Comments regarding Draft Management Criteria for Big Horn Lake

Submitted by: Frank F. Johnson
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To: Bureau of Reclamation
Montana Area Office
Billings, Montana

Attention:

Lenny Duberstein
lduberstein@usbr.gov

Dear Lenny,

Please accept the following as my personal comments regarding the Draft Management Criteria now being considered.

I would like to echo and enthusiastically endorse the comments presented by:

Doug Haacke, Friends of Big Horn River
Big Horn River Alliance
Big Horn County Commissioners
Bob Krumm.

I thank the scientists at Montana Department of Fish Wildlife and Parks for their council as all these comments have been prepared.

I also thank the Bureau of Reclamation for giving us the opportunity to comment on this management criteria, and for your help in allowing us to understand and evaluate these criteria from our unique viewpoints.
I would hope that your thoughtful consideration be given to all the comments. All of these comments and suggestions are made in the best interest of all resource users.

My comments are not scientific, nor are they economically motivated. My comments are meant to be a reflection of the feelings of many thousands of anglers who visit the Bighorn River.

I am lucky to say that I have recreated on Big Horn Lake, the Afterbay, and on the River since the dam was constructed. I and many others have forged careers and businesses guiding anglers, or providing other services to those anglers who come to the river.

It is easy to focus on such issues as boat launching at Horseshoe Bend Marina and the inundated camp grounds at Black Canyon and Grant Marsh Fishing Access. Stream bank erosion and side channel occlusion are very evident. Fish biology issues are apparent. Debris accumulation is an issue. Economic impact and public safety are to be considered. Waterfowl hunting is an issue for all members of the Issues Group. All of these issues are important for your consideration.

Let me address a piece of the puzzle that is important to me and perhaps taken lightly or ignored in these deliberations. That puzzle piece is: THE PEOPLE WHO RECREATE ON THE BIGHORN RIVER. We, in our discussion of the Draft Criteria, seem to be leaving them out of the equation. They are, along with other more obvious reasons, why we are having this discussion.

At the Jan 4th meeting in Billings it was stated by the BOR staff that NO downside to the Draft Operating Criteria had been recognized or was considered when formulating the plan. I'm sure that by now you've received many comments pointing out the numerous downsides to the Draft Criteria. There are, in fact, numerous downsides that affect the recreational users of the river downstream from Yellowtail Dam as well as down sides for the people who use the north end of the lake for recreation.

Very little real discussion and understanding of the river anglers has been expressed. I hope to do my best to help you understand the people and the angling opportunity that exists on the River.

Each year nearly 100,000 angler-days are spent fishing primarily the first 13 miles below the dam. That section of the river is the most heavily fished area in the entire State of Montana. Those anglers generate a huge amount of economic impact for Big Horn County and Montana ($50,000,000 annually is not to be ignored) Below Big Horn Access the fishing is often effected by poor water conditions due to irrigation returns, turbidity from tributaries and accumulations of aquatic vegetation and therefore not as heavily used as the first 13 miles. When water conditions are right, however, anglers stream (pardon the pun) to those downstream areas.

Nearly 200 people make all or part of their living as a part of the fly fishing industry that has developed beginning nearly 40 years ago. These people have worked hard to make their business successful. They have done it, however, and they do exist. These people aren't looking into the sky for some future happening. It has happened! I, very simply, ask that you recognize this and ask that this economy and recreational opportunity not be degraded.

All of this economic success and recreational opportunity is very simply a result of the magic of the Bighorn River. Thanks to Mother Nature (a term BOR fully understands) and the construction of the dam the elements have come together to create what is probably the finest trout fishing river in America, and perhaps the world. If the Bighorn River were a golf course it would be compared to Augusta or St. Andrews. If the Bighorn River were an art museum it would rank up there with the Metropolitan Museum of Modern Art or the Louvre. I give you these examples in order that you might understand and appreciate the treasure that we are trying to maintain. People from all over America and the World think of the Bighorn as the Valhalla of Fly Fishing.

Books have been written about the Bighorn and its fabulous fly fishing. Every outdoor magazine in America has published many articles about the river. Look at nearly any fly fishing blog or chat room on the internet and you will find threads talking about the Bighorn River. Almost without exception the context of these chats is that the Big Horn is the place to be. Call nearly any fly shop in Western Montana and you will be lead away from the Bighorn – They know that if a visiting angler comes to the Bighorn he will be stuck there.

The Bighorn River is not a place where just the locals come and stick a pole in the mud along the bank and hope to get a bite. The Bighorn is a river used and loved by anglers from all across the country and the world. They come here to stand in awe of this fantastic place. Over the years as a guide I have heard comments such as the following thousands of times: "This is the best day of fly fishing I've ever had" "I've fished in Montana for 30 years and that's the best trout I've ever taken." "Today I took both the best Rainbow and the best Brown trout I've ever seen." "This is a beautiful river." The anglers I have guided have released every fish caught. They released it back into the river to be enjoyed again and again by other anglers. Perhaps a quick photograph, then the release of the fish and they say: "I hope to see you next year because I will be back!"

Any long term Outfitter or Guide on the river will tell you the same stories and that they have clients who return to the river year after year, many for 20 years or 25 years or more. Anglers from all across Montana and surrounding areas grow up on this river. Why? Because they can't find a better place to be.

Anglers who have the opportunity and means to travel the world to fish return to the Bighorn River time after time. Why? "Because it is the best place to be!" One of the early Crow Chiefs, when referring to the Crow homeland, coined this phrase: "The last best place." His reference was to the Bighorn River area and I and many others echo his words in describing the Big Horn River.

Please, in your planning and management of the flows of the river, do not disregard the aesthetic value of the recreational opportunity so many anglers enjoy while fishing this river.

Respectfully Submitted,

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