

BIG HOLE WATERSHED COMMITTEE

FALL 2023 NEWSLETTER

Collaborative conservation
for the Big Hole River watershed
since 1995.



BIG HOLE
WATERSHED COMMITTEE
Conservation Through Consensus.

P.O. Box 21
Divide, Montana 59727
406-960-4855
bhwc.org



In the breathtaking Big Hole Valley, our collaborative watershed group is forging a legacy of environmental stewardship that echoes across the valleys and mountains.



Read on for details about the Committee's tireless efforts to maintain, manage, and enhance our precious river and the communities & wildlife that depend upon it!

Big Hole Watershed Committee

Governing Board

Randy Smith
Chairman, Rancher
Jim Hagenbarth
Vice Chair, Rancher
Steve Luebeck
Treasurer, Sportsman
Roy Morris
Secretary, George Grant
Trout Unlimited

Dave Ashcraft
Rancher, Business Owner

Sean Claffey
The Nature Conservancy

Peter Frick
Rancher

Jim Keenan
BSB Cty. Water Utility

Liz Jones
Rancher

Mark Kambich
Rancher

Erik Kalsta
Rancher

Dean Peterson
Rancher

Phil Ralston
Rancher

John Reinhardt
Rancher

John Jackson
BVHD Cty. Commission

Andy Suenram
Resident/Bus. Owner

Eric Thorson
Guiding/Outfitting

Paul Cleary
Resident

Mark Raffety
Rancher

Brian Wheeler
Big Hole River Foundation

Diane Hutton
Resident

JM Peck
Rancher

Staff

Pedro Marques
Executive Director

Tana (Nulph) Lynch
Associate Director

Ben LaPorte
Program Manager

Chet Robertson
UBH Range Rider

Johnathan Costa
Wildlife Program Tech.

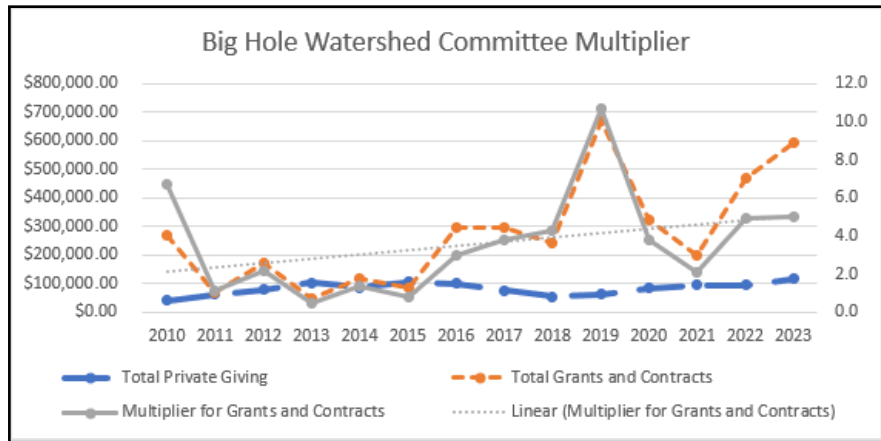
Allyson Allen
MCC Conservation Fellow*
*Ally's term ended October 2023

Beneath the Surface, Above the Noise

Thoughts from Pedro Marques, Executive Director

Gazing out over the Big Hole River this past August, I chuckled at the irony. Fresh out of a meeting with the Governor, where BHWC had a seat at the table to discuss the fishery "disaster," I was watching a river go by at bankful levels after the 3rd large rain event of the month ... in August! By most accounts, 2023 was a banner year for fishing. Those who ignored the headlines and kept their August bookings were treated to some of the world's best fishing with a fraction of the people. At the same time, irrigators got all the water they needed.

When the fisheries numbers were released in March, we braced for the worst year ever as the headlines started to roll out. Looking back now, what did all the publicity about the Big Hole get us? Who were the winners and losers with all the hysteria? Would the State have implemented their fisheries study without all the alarm bells? Since we won't see results of the fisheries studies for years, what's next? Isn't the Big Hole about more than fish?



While BHWC staff and Board members provided important context and commentary when asked, we tried not to add to the noise. We kept our heads down and did the work our streams, wetlands, and forests needed us to do. We know how to support landowners to avoid conflict with predators; we know how to fix degraded streams and crumbling irrigation infrastructure; and we know how to bring the right people to the table to solve resource issues. Most importantly, we know how to hold competing ideas in the same space, allowing dialogue and quiet progress—and consensus—to win the day.

Without fanfare or press coverage, in 2023 we got a Superfund site checked off the list by EPA on Mt. Haggin; we documented a 150% reduction in sediment beyond what the DEQ recommended for the entire Deep Creek drainage; we helped stock French Creek with the second largest native fish project in Montana history; We secured support for full-blown restoration of the Elkhorn mine site and Coolidge Ghost Town; we completed a major wetland project on private ground outside of Wisdom; and we delivered conifer projects for the BLM and the Forest Service. Along the way, we managed to inspire young conservationists—from our Conservation Fellow to two cohorts of the Wild Rockies Field Institute, Montana Conservation Corps, and Youth Employment Program laborers, and countless others who saw our videos. And I hope we inspired you, whose generous support makes it all possible!

Welcome, JM!

Our New Board Member

In October, we were delighted to welcome JM Peck to our Board of Directors. JM was raised in Melrose at the Trapper Creek Ranch. Armed with a mechanical engineering degree, a passion for educating young ranchers, and a desire to unite river users, we know JM will be a great addition to our board.



Photo: Meagan Thompson, MT Standard

Please join us in extending a warm welcome to JM. Here's to a future marked by collaboration and success!



Photo: Duncan Adams, MT Standard

Activities & Events

Join Us in Divide or on Zoom

Monthly Public Meetings at the Divide Grange

Please join us on the 3rd Wednesday of each month (except July and December) for our monthly public meetings! We meet at 7 pm (or 6 pm February & November) at the Divide Grange Hall. You can also join us via Zoom. In January, we meet at Fairmont for our annual business meeting, which is for board & staff only.



Our meetings include committee reports, project updates, new business, time for discussion, coffee & snacks, and special topic presentations. We are already lining up speakers for 2024: you can expect to hear about fisheries research, USFS work on Elkhorn, invasive weeds, wildlife, and more. Have a relevant topic you'd like to share with us? Reach out to Tana at tlynch@bhwc.org or (406) 267-3421!

Saving the Trout

Governor Gianforte Visits Wise River

In response to diminished trout numbers in the Jefferson Basin, Governor Greg Gianforte organized a roundtable dialogue in Wise River in early August. The discussion brought together over 100 attendees, including fishing guides, anglers, irrigators, agricultural producers, biologists, and a seat at the table for BHWC.

Trout numbers in the Big Hole have been on a steady decline since 2011. In response, MFWP and Montana State University have initiated research initiatives aiming to investigate fish mortality, juvenile fish dynamics, and overall fish health and seeking a comprehensive understanding of the factors contributing to these declines. MFWP also introduced sickfish.mt.gov, urging Montanans to actively report instances of sick or dying fish, fostering community engagement in monitoring and addressing the issue.



According to the Governor, "Addressing this issue must involve all of us working together. Let's continue to strengthen our partnership and develop meaningful, consensus-driven solutions." We couldn't agree more.

Big Hole Watershed Committee

Mastering Skills & Making Memories on Mount Haggin

Montana Conservation Corps Fellow Ally Allen Reflects on Her Time with BHWC

A heartfelt **THANK YOU** to MCC Conservation Fellow, Ally Allen, who did fantastic work for us over the summer. We were amazed by everything she accomplished! The summer flew by while Ally built hundreds of Beaver Dam Analogs (BDAs) and visited national and state parks by the dozens. When her time was up, parting was bittersweet as she moved on to her next adventure. But we know she will do great things, and we look forward to hearing about them!

Here's what Ally had to say about her time in the Big Hole:

"My time in the Big Hole has been nothing short of amazing. It has been a journey during which I've acquired invaluable lessons and experiences that I will forever cherish. The Big Hole Watershed Committee has been an exceptional source of support, expertise, and opportunities throughout this adventure. I've had the privilege of immersing myself in the various aspects of the watershed, connecting with landowners, and actively participating in a multitude of restoration efforts. I've had

the chance to be involved in various low-tech and high-tech process-based restoration projects, conduct a wide array of surveys, and gather different types of field measurements.

This experience has deepened my understanding of the cherished Big Hole River and its ecosystem, instilling a profound knowledge and appreciation for this remarkable place that we all hold dear. I am immensely grateful for what has been the most enriching summer/fall season of my life. Thank you for providing me with this unparalleled opportunity to contribute to the conservation and restoration of the Big Hole Watershed. This journey has left an indelible mark on my heart, and I look forward to carrying the lessons and memories with me into the future."

"... the most enriching summer/fall season of my life."

Program Manager Ben LaPorte added: *"Ally showed confidence and eagerness to learn from the very beginning of her internship, and she carried these traits and her enthusiasm all the way through her time with BHWC! We got a lot done this year in our Restoration Program thanks to Ally's help. Ally has all the right attributes to be successful in whatever field she chooses. We really lucked out with her as our Conservation Fellow. Good luck, Ally, and thank you!"*

Photos: Top right: Ally in front of "her" valley. Bottom left: Ally measuring how much sediment could be stored behind erosion control structures BHWC and partners installed on Mount Haggin. Bottom right: The queen of BDAs! Ally building BDA structures with the Youth Employment Program (YEP).



Join the Flow—Add a Drop!

Make a Difference Today by Joining BHWC!

As the rhythmic flow of our river continues, so does our commitment to its conservation and restoration. It's time to roll up our sleeves, put on our waders, and take action for the lifeline that sustains our communities and ecosystems.

Why Our River Needs You

Our river is more than just a body of water; it is the vein that connects landscapes, wildlife habitats, and human communities. Just as the river connects the aspects of the ecosystem, BHWC connects the experts, the partners, and the landowners to get work done. Now, more than ever, we need your support to ensure the vitality of this precious waterway.



Ways You Can Wade In

1. **Volunteer:** Your time is a valuable gift. Attend our meetings or get on the ground with us to be part of the change!
2. **Spread the Word:** Help us amplify our message by sharing our cause on your social media platforms. Every share is a step toward building a stronger, more supportive community.
3. **Donate:** Your financial support is crucial for the success of our projects. Consider making a donation to the Big Hole Watershed Committee and be a catalyst for positive change.



- Donate online: Point your phone's camera at this QR code or visit bhwc.org.
- Donate by text: BIGHOLE to 26989 to donate from your phone.
- Donate by mail: Send checks to P.O. Box 21, Divide, MT 59727.
- Donate livestock: Click for more information: bhwc.org/giving/livestock.
- Give extra through partner businesses in the [Big Hole Conservation Fund](https://bhwc.org).
- Contact us by phone (406-960-4855) or email (info@bhwc.org) to donate items for auction or raffle.



Together, we can create waves of positive change. Thank you for being a vital part of our mission to conserve and protect our river for generations to come.

Big Hole Watershed Committee

Building Drought Resilience in the Big Hole

Informing and Connecting our River's Users

BHWC Installs Informative Signs at Fishing Access Sites

In a collaborative effort to promote awareness and responsible use of the Big Hole River, the BHWC has installed informative signs at Fishing Access Sites along this iconic waterway. Made possible through generous funding from the Bureau of Reclamation (BoR), the Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC), and Beaverhead County United Way, these signs are intended to educate all river users about our resource.

The first wave of signs is already making its mark along the banks of the Big Hole River, with more installations planned for the spring. At BHWC, we are thrilled to bring these educational tools directly to the heart of the action—the Fishing Access Sites—ensuring that water users gain a deeper understanding of our intricate web of water.

The signs are a testament to the power of community collaboration in preserving and enhancing our natural resources. They highlight major water uses, emphasizing the interconnectedness of various stakeholders in maintaining the health and sustainability of the Big Hole River.

At the heart of this initiative is a desire to empower people with knowledge about the vital role they can play in the watershed and how to learn more about the BHWC and contribute to our cause.

Your river, your community—let the signs guide the way to a more informed and connected future.



Weekly Water Supply Reports

Text DROUGHT to 26989 to sign up



Text messages sent weekly
May - October

Know the Flow Before You Go

Get River Conditions via Text

How are the flows today? Is the river open?

Picture this: every week, right at your fingertips, receive crucial information on river flows, water temperatures, 3-day trends, and the status of different river sections.

Sign up now and let the currents of knowledge guide your next aquatic adventure! It's as simple as texting "DROUGHT" to 26989.

Building Drought Resilience in the Big Hole

Fall/Winter 2023 Snowpack & Climate Forecast

-Kaitlin Boren, Hydrologist, Montana Dept. of Natural Resources and Conservation

Streamflow: Flows & temperatures in the Big Hole River are at or above normal rates and conditions with the changing of the seasons and the steady precipitation the watershed has received this fall. Late fall precipitation prior to the late October snowfall event provided excellent moisture for the soils leading into winter.

Snowpack: Water year 2024 officially kicked off on October 1, 2023. With the advent of the new year, higher elevations have seen several snowfall events which bodes well for snowpack generation in the early winter season.

Forecast: El Nino conditions persist. NOAA predicts an 80% chance of persistent conditions through the spring of 2024. There are equal chances of above or below average precipitation through the winter season, and temperatures are predicted to be above average.

Water Year Wrap-Up

2023 was a good year for the Big Hole River. The streamflow conditions during the summer were due to consistent precipitation in the later summer months, the continuation of conservation projects with the Upper Big Hole Artic Grayling CCAA and the BHWC, and generous landowner water contributions.

Water temperatures on the river were average or slightly below average during the summer months, with the highest monthly average, not surprisingly, during the month of July (Figure 1). Streamflow during the water year peaked in early June and reached the lowest flows in mid-August. There was a continued upward trend in late summer flows due to the success of water conservation efforts by the Big Hole River landowners, BHWC, and the CCAA (Figure 2).

Helpful Resources

- BHWC River Conditions webpage: <https://bhwc.org/river-conditions/>
- DNRC Stream and Gage Explorer (StAGE): <https://gis.dnrc.mt.gov/apps/StAGE/>
- MFWP Current Water Body Restrictions: <https://fwp.mt.gov/news/current-closures-restrictions/waterbody-closures>
- US Drought Monitor — Montana: <https://droughtmonitor.unl.edu/CurrentMap/StateDroughtMonitor.aspx?MT>

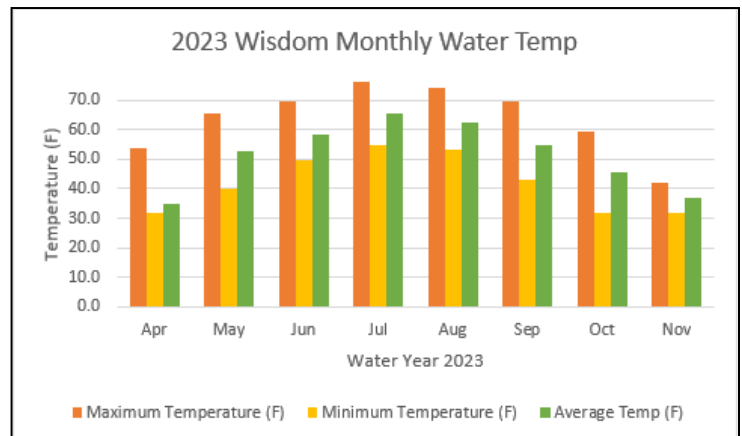


Figure 1. Wisdom USGS Gage (06024550) Water Year 2023 average monthly temperature, and minimum and maximum values.

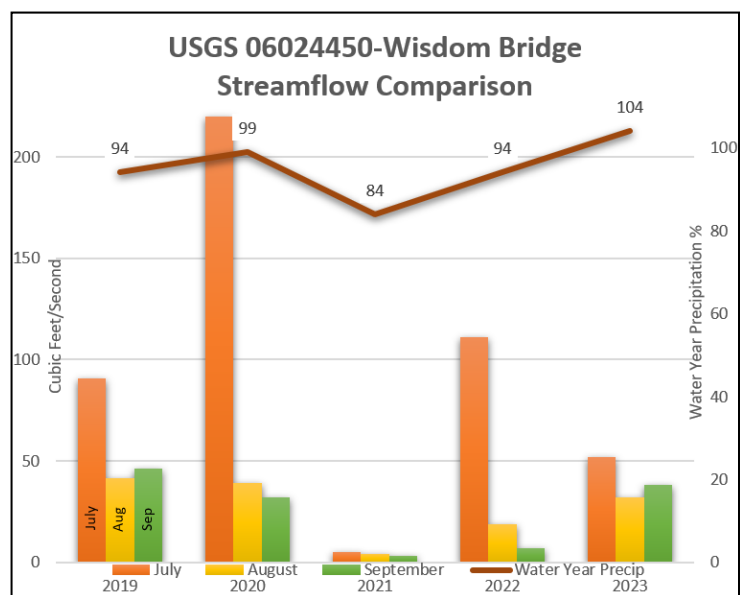


Figure 2. Wisdom USGS Gage (06024550) Average streamflow in late summer months and associated precipitation.

Big Hole Watershed Committee

Fish & Water

And the Work Goes On

BHWC and Partners Monitor Progress and Build BDAs on Mount Haggin

Our work continues on one of the watershed's most degraded landscapes, the Mount Haggin uplands! BHWC and partners have been collaborating for nearly a decade to repair this landscape, which was damaged by historic mining, smelting, and logging.

In 2023, BHWC and partners built 236 in-stream structures (BDAs) and 30 gully check dam structures, treated 1,341 feet of erosive gullies, seeded and fertilized 24 acres of bare hillsides, and sprayed 207 acres for weeds throughout the Mount Haggin WMA. We also helped MFWP complete 39 acres of aspen enhancement and treat 10,660 feet of gully erosion in the North California Creek drainage. That's a lot of work!

Over the summer, we monitored and surveyed previously installed gully check dams to see how well they're holding back sediment.

You can learn more about this project here: bhwc.org/project/mount-haggin-anaconda-uplands/.

Thank you to our 2023 project partners: NRDP, MFWP, MDEQ, Watershed Consulting, Watershed Restoration Group, MCC, and Wild Rockies Field Institute.



Cleaning Up the Mine at Coolidge

Forest Partners Rally around Elkhorn Project

Momentum has been building behind our work at the Elkhorn Creek, Mine, and Mill, where soil and water still exceeds DEQ contamination standards nearly sixty years after mining operations ceased.

BHWC and a variety of partners have been working since 2020 to characterize the site and inform the eventual remediation and restoration. Work completed to date includes:

- Collection and lab analysis of surface water, groundwater; adit infiltration study (2021 and 2022)
- Pilot biofiltration demonstration and metals loading study (2022)
- Repository investigation, cultural inventory (2023)
- Preliminary restoration and biofiltration designs (in-progress)

In October, BHWC met on-site with the Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest, the USFS regional office, DNRC, and Pioneer Technical Services to discuss project status and next steps. Remediation is expected to take place in 2026.

You can learn more about this project here: bhwc.org/project/elkhorn-mine.

Thank you to our 2023 project partners: USFS, DNRC, and Pioneer Technical Services.

Fish & Water

Stabilizing Headcuts at Smith-Sage Springs

Wet Meadow Restoration Repairs Habitat for Pronghorn, Sage Grouse, Fish

We completed construction this fall on our Smith-Sage Springs mesic restoration project. This wet meadow provides important habitat for a variety of species including sage grouse and pronghorn. The wetland was experiencing severe headcutting due to increased flow and vegetation modifications from historic grazing and irrigation. The project stabilized the headcut and regraded the eroding stream banks, restoring hydrological connectivity and improving wetland conditions.



We also assisted MFWP with shocking and salvaging Westslope Cutthroat trout from the system prior to construction and drafted a DEQ-approved monitoring plan for the project. Additionally, we contracted Tom Attwater Media to create a short film about the project. Make sure to subscribe to our YouTube channel (youtube.com/big-hole-watershed-committee) to see it when it comes out! Learn more about the project here: bhwc.org/project/smith-sage.

Thank you to our project partners: USFWS–Partners for Fish & Wildlife, MFWP, the CCAA, DEQ, George Grant TU, SW MT Sagebrush Partnership, Trout & Salmon Foundation, Bass Pro Shop, Glacier Excavating, Confluence Consulting, and private landowners.

YEP! Summer 2023 “Rocked”

BHWC and Partners Install Low-Tech Structures in the Eastern Pioneers

We had the pleasure of working with the Youth Employment Program (YEP) from Dillon over the summer when they helped us install Zeedyke and log structures in the Eastern Pioneers! Along with YEP, we maintained 60 low-tech, process-based restoration (LTPBR) structures and built 97 new ones to trap sediment, spread water, and raise the water table! Work was completed in mainstem Brown’s Gulch and intermittent tributaries of Brown’s Gulch and Trapper Creek. These structures will store spring runoff, soak the sponge, and help reestablish native plants in degraded riparian areas.

You can learn more about this project here: bhwc.org/project/eastern-pioneers.

Thank you to our project partners: BLM, YEP-Dillon, TNC-Southwest Montana Sagebrush Partnership, Wild Rockies Field Institute, and volunteers.



Big Hole Watershed Committee

Fish & Water

Too Many Trees = Not Enough Water

BHWC & Partners Cut Conifers at Trail Creek

We recently completed conifer reduction work in the Trail Creek area, where in 2021, fire wreaked havoc on the landscape. BHWC and partners removed 507 acres of conifers to conserve water and maintain the existing grassland/willow habitat. Proactively removing expanding conifers will allow valuable riparian shrub/willow habitat to flourish. Removing competition for resources in this grassland habitat will positively impact forb production over time.

This project will also aid in late-season water availability, because fewer straws (trees) equals more water. Conifers removed were less than or equal to 8" diameter.

Future stream enhancements are also planned for this area, including installation of low-tech, process-based structures near the Hogan Cabin to recharge groundwater and reestablish wetland vegetation. Project planning and scoping is currently in progress. Construction is expected to take place in 2025.

Thank you to our project partners: USFS, Anchor Habitat Land Management, Worman Forest Management, and YEP-Dillon.



Wildlife & Uplands

Nature's Engineers—or a Nuisance?

BHWC Helps Landowners Live with Beavers

In September, we installed two pond levelers on private property in Mudd Creek where beavers were causing problems for the landowners by flooding neighboring pastures. The structures will maintain the ponds at a level set by the landowner, preventing flooding while also keeping beaver in the system.

Often regarded as both ecosystem engineers and occasional challenges, beavers play a vital role in maintaining healthy landscapes. While their dam-building activities can pose issues for irrigators, it's crucial to recognize the ecological benefits they bring, such as water filtration, habitat creation, and flood control. BHWC comprehends the delicate balance between coexistence and conflict with these industrious creatures. We excel in addressing beaver-related issues, ensuring harmony between their presence and human needs. If you're facing challenges or seeking ways to foster a balanced ecosystem, we invite you to reach out to our Programs Manager, Ben LaPorte, at blaporte@bhwc.org or 303-808-5611. Let's collaborate to keep beavers on the landscape while effectively addressing concerns.



Wildlife & Uplands

Sharing the Landscape with Carnivores

Conflict Reduction Workshop Drives Momentum for Collaborative Solutions

In a collaborative effort to advance carnivore conflict prevention, multiple BHCW board and staff members attended a workshop titled "Delivering Carnivore Conflict Prevention: A Workshop to Advance Partnerships and Solutions" in mid-June in Missoula. Tana took center stage with an insightful panel presentation, sharing valuable expertise and representing BHCW. Chet, our dedicated range rider, engaged attendees with discussions about his on-the-ground work. This dynamic participation underscores BHCW's commitment to fostering partnerships and implementing effective solutions for carnivore conflict reduction in the Big Hole watershed.



The workshop brought together a diverse range of voices to share experiences and challenges of living and working in landscapes with carnivores. Participants explored a common vision for opportunities and solutions that support the cohabitation of working lands and large carnivores.

There is a growing momentum to enhance collaboration between state, Tribal agencies, and federal entities, bringing with it technical and financial assistance, coordinated efforts in implementing conflict prevention practices, and the funding needed to run these programs.

The ultimate aim is to establish long-term strategies that mitigate conflicts between agricultural operations and wildlife and sustained funding for programs like ours.



A Baker's Dozen

Our Range Rider Program Turns Thirteen

For thirteen summers, BHCW's Range Rider Chet Robertson has patrolled summer grazing allotments in the Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest near Wisdom & Jackson, keeping an eye on predator activity and monitoring livestock conditions.

In 2023, there were zero confirmed livestock depredations on grazing allotments enrolled in our range rider program, even though our game cameras show wolves, mountain lions, and black bears in abundance and even an occasional grizzly bear. While it's tough to prove what was prevented, we like to think that Chet's presence on the landscape is helping to deter conflicts. And as we continue to see more grizzly bears move through and possibly into our watershed, his work will only become more important. So, thank you Chet, for your dedication all of these years—and here's to many more!



Thank you to our 2023 project partners: USFS, NRCS, Livestock Loss Board, Heart of the Rockies Initiative, WLA, and program enrollees.

Big Hole Watershed Committee
P.O. Box 21
Divide, MT 59727

**Non Profit
Organization
US Postage
PAID
Permit #16
Butte, MT**

Return Service Requested

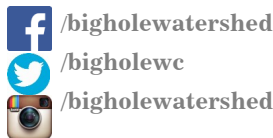
FALL 2023 NEWSLETTER



**BIG HOLE
WATERSHED COMMITTEE**
Conservation Through Consensus.

P.O. Box 21
Divide, Montana 59727

Phone: 406-960-4855
E-mail: info@bhwc.org



Conservation Through Consensus Since 1995

Mission: To seek understanding and agreement among individuals and groups with diverse viewpoints on water use and management in the Big Hole River watershed of Southwest Montana.

Established in 1995, the Big Hole Watershed Committee (BHWC) is a collaborative organization representing diverse regional interests, including ranchers, sportsmen, conservationists, tourists, and community members. For two decades, BHWC has taken a leadership role in enhancing the vitality of the Big Hole River, the surrounding watershed and communities, and the diverse and rare wildlife that inhabits the Big Hole Valley. The Big Hole River is the lifeblood for the surrounding area's natural and agricultural legacies, and the foundation for the region's economy. By proactively working to conserve this precious resource, BHWC is enriching one of Montana's last, best places for local residents and visitors from around the world.

BHWC is a consensus-driven, multi-stakeholder entity that works closely with other conservation organizations as well as local, State, and Federal agencies on watershed restoration and management plans.

The Big Hole Watershed Committee is a non-profit, tax-exempt charitable organization under Section 501(c)3 of the Internal Revenue Code. Donations are tax deductible as allowable by law. *Our tax identification number is 11-3737644.*

Donate online!
Visit bhwc.org and click
the "Donate" button.