthroat trout. Dave Mayhood is an aquatic ecologist who has extensively researched Silvester Creek, which he believes is one of only a few remaining pure populations of this species.



*The pipeline right-of-way crosses westslope cutthroat trout critical habitat and is heavily used by OHVs, despite clearly being marked on the map.*  
SOURCE: GOVERNMENT OF ALBERTA.

Westslope cutthroat trout first experienced serious declines decades ago when a combination of over-harvest and hybridization with introduced rainbow trout populations caused the species to suffer. In more recent years, damage to the habitat of the remaining populations continued the downward spiral. Consequently, westslope cutthroat trout were assessed as Threatened by the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC) in 2006. It took seven more years until the species was listed as Threatened under the *Species at Risk Act*; it took two more years

for the federal government to issue a critical habitat order (protecting the habitat that westslope cutthroat trout need to survive). This vital federal action only came after AWA and Timberwolf Wilderness Society filed an application in Federal Court demanding Ottawa take this action.

Standing in the Silvester Creek watershed, you would have no idea that there was a federal order protecting cutthroat habitat. This relatively small landscape hosts a myriad of activities that degrade cutthroat habitat. It is used for livestock grazing, logging, and has off-road vehicle use (both a designated trail network and illegal trails) and it also contains old logging roads, an access road, and a pipeline. The density of trails and roads in the area is 2.5 km/km<sup>2</sup> and reaches 4.8 km/km<sup>2</sup> in the upper parts of the basin. Such disturbance and fragmentation levels are a far cry from the near-zero levels of disturbance required to recover this species.

We walked down to a portion of westslope cutthroat trout critical habitat where

a pipeline right-of-way is heavily used by OHVs. This use is ongoing despite the fact the map clearly marks it as prohibited for OHV use (see map). The pipeline right-of-way is located on steep slopes on both sides of the creek that runs at a 90-degree angle to the right-of-way. Consequently, an incredible amount of sediment is washed into the creek. Back in 2013, Dave found more than 40 sediment sources contributing to ongoing damage to this 6.5 km creek stretch. He said that ongoing and frequent use of trails has kept them disturbed and, as a result, muddy water is constantly being dumped into the creek. Further downstream, Dave showed me the location of one of the key spawning areas for this population. Leading into this portion of the creek was... you guessed it... another illegal trail which was dumping loads of mud into the water. Measured levels of sediment in this water were many times higher than natural levels. This poses serious challenges to redds and juvenile trout, who are often suffocated by muddy water.



*The pipeline right-of-way (foreground) and cutline (background) are both located on steep slope approaches to westslope cutthroat trout critical habitat. Ongoing OHV use of these linear disturbances prevents them from recovery and continues to deliver sediment to the creek.* PHOTO: AWA FILES.



*This illegal OHV route is located on a pipeline right-of-way and goes into Silvester Creek, which is critical habitat for westslope cutthroat trout. This is clearly marked on the official trail map and with signs saying "OHV Use Prohibited," yet is heavily used and eroded up to 1 m deep in places. CREDIT: D. W. MAYHOOD*

This situation is not limited to Silvester Creek; it occurs all the way up and down the Eastern Slopes. So far, the critical habitat order seems to have offered very little, if any, protection on the ground. This is despite the fact that under the *Species at Risk Act*, the federal government has a legal obligation not only to prevent this species' extinction, but to recover cutthroat as well. We think that at least one population has gone functionally extinct since westslope cutthroat trout was federally listed as Threatened in 2013. Most remaining populations are small, highly vulnerable, and exposed to ongoing habitat damage.

In order to recover this species, we need immediate action. To that end, the federal government is now more than two years late on producing their Action Plan – this out-

lines exactly what the government intends to do in order to recover this species. Along with Timberwolf Wilderness Society, AWA sent a demand letter this spring demanding that the federal government publish what steps it has taken to date towards completing an action plan for Alberta's threatened westslope cutthroat trout – which is legally required if the Action Plan isn't produced on time. This is now the third time we have demanded that the federal government fulfil its legal responsibilities under the *Species at Risk Act*. It's hard not to see a clear pattern of neglect here.

Our demand letter gave the federal government a chance to prove that it is serious about recovering westslope cutthroat trout. However, the current impression I get from the federal government is that it seems con-

tent to wait until the species goes extinct so that they don't have to spend resources recovering them. Make no mistake, recovering this species will require some difficult choices, but it will only get harder the longer we avoid doing anything.

Unfortunately, my impression of Ottawa's "laissez-faire" approach to recovering species at risk was only strengthened when they released a two-page statement at the end of May. Entitled "Summary of the Action Plan for the Westslope Cutthroat Trout (Alberta Populations)", this statement was supposed to provide a summary of what steps the government has taken towards completing an action plan. Such actions are absent completely. Instead the government suggests that a promise to create a combined recovery strategy-action plan document will satisfy the law and assist this Threatened species. Promises that the government "will do" this or that are used liberally throughout the document. In AWA's view, this two page document is very disappointing. Four years since westslope cutthroat trout was federally listed and 11 years since COSEWIC flagged this species to be in trouble, the most the federal government has done is write a half-hearted statement explaining that they are going to write a plan which would outline what they intend to do in order to save this species. But nothing has been done, even though they have a legal obligation to recover this species! To borrow some words from the King himself, what we really need is a little less conversation, a little more action...

*Joanna Skrajny*