

Get wild on the Big Sandstone

In 1879, at his camp located not far from the North Fork of Big Sandstone Creek, Thomas Edison formulated the idea that later resulted in what we now call light bulbs. The landscape today is much the same as it was in the late 1800s, and ambitious anglers can still enjoy pristine solitude along this small headwater stream that gurgles through dense timber and moss-covered boulders.

The fishery

Before the fur traders arrived in the very early 1800s, beaver were widespread in the mountains and foothills of the Sierra Madres, and Colorado River cutthroat trout were abundant in their numerous ponds. The early trappers were pretty thorough in their removal of beavers, and as the furbearers disappeared, so did the ponds that provided critical habitat for the native trout.

Early fish managers introduced non-native trout like brook trout to fill this void and met with great success. Brookies readily adapted to the many small streams running off the mountain, including the North

Fork, and the fish are abundant throughout the Sierra Madres today. Though abundant, don't expect to catch many fish bigger than about 10 inches long, as this small, cold stream doesn't have the potential to produce fish much bigger than that. But if you're looking for an out-of-the-way stream to spend a day or two on and get a feel for what the landscape looked like over 100 years ago, there are few better destinations.

How to get there

From the town of Encampment, go approximately 23 miles west on U.S. Highway 70 to the junction of Forest Service road 801 (the Deep Creek Road). Turn north and go about seven miles to the junction of Forest Service road 830. Turn right on this road (heading northeast) and go about three miles to Forest Service Road 874, where you turn off to the right (east). Though you can drive the remaining five miles to the stream on this abandoned four-wheel-drive road, the last couple miles are definitely four-wheel-drive caliber, so you may want to make this part of the trip on an ATV, by foot, or in someone else's truck.

The Instream Flow

Permit Number: 59 I.F.

Priority Date: June 27, 1996

Quantity: Variable flow between 0.5 cubic feet per second (cfs) and 1.6 cfs from October 1 to May 14; 19.0 cfs from May 15 to June 30; and 1.7 cfs in July; 0.9 cfs in August; 0.7 cfs in September.

Location and length: The instream flow segment is about 20 miles due west from Encampment in the Sierra Madres. The segment begins at the stream's confluence with Big Sandstone Creek and extends 0.7 miles upstream.

Landownership: The entire segment is located on lands administered by the U.S. Forest Service.

Rationale: Even though the stream is dominated by brook trout today, the primary purpose of the filing was to maintain adequate base flows for native Colorado River cutthroat trout. The purpose of any water right is not so much to change the amount of water in the stream today as it is to protect an interest in existing flow patterns for future use. Though there are no specific plans today, having enough water in this stream and others like it will maintain the opportunity to reintroduce native cutthroat trout in the future, if that decision is reached. The various flow levels filed for are intended to address habitat needs for spawning in the spring, maintain growth rates in the summer and minimize winter mortality. Channel maintenance and flushing flows that provide long-term habitat by cleaning riffles, scouring deep pools and keeping the streambanks from encroaching (narrowing) were not filed for. The state engineer has ruled that the state's instream flow law does not allow flows for these habitat needs.

Status of the filing: A public hearing was held in Baggs on March 10, 1997. The state engineer approved the water right on April 28, 2006. The Board of Control has not adjudicated the water right.



Big Sandstone Creek is a picturesque, challenging place to catch Colorado River cutthroat trout, as well as brookies. Photo by Tom Annear

To get more information about instream flow, visit the Wyoming Game and Fish Department's Web site at <http://gf.state.wy.us/fish/instreamflow>