

Bitterroot Watershed Partnership
Hamilton, Montana

Annual Report FY 2002



*Bitterroot Mountains from the Lee Metcalf Wildlife Refuge, Stevensville, Montana
Photo by Steve Sherman*

Submitted to: U.S. Forest Service Large-Scale Watershed Restoration Program

November 15, 2002

I. Partnership Overview

The Place

The Bitterroot watershed encompasses approximately 2,800 square miles in southwestern Montana. Nearly 70% of this area is federally owned and managed. Federally owned lands include portions of two national forests (Bitterroot National Forest and Lolo National Forests) as well as a portion of the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness, a component of one of the largest pristine wilderness areas in the lower 48 states and a key protected area in the Yellowstone to Yukon ecoregion. The Bitterroot watershed provides important large-species habitat as well as migratory corridors and linkages; its rivers and streams support populations of bull trout (a federally-listed threatened species) and westslope cutthroat trout (a Montana state sensitive species), as well as a variety of other aquatic species. The watershed's rivers, streams, and associated riparian areas also provide essential resources for many terrestrial species. Most of the privately owned land in the Bitterroot watershed is located in the Bitterroot River valley, and is home to a rapidly growing human population.

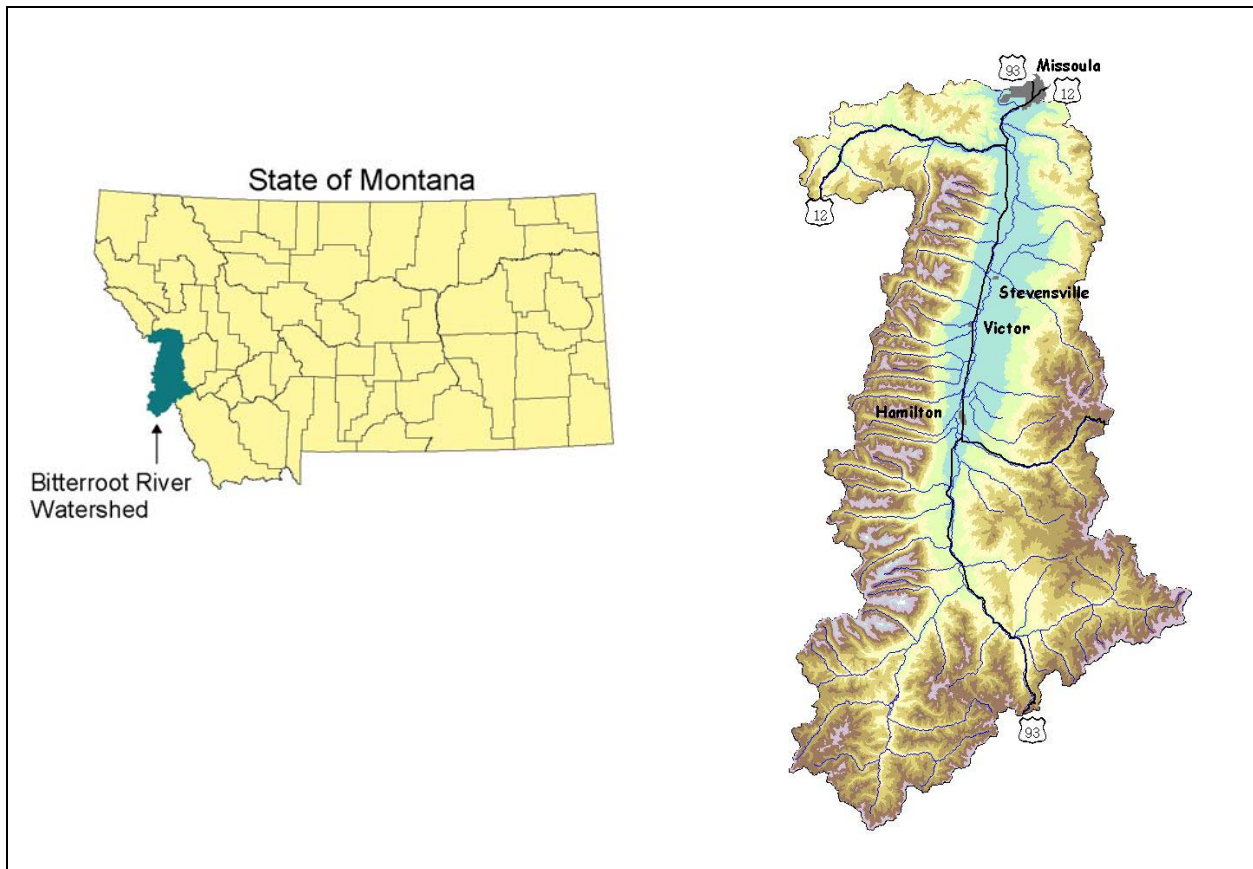


Figure 1. The Bitterroot River watershed.

Ravalli County, whose boundaries coincide with those of much of the Bitterroot watershed, experienced a population increase of 44% during the 1990's, making it Montana's fastest growing county and one of the fastest growing in the U.S. Many new residents have relocated from other parts of the country, drawn in part by the area's rural character and natural beauty. However, the area is being rapidly transformed as former agricultural areas are converted to subdivisions and ranchettes. The Bitterroot watershed was also profoundly impacted by the wildfires of 2000, which burned over 300,000 acres.

The Bitterroot watershed shares much in common with many other gateway communities throughout the west: wildlands are juxtaposed against an increasingly urban landscape; rapid population growth is beginning to undermine the qualities that first attracted new residents; economies once based on agriculture and resource extraction are increasingly service-based; both current land use practices and the legacy of past practices have altered the structure and function of natural systems; and residents are concerned with the loss of traditional ways of life and the degradation of natural resources that provide livelihoods, recreational opportunities, and the dominant character of the landscape. Major threats to the Bitterroot watershed include loss, degradation, and fragmentation of habitat; water diversion from the Bitterroot River and its tributaries for irrigation; over-appropriated water rights; non-point source pollution of streams; forest conditions that depart markedly from historic conditions; impacts from the wildfires of 2000; noxious weeds; and limited public understanding of the ecological and societal costs posed by a degraded watershed. The Bitterroot watershed can be considered a system "at risk," but one with potential for restoration and recovery if action is taken now.

The Partnership

The need for increased communication, collaboration, and coordination among the different entities committed to protecting the natural resource values and way of life in the Bitterroot watershed helped catalyze the formation of the BWP in the spring of 2001. The BWP is governed by a steering committee of 10 members that meets monthly. Steering committee members represent the following organizations, agencies, and businesses: Bitter Root Resource Conservation and Development Area, Bitter Root Water Forum, Bitterroot Chapter of Trout Unlimited, Bitterroot National Forest, Hackett Ag Consulting, Lee Metcalf National Wildlife Refuge, Montana Audubon, Montana Department of Environmental Quality, National Forest Foundation, and Tri-State Water Quality Council. In addition to organizations represented on the steering committee, the partnership includes members such as the Bitterroot Conservation District, Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks, University of Montana, and U.S.D.A. Natural Resources Conservation Service.

BWP's partners all have a history of involvement and interest in restoration and conservation of the Bitterroot watershed. Some have access and authority over significant and important habitat areas. Many have on-going, financed projects. Collectively, BWP's partners supply the knowledge, expertise, and commitment

essential to conservation and restoration of the watershed. The partnership serves the interests of its members by creating a formal structure to identify shared goals and objectives and to define strategies that promote coordination and efficiency in attaining those goals and objectives. Because 70% of the land area within the Bitterroot watershed is federally managed, an important objective is to promote a “boundaryless” approach to restoration and conservation by coordinating activities on public and private lands. The BWP’s steering committee has identified 7 areas of concern which will be addressed by our projects: water quality, instream flows, fisheries, noxious weeds, forest conditions, rural sprawl, and public awareness.

The Mission

The quality of our watershed defines the quality of life we enjoy. The Bitterroot Watershed Partnership is a collaborative group of citizens, organizations, and agencies conserving and enhancing our watershed health through teamwork and local initiatives to benefit our communities.

II. Partnership Goals

The Partnership began a series of strategic planning meetings in May of 2002. Members of BWP’s steering committee have thus far invested three full days in strategic planning, and will be meeting for another day of planning in November of 2002. During these meetings, we have reviewed and refined our mission statement, goals, values, and strategies. We will continue the process of defining strategies and developing specific and measurable objectives during our November meeting.

Goals

Ecological: Support healthy human and ecological communities along our rivers, streams, riparian, and upland areas.

Social: Empower communities to make ecologically responsible decisions.

Economic: Encourage retention, expansion, and development of new economic opportunities to support sound watershed management practices.

Values

Collaboration, healthy natural world, thinking long-term, healthy community, thoughtful land use, tangible results, respecting diversity, cross-boundary approach, environmental-economic connectivity, community engagement

Core Strategy

Our core strategy is to approach restoration and conservation in the Bitterroot watershed in an integrated fashion on a tributary-by-tributary basis, beginning with the highest priority tributaries.

III. Accomplishments

A. Actions

Of the seven projects for which funding was received in FY 2001, BWP has completed five and is on schedule with the other two. Completed projects include: (1) Education and Public Awareness: Initiate Community Education Partnership; (2) Bitterroot Community Conservation Center; (3) Bitterroot Important Bird Areas; (4) Fire-Dependent Birds; and (5) Agricultural Entrepreneurs Support. The two projects which are still underway are (1) Monitoring and Water Resource Center and (2) Model Tributary Stream Restoration. The Education and Public Awareness project involved funding a coordinator to help facilitate communication and coordination among environmental education providers in the Bitterroot watershed, coordinate strategic planning for the group, and assist in development of watershed education activities. Funding for the Community Conservation Center project enabled Montana Audubon to identify a site for a community conservation center in the Bitterroot watershed and to develop a preliminary business plan for the center. The Fire-Dependent Birds and Important Bird Areas projects had several components, including identifying important post-fire habitat, citizen monitoring of bird usage of post-fire habitat, and development of an interpretive trail. The Agricultural Entrepreneurs Support project provided assistance to a dairy farmer seeking to improve manure management to help reduce nutrient pollution of surface and ground water. The Monitoring and Water Resource Center project is developing plans for comprehensive water quality monitoring in the Bitterroot watershed and for a computerized center that will make data available to all interested users. The Model Tributary Stream Restoration involves work on two tributaries of the Bitterroot River, Skalkaho Creek and Threemile Creek. Work on Skalkaho Creek includes development of a plan for restoration of westslope cutthroat trout as well as engineering studies for means to reduce barriers to fish migration associated with irrigation structures in the creek. The Threemile Creek project is featured in Section D of this report.

Other activities sponsored during FY 2002 by the BWP include a two-day workshop on the National Fire Plan and Large-Scale Watershed Restoration Program. The BWP also co-sponsored a forum on noxious weed management for interested landowners and community members.

B. Environmental Consequences/Outcomes

Biological/Physical:

Model Tributary Project, Threemile Creek: Reduction of sediment and sediment-bound nutrients in Threemile Creek; improvement of bank stability; improvement in riparian habitat conditions.

Model Tributary Project, Skalkaho Creek: restoration of migratory populations of westslope cutthroat trout.

Agricultural Entrepreneurs Support: Reduction of surface and groundwater contamination by soluble nutrients.

Socio-economic:

Agricultural Entrepreneurs Support: Development of an additional source of income for the participating farmer (selling composted solids from manure).

All Projects: All BWP projects have an educational/outreach component, such as field tours, to help increase public awareness of the benefits of a healthy watershed. Several projects, including the Environmental Education Partnership, Community Conservation Center, and Fire-Dependent Birds and Important Bird Areas projects had public education as their central focus.

C. Growth

Significant investment in strategic planning has been an important element of the BWP's growth and development as a partnership during the past year. BWP's steering committee members recognize the necessity of planning for clarifying the mission and purpose of the partnership as well as its value for enabling BWP to develop strategies to truly implement a watershed-scale, boundaryless approach to conservation and restoration. BWP's steering committee members and coordinator participated in a two-day facilitated retreat during May of 2002, and held another day-long facilitated session in October. A final day-long facilitated session will be held in November. During these meetings the steering committee reviewed and refined BWP's mission statement, goals, and values, and has made progress toward identifying strategies and developing measurable objectives. Because of uncertainties regarding future funding for BWP, our goal at present is to develop a detailed one-year workplan and set only broad objectives for a 5-year plan.

In addition to match secured for projects funded by the Large-Scale Watershed Restoration Program in FY 2001, we have secured funding from several other sources to help support existing and new projects:

- \$15,000 from U.S.F.S. Region 1 Partnership Funds to support coordination of BWP, including funding for a half-time coordinator and strategic planning
- \$24,500 from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation’s “Bring Back the Natives Program” to conduct a comprehensive analysis of factors limiting recovery of Bull Trout and Westslope Cutthroat Trout populations on several priority tributaries of the Bitterroot River. We will be matching this with \$25,500 in cash and in-kind contributions.
- \$20,000 from River Network to develop restoration and conservation plans for 3 priority tributaries of the Bitterroot River.
- \$5,000 from sources including the Cinnabar Foundation, Bitterroot Chapter of Trout Unlimited, and National Forest Foundation

D. Features

Model Tributary Restoration Project

The BWP’s model tributary restoration project is providing a model not just for tributary restoration, but for how the partnership intends to approach restoration and conservation throughout the watershed. Our approach to restoration of Threemile Creek exemplifies the integrated and cooperative approach we plan to extend to other tributaries of the Bitterroot River. The Threemile Creek watershed has a variety of restoration needs including grazing management, bank stabilization, fisheries restoration, noxious weed management, and fuel load reduction. Threemile Creek carries the largest nutrient load measured for any tributary of the Bitterroot River; initial efforts have focused on identifying sources of sediment and nutrients; grazing management (fencing of selected riparian areas to limit impacts from cattle grazing); flow monitoring (10 sites monitored monthly), and involving students from a local school in water quality monitoring. In addition to Forest Service funding, assistance has been received from the Montana Department of Environmental Quality (319 Program grant) and River Network’s Watershed Assistance Grants program (to help with developing a comprehensive restoration and conservation plan for the creek).



Figure 2. Threemile watershed.

The initial work on Threemile Creek has attracted the attention of additional partners such as the Ravalli County Weed District, which is exploring options for development a weed management area. A visit to the Threemile restoration project was part of a field tour recently held in conjunction with the semi-annual meeting of the Tri-State Water Quality Council, and the project received press coverage when an article about the tour appeared in the local newspaper. The BWP is in the process of identifying all conservation and restoration projects taking place within the Threemile watershed, so that gaps and additional priorities for action can be identified. Plans are also underway for a “Know Your Watershed Workshop” to be offered to residents of the Threemile watershed sometime in 2003.



Figure 3. Lone Rock School.

Involvement and leadership by a variety of partners, including local community members and landowners has been crucial to the success of the project thusfar. In addition to organizations represented on BWP’s steering committee, partners involved to date include the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks, Montana Department of Natural Resources Conservation, Montana Watercourse, and the Lone Rock School.

IV. Challenges and Change

Securing funding is a continuing challenge, particularly given the impact of current economic conditions on private foundations. The BWP initially envisioned seeking 501(3)c status; given funding limitations, we are now evaluating other options such as joining forces with one of our member organizations that is seeking 501(3)c status.

V. Future Actions and Opportunities

During the coming year we plan to complete development of a one-year operational plan, continue implementation of our Monitoring and Water Resource Center and Model Tributary Stream Restoration projects, initiate implementation of the projects funded by the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation and River Network, develop a plan for comprehensive monitoring of watershed health, and develop and seek funding for additional projects as guided by our strategic plan.

V. Partnership Budget/Costs

The initial seven projects selected by the steering committee for funding met one or more of four objectives: habitat conservation and restoration; development of monitoring mechanisms to provide information for decision making; improving understanding and appreciation of the benefits of a healthy watershed; and promoting existing and new economic structures supportive of sound watershed management. Once our strategic plan is completed it will provide important guidance for developing and prioritizing future projects that will help achieve BWP's goals. The BWP has successfully leveraged the funding it received from the Large-Scale Watershed Restoration Program; of the total funding and in-kind support committed in FY2001-FY2002, 26% was received from the Large-Scale Watershed Restoration Program, 19% from the Bitterroot National Forest, and 55% from other federal and non-federal sources.

As a late entry to the national Large-Scale Watershed Restoration Program, the BWP has not had access to large sums of national-level funding and has depended significantly on the Bitterroot National Forest for financial support. Consequently, there will be far less of challenge for us to transition away from nationally-earmarked Forest Service funds. Approximately 35% of BWP's operating capital has been provided by the Bitterroot National Forest from their annual allocations. Our strategy for the future includes an interim phase which is dependent upon continuation of the productive financial relationship we have with the Bitterroot National Forest, coupled with a more aggressive grant writing campaign which has already been successful in securing some non-Forest Service funds. Our long-term goal is to be in a position to accept and wisely use Forest Service funds when they become available, but to not be dependent on them as a source of funds.

Bitterroot Watershed Partnership Organizational Budget

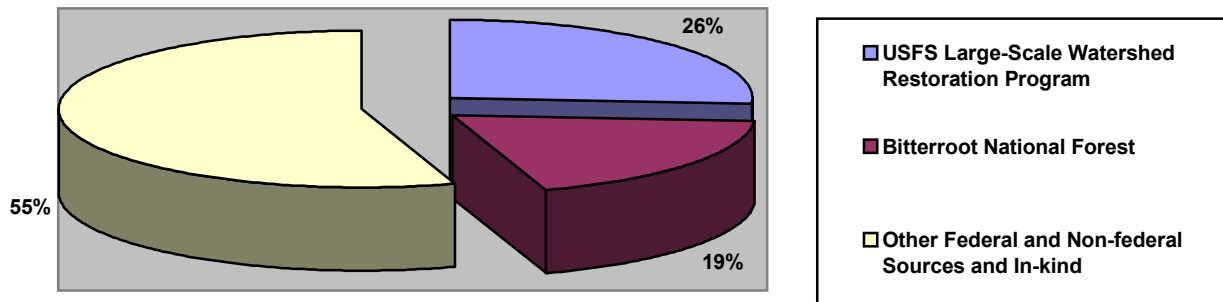
PROGRAM AREAS	Carry Forward 2002 ^A	Income 2002 ^B	Total 2002	Match/ In-Kind Committed ^C	Draft Budget 2002
Operations/Administration					
Coordination	4,811	23,300	28,111	7,100	27,400
Administration	6,460	3,500	9,960		9,960
Projects					
Water Quality/Monitoring	12,491		12,491	7,072	10,000
Model Tributary	16,800	15,000	31,800	25,890	25,000
Community Conservation Center	16,406		16,406	6,884	16,406
Bitterroot Env. Ed. Partnership	4,930		4,930	1,588	4,930
Fire-Dependent Birds	13,109		13,109	3,885	13,109
Important Bird Areas	1,657		1,657	15,140	1,657
Agricultural Entrepreneurs	9,130		9,130	3,420	9,130
Comprehensive Monitoring		9,200	9,200	2,300	
Tributary Assessment		24,500	24,500	25,500	
River Network		20,000	20,000	9,900	
Total	85,794	95,500	181,294	108,679	117,592

A. Carry forward from initial funding of \$92,240 (\$38,900 from USFS Large-Scale Watershed Restoration Program and \$53,340 from the Bitterroot National Forest)

B. 2002 funding: \$35,000 from USFS Large-Scale Watershed Restoration Program, \$15,000 from USFS Region 1 Partnership Funds, \$24,500 from National Fish and Wildlife Foundation Bring Back the Natives Program, \$20,000 from River Network's Watershed Assistance Grants Program, \$1,000 from the Cinnabar Foundation

C. Includes awards of \$2,000 from the Bitterroot Chapter of Trout Unlimited and the National Forest Foundation.

Distribution of Funding and In-kind Sources for Bitterroot Watershed Partnership, FY 2001-2002



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