

Watershed Planning: Balancing Resources in the Clearwater Valley

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The Clearwater River Watershed is a unique place. It is a source of clean water, recreational opportunities, scenic beauty, and jobs. Most of us live here because we love the setting, because we can make a living tied to the natural resources of the area, or both. The watershed produces timber, fish and wildlife, water, and scenic vistas. It absorbs our waste and cleans our air. We all use and benefit from these "services." We send some of them downstream and even out of state, and we open our valley so that others can come and enjoy it as well.

The richness and diversity of the natural resources and services we have is in part due to the expanse and diversity of the lands that make up the watershed. Some lands are well suited to some uses, but not others. Planning and managing such a diverse system can be a complicated process. The watershed can also challenge us in other ways. Drought, bark beetle outbreaks, wildfire, and flooding can tax the capacity of our management agencies and threaten our homes and infrastructure. The beauty of the valley makes it a magnet for development that can mean mixed blessings in the density of homes, cost of living, and new infrastructure required to keep pace. Inappropriate exploitation of one resource such as timber can threaten water quality and habitat in streams and lakes that support other resources such as native fish populations. Expanding housing development can bring new money and jobs into the Valley, but they can also threaten our water supplies, the conditions of lakes and streams, wildlife habitat, and production of forest products that make this such a desirable place to live and work. Understanding, quantifying, and balancing these various tradeoffs are a challenge for state and federal agencies, local government, and the community.

The bottom line is that we have diverse and abundant natural resources but face important tradeoffs in where, when, and how we use them. Conditions largely beyond our control, like a changing climate and global financial crisis, can make our ability to wisely manage these tradeoffs even more difficult. These are not new problems. Communities and governments around the world and through time have struggled with the balance of both using and sustaining the capacity of natural systems. The land use plan of the Seeley Lake Community Council strived to address a balance by encouraging development in some areas, while trying to maintain wild and working forests in other areas. Agencies like the Forest Service and Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation have long worked to balance the often conflicting demands of multiple land uses on public lands. Others, like the Montana Department of Environmental Quality and Montana Department of Fish Wildlife and Parks, work to regulate or constrain the degradation of specific resources like air, water, and wildlife across ownerships. The Blackfoot Clearwater Stewardship Project is working to gain the resources needed to conduct more stewardship activities on our forestlands. Non-government organizations like the Nature Conservancy and the Trust for Public Lands work to purchase private lands to minimize development in favor of natural resource conservation, working forests, or public access. Others, like the Big Blackfoot Chapter of Trout Unlimited, work hard to restore damaged streams and habitats on both private and public land.

We are fortunate to have all these and other groups working hard in the service of sustainable natural resource management in the Clearwater Watershed. That is one reason this is still such a

great place to live. But the challenges of the future will be even greater than the past, and so we need to bring the knowledge of all these groups together to build a watershed plan that looks across all lands and the jurisdiction of all landowners to identify opportunities for maintaining the qualities we cherish in the Valley, provide for appropriate uses of the resources, and accomplish ecosystem restoration and enhancement where needed.

A watershed plan is a means to identify, resolve, and prevent degradation to terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems in a given watershed. It includes a focus on water quality issues because they tend to be indicative of overall watershed health, but a complete plan evaluates the current status and desired conditions of the upland ecosystems as well. A watershed plan provides a framework to restore water quality in impaired waters and to protect water quality in other waters. One of the strengths of a watershed plan comes from the compilation of all available natural resources data pertaining to a given watershed. Pulling this information together provides a comprehensive look at the state of a watershed. It is then possible to identify areas within the watershed in which more information is needed to truly understand the condition of that area. Once there is sufficient data for the entire watershed, a plan for prioritizing areas of greatest concern and for implementing restoration activities can be made.

The Clearwater Resource Council is currently seeking the resources to coordinate the development and implementation of a watershed plan for the Clearwater Watershed. We have the support and commitment of federal and state agencies, as well as area non-government organizations, to provide information about the Clearwater Watershed and to be part of a watershed planning group that will meet regularly to oversee the development and implementation of the plan. Individually, the capacity and influence of each agency and group can be limited, but our hope is that by bringing these individual resources together, we can leverage more support for a watershed plan in the Clearwater Valley.

We will continue to keep the community informed and involved in our efforts as we move forward with this process. Please visit our website (www.crcmt.org) to stay abreast of new developments.

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