

The Clearwater to become a model watershed!

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Last week Bonneville Environmental Foundation (BEF) announced that it would fund a long-term “model watershed” project with the Clearwater Resource Council (CRC) for the Clearwater River Watershed. Since 1999, BEF has committed over \$1.6 million to support community-based initiatives that conserve and improve water quality, restore habitat, and bolster native salmon and trout populations. The project partnership with CRC is the fourteenth such project supported by BEF in the nation and the first in Montana. This project will greatly enhance CRC’s ability to work with local volunteers, community groups, and agencies such as the Forest Service and Fish Wildlife and Parks to monitor and restore aquatic ecosystems that are essential for long-term ecological and economic benefits of the Seeley Lake community.

Who is BEF? The Bonneville Environmental Foundation, a national non-profit, was formed in 1998 in Portland, Oregon. BEF was a pioneer in developing of the carbon offset market as well as adapting this approach to watershed improvement through the water restoration certificates. Funds that are collected from companies and individuals purchasing carbon offsets and water restoration certificates are utilized to support renewable energy development and watershed restoration. BEF also receives money from the Bonneville Power Administration that is used on watershed restoration projects.

BEF has an impressive set of corporate partners including well known companies such as Levi Strauss, The North Face, Lamb Weston and Silk Soymilk plus three Montana utilities (Missoula Electric Coop., Flathead Electric Coop. and Northwestern Energy). While BEF’s program focus is national in scale, the majority of renewable energy and aquatic restoration projects are located in the western part of the country. All current model watershed projects are located in the Pacific Northwest and Northern California.

What is a “model watershed?” BEF has developed a unique approach to supporting watershed restoration. Instead of funding short-term, small scale projects that often have had limited success, BEF developed a long-term support process that starts by creating a partnership with a local watershed group and, together, they plan, undertake restoration activities and monitor success over a minimum of a ten year time horizon. Each local watershed group’s capability is enhanced by taking advantage of BEF’s resources, both scientific and financial, plus the ability to share information and successes between watershed project groups.

BEF has developed a science-based framework that emphasizes community engagement and that can be readily adapted to specific local needs. As the project is developed and annual work plans are defined, CRC and BEF will jointly review the progress and adapt the plan as necessary based on local conditions. The objectives are to create a project based on the best available science, to create a capable and sustainable local organization that can carry on over time, and to support local community interests and values. A key component is community

involvement and the model watershed project must work to engage the Seeley Lake community and other stakeholders by expanding outreach activities.

Why the Clearwater? The Crown of the Continent eco-region is considered a unique treasure within the lower 48 states and is the focus of considerable conservation and recreation, and economic development interest. The Clearwater watershed supports important populations of westslope cutthroat trout and threatened bull trout. We have lake migratory bull trout and westslope cutthroat trout that are unique in the upper Clark Fork River basin. These species depend on suitable conditions in small tributary streams, the lower mainstem rivers and the lakes. Efforts that help maintain those habitats will also help maintain habitats for terrestrial species such as grizzly bears, bald eagles, and loons. Several streams in the watershed are considered critical spawning and early rearing habitats for these species. Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks has identified the West Fork of the Clearwater River, East Fork Clearwater River and Morrell Creek as "core" populations of bull trout, while the US Fish and Wildlife Service has identified them as critical habitat for ESA recovery efforts. Both BEF and CRC are interested in finding ways to improving habitat for these and other aquatic and terrestrial species, while still maintaining access for recreation and management of forests.

What can we expect from the project? CRC and BEF are currently putting the final touches on the first year's work plans. One of the more visible aspects of the model watershed project will be the expansion of the Adopt-a-Lake program to gather data about trends in water quality in our lakes. In addition, working with the Watershed Planning Group and restoration and monitoring efforts that are part of the Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program (CFLRP) and other initiatives, CRC will continue to play a coordinating role between Federal, State, local and non-governmental organizations and linking these organizations to the community. As an example we are currently engaged with the Forest Service and Fish Wildlife and Parks to find ways to focus restoration actions that benefit fish and wildlife, while helping to mitigate the threat of severe wildfire and restore damaged forests.

The support from BEF is important to CRC's mission to "initiate and coordinate efforts that will enhance, conserve, and protect the natural ecosystems and rural lifestyle of the Clearwater River region of Montana for present and future generations", but it should also bring other benefits as well. The project will contribute at least \$250,000 to the local economy that can be leveraged and expanded through other funding sources. In the past, CRC has been successful in obtaining funds to address issues of water quality, fuel mitigation and weed mapping and control. While these and other efforts will continue, additional focus will be placed on education in schools, through community demonstration projects in collaboration with other local groups and hopefully through an open discussion of natural resource issues and opportunities within the community.