

Summary of Wallow Fire Impacts to Trout Fisheries in White Mountains Arizona Game and Fish Department Pinetop Region

The White Mountains of eastern Arizona are known for some of the best trout fishing in the Southwest. Recently, anglers have been concerned how the Wallow Fire of 2011, the largest recorded wildfire in Arizona history, impacted lakes and streams within the fire area. The short answer is there were a wide range of impacts to fish populations, ranging from complete fish kills to no detectable impact. The good news is many favorite fishing locations were only slightly affected or not affected at all.

Lakes

There were few serious impacts to lakes, with the highest profile lakes – Big Lake and Crescent Lake – emerging completely unscathed. Both have extremely small watersheds comprised of mostly grassland habitat, thus received little ash runoff from the fire, which is what usually affects fish populations. Fishing will continue to be good at Big and Crescent Lakes.

Nelson Reservoir, River Reservoir and Luna Lake received large ash flows from high severity burn areas, but only Nelson suffered a moderate fish kill due to this runoff. However, it was only a partial fish-kill. Nelson recovered quickly and was fishing well by the fall. Long-term nutrient loading is a concern that could cause greater water quality issues in the future, but for now, Nelson, River and Luna Lakes shouldn't be much different than before the fire.

Two other Greer-area lakes, Bunch and Tunnel Reservoirs, are located off-channel from the Little Colorado River (LCR) and did not receive much ash flow, thus were not impacted and will be fishing well. Trout stocking is planned as normal for each of these lakes (Big, Crescent, Luna, Nelson, River, Bunch and Tunnel) this spring, and the fishing quality shouldn't be any different than before the fire.

The greatest impacts to lakes occurred to the two smallest lakes in the area – Hulsey Lake and Ackre Lake. Both were drained prior to the ash flows, causing complete fish kills. Hulsey is expected to fill with silt eroding from Escudilla Mountain and will likely not be stocked or fishable for several years. Ackre has refilled, had good water quality in the fall, and will be restocked on a normal schedule this spring.

Other popular lakes, such as Becker, Carnero, Lee Valley, all the Fort Apache Indian Reservation lakes, and all the lakes in the Pinetop and Mogollon Rim areas, were completely outside of the fire area and totally unaffected by fire impacts.

Rivers and Streams

Some rivers and streams within the fire area suffered the greatest impacts to fish populations from ash flows and flooding after the fire. A number of Apache trout and Gila trout streams suffered significant fish kills, including South Fork Little Colorado River, Fish Creek, Bear Wallow Creek, Hannagan Creek, KP Creek, Raspberry Creek and upper Coleman Creek. However, several Apache trout streams were only slightly affected or not affected at all. Wild Apache trout in the upper West Fork Black River and West Fork LCR were not affected and are still fishable.

Other streams that are stocked with pure hatchery Apache trout, including the lower West Fork Black River, East Fork Black River, Sheeps Crossing on the West Fork LCR, and the LCR in Greer, had minor impacts and will continue to be stocked with trout. The only change in the stream stocking schedule will be at the East Fork Black River and lower West Fork Black River. Campgrounds and associated roads on the East Fork and West Fork will be closed for a couple years.

Trout stocking will continue, but only at the main access points on these rivers, at Buffalo Crossing (junction of Forest Roads 24 and 25) on the East Fork and at the Forest Road 68 crossing on the lower West Fork. The LCR in Greer will continue to be stocked as scheduled, but most of the trout will be stocked at Government Springs at the end of the Greer Road, which had little impact. No impact or stocking changes are expected at Sheeps Crossing. Several areas may actually get more stocked trout because of the cutback in the areas stocked on the East and West Forks.

In wild trout waters, the greatest impact occurred on the mainstream of the Black River, which suffered nearly a total fish-kill. However, the aquatic habitat appears to be in good condition, so wild trout are expected to repopulate the stream from unaffected tributaries and rebound as a sport fishery in several years. The Blue River and Campbell Blue River suffered significant trout kills (plus total fish-kill in lower Blue), and Eagle Creek suffered a major fish-kill. Brown trout are expected to recolonize the Blue and Campbell Blue Rivers fairly quickly from unaffected tributaries.

On the positive side, several key sport fish streams continue to hold wild brown trout and will continue to have good fishing. The upper LCR from the upper end of Greer to the confluence with the South Fork still contains high densities of wild brown trout, including the Government Springs area at the end of the Greer Road, through the Greer meadow, and through the X-Diamond Ranch, a private blue ribbon fee-fishery at the end of the South Fork Road. The LCR downstream of the South Fork confluence suffered moderate impacts on wild brown trout, but the larger trout survived. They will just be in lower numbers until they repopulate. Two other popular brown trout fisheries – East Fork Black River and lower West Fork Black River – experienced localized moderate impacts close to high burn areas, but low to no impacts in other areas. High densities of wild brown trout still exist in the upper and lower reaches of the East Fork Black and the middle reaches of the West Fork Black below the fish barriers. Lower Reservation Creek and the North Fork of East Fork Black River also contain wild brown trout that were mostly unaffected.

Other trout streams that were completely outside of the fire area and were unaffected by the Wallow Fire include all the trout streams on the Fort Apache Indian Reservation (except for the Black River), Silver Creek in the Show Low area, and all the trout streams on the Mogollon Rim.

Overall, there were few serious impacts to popular fishing areas in the White Mountains, resulting in very little impact to trout stocking plans for these waters in 2012. For more information, please contact the fisheries staff in the Pinetop regional office of the Arizona Game and Fish Department at (928) 367-4281.