



Big Hole Watershed Committee

Monthly Meeting Minutes
September 16, 2015 – 7:00 pm
Divide Grange

In Attendance

Jennifer Downing, BHWC; Tana Nulph, BHWC; Sarah Washko, BSWC/BHWC; Doug Finnicum, BHWC/BSB Water; Tracy Finnicum; Rick Hartz, BVHD County; Jim Carpita, BVHD County; Jason Brooks, BLM; Scott Reynolds, BHWC/GGTU; Corey Meier, BLM; Sierra Harris, TNC; Garth Haugland, BHWC/BVHD County; Peter Frick, BHWC/Rancher; Liz Jones, BHWC/Rancher; Doug Clark, ADL County; Paul Hooper, USFS; Pedro Marques, Watershed Consulting; Bill Cain, BHWC/sportsman; Mike Roberts, DNRC; Julie Willsen, USFS; and Eric Trum, DEQ.

Introductions *Attendees introduced themselves.*

Meeting Minutes *June 2015 meeting minutes were reviewed, no additions or corrections.*

Reports

Drought Management Plan – Jennifer Downing, BHWC

- Used the DMP quite a bit in 2015, starting in June for most of the river, spring for the upper.
- High water temperature was the main concern in early summer, followed by low flows late summer.
- Sections I and V were hardest hit; Section IV also fairly low and warm;
- In the last 48 hours, a lot of rainfall – gage readings rose dramatically in most of the river;
- River closures for Section I and V were lifted 9/23 by MFWP. This opening occurred prematurely due to a logistical error within MFWP. Those sections had not reached the seven day flow target yet. BHWC worked with MFWP to resolve. BHWC was not notified of the opening until after the public information release. MFWP was not willing to re-close and pull announcements. BHWC and MFWP resolved to call the re-opening a “whoops!” MFWP and BHWC are working together to make sure this won’t happen again;
- Drought Management Plan review meeting will be in November, rather than spring;
- BHWC represented at National Drought Resiliency Partnership meeting in Dillon last week. Meeting goals continues to be Federal and State partners to address drought and drought resiliency. BHWC has been part of this work since July 2014.

Streamflow Report –Mike Roberts, DNRC

- 2015 was definitely a drought year, but flow increased in the last few days due to heavy rains;
- Sarah (BSWC) has been helping a lot with measuring flows in the upper Big Hole;
- The silver lining this year was the cooperation and collaboration of the irrigators. During low flows, no one was irrigating. Additional locations were identified for stock tanks.
- Still looking at an El Nino winter – warmer and drier than average – but the short-term forecast looks pretty good; and
- Darkhorse Lake received 4 inches of snow last night.

Director’s Report - Jennifer Downing

- Summer newsletter published in June;
- 20th Anniversary Party on August 28th at Fairmont; ~90 people came and the response was overwhelmingly positive. Thank you to everyone who came!

- BHWC participating in to securing ~\$1.4 million for the Big Hole since the spring, either through our own grants or through partnerships with other groups. Most of that money will be spent throughout the next year;
- Communications update draft for review, first seen at the 20th Anniversary dinner. **This is the first draft – what do you think? Please submit comments in person or via email, telephone. We need your help deciding how to best represent BHWC.**
 - Updated logo/font;
 - Simplified language that reaches a broad audience;
 - New posters;
 - Hoping to have it finalized before the end of November;
 - Next step will be website overhaul.
- Updated bylaws – a draft will be out for review in November.
- Projects on Mount Haggin:
 - Restoration Tour on August 28th on the Mount Haggin WMA – excellent attendance, very positive response. Great way to show off the work we’ve been doing up there;
 - California Creek is still under way; almost complete – will hear more in the presentation;
 - French-Moose Creek in design phases;
 - Uplands planning grant secured;
- New DNRC gage at the mouth of Wise River – should be installed this fall. Will support Wise River, including a GWIP proposal, irrigators involved with the Drought Management Plan. Part of the funding for the gage was provided by TNC. Wise River currently has TruTrack gages, but we’ve had a lot of problems getting them to operate correctly.
 - DNRC is partnering with MBMG to start a new gaging program placing Real Time gages on smaller streams. Meant to complement, not challenge, the USGS program. Hired a hydrologist to manage the program. 10 gages this year; 10 next year. Will be serviced by DNRC staff.
- MFWP has new initiative called “Fifteen and Forward”, making changes regarding hunting, fishing regulations. **Do we want BHWC to have a voice in that, and if so, how should we proceed?**
 - *We’d like to know what they’re talking about – what changes are they proposing?*
 - *Would like to know the reasoning behind the proposed changes;*
 - *Jen will look into it further;*
 - *GGTU has submitted comments, and they may be able to better address the issue than BHWC.*
 - *One change they’re considering making is changing regulations so that fish can be kept all year (5 fish limit) rather than just May-December. There will likely be some push-back to this due to the fish die-off we had from fungus last year and the drought season we’ve had this year. Some committee members feel that this is too drastic a change to make. Comments due very soon.*

Steering Committee – Bill Cain

- Steering Committee is happy with progress BHWC is making;
- Would like additional information regarding MFWP changes (discussed above).

Wildlife Committee – Tana Nulph

- Range Rider Program: Program is going well, despite a few technical and mechanical difficulties. Several wolves out on the range.
- Carcass Removal Program: Debating having a short pick-up season in October during weaning. **Does anyone think that would be beneficial?**
- Carcass Compost Facility: Permits in place, now working on an agreement with MDT. Next step will be a work day to set the place up; hope to have that done by October.
 - Programs are funded by the Montana Livestock Loss Board and are supported by our partners @ /MFWP, WCS, MDT, and People and Carnivores. The intent is to remove carcass attractants from the landscape to prevent (or at least minimize) livestock/predator conflict.

- Wildlife Speaker Series: The 2015 Wildlife Speaker Series event, co-sponsored by BHWC/Wildlife Conservation Society-Community Partnerships group and hosted by Erik and Jamie Kalsta, was a huge success! It included a BBQ-potluck and a presentation on bats by Matt Bell from the Montana Land Reliance. About 60 people attended.
- November BHWC meeting topic will be sage grouse: Lorelle Berkeley and Catherine Wightman from FWP will talk about sage grouse management and policy as well as habitat requirements, migration patterns, etc.

Land Use Planning Committee – Jennifer Downing

- Jennifer Boyer is transferring out of Future West and out of conservation work, but will remain part of the incentive program development.
 - We need to consider the role of Land Use Planning subcommittee: what will it look like and who will run it?
- Payment for Ecosystem Services pilot program: Future West leading incentive program development with DNRC funded pilot. BHWC will have role in work.
- BVHD County finished up final draft of floodplain ordinances this week – will go to commissioners this week. Will go to a few meetings to become an ordinance once the commissioners pass it.
- Anaconda Deer Lodge County – updating county floodplain ordinances. Hoping to adopt Big Hole floodplain maps by the end of the year.
- Planner’s Conference – September 28th - 30th at Fairmont Hot Springs – everyone is welcome.

Meeting Topic: California Creek Restoration

Presentation by: Pedro Marques, Watershed Consulting

Project Background

- Pedro has been very impressed working with BHWC. “It has been a breath of fresh air working with Jen and the committee. You guys are doing a great job – keep it up ... I look forward to continuing this work, because there is a lot to do up there.”
- Hired in 2009 as steep slope restoration contractors for NRDP. Watershed Consulting’s job in this area is to restore any areas where you can’t take machinery and where the slopes are too steep to stop sedimentation and get vegetation reestablished;
- Water quality exceedance in California Creek triggered NRDP action to control sediment and establish upland vegetation;
- NRDP has money to restore the Mount Haggin uplands (Mount Haggin WMA from Cabbage Gulch to top of the divide. Thanks to Vanna Boccadori, MFWP, the range was extended over the divide to cover California Creek);
- Mount Haggin Technical Working Group (FWP, Pioneer Technical, Stuart Jennings, DEQ);
- Watershed Consulting has restored uplands through NRDP; wetlands/riparian areas through BHWC/DEQ-319 nonpoint source program

Area Background

- Area heavily harvested for timber ~the turn of the century: 1890s-1900s: 50,000-75,000 cords of wood/year removed for smelter and building;
- ~6-18 inches of soil erosion since 1890 (including the loss of all organics and most water holding capacity);
- Seed sources are few and far between (including weeds);
- These effects combined with moving mineral “soils”, friable bedrock, seed predation, and wind erosion have put the area past its “ecological tipping point”, meaning without restoration, it may never recover;



Above left: Bare upland slope, logged in the 1890s-early 1900s. Above right: Large gullies formed by sediment erosion.

- Sediment erosion caused large gullies to form.
- Most of the metals washed away years ago with the topsoil; metals that remain are under existing vegetation. That makes this not a reclamation issue, but a habitat restoration issue.
- Prior to degradation, this was a completely different landscape than it is now. It used to be lush with beaver, but beaver were removed from the area due to trapping and loss of habitat.
- Plumes can sometimes re-reroute themselves once gullies are plugged. This why we need to revegetate both the uplands and the riparian areas; uplands will continue to erode and form sediment plumes until they are revegetated. It is a possibility that new gullies will form as old ones are plugged up, but we'll address that issue when/if we come to it.
- The one positive – very few weeds on CA Creek!

2013-2015 Work Summary

- Uplands- NRDP:
 - Seeding with amendments;
 - 3.5 miles gully controls;
 - 6 Rock checks.
- Riparian- FWP/DEQ 319:
 - 11 exclosures;
 - 2200 shrubs and trees;
 - Culvert removal and regrade;
 - 100 Beaver Mimic Structures;
 - 600 ft. Bank fascines.
- Road- DEQ 319:
 - 2 new culverts and ditch relief;
 - 1 headcut treatment;
 - 1 road sediment catchment basin.

Upland Restoration – Erosion Control BMPs

- Originally tried “thinking like a 6 year old”. Fill the gullies with fallen trees/debris and see what happens. Helped somewhat but wasn't sufficient to plug the gullies;

- Next installed rock check-dams – these have proven to be more efficient in stopping sediment. The goal now is to wait for the gullies to fill up and then revegetate them;
- Used bank facines (trees cabled into the side of gullies) to slow erosion of sediment from gully banks;
- Had to get inventive in a few places – experimenting with different techniques to see what works best;
- “If we can slow these erosive forces enough that the vegetation starts taking over, at least that’s something.”



Above left and right: Erosion Control BMPs

Wetland Enhancement

- Beaver mimicry structures – installed vegetation to the stream to allow the water table to rise and re-inundate the wetlands – creating conditions that will allow willows, aspen, etc. to reestablish;
- Beavers are free engineers! Hopefully they will reestablish in the area once habitat is in place for them;
- Mimicry structures can lead to dramatic increases in groundwater/the floodplain.

Upland Amendment Trials

- Several bare upland areas;
- Trying soil amendments to encourage reestablishment of vegetation;
- Used both compost and broadcast fertilization;
- Plants bred specifically for low pH and heavy metals tolerance;
- Showing great success; new grasses already starting to grow.

Right: Vegetation beginning to reestablish on amended upland slopes.



Questions

Question: Is MFWP changing beaver trapping regulations on the Mount Haggin WMA to encourage beaver reestablishment?

Answer: They are keeping a close eye on it, but the trapping is currently so low in the area that it's not really an issue. MFWP encourages reestablishment of habitat rather than preserving or reintroducing beaver.

Question: What is the NRDP money for?

Answer: It's for some of the work we're doing up there, but it's on hold until some issues are worked out between NRDP, ARCO, and EPA.

Question: Is there a copper issue in the Big Hole? Where is the copper coming from?

Answer: There is, it is mostly sequestered under vegetation, but during periods of heavy runoff, the copper runs off and levels spike. We are not directly addressing remediation/cleanup of metals – that's ARCO's responsibility. But hopefully there will be some effects to metal content based on the work we're doing to reduce sediment runoff.

Key point: The momentum and excitement that we're building doing this work will hopefully make NRDP more willing to work with us and put money into our projects. We're building our case to get NRDP to allocate funding to this side of the divide.

Question: The NRDP funds being used for this project – is it coming out of the terrestrial and aquatic portion of the NRDP pot of money?

Answer: No, this contract pre-dates the terrestrial/aquatic portions.

Upcoming Meetings

- October 21, 2015, BHWC public meeting, 7pm @ Divide Grange. Topic: French & Moose Creeks Restoration
- November 18, 2015, BHWC public meeting, 6pm @ Divide Grange. Topic: Sage Grouse

Adjourn