

Ranch ownership change and new approaches to water resource management in south western Montana: Implications for fisheries¹

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ABSTRACT:

This article reports on a survey of ranch owners in high amenity areas in south western Montana that have experienced marked ownership change over the last two decades. Specifically, we focus on findings from a set of questions targeting water resource and riparian area management. After reviewing the results, we consider how new owners may be managing water resources differently than longtime owners and what the ecological implications of this shift in management might be for Montana's prized wild fisheries. Uses more closely associated with new owners than with longtime owners include water reallocation to instream uses, aquatic and riparian ecosystem restoration, and fish pond construction. These uses have both positive and negative impacts on the region's fisheries. Our findings suggest that current laws and institutions guiding the management of water resources and the aquatic and riparian ecosystems they support may not be adequate to address emerging conservation opportunities and challenges.

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