

## Natural Resource Priorities for the Clearwater Valley

By Jon Haufler

One of the reasons most of us live in Seeley Lake is because of the quality of our environment. We often hear reports from other locations in the country about how unique and special their areas are, and certainly every place has some component or combination of factors that is different than anywhere else. But for us, saying that the Clearwater Valley offers a unique setting is not hard to document. The incredible environment of the Valley with its chain of beautiful natural lakes, snowy peaks lining both sides of the Valley, diversity of fish and wildlife, and virtually unlimited outdoor recreational opportunities provide us with a quality of life that is matched by few if any other locations. Being within the Crown of the Continent Ecoregion places us in one of the most intact ecological settings in the lower 48 states. The Clearwater Resource Council (CRC) is fortunate to be located in such a place, which adds significance to our mission of helping to maintain our quality environment and rural lifestyle. CRC strives to fulfill its mission by working on the most important natural resource concerns for the Clearwater Valley. What are the issues that CRC is currently addressing?

A new initiative for CRC is a focus on water quality and aquatic habitat. Our lakes offer both outstanding recreation and provide habitat for a diversity of aquatic species including the threatened bull trout. Similarly, our streams and rivers offer recreational opportunities and support a diversity of aquatic species including bull trout and west slope cutthroat trout. Concerns exist about the future water quality of our lakes, and about water quality, habitat quality, and fish passage in some of our streams. Recent community discussions about sewer and water systems highlighted some of these concerns, but also revealed the range of opinions that exist. Some data exist that point to increasing concerns for the water quality of our lakes, especially Seeley Lake. However, these data are limited, and more are needed. CRC is launching a new initiative to begin monitoring the quality of our lakes. We will start with a small monitoring program, initially focusing on establishing a record of water clarity readings. As we gain momentum and funding, we plan to increase our monitoring to include measures of nutrients, potential contaminants, or other such measures. This monitoring won't solve all of the problems, but over time it will provide a solid database that we can use to specifically identify the extent of the problem.

We are also addressing concerns with the quality of some of our streams. A concern with a few streams is streamside encroachment that can degrade stream quality and habitat. We will be seeking proactive solutions to this concern by seeking voluntary actions to address problem areas. Our next CRC monthly meeting is on Tuesday June 24<sup>th</sup> at 7 PM at the Community Hall and will focus on this initiative. We invite all to attend.

CRC is planning on assisting the Forest Service with evaluation of its newly acquired lands in the Horseshoe Hills that were part of the Blackfoot Challenge/TNC purchase of Plum Creek lands. CRC will coordinate volunteer time to help identify important resources and features of interest in this area. We will also seek community input as to what Seeley Lake would like to see as the future uses and management of this area. While it will be up to the Forest Service to make such decisions, CRC can assist by providing a community forum for discussions.

CRC will be working with the Department of Transportation (DOT) on their ITEEM initiative. This is a pre-planning effort by DOT to look at ecological issues along Route 83 prior to initiation of any improvement

projects, as discussed at the open community meeting held by DOT several weeks ago. This is a great opportunity to identify any areas of concern, and to incorporate these into the initial planning of future road improvements.

CRC has been involved in fuel mitigation efforts since our formation, and we helped create the Seeley Lake Fuels Mitigation Task Force. CRC serves on the Task Force to help promote, fund, and implement fuel mitigation and fire readiness efforts. CRC recently received a grant of \$137,500 that we obtained through a cooperative request with MT DNRC and the Blackfoot Challenge to the Western Competitive Grant Program of the Forest Service's State and Private Forestry. The grant will provide funding for fuel mitigation by private landowners, particularly those with holdings in the Primary Line of Defense that was delineated by the Task Force. We will work with the Task Force and through the Bitter Root RC&D to make these funds available to the community for fuel mitigation.

Weed management continues to be a challenge in the Valley. CRC has initiated a collaborative weed steering committee that will be integrating the efforts of agencies, homeowner's associations, private landowners, and other organizations. The committee will be developing a strategic weed management plan for the Valley that will focus on helping guide the use of available weed management funding to be as efficient and effective as possible. For example, we all know of locations in the Valley where we could spend all of the funding we might obtain attempting to control weeds on some of our more heavily infested sites, but that might have little effect on controlling the total distribution of weeds in the Valley. If we can collectively identify critical areas where we can focus our weed management efforts, we hope to turn the tide on the spread of invasive species, and over time develop more and more of the Valley as weed-free areas.

CRC is maintaining its Landscape Assessment of the Clearwater Valley, and will add new information to this assessment and its database as it becomes available. This information can help groups involved in planning and management, such as the ITEEM project discussed above or the Community Council's ongoing land use planning efforts.

CRC is very interested in the recently announced cooperative land acquisition effort involving Plum Creek, The Nature Conservancy, the Trust for Public Lands, and the State of MT. We will be encouraging the conservation of key areas of the Clearwater Valley as part of this and any other land conservation efforts.

These are a number of the natural resource priorities that CRC is currently addressing and that our occurring in our Valley. We welcome the involvement and input from anyone interested in these topics. Please visit our website at [www.crcmt.org](http://www.crcmt.org), contact us, or attend one of our meetings to get involved.

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