

Death of a River?

Annual dewatering of the Gros Ventre causes concern.

A substantial portion of the Gros Ventre River downstream of Kelly until about two miles below the Highway 89 Bridge (just south of Gros Ventre Junction in Grand Teton National Park) is either partially or completely dewatered most years during parts of July, August and September. Low flows and dry sections of river are caused by water diverted for irrigation, drought and an undetermined amount of natural seepage into the aquifer.

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Driving north from Jackson one crosses the tree-lined, pastoral clear waters of the Gros Ventre River. Crossing it at this time of year, however, one is faced with a barren expanse of cobble rocks and dead riverine vegetation. How a once vigorous and beloved stream has suffered dewatering and destruction is a typical story of the American West. The tragedy is that this has occurred despite being under the ostensible authority of the National Park Service.

The Gros Ventre is one of those increasingly rare features of our world: a free-flowing river with a nearly undisturbed watershed. Tracing a path from green alpine meadows to craggy sagebrush canyons and rolling grassland, it quenches the thirst of big game, provides valuable streamside wildlife habitat, enhances the Jackson Hole fishing experience and draws the eye to its limpid pools and stately cottonwoods.

Yet to visit the river in July where it drops through the soft lands at the lower end of Grand Teton National Park is to visit a river that is a parched shadow of its former self. The Gros Ventre by August gives up the ghost miles short of its junction with the Snake, expiring as a series of tired warm pools. The reason for this is not difficult to decipher – even casual tourists have commented on the odd juxtaposition of brimming ditches crossing the highway in close proximity to the depleted riverbed.

Beginning around Kelly, the river suffers a series of wounds in the form of diversions

and ditches, continuing until the river has no more to give. In earlier years, the river traced a verdant line across the valley floor. There were adequate flows that supported an excellent fishery and a community of water-dependent life. Beginning more than 100 years ago, irrigation ditches were dug to help support the agriculture that was a major foundation of the economic life of Jackson Hole. As was typical of the West, these diversions proliferated without control, essentially ending the life of this portion of the river.

What's Instream Flow?

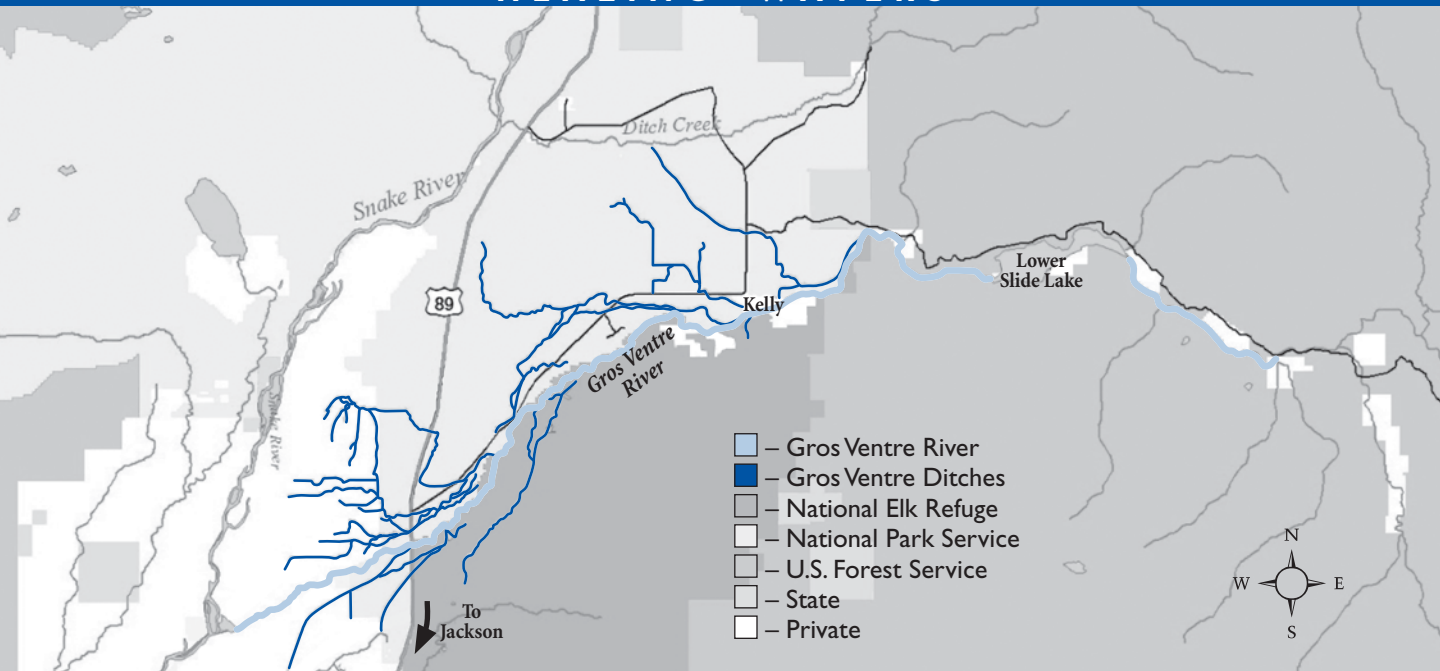
Instream flow is the name given to water that is appropriated to stay in a stream or river for the benefit of fisheries or the environment. Wyoming's current laws require that, to designate an amount of water as instream flow, the state must own the water right. But many water right owners are hesitant to transfer their rights to the state in perpetuity. Also, if the state does acquire the right, it loses its priority date, meaning that that right will be the first one shut off in the event of water shortage.

Earlier this year, the Wyoming Legislature failed to pass an instream flow bill that would have allowed willing parties to sell and buy water rights. Such a law could have been used to keep water in rivers like the depleted Gros Ventre to benefit fisheries.

For a number of years agriculture has been on the decline in Jackson Hole, and many of these diversions no longer serve to support an agricultural economy. The crucial importance to a river's health of maintaining a minimum flow has been widely recognized (see box). Likewise, throughout much of the West, with the critical biological and agricultural role of water, users have become much more sophisticated in the allocation, monitoring and control of water resources. Unfortunately, despite the importance of the Gros Ventre River and the fact that it runs through a national park, there have been no serious efforts to develop a plan to preserve the biological integrity of the river. Instead, dewatering continues year after year, with little apparent thought as to the damage it causes. An independently produced paper* examined this issue more than 20 years ago, pointing out the deleterious effects of dewatering and suggesting methods for remediation. Instead of anyone taking any of the suggestions, there has been an unbroken chain of years of inaction.

The Alliance would like to see a strong effort mounted to correct this situation, with dialogue among Park Service officials, conservationists and water users. Every year there is less water coming down the Gros Ventre, and we don't believe anyone feels this river deserves the fate that is looming. 💧

**Minimum Instream Flows for the Lower Gros Ventre River, Teton County, Wyoming* (Report prepared for the Water Heritage Trust and Jackson Hole Chapter of Trout Unlimited by the Lower Gros Ventre River Study Group, June 1990)



Map courtesy Trout Unlimited

A Warm and Dry Forecast

Irrigation, fish ponds incompatible with global warming, wild rivers.

The fishing closures of rivers in Yellowstone National Park this past July may not occur in the future, if current trends continue. Unfortunately, the reason they may not be necessary is that the rivers of the Rockies may lose their populations of cold-water fish such as cutthroats.

All the data from recent years in Wyoming demonstrate an accelerating trend of decreased winter precipitation and warmer summer temperatures. We are already seeing insect epidemics and widespread tree loss as a result; lakes are drying as well, and glaciers are shrinking.

For streams such as the Gros Ventre, the lesson is clear that consumptive uses such as irrigation and fish ponds may no longer be compatible with a wild and free-flowing river. No one knows exactly what the future may hold, and there are myriad other possible effects of climate change, but potential effects on our rivers and their ecosystems cannot be neglected by those making decisions as to their treatment.

Accompanying are some graphs demonstrating precipitation and mean summer temperatures in northwest Wyoming. (These measurements were taken at Togwotee Pass.) If current trends continue, years such as 2007 could become the norm in Jackson Hole. 💧

