

## Going native on the **Smiths Fork** of the Bear River

The Smiths Fork is a tributary of the Bear River in far western Wyoming, draining the west slope of the Wyoming Range. The mountains through which this stream meanders are some of the most classically beautiful mountains in the state. Cokeville is the main population center near the Smiths Fork instream flow segment. About 150 years ago, the area witnessed the passage of thousands of emigrants passing through to California and Oregon. Today, the countryside is still important ranch country, though views and values are changing as evidenced by the recent creation of the Cokeville Meadows National Wildlife Refuge and the increasing number of properties being purchased for recreational purposes.

### The Fishery

The lower portion of the instream flow segment contains a mixed population of native Bonneville cutthroat trout, mountain whitefish and brown trout. The proportion of native cutthroats generally increases as you progress upstream. Though there are occasional reports of large trout taken from this stretch of river, most are less than 16 inches long. Studies show cutthroats

exhibit extensive spawning movements up and downstream and in many of the river's tributaries. These unrestricted movements are important for maintaining genetic diversity and numbers of native trout.

### How to Get There

Take Wyoming Highway 232 east from Cokeville and continue about 12 miles to where the pavement ends. At this point the road forks, but stay to the left (go straight ahead). Continue another 10 miles on this gradually deteriorating gravel road that's usually passable by most vehicles when it's dry, but not a good place to drive a car during or after a rainstorm. You'll see Hobble Creek canyon coming in on the right (east), at which point you'll shortly find a two-track, 4-wheel drive road that forks off from the main gravel road and dead ends at the bottom of the instream flow segment after a half mile. The main gravel road continues on parallel to the Smiths Fork, but you may need an off-road vehicle to get to the stream. You won't find any developed camping or picnic areas near the segment, but you will find some great fishing for one of Wyoming's often-overlooked native species.

### The Instream Flow

**Permit Number:** 26 I.F.

**Priority Date:** December 19, 1995

**Status of the filing:** A public hearing was held in the Cokeville town hall on April 27, 1999. The state engineer approved the water right on November 26, 2002. The Board of Control has not adjudicated the water right.

**Quantity:** 9 to 17 cubic feet per second from October 1 to April 30, 45 cfs from May 1 to June 30, and 20 cfs from July 1 to September 30.

**Location and length:** The approximately 5-mile-long reach extends downstream from the Smiths Fork's confluence with the West Fork of Smiths Fork downstream to near the mouth of Hobble Creek.

**Landownership:** The segment is located primarily on lands administered by the Bureau of Land Management, although some state-owned lands lie along its reach.

**Rationale:** The primary purpose for filing this water right was to protect vital habitat for native Bonneville cutthroat trout. The instream flow segment contains habitat for all life stages of this species. Consequently flows were filed to maintain spawning habitat (May through June), adult and juvenile habitat (July through September) and winter survival (October through April).

**Related details:** A Water Development Commission feasibility study found that the recommended instream flow amounts were naturally available during all months of the year except during some winter months. The average monthly flow is about 12 cfs from October through April, 230 cfs in May and June, and 130 cfs in late summer. This filing does not protect channel maintenance flow levels that are necessary to sustain long-term physical habitat characteristics, nor are recommendations adequate to flush sediment from the gravel.



If you're looking to catch a Bonneville cutthroat trout, the Smiths Fork of the Bear River is the perfect place to do it. *Photo by Tom Annear*

To get more information about instream flow, visit the Wyoming Game and Fish Department's Web site at <http://gf.state.wy.us/fish/instreamflow>