

Get hooked on Medicine Lodge Creek

The Instream Flow

Permit Number: 85-IF.
Priority Date: Dec. 17, 1990.
Quantity: 15 cubic feet per second (cfs) in October, 13.8 cfs in November, and 8.9 cfs for all other months of the year except April. A flow of 3.8 cfs was approved for April.

Location and length: 4.2 miles extending downstream from the west section line of section 2, township 50 north, range 89 west to the south boundary line of tract 60 in township 50 north, range 89 west.

Land ownership: A combination of state and U. S. Forest Service lands.

Rationale: Detailed field studies by department personnel in the summer of 1989 served as the basis for recommendations to maintain the existing wild brown trout fishery. Achieving that goal requires continuous and adequate flow regimes to provide spawning habitat in October and November, protect the eggs while they incubate and hatch during the winter, and allow fish to move freely among all habitats at other times of year.

Status of the filing: A public hearing was held in Tensleep on April 29, 1999 at which department personnel provided information about fishery flow needs and Wyoming Water Development Office staff presented information about water availability. A particularly lively exchange was provided by several of the attendees at the hearing. Opposing views claimed Game and Fish could not own any water rights and that the filing would negatively affect future water development. These views were found without basis because the state constitution allows any individual or entity (including Game and Fish) to own water rights, and in all instream flow water right cases, the water right is held by the state – not the Game and Fish Commission. The State Engineer also ruled that the state's water law that's based on the doctrine of prior appropriation precludes denying any properly filed water right on the basis that some future unidentified user might be impacted. Several other parties spoke in favor of the filing noting the overall public benefit and importance of a healthy stream to the state park and the people who use it. The State Engineer issued this instream flow permit on February 9, 2010. The final step in the process of securing this, or any other water right, is called adjudication. The Board of Control has not yet adjudicated this water right.

An up-close look at Wyoming's instream flow water rights and what they mean to fishermen

THE SETTING

The countryside around Hyattville and Medicine Lodge Creek has long been known for its abundant fisheries and wildlife. In fact, the highly diverse landscape and cool, clear waters in Medicine Lodge Creek and other nearby streams supports one of the more diverse wildlife assemblages in the state. Petroglyphs and pictographs found throughout the area provide clear evidence that hunting and human habitation has occurred here for more than 10,000 years. While long-ago hunters were known to pursue the same big game that modern hunters seek, the discovery of rodent and bird bones from a 9,500 year old cooking pit indicate that early hunters had more flexible standards for acceptable prey species.

Lands along Medicine Lodge Creek were homesteaded over 100 years ago by B.F. Wickwire and other early settlers who, like modern residents, raised cattle and hay with the help of water diverted from the stream. In 1972 most of the lands homesteaded by the Wickwires were purchased by the Game and Fish Commission to provide winter forage for the large elk herd that migrates here from their summer range in the Bighorn Mountains. In 1973, the commission entered into a cooperative agreement with what was then the Wyoming Recreation Commission to develop and administer a portion of those lands as the Medicine Lodge State Archaeological Site – one of the more important archaeological sites in the country. The current state park includes 25 camping spots with fire grills and picnic tables for tents, R.V.s, or picnicking. There's also a visitor center and hiking trails. And there's some great fishing in Medicine Lodge Creek that winds through the park providing the same solace and support to wildlife and people that it has through the ages.

THE FISHERY

Medicine Lodge Creek is a productive foothill stream that flows off the west side of

the Bighorn Mountains. After spring runoff subsides, this stream offers some great fishing for brown trout and occasional rainbow trout and mountain whitefish. The stream is easily wade-able with hip boots but many pools can be fished from the bank. Waters in the stream tend to warm considerably during the hotter days of summer, which means the best fishing is in early morning or late evening. Big game hunters who camp here – and other park visitors in the fall – should definitely remember to throw a fly rod or spinning gear in the truck and go after actively feeding trout in the crisp, cool days of fall. The watershed is fairly stable and well-vegetated, which yields relatively clean gravels and good water quality that benefits trout spawning and insect production.

Area 2 flowing water fishery regulations apply here. That means there is a limit of six trout per day or in possession, only 2 of which may be cutthroat and only one trout may exceed 16 inches. There are no special restrictions on terminal tackle.

HOW TO GET THERE

Best access to the stream is through the Medicine Lodge State Archaeological Site located on the Cold Springs Road 6 miles from its intersection with the Alkali Road near Hyattville. Take State Route 31 east from U.S. Highway 20 at Manderson or north from Highway 16 at Tensleep and go to Hyattville. The Alkali Road takes off the highway just north of Hyattville and the Cold Springs Road branches off from the Alkali Road in less than a half mile.

Additional information about the archaeological site can be found at <http://www.wyomingtourism.org/overview/Medicine-Lodge-State-Archaeological-Site/3666>. For more information about instream flow or to read other X-Stream fishing articles, visit the department's website at: <http://gf.state.wy.us/fish/instreamflow/index.asp>



Medicine Lodge Creek is a productive stream where you can catch brown trout, rainbow trout, and mountain whitefish. Photo by Tom Annear