Montana State University's $315 million Romney Hall is near both House and Senate infrastructure bills.

State, locals talk Yellowstone fish kill response

By MICHAEL WRIGHT
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LIVINGSTON — When a bunch of fish turned up dead in the Yellowstone River late last summer and the state shut off all river use for a time, locals felt the pain. Now, as they look toward another summer, with the possibility of another die-off, they're talking about how the state can do better.

“it was a reminder of how fragile our ecosystem really is,” Cooney said. Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks started hearing about dead fish in the Yellowstone River in mid-August. They learned the fish were suffering from a microscopic parasite that causes proliferative kidney disease, a condition that can be devastating to trout and whitefish. In response, the state banned all recreation on 183 miles of the river and its tributaries, a move it said was meant to give the remaining fish a chance to survive.

The closure was lifted piece by piece over the next month, but it dealt a significant blow to the local economy. Jeremy Sage, an economist with the University of Montana's Institute on Recreation and Tourism, estimated that Park County lost about $500,000 in non-resident spending.

Leslie Feigel, the executive director of the Livingston Area Chamber of Commerce, said that impact was certainly felt in Livingston. “It impacts everyone. Even our local plumbers,” she said.

Looking forward, Feigel and others here last night said the state needed to communicate better with locals. Some said that the closure totally blindsided them, and others said they were frustrated that the state couldn't offer a clearer blueprint for how the river would reopen and when, something that may have helped them plan better.

Several at the meeting said they felt the closure was the right thing to do for the river at the time, but they wondered what they could do next year to better prepare. They’re also concerned that the water in the river is still in the river, and there’s a chance this more fish will turn up dead this summer.