

Get hooked on North Cottonwood

The Instream Flow

Permit Number: Instream Flow Segment 1, Permit Number 731F

Priority Date: July 12, 1989

Quantity: Eight cubic feet per second (cfs) from October 1 through March 31, 16 cfs from April 1 through May 14, 35 cfs from May 15 through June 30, and 8.8 cfs from July 1 through September 30.

Location and length: 8.9 miles

Land ownership: The entire segment is located on lands administered by the U.S. government (Forest Service or Bureau of Land Management).

Rationale: Colorado River cutthroat trout is a native species that has been proposed for listing as an endangered species by some environmental groups. The Fish and Wildlife Service is charged with making that determination and has ruled that the decision is not warranted at this time because populations of this fish are stable or increasing. This section of North Cottonwood Creek provides important habitat for Colorado River cutthroat trout. Maintaining or improving habitat for this species is of critical importance to the state's interest in preventing the species from becoming listed as threatened or endangered. The quantities of flow recommended at different times are based on detailed field studies that will provide adequate survival in the winter (October through March), spawning and egg incubation habitat (April 1 through June 30), and growth (July 1 through September 30).

Status of the filing: A public hearing was held in Marbleton on Nov. 9, 1993. Some of the comments provided at the hearing were supportive of the filing, though others questioned how the proposed instream flow right would affect other water rights and the potential for future water development. The Board of County Commissioners and Green River Valley Cattleman's Association submitted letters opposing the water right, but neither party offered evidence of how issuance of the right would harm or otherwise affect their interests. In the absence of any finding that issuance of this water right would harm any other water right, the state engineer issued this instream flow right on January 15, 2008. The final step in the process of securing this, or any other water right, is called adjudication. The Board of Control has not yet adjudicated this water right.

An up-close look at Wyoming's instream flow water rights and what they mean to fishermen

On December 30, 1908, entrepreneur J. A. Whiting of Cheyenne envisioned great potential to divert water from North Cottonwood Creek and other streams to irrigate more than 11,000 acres of desert and provide water for livestock and domestic uses. So he applied for permits to establish the Cottonwood Canal under the name of the Uinta County (now Sublette County) Irrigation Company. By the spring of 1911 the canal was able to carry water and irrigate crops. Within the next two years, more than five miles of canal were completed and water was being diverted from North and South Cottonwood creeks and other nearby streams.

On August 20, 1913, the irrigation company advertised that it was opening 4,000 acres of land for settlement. The company's officials posted an advertisement saying the Cottonwood Canal had been completed, and water rights had been acquired from North and South Cottonwood creeks, South Horse Creek, Muddy Creek, North Piney Creek and the Green River. In reality, the Cottonwood Canal was not even half done and would never be completed.

As was done for other large-scale settlement projects, farmers were recruited from other parts of the country to settle the area with promises of rich lands and near-certain prosperity.

However, without a dependable source of water, the newly recruited settlers soon realized they could not make a living on the poor soils and short growing season in the area at the foot of the Wyoming Range. By 1915, most of them had left to seek their fortunes elsewhere. In 1927 the irrigation company filed for bankruptcy, and in 1929 the company was dissolved.

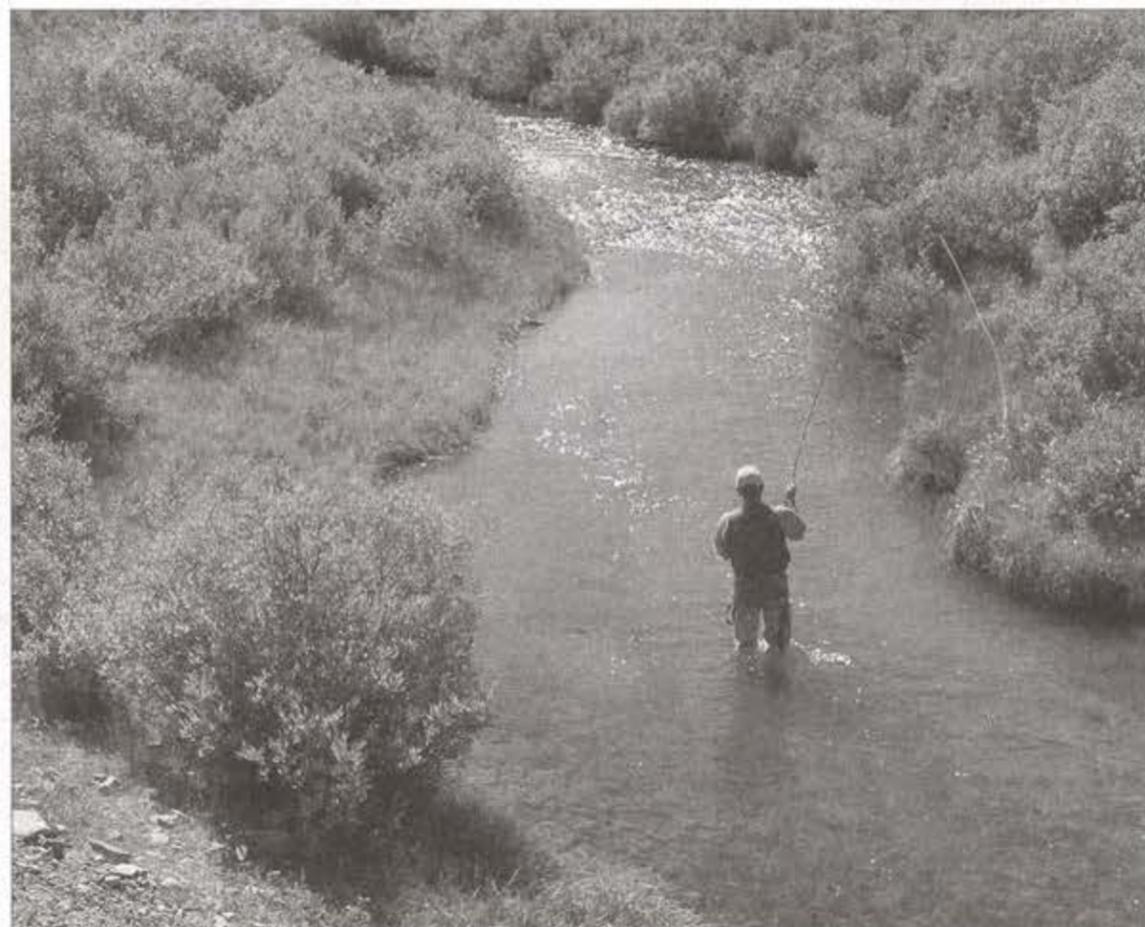
Little has changed on the landscape since then, though local interests still retain visions of past efforts to use water in North Cottonwood and other tributaries for irrigation. In recent years the state has begun studying options for a large-scale diversion project again, though that effort is still in the planning stages. One thing that hasn't changed is the vibrant, world-class trout fishing in North Cottonwood Creek. This stream and others on the Wyoming Range never fail to provide excellent angling for those who take the time to visit the area.

The fishery

North Cottonwood is a relatively low-gradient stream that meanders through a wide valley of willows, which provide ample material for beavers to construct dams and lodges. Colorado River cutthroat trout are common throughout the instream flow segment, but brook and rainbow trout also share the stream. Mountain whitefish are present, though in relatively low numbers. Mottled sculpins and mountain suckers are native non-game fish that have been reported in the stream and are an important component of this biologically diverse mountain stream. This is one of the state's finest fly-fishing streams, and a wide range of dry fly and nymph patterns work well depending on conditions. Area 4 flowing water fishery regulations apply here. That means there's a limit of three trout per day or in possession; only one can be a cutthroat trout; only one can be more than 16 inches; and anglers may only use artificial flies and lures.

How to get there

From Pinedale, go north on Highway 191 about 11 miles to the junction of Highway 189. Turn south on 189 and go 3 miles to County Road 23-117 (Rye Grass Road) and turn right (West). There is a sign at this junction that says, "Bridger-Teton National Forest, South Horse, Cottonwoods". Travel west on 23-117 for about 13 miles. While on 23-117 the road turns to gravel. When it does, stay to the left. Continue to the Horse Creek road and then turn south at this junction. Continue on 23-117 for about 2 miles. Turn right (west) onto the North Cottonwood Road. (There is a Forest Service sign at this junction that says "North Cottonwood and South Cottonwood.") Continue on this road until you reach the junction of North Cottonwood Road and South Cottonwood Road. Continue straight (west) on this road for about 1.5 miles to the Forest Service boundary, where the road changes to FS 10125. North Cottonwood Creek is on your right and parallels the road most of the way to McDougal Gap (another 8 miles). You can go all the way to Alpine if you wish, though that's another 50 miles.



North Cottonwood Creek is a prime fly-fishing stream along which you can catch Colorado River cutthroat, brook and rainbow trout, as well as the occasional mountain whitefish *Photo by Andrew Annear*