

Montana Chapter of the American Fisheries Society

389 Rick Oshay Road
Kalispell, Montana 59937
amyclint@montanasky.us

April 13, 2005

The Honorable Dennis Rehberg
United States House of Representatives
516 Cannon House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Congressman Rehberg:

The Montana Chapter of the American Fisheries Society (MCAFS) requests your leadership to secure funding for the Land and Water Conservation Fund and Forest Legacy Program for the Swan Valley, Montana. We believe that these important programs will help to protect and conserve some of Montana's best native fish and wildlife populations and critical habitats on which they depend.

The MCAFS is an organization of professional fisheries scientists and students from multiple agencies, universities and the private sector across Montana. One of our objectives is the conservation, development and wise utilization of Montana's fisheries. As a result, our Chapter has been an advocate for collection of fish resource information; conservation and restoration of native fishes; protection and conservation of high quality aquatic habitats; and wise management of land, water and fish resources in the state of Montana.

We are keenly interested in the conservation and protection of native fish populations and critical habitats in the Swan River Valley. The Swan Valley supports one of the strongest remaining populations of the threatened bull trout throughout their range, and also harbors native populations of westslope cutthroat trout, which is Montana's state fish and is currently designated as a Species of Special Concern in Montana. The Swan Valley contains cold, complex fisheries habitat, and excellent water quality conditions for maintenance and restoration of bull trout and westslope cutthroat trout populations. The Valley's forestlands provide a rich diversity of wildlife and fisheries habitat, outdoor recreation opportunities, and support a variety of forest-based livelihoods in the local and regional economy. Protection of stream corridors and avoiding habitat fragmentation that can occur through conversion of forestland to rural residential uses is critical to the maintenance of the area's fisheries. We are aware that Plum Creek Timberlands has intentions to sell some of its lands in the Valley. When these lands are sold for private

development, riparian and fisheries habitat can be impacted and traditional public recreational access will likely be terminated.

Through a long-term collaborative effort, Plum Creek Timber Company has offered a portion of its land in the Swan Valley for conservation sale to the public. This process included a science-based assessment of resource values and a conservation strategy that appropriately addresses the identified resources. The MCAFS wants to lend its support for the State of Montana's request for \$6.6 million in FY06 from the Forest Legacy Program. These funds will serve to protect important lands within the Swan River State Forest for ongoing forestry, as well as for public access. Important stream reaches on Goat Creek and Squeezer Creek will be protected, which provide critical bull trout spawning and rearing habitats. We also support the U.S. Forest Service request for a \$10.6 million appropriation in FY06 from the Land and Water Conservation Fund. This would allow the Flathead National Forest to acquire lands in the southern part of the Valley that are important for habitat and public recreation. In particular, the Howellia Ponds property contains numerous wetlands that provide for a rich diversity of wildlife habitat. Such acquisitions would also reduce land ownership fragmentation and lead to more effective and cost-efficient land management. These Swan Valley requests are the highest priority for the State and the Forest Service this year.

The MCAFS requests your leadership to secure Land and Water Conservation Fund and Forest Legacy Program funding for the Swan Valley. We support these high-priority projects and encourage their full funding. We have an opportunity to maintain and restore fisheries habitat and fishing access and it is imperative that we act on such opportunities when they exist. Your support for these programs will allow the citizens of Montana to enjoy these streams and their rich resources for generations to come. Thank you for your consideration, and work to protect and conserve Montana's fishery resources.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Clint Muhlfeld". The signature is written in dark ink and includes a long, sweeping horizontal line extending to the right.

Clint Muhlfeld
President