

BIG HOLE WATERSHED COMMITTEE

FALL 2024 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



Photo: Tom Bowler



In the stunning Big Hole Valley, our collaborative watershed group is creating a legacy of environmental stewardship that resonates from valleys to mountains. Read on to learn about the Committee's relentless work to conserve, manage, and enhance our valuable river, along with the communities and wildlife that rely on it!

Big Hole Watershed Committee

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Johnathan Costa
Wildlife Program Tech
Justin Cottingham
Wildlife Program Tech

Constant Change with Rivers and Conservation

Thoughts from Pedro Marques, BHWC Executive Director

As we close another year delivering important projects and continuing to bring people together, I can safely say that watershed work, like the river we work for, is never stagnant. Every season the river responds to different amounts of precipitation, delivered by clouds at different times and amounts every year. Natural resources are dynamic, and need to be. The variable is how we deal with change. With so much at stake, people's emotions rise and fall with river levels, and we hear it all.

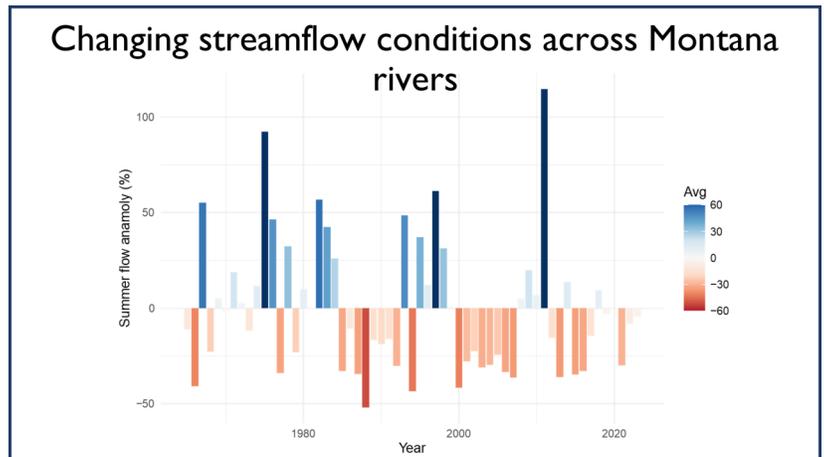
As the Big Hole's preeminent conservation organization, we believe people and the river deserve consistency and leadership so we can effect change where it is possible; even when the seasons change for our organization also.

After 8 years of funding a full-time Restoration Program Manager, Ben's departure this fall marks the end of a period of intense focus delivering some of the State's most consistent and significant restoration programs.

We accomplished the highest priority goal of our existing Watershed Restoration Plan in the French Creek drainage, delivering a checked-off Superfund site and over a dozen projects that set habitat and passage for a native fish stronghold along 51 miles of cold headwaters.

In this new season, BHWC is shifting its focus to thoughtfully plan for the next chapter for the Big Hole and to write a new Restoration Plan with funding from the Bureau of Reclamation's WaterSMART program. Our plate is still full of project work and thanks to trusted partnerships and skilled contractors, we will continue to get the jobs done. We are attracting the next generation of conservation leaders to the Big Hole, leading innovation for the State with our exploration of natural water storage, cloud seeding, and generating water by reducing conifer encroachment.

Every third Wednesday (except July and December), our Governing Board will continue to lead the way at the Grange Hall in Divide, creating space for science-based decision-making and collaboration, the consistency we need in the world of water, which is constantly changing.



Source: Tim Cline, Montana State University

Knowledge We Have Gained

Takeaways from Our Monthly Meetings

1. [Regenerative Land Solutions](#) improves soil and combats weeds using biology (bacterial and fungal soil amendments).
2. Thirty landowners and 167,084 acres are enrolled in the Upper Big Hole Arctic Grayling CCAA program. In 2024, landowners met their flow targets 54% of the time (which is pretty good considering the water year we had).
3. Flood-irrigated grass hay represents just 3% of irrigated lands, but supports:
 - 58% of the temporary wetlands and
 - 20% of the seasonal wetlands in the Intermountain West (Donnelly et al. 2024).
4. Flood-irrigated grass-hay supports 60% of the temporary wetlands used by breeding greater sandhill cranes in the West (Donnelly et al. 2024).
5. Many western states already utilize cloud seeding, including Idaho, Wyoming, Colorado, Utah, Nevada, and California. DNRC will be doing a pilot study to assess the potential for cloud seeding in the Big Hole.
6. Regionally and statewide, brown trout populations have decreased since the 1980s with decreasing streamflow (Cline et al. 2022).

An Unforgettable Summer

Thoughts from Emma, Our 2024 Summer Intern

My name is Emma Roginski, and I'm a 3rd year undergraduate student studying environmental science at the University of California, Davis. This summer, I've had the pleasure of interning for the Big Hole Watershed Committee to support their restoration efforts in the Anaconda Uplands. During my time at BHWC, I've had the opportunity to work on a variety of different restoration projects, all of which reinforced my passion for restoration and ecology. One of the first projects I worked on was alongside Watershed Restoration Group, building gully check dams and gully slash filters in the Anaconda Uplands to mitigate sediment erosion and buildup in downstream waterbodies. I went on



to work on the Future Fisheries Improvement Program monitoring projects, which involved visiting completed restoration project sites and reporting back on their current status. I've really enjoyed working on Future Fisheries projects, as they have given me the chance to observe multiple different types of restoration practices, connect with local ranchers, and gain a deeper understanding of what long-lasting, self-sustaining ecosystem restoration looks like.

Another project I've enjoyed working on is the First Chance Gulch Habitat Improvement project. I've had the special opportunity to be very involved in this project and see it through until the end. Alongside 3 different crews, including Montana Conservation Corps, Wild Rockies Field Institute, and Watershed Restoration Group, we built 153 in-stream log structures in First Chance Gulch and French Creek, which will establish pool habitat and enhance channel complexity for the health of the Big Hole Watershed's native fishery. I've found

it especially exciting to work with a variety of restoration crews and share in the reward of a project's success.

From writing up monitoring reports on my computer to getting my hands dirty with uplands work and stream work, I couldn't be happier to spend a summer doing what I love in the Big Hole Watershed.

Big Hole Watershed Committee

Activities & Events

Join Us in Divide or on Zoom

Monthly Public Meetings at the Divide Grange

Join us for our monthly public meetings on the 3rd Wednesday of each month, except July and December. We gather at 7 PM (or 6 PM in February and November) at the Divide Grange Hall. Alternatively, you can participate via Zoom. Our meetings include committee reports, project updates, new business, time for discussion, coffee & snacks, and special topic presentations. For more information, visit bhwc.org/monthly-meetings.

Have a relevant topic you'd like to share with us? Reach out to Associate Director Tana Lynch at tlynch@bhwc.org or (406) 267-3421 to inquire how to get on our list of monthly meeting speakers!

Getting Our Name (and Story) Out There

Updating Our Communications and Branding

We have been working diligently to enhance our communications and branding efforts, ensuring that our message resonates with our community and stakeholders. This year, our board members and monthly meeting speakers received branded tumblers. Our staff got hats and sweatshirts, and we're always giving away stickers and magnets. These items not only help spread the word about our mission but also allow our supporters to show their enthusiasm and pride in our work.

This year, with support from the Montana Association of Conservation Districts, we also invested in new equipment for outreach events, which we showed off at the 2024 Montana Folk Festival in Butte (see photo below). Joined by Butte Silver Bow Water Utility Department, we hosted a chilled water-filling station complete with misters, which helped us connect with parched music-lovers and expand our reach!

We also found a new printing partner for our newsletters which now allows us to showcase our projects, achievements, and upcoming initiatives in full color! For our monthly meetings, we invested in an Owl camera to improve the experience for our online audience.

Finally, we've been working closely with publishers to produce articles that highlight our organization's work and impact. These collaborations have provided valuable exposure and have helped tell our story to a broader audience, ultimately strengthening our brand and furthering our mission. To see what we mean, read this article published in International Business Times:

[*Ripples of Change: The Impactful Work of the Big Hole Watershed Committee.*](#)

These enhancements represent just the beginning of our commitment to improving how we engage with, grow, and build are community of supporters of the Big Hole.



Support the Big Hole River Now for a Sustainable Future

Your Donation Supports Conservation Now, and for the Next Decade

Our cherished river, the heart of our communities and ecosystems, flows with a timeless grace, nurturing everything in its path. Yet, this crucial resource is now confronted with unprecedented challenges that threaten both its health and the well-being of those who rely on it. This is where your support is needed.

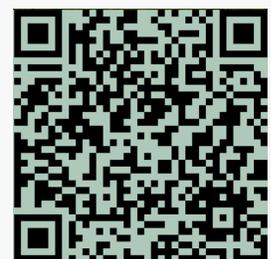
At the Big Hole Watershed Committee, we are deeply committed to maintaining and restoring our river, along with the communities and habitats it supports. Our efforts include removing harmful pollutants, restoring native vegetation, and ensuring that the river continues to flow cold, clean, and abundant for the diverse species and businesses that depend on it. Most critically, we create space for dialogue among people who might otherwise not sit down together to find common ground.



But we need your help! Please join us. This is an all hands on deck mission, and every contribution makes an impact. Your support will enable us to:

- Roll up our sleeves and develop and execute innovative conservation and restoration initiatives.
- Put on our waders and revitalize & improve natural habitats to support a vibrant ecosystem for wildlife.
- Involve and educate communities on resource challenges and methods to protect our river for future generations.

- **Donate online:** Simply point your phone's camera at this QR code
 - Or visit bhwc.org
 - *We have one-time, monthly, and round-up options!*
- **Donate by text:** BIGHOLE to 26989 to donate from your phone
- **Send us a check:** BHWC, P.O. Box 21, Divide, MT 59727



Big Hole Watershed Committee

Building Drought Resilience in the Big Hole

A Challenging Year for Water (or Lack Thereof)

2024 Fishing Restrictions & Closures

We had a rocky start to the summer when the entire Big Hole River was put under hoot owl fishing restrictions (no fishing after 2:00 pm—the hottest part of the day) in mid-July due to high water temperatures. Sections 1 and 5 remained closed for the rest of the water year, with Section 2 joining in late August. Sections 3 and 4 bounced between hoot owls and closure until mid-September. Lack of precipitation didn't help, making for a tough summer for everyone.

BHWC and partners on the drought subcommittee reviewed the [Big Hole River Drought Management Plan](#) and made the decision to close Section 3 when Section 4 hits closure criteria to prevent commercial angling concentration on Section 3. You can view the plan and check out current river conditions (during the water year) by visiting bhwc.org/river-conditions. The Drought Subcommittee will meet this winter to review the 2024 season, update the DMP as needed, and plan for 2025.

2024 Fishing Restrictions		
<i>River Section</i>	<i>Temperature-based Fishing Restrictions</i>	<i>Flow-based Fishing Restrictions</i>
Section I: Saginaw Bridge on Skinner Meadows Road to North Fork Big Hole River confluence	Hoot owl restriction (7/10 to 8/5 when moved to closure) <i>27 days</i>	Full fishing closure (8/6 to 10/31) <i>87 days</i>
Section II: North Fork Big Hole River confluence to Dickie Bridge	Hoot owl restriction (7/12 to 8/5) <i>25 days</i> (8/6 to 8/16) <i>11 days</i>	Full fishing closure (8/31 to 10/21) <i>52 days</i>
Section III: Dickie Bridge to MFWP Maidenrock FAS	Hoot owl restriction (7/12 to 8/2 when moved to closure) <i>22 days</i> (8/6 to 8/16) <i>11 days</i>	Full fishing closure (8/3 to 8/5) <i>2 days</i> (8/31 to 9/19) <i>20 days</i>
Section IV: MFWP Maidenrock FAS to Tony Schoonen FAS	Hoot owl restriction (7/12 to 8/27) <i>47 days</i>	Full fishing closure (8/3 to 8/5) <i>2 days</i> (8/31 to 9/19) <i>20 days</i>
Section V: Tony Schoonen FAS to confluence with Jefferson River	Hoot owl restriction (7/10 to 8/1 when moved to closure) <i>23 days</i>	Full fishing closure (8/2 to 9/30 when moved to spawning closure) <i>60 days</i>

Spawning-Based Closures

Annual fishing closures began October 1 for sections of the Big Hole River to protect trout during spawning seasons. The Montana Fish and Wildlife Commission adopted new regulations last year in response to struggling fish populations. These restrictions limit fall and spring angling during trout spawning season in some stretches of the river. The following sections of the Big Hole are under spawning-based closures until April 1, 2025:

- **Section 3: Dickie Bridge to FWP Maiden Rock FAS**
- **Section 4: FWP Maiden Rock FAS to Tony Schoonen FAS (Notch Bottom)**
- **Section 5: Tony Schoonen FAS (Notch Bottom) to the confluence with the Jefferson River**

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks is conducting new research with Montana State University to better understand and manage trout mortality, recruitment and health. To learn more about this research, click [here](#).

Building Drought Resilience in the Big Hole

View River Conditions in Realtime

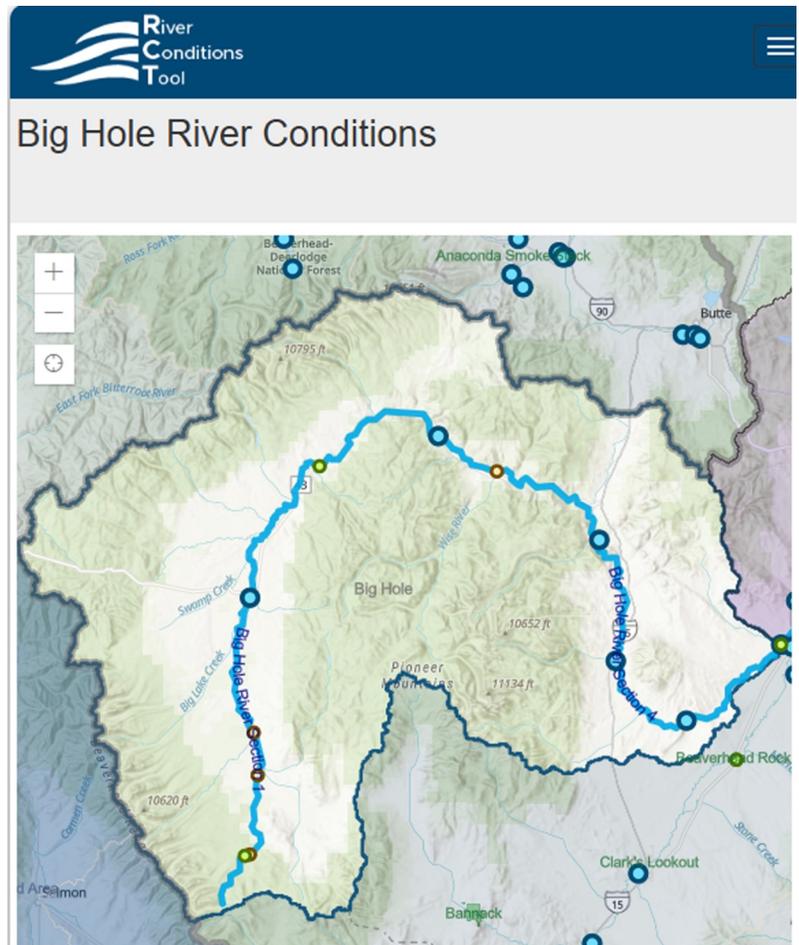
Via Our Website, bhwc.org

Did you know you can view all of the Big Hole River's stream gages on our River Conditions webpage? Check it out at bhwc.org/river-conditions!

Our River Conditions map displays stream gage locations and readings, Drought Management Plan (DMP) trigger locations, and developing streamflow and temperature trends. It also displays river restrictions and conservation status by section as well as links to the DMP and other useful resources.

The River Conditions web tool was created in 2018 by the USFWS and the Missouri Headwaters Partnership with input from the BHWC and based on an earlier model made by BHWC in 2016.

Thank you to our friends at George Grant Trout Unlimited for covering the costs of the Big Hole River's three temperature gages (at Dickie Bridge, Maidenrock, and Tony Schoonen Fishing Access Sites) each year since 2021!



Check the Flow Before You Go

Live River Conditions Online, Via Text

How are the river flows today? Is the river open?

Imagine every week, having essential information on river flows, water temperatures, 3-day trends, and the status of various river sections right at your fingertips. Weekly updates are available via both text message and email.

Sign up now and let the currents of knowledge guide your next aquatic adventure! Simply text "DROUGHT" to 26989.

Big Hole Watershed Committee

Fish & Water

A Decade of Restoration Success at French Creek

Showcasing our Efforts and Hoping for Delisting

In late September of this year, BHWC hosted the leadership team from the State's Water Quality Planning Bureau on an all-day tour of the major projects we have completed in the French Creek watershed over the last decade. That drainage, one of the 13 major sub-watersheds of the Big Hole, is almost entirely publicly-owned and was highlighted in our [2013 Watershed Restoration Plan](#) as our priority watershed for restoration.

Prior to our work, downstream landowners recalled French Creek and downstream Deep Creek running white every spring from volcanic sediments eroding from bare slopes along the Continental Divide. The erosion, though terrible for fish and water quality, was a legacy of the incredible history of the area from the early days of white settlement. Beginning with [a gold strike in French Gulch in 1864](#), several drainages were turned upside down by placer mining and left non-functional from the perspective of stream function and fish habitat and passage. Soon after, with the boom of Butte and Anaconda, every pine tree in site was logged to fuel smelters and build the places we call home. [The incredible ingenuity involved in transporting logs up and over the divide](#) left a landscape marked by deep gullies that for years were sediment super-highways.

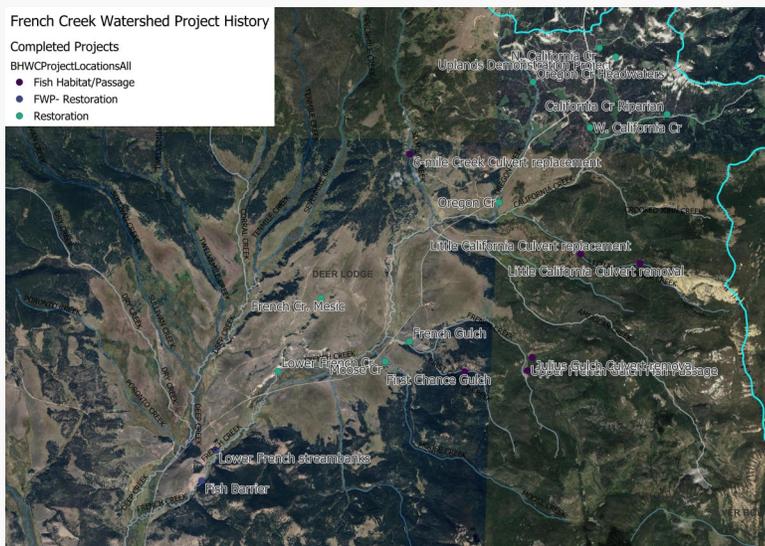
Fast-forward to 2013, a confluence of factors propelled BHWC to begin coordinating restoration in the drainage: BHWC and FWP pushed to make Superfund dollars for upland restoration available for the Big Hole; FWP identified a fish barrier location on French Creek, prompting a large-scale native fish restoration effort; the Department of Transportation began designing the relocation of Highway 569 out of wetland bottom areas plagued by maintenance issues (i.e. beaver).

[Over the next decade](#), BHWC rebuilt over 5 miles of degraded streams, removed and replaced culverts and fish passage barriers, installed thousands of sediment catchment structures in streams and gullies, revegetated over 100 acres of bare uplands. In parallel, FWP built a fish barrier, removed non-native fish and are now 3-years into stocking a native fish stronghold across 51 miles of ideal cold-water tributaries for Westslope cutthroat trout and Arctic grayling. As they grow, they'll drop over the barrier and feed the Big Hole for generations to come.

Back to the visit by the DEQ- we made the case to them that taken together, our projects documented more sediment reduction than the amount prescribed in the State's guidance for the system (TMDL). Through their TMDL Implementation Evaluation (TIE) process, we hope to see in the coming years, the first large-scale delisting of a stream system from Montana's Impaired Waters List for sediment and possibly metals.

We are so proud of this collective work that amounted to millions of dollars of investment by dozens of agencies and partners (too numerous to list). Check out the links provided below for more detailed information:

- [California Creek](#)
- [Oregon Creek headwaters](#)
- [Oregon Creek placer](#)
- [French Gulch restoration](#)
- [French Gulch fish passage](#)
- [Lower French Creek restoration](#)
- [French Cr. Mesic restoration](#)
- [Mount Haggin culverts](#)
- Julius Gulch restoration
- Fish barrier*
- Lower French Streambanks*
- Fish restocking*
- Highway relocation**



* Projects completed by Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks.
** Project completed by Montana Department of Transportation.

Fish & Water

A Job Well Done

Updating Culverts to Restore Fish Passage

Over the summer, BHWC and partners removed or replaced four undersized and perched culverts on the Mount Haggin Wildlife Management Area. These culverts impeded the movement of native fish, specifically Arctic grayling and Westslope cutthroat trout. They were located within the French Creek watershed, an area with a rich history of gold and silver mining dating back to 1864.

By removing or replacing these barriers, we restored approximately 8.4 miles of upstream passage, significantly benefiting the native fish populations in this critical habitat. Two culverts were removed entirely, while two were replaced with larger, more fish-friendly structures. This project builds on previous successful efforts in the French Creek drainage, which now represents one of the largest interconnected populations of native trout in Montana.

Thank you to our project partners: USFWS, MFWP, and RE Miller & Sons Excavation.



A New Chapter for BHWC

Restoration Program Manager Ben LaPorte Moves On to Trout Unlimited

At our August monthly meeting, we said an emotional farewell to our Restoration Program Manager of 6 years, Ben LaPorte. Ben accepted a position as Upper Clark Fork Project Manager with Trout Unlimited in early September, allowing him to advance his career, travel less, and spend more time with his family.

Ben has been the driving force behind our restoration program's success for many years. In his time with us, he oversaw the completion of dozens of projects (to the tune of MILLIONS of \$\$\$), secured and managed grants, starred in multiple outreach films, presented at conferences and workshops all over the West, and made countless connections and friends.

He's been a joy to work with, with his near-constant positivity, kindness, and excellent work ethic. While we will miss his optimism and passion for restoration work, we wish him all the best in his new position, where we know he will excel!

Thanks, Ben, for the good work and the good times!

Big Hole Watershed Committee

Fish & Water

Ongoing and Upcoming Projects

Other Ways We're Maintaining and Enhancing the Watershed

- Maintaining Beaver Dam Analog (BDA) structures along Browns Gulch with the Youth Employment Program
- Treating 232 acres of conifer encroachment at Trail Creek with Worman Forestry Management
- Treating conifer encroachment in the Eastern Pioneers thanks to a \$30,000 grant from the Mule Deer Foundation
- Maintaining streambanks on Lower French Creek
- Planting willows on 3.5 miles of streambank near Wise River
- Planning future restoration efforts



Wildlife & Uplands

New Funding Opportunities for Wildlife Conflict Reduction

FWP and HRI Secure Nearly \$12 Million to Assist Montana Landowners

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP), in collaboration with the Heart of the Rockies Initiative, will spend the next five years assisting landowners in proactively reducing conflicts with grizzly bears, supported by nearly \$12 million in federal funding. FWP received close to \$5 million from the Department of the Interior through a National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF) grant, which adds to more than \$6 million already provided by a Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources and Conservation Service.

The Heart of the Rockies Initiative will collaborate with FWP and NRCS to support landowners and producers in using non-lethal tools to prevent conflicts with grizzly bears. Available tools include carcass removal programs for livestock producers, electric fencing, range riders, and expanded use of bear-resistant garbage infrastructure.

To help Montana landowners access these funding opportunities, the Heart of the Rockies Initiative will partner with local producers, agencies, and nonprofits to host community workshops throughout western Montana this winter and spring. More information is available on the Heart of the Rockies Initiative website at heart-of-rockies.org/ccr/grants.

The BHWC will be sub-awarded NFWF grant funding to support our existing wildlife programs (range riding and carcass management). We are also willing to help producers secure RCPP funding if interested—contact Tana Lynch, BHWC Associate Director, at 406-267-3421 or tlynch@bhwc.org to learn more.



Wildlife & Uplands

An Asset to Our Organization and Our Community

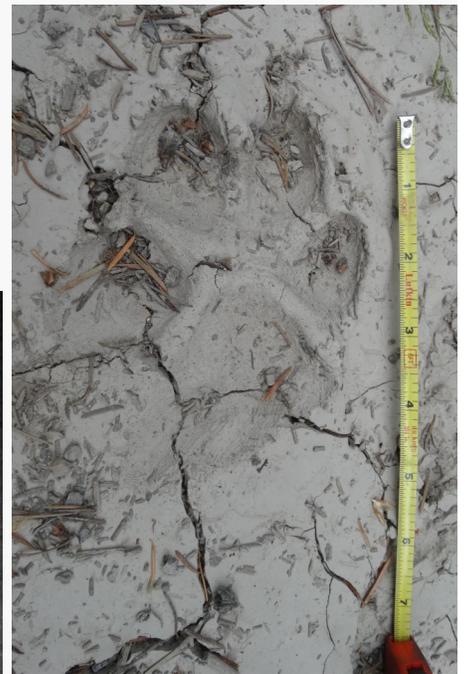
BHWC Range Rider Monitors Livestock, Tracks Carnivores, and Mentors Youth

We are proud to highlight one of our most dedicated team members, Upper Big Hole Range Rider, Chet Robertson. Since 2010, Chet has provided supplemental monitoring for livestock producers who use public land allotments in the Upper Big Hole Valley. He monitors 6 USFS allotments for 7 producers each summer assessing wolf and bear activity and risk as well as livestock condition and location. His duties include reporting sick, injured, or dead livestock to producers along with information regarding livestock distribution, congregation in riparian zones, range issues including access to water, fencing problems, carnivore activity, and other range issues. Chet also installs and monitors game cameras for additional monitoring of carnivore activity (see wolf and bear photos below).

For the past three years, Chet has also gone above and beyond his duties by engaging with University of Montana Honor's College students, sharing his wealth of knowledge on range management and conservation in a hands-on, immersive way. Every year, he meets with Professor Rick Graetz, PhD, and students at various locations across the valley, choosing unique spots that reflect the diverse range of challenges and strategies involved in his work. This year, 19 students attended Chet's talk (photo below). These on-site discussions bring the realities of range management to life, sparking curiosity and a deeper understanding in the next generation of environmental stewards. The students consider it a highlight of the trip.

Chet's dedication to both his job and community outreach exemplifies the values our organization stands for, and we are immensely proud of the impact he continues to make. We are grateful for his commitment.

Thank you to our 2024 project partners: USFS, Montana Livestock Loss Board, and enrolled livestock producers.



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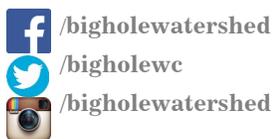
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**BIG HOLE
WATERSHED COMMITTEE**
Conservation Through Consensus.

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.

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.

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 nearly three 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.

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.