

Water

Submitted by the Clearwater Resource Council

Water. We are seemingly blessed with abundant, clean, clear water in this part of the world... right? Yes... but, it's also something we take for granted. It's easy to think we'll always have plenty for all the ways we use water. We trust that somebody, somewhere will make sure that's the case. Who?

Water is critical to all of us in the Blackfoot, Clearwater and Swan watersheds. We have beautiful rivers, streams and lakes that provide for our needs. Our lakes and streams support recreation and tourism through fishing, swimming and boating, and the stunning beauty of this place. We use water for our homes, gardens, livestock and fields. Water provides critical habitat for fish and wildlife such as native bull trout and cutthroat trout, loons and other water birds, and even the bears and other wildlife. For us, it's a basic part of our landscape, a mainstay of our economy, the backdrop for our community and our sense of home.

There's no guarantee that all those values can be maintained indefinitely. Many communities like ours have sad tales to tell. Throughout the west many places suffer shortages of clean water for basic uses, or have seasonal closures for swimming and drinking because the water is unsafe. Around the country many have seen water quality so degraded that many uses of water are seriously compromised. Recently, the community on Lake Delton Wisconsin spent \$30,000 to dye their tiny lake blue for a couple weeks in the summer. Why? Because declining water quality turned the lake cloudy green, rather than clear blue, and the visitors their businesses depended on stopped coming.

Prevention is a lot simpler and cheaper than the cure, so it's worth thinking about how our watersheds work. The basic idea is pretty simple, water flows downhill. A watershed is just an area where all the water drains to one point. Rivers, streams and lakes are the low points in the watershed and thus the routes for flow and accumulation of water. In places, a substantial amount of water moves or sits underground, especially in watersheds like ours that have a glacial history. The bottom line is that streams, lakes, ponds and groundwater reservoirs are just low points where water from all the rain and snow over the seasons accumulates. And it's not just water, everything we do, everything we put in the watershed, can eventually show up in those lakes and streams as well. Lakes, in particular, can be a very good indicator of what we're doing and putting in the watershed.

So how are we doing? Let's look at the streams and lakes themselves. Over the last 7 years or so, agency professionals, volunteers, teachers and students have put considerable time and effort into learning more about the Clearwater, the Swan and larger Blackfoot. We've learned a lot. Our lakes are generally doing ok, some better than others, but we are also seeing some signs of stress. Seeley and Salmon lakes in particular have little capacity to absorb more nutrients without running into some serious problems. Salmon lake has already had a series of nuisance algae blooms

that tell us we better not push that lake any harder. We've learned we're adding nutrients to the watershed in some places (septic systems, old and newer developments), and we're actually seeing reduced nutrients from some areas that were large sources in the past. We've learned that erosion from roads, raw stream banks and de-vegetated lake shores are a significant new source of nutrients. We've learned that 90-95% of the problems with roads come from 5-10% of the roads, so fixing those problems is not an impossible task.

We're continuing to learn more all the time. Volunteers have monitored five of our major lakes continuously for the last 6 years. Teachers, students, and volunteers continue to monitor streams like Morrell Creek full time. More detailed information on other streams continues to grow as we find new funding sources and more volunteers.

We are starting to address some of our problems. Seeley Lake Junior High students have been working to restore the stream side vegetation along Morrell Creek near the High School. The Double Arrow Ranch Land Owners have started similar work on Trail Creek. More and more private property owners are working to restore the vegetation along their stream banks or lake fronts and to encourage others not to mow or remove vegetation or build close to the water. The Forest Service and Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks are working hard to rebuild or reroute particularly damaging roads without losing important access for recreation and forest management. Timber lands that were intensively logged in the past are getting a chance to rest. We're even talking about a sewer system that could eventually be expanded to cover much of the business and housing development that is critically close to streams or lakes.

All of these are important steps, but no single one guarantees that the water and water quality we've built our community around will be here indefinitely. Climate change is happening and the bottom line there is that as temperatures increase, summer stream flows decline, and the warm season gets longer... lakes and streams become even more vulnerable to declining water quality. If we want clear water, beautiful streams and lakes and all the things they support in the future, we'll have to work together. We will all need to learn and care about water and how to conserve it. We'll need to manage our own yards, stream or lake banks, and septic systems carefully, and we'll need a sewer in areas where septic fields, outhouses, cesspools and other old remedies no longer work. We'll need an "all of the above approach" for the benefit of future generations.

If you want to learn more about how our water is faring, CRC just posted a report on the web (crcmt.org). If you want to help make sure your watershed stays clean and pure for the future, there are plenty of opportunities to get involved.

Contact: info@crcmt.org or Joann (210-8453) or Cathy (677-0069)