

To: Interested Parties

From: Ben Tulchin, Ben Krompak, Kiel Brunner and Tia Seltzer, Tulchin Research

April 24, 2018

Polling Finds Strong Support For Pallid Sturgeon Recovery in Montana

A new Tulchin Research poll finds that Montana voters strongly support efforts to protect the endangered pallid sturgeon native to the Yellowstone and Missouri Rivers and back the approach favored by leading fishery scientists and conservationists over the existing plan being pursued by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. By a margin of nearly 2-to-1, Montana voters support helping the pallid sturgeon population recover by removing the existing Intake Diversion Dam and installing irrigation pumps to allow the fish to swim up and downstream instead of the Corps' plan to build a higher dam and a bypass channel that scientists are not confident the fish will use. Here we present key research findings.

Montana Voters Overwhelmingly Support Pallid Sturgeon Protection

The pallid sturgeon, which has existed since the dinosaur era and is one of the most rare and ancient fish in the United States, is well known to Montanans (90% ID). Voters feel very positively about pallid sturgeon (58% total favorable to 3% total unfavorable) and overwhelmingly support efforts to protect the fish, which is listed under the Endangered Species Act. More than 8 in 10 Montana voters (81%) back efforts to protect pallid sturgeon, including nearly half (46%) who *strongly* support these efforts.

Montana Voters Strongly Support Efforts to Protect Pallid Sturgeon	
<i>“Do you support or oppose efforts to protect the pallid sturgeon, a fish native to the Yellowstone and Missouri Rivers?”</i>	
Total Support	81%
Total Oppose	8%
Undecided	12%
Support – Oppose	+73

Support for protecting pallid sturgeon extends across the political spectrum and includes strong majorities of Democrats (93% support), independents (82% support), and Republicans (73% support). Support for protection efforts also extends across the state, with some of the strongest support coming from the area neighboring the Yellowstone and Missouri Rivers, including the Billings media market (83% support) and Yellowstone County (88% support), which includes a large portion of the Yellowstone River watershed.

Voters Strongly Back Plan to Remove Intake Diversion Dam and Install Irrigation Pumps Over Plan to Build a Higher Dam and Bypass Channel

Asked specifically about what course of action should be taken to help the pallid sturgeon population to recover, Montana voters overwhelmingly back an approach favored by fishery scientists – even though it carries a higher price tag – over the approach currently being pursued by the Corps that scientists are skeptical will be effective.

After hearing more information about endangered pallid sturgeon and basic information about the plan to help them recover by removing the existing Intake Diversion Dam on the Yellowstone River and installing irrigation pumps to meet the water needs of farmers, Montana voters support this plan by a 3-to-1 margin. More than six in ten Montana voters (64%) express support for this plan to 21 percent who oppose it.

Montana Voters Strongly Back Plan to Protect Pallid Sturgeon by Removing Intake Diversion Dam and Installing Irrigation Pumps	
<p><i>“As you may know, the pallid sturgeon is currently protected under the Endangered Species Act. This species of fish has existed since dinosaurs roamed the earth but is now in danger of extinction. Since the construction of dams by the federal government on the Yellowstone and Missouri Rivers, native pallid sturgeon have been prevented from moving up and downstream to successfully reproduce and the population has fallen to fewer than 125 fish, which are now near the end of their lives. Since the pallid sturgeon was listed as endangered more than 25 years ago, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has acknowledged that to have a chance at recovery, pallid sturgeon must be able to move up and down stream past diversion dams that currently obstruct them.</i></p> <p><i>Would you support or oppose efforts to recover the pallid sturgeon by removing the Intake Diversion Dam, the lowermost dam on the Yellowstone River, and replacing its function with irrigation pumps to meet the water needs of farmers in that area?”</i></p>	
Total Support	64%
Total Oppose	21%
Undecided	14%
Support – Oppose	+43

As with pallid sturgeon protection generally, this issue crosses the partisan divide with majorities of Democrats (81% to 6% oppose), independents (65% support to 20% oppose), and Republicans (51% support to 33% oppose) backing this plan to remove the dam and install irrigation pumps to meet the needs of farmers and protect the pallid sturgeon from extinction. Across the state, voters broadly support this approach, including more than 7-in-10 voters in the Billings media market (72% support to 19% oppose), the Butte-Bozeman media market (68% support to 16% oppose), the Missoula media market (64% support to 20% oppose), the Great Falls media market (60% support to 26% oppose), and the Helena media market (58% support to 22% oppose).

Support for the plan remains strong when voters hear balanced information about both this approach to helping the pallid sturgeon population to recover and the one currently being pursued by the Corps. Presented with basic factual information about two approaches to pallid sturgeon protection and the major criticisms of each, Montana voters choose the plan to remove the existing intake diversion dam to allow pallid sturgeon unobstructed passage upriver and to install irrigation pumps to meet the water needs of farmers over the plan to build a higher dam and a bypass channel.

Removing Intake Diversion Dam and Installing Irrigation Pumps Strongly Favored Over Building a Higher Dam and Bypass Channel as Best Approach to Protect Pallid Sturgeon	
<i>“Here are two approaches the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers could take to protect the pallid sturgeon under the Endangered Species Act. Please tell me which you prefer.”</i>	
<i>The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers could remove the existing Intake Diversion Dam to allow pallid sturgeon unobstructed passage upriver and replace it with irrigation pumps to meet the water needs of farmers in the area. This plan would cost around \$7.8 million a year over 50 years and would be initially funded by the federal government and annual maintenance paid by the irrigators. Fishery scientists are confident that this approach is the most likely to recover the fish population, and that extinction of the pallid sturgeon would be prevented. Critics say this approach is too expensive.</i>	51%
<i>The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers could replace the existing Intake Diversion Dam with a new and bigger concrete dam that would serve the needs of farmers and build a two-mile-long by-pass channel that the fish hopefully would use to move upstream and reproduce. This plan would cost around \$2.5 million a year over 50 years and would be initially funded by the federal government and annual maintenance paid by the irrigators. Fishery scientists are not confident the fish will use this experimental by-pass channel. Critics say it is unlikely to work and that sturgeon and other fish are likely to be harmed by it, making it a waste of taxpayer money.</i>	26%
Undecided	24%
Remove Intake Diversion Dam & Install Irrigation Pumps - Build Higher Dam & Bypass Channel	+25

Montanans Favor Candidates Who Will Best Protect the Pallid Sturgeon

Reflecting the electorate’s strong commitment to protecting Montana’s natural heritage, more than 6 in 10 voters (62%) indicate that they would be more likely to support a candidate for public office who backs the most scientifically sound plan to recover the native pallid sturgeon – including nearly a quarter of voters (24%) who say they would be “much more likely” to support such a candidate. Conversely, just one in five voters (20%) say they would be *less* likely to support a candidate who favors the plan to help the pallid sturgeon recover by removing the Intake Diversion Dam on the Yellowstone River and installing irrigation pumps.

Montanans Favor Candidates Who Will Pursue Scientifically Sound Plan to Protect Pallid Sturgeon	
<i>“The pallid sturgeon is protected by the Endangered Species Act. Would you be more or less likely to vote for a candidate for office who supports replacing the Intake Diversion Dam on the Yellowstone River with irrigation pumps, the most scientifically sound plan for recovering native pallid sturgeon that also meets the irrigation needs of farmers?”</i>	
More Likely	62%
Less Likely	20%
More Likely – Less Likely	+42

Those indicating they would be more likely to support a candidate favoring the most scientifically sound plan for recovering native pallid sturgeon that also meets the irrigation needs of farmers include strong majorities of Democrats (85% more likely to 8% less likely) and independents (65% more likely to 16% less likely) and a plurality of Republicans (48% more likely to 31% less likely).

In conclusion, Montana voters strongly support the protection of the pallid sturgeon, overwhelmingly prefer a plan to remove the Intake Diversion Dam and install irrigation pumps to building a higher dam and a bypass channel, and are more likely to support a candidate for public office who supports this plan. Support for protecting the pallid sturgeon is broad and deep and extends across the state and across the political spectrum.

Survey Methodology: From April 2-5, 2018, Tulchin Research conducted a survey among 400 likely November 2018 general election voters statewide in Montana on behalf of Defenders of Wildlife, the Natural Resources Defense Council, Trout Unlimited, and American Rivers. The survey was conducted using live professional interviewers calling both landlines and cell phones. The margin of error for the survey is +/- 4.9 percentage points.