

BIG HOLE WATERSHED COMMITTEE

SPRING 2026 NEWSLETTER

Collaborative conservation
for the Big Hole River watershed
since 1995.



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



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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Staff

Pedro Marques
Executive Director
Tana Lynch
Associate Director
Nolan Salix
Restoration Specialist
Chet Robertson
Range Rider
Eric Lewis
Conflict Reduction Coord.
Jon Peterson
Hydrology Technician

Summer 2026 Interns
Noah Dowler
Cora Johnson
Simon Shepherd
Madelyn Hanson
Marieke Jeffrey

Teaming Up!

Stepping It Up Because the River Needs It

By Pedro Marques, Executive Director



As you read through our updates in these pages, take a moment to consider where this organization was 10, 20, and 30 years ago. Our grassroots effort began from a need to engage decision-makers over water management, demonstrate voluntary conservation's benefits for fish, and create space for expanding science-based knowledge about our water resources. From this expanded knowledge-base about flows and temperatures, complex ecological interactions, and about each other and achieving consensus, we identified concrete management actions and projects we could all agree on that could make a difference. For much of the first half of our history we had one staff person and committed volunteer board members doing it all, completing a few projects a year.



Fast forward to today: Our 4 full-time staff, intern, techs, and families (20 of us in all) just spent two days floating the river together. This is not just a job for us. It's a relationship. To the land, with each other, our partners, and our stakeholders. It's a commitment to our kids and a hope for the next generation of land stewards. We all need to row in the same direction, enhancing the resource for water everywhere we can, cooperating while we wait for more rain and snow.

We cannot escape that the drought we have been in is the equivalent of three dust-bowls in a row. In the past, our drought plan and cooperation kept the river wet in dry years and there was always a rebound in snow and precipitation. Fish populations responded accordingly. Today, we're still waiting for the rebound, and that is out of our control. For what we can manage, we need to scale our work to the size of the problem. And everyone that wants to find common ground is welcome! There's an incredible team at BHWC ready to work with you for the Big Hole River. Join us.

Restoring the Headwaters Reaches Audiences Across the West

Sharing the Story of Big Hole Conservation Beyond the Watershed

After nearly five years of planning, filming, editing, and collaboration, *Restoring the Headwaters* made its way on-to screens across the West and beyond. Produced by the Big Hole Watershed Committee (BHWC) in partnership with the Intermountain West Joint Venture (IWJV) and Tom Attwater Media, the film was also made possible through support from a Montana Film Office Big Sky Film Grant.

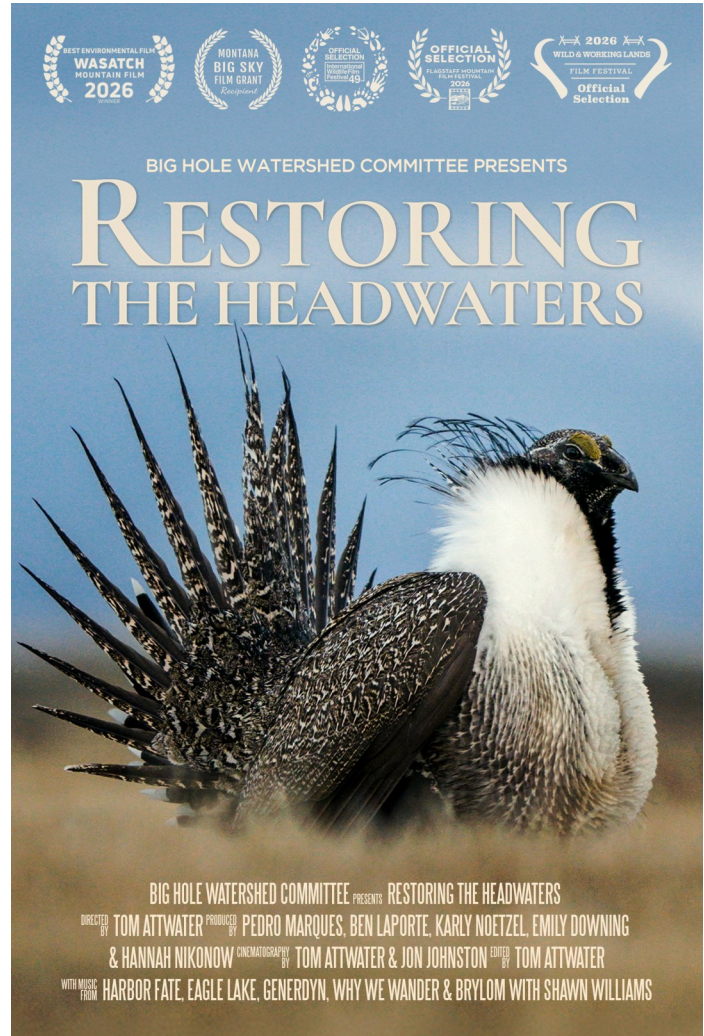
The documentary tells the story of BHWC's Smith Sage Springs Restoration Project, a large-scale effort to restore a degraded mesic wetland on private land in the upper Big Hole watershed. By reconnecting water to the landscape, the project has improved habitat for fish and wildlife, increased drought resilience, and demonstrated how voluntary conservation can benefit both working lands and the broader ecosystem.

Restoring the Headwaters was selected for the 2026 Wild & Working Lands Film Festival, the 2026 Flagstaff Mountain Film Festival, and the 49th International Wildlife Film Festival. Most recently, the film was awarded **Best Environmental Film** at the 2026 Wasatch Mountain Film Festival.

In addition to its festival run, the film was featured at community screenings hosted by BHWC at the Covellite Theatre in Butte in March and at the Patagonia Outlet and a ranching workshop in Dillon in April. It was also shown at the Montana Farm Bureau Federation's annual meeting in June. These events gave local audiences an opportunity to connect with the people and partnerships behind the project.

While the awards and screenings are exciting, the true success of the film lies in its ability to showcase the collaborative conservation taking place throughout the Big Hole Valley. The Smith Sage Springs project demonstrates what can be accomplished when landowners, conservation organizations, agencies, and community members work together to restore habitat, improve watershed health, and sustain working landscapes.

We look forward to sharing this story of restoration, partnership, and stewardship with an even wider audience in the months ahead. For those of you who missed a screening, *Restoring the Headwaters* will soon be available to watch on BHWC's YouTube channel, and we will do a special screening at our August monthly meeting (August 19, 2026 at 7:00 pm) at the Divide Grange Hall.



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 get on our list of monthly meeting speakers!

Welcome, Kim!

BHWC Hires Dillon Resident as Communications Coordinator

We are excited to welcome Kim Wheatley to the BHWC team as our new Communications Coordinator!

Kim brings a passion for our communities and the landscapes that make southwest Montana such a special place. We believe she will be a tremendous asset to our organization, helping us share the stories of the people, projects, and partnerships that make our work possible.

Here's what Kim had to say about joining our team:

"Southwest Montana is my chosen home and I am so excited to contribute to protecting the landscapes and communities that make it worth choosing. The BHWC team is a remarkable group of people and I am eager to not only learn from their decades of experience but to join them in getting our boots dirty and their stories told."

Please join us in welcoming Kim—we look forward to seeing all she will accomplish with BHWC!



Join Us in the Field in July

Building Beaver Habitat at Moose Creek in the Highlands

Join us on **Tuesday, July 7**, for a volunteer beaver habitat restoration day at Moose Creek in the Highlands! Volunteers will help improve habitat conditions that support beaver activity and the many benefits beavers provide to streams, wetlands, wildlife, and water storage across the watershed.



MOOSE CREEK VOLUNTEER DAY

Help improve stream health and protect infrastructure during our beaver habitat restoration volunteer day!

DATE & LOCATION July 7, 2026 9 AM to 4 PM Meet at Feely Exit 111 off I-15	WHAT TO BRING Waders or irrigation boots Hat and sun protection Bug spray Water (we'll provide refills!)
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Lunch and gloves provided!



**BIG HOLE
WATERSHED COMMITTEE**
Conservation Through Connection
Big Hole Watershed
Committee

HOSTED BY



Sage Steppe
Conservation

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CONTACT
Nolan Salix
BHWC Restoration Specialist
nsalix@bhwc.org

Protect What Makes the Big Hole Home

Enhance the Big Hole River for Future Generations

Why do people care about the Big Hole? For some, it's where they make a living. For others, it's where they catch their first trout, watch sandhill cranes return each spring, hunt elk in the fall, float with family on a summer afternoon, or simply find peace in an increasingly busy world.

The Big Hole River means something different to each of us, but it connects us all. It is the lifeblood of our valley—supporting ranches, wildlife, recreation, local businesses, and communities from the headwaters to the confluence. It shapes the landscape we love and the way of life that makes this place special.

But healthy rivers don't stay healthy on their own. Streambanks erode. Habitat declines. Drought and changing conditions put increasing pressure on our water, fish, and wildlife. Protecting the Big Hole requires ongoing work, thoughtful stewardship, and people who care enough to invest in its future.

That's why the Big Hole Watershed Committee exists. For more than three decades, we've brought together landowners, agencies, businesses, sportsmen, conservationists, and community members to find practical, locally driven solutions that improve watershed health while respecting the people who live and work here.

Every year, your support helps us:

- Restore rivers, streams, wetlands, and floodplains.
- Improve habitat for trout, waterfowl, big game, and other wildlife.
- Support voluntary conservation projects with local landowners.
- Monitor watershed conditions and identify emerging challenges.
- Educate the next generation of watershed stewards.
- Keep the Big Hole cold, clean, connected, and resilient.



One day, future generations will stand on these same riverbanks. They'll watch trout rise in the evening, hear cranes overhead, and experience the same sense of wonder that we do today. What kind of watershed will we leave for them?

Your gift helps answer that question. Please consider making a donation today. Together, we can ensure that the Big Hole River continues to sustain the fish, wildlife, working lands, and communities that make this watershed such a remarkable place to call home. Because the Big Hole is more than a river. **It's our shared legacy.**

Donate Online: Point your phone's camera at this QR code or visit bhwc.org. (We have one-time, monthly, and round-up options!)

Send Us a Check: to BHWC, PO Box 21, Divide, MT 59727

Buy some BHWC Gear! at: bhwc.org/shop-to-support. All proceeds support the Big Hole Conservation Fund!



Big Hole Watershed Committee

Building Drought Resilience in the Big Hole

Measuring the Big Hole's Water

Meet Hydrology Technician Jon Peterson

Understanding how much water is moving through the Big Hole watershed is critical for ranching, fisheries, drought planning, and long-term river health. That's where hydrology technician and life-long rancher Jon Peterson comes in. Jon works throughout the watershed collecting streamflow and discharge data at springs, tributaries, creeks, irrigation systems, and along the river itself. He measures creeks, springs, and any water ranchers want to measure.

Documenting conservation and water contributions on the landscape is becoming increasingly important. *House Bill 580 protects irrigators from claims of abandonment but only if they document and report voluntary conservation.* The flow measurements and monitoring Jon provides may help landowners better understand and document the effectiveness of projects and practices that contribute water to the river.

Reliable streamflow data helps landowners, agencies, and conservation partners better understand conditions on the ground and respond to changing water supplies. Jon's work supports irrigation planning, drought awareness, fish habitat monitoring, and long-term water management decisions. "At the end of the day, healthy rivers support both ranching and fisheries," Jon says. "Better data helps improve decision-making, and local collaboration is key."

All individual flow data collected through this effort is kept confidential. BHWC does not share individual landowner data. Instead, information is combined to report conservation contributions by river section, demonstrating the collective impact of voluntary stewardship efforts across the Big Hole. If you have questions about streamflow monitoring or would like assistance with flow measurements on your property, Jon can be reached at jonhpeter-son11@gmail.com or (406) 660-2306.



"Jon is wonderful to work with. You show him what to do once, and he takes it from there. This is a no-brainer. It's so easy to do, and I hope that other ranchers will take advantage of it."

– Mark Raffety, Rancher near Glen

Realtime River Conditions via Weekly Text or Email Updates

Text "DROUGHT" to 26989 and Register to Sign Up!

Want to know flows or temperatures on the Big Hole River right now? Follow real-time conditions at bhwc.org/river-conditions. Our River Conditions page brings shows stream gage locations and current readings, Drought Management Plan (DMP) triggers, developing streamflow and temperature trends, river restrictions, and conservation status by section, along with links to the full DMP and other helpful resources. It's the easiest way to stay up to date on flows across the watershed.

You can also get weekly updates delivered straight to your phone or inbox. Text "DROUGHT" to 26989 to sign up for SMS alerts (make sure texts are enabled). These updates include river flows, water temperatures, 3-day trends, and current section status. Or subscribe to email updates through our website at bhwc.org

A big thank you goes out to our partners at George Grant Trout Unlimited and the Fishing Outfitters Association of Montana for once again covering the costs of the Big Hole River's three seasonal temperature gages this year. These gages—located at Dickie Bridge, Maidenrock FAS, and Tony Schoonen FAS (Notch Bottom)—are a critical part of informing Drought Management Plan decisions and tracking summer conditions in real time.

Building Drought Resilience in the Big Hole

Welcoming the Next Generation of Water Stewards

New Watershed Field Crew Maps Alpine Meadows Across the Big Hole

This summer, BHCW is excited to welcome a dedicated team of four seasonal Watershed Field Technicians who are already deep into fieldwork across high alpine meadows throughout the watershed.

Funded through support from the Broad Reach Foundation, the crew is using a Rapid Assessment method developed by BHCW to collect detailed, on-the-ground data in high elevation meadow systems. A major goal of the project is to “ground-truth” earlier mapping and prioritization work completed by WGM Group, which identified meadow complexes with strong potential for natural water storage.

These high alpine meadows play a critical role in watershed health, functioning as natural sponges that capture snowmelt, slow runoff, and release water gradually through the dry season. There are over 34,000 acres of meadows larger than five acres in the Big Hole between 6,000 and 8,000 feet elevation, places far upstream of irrigation infrastructure. Their efforts will help us refine watershed-scale restoration priorities and inform our long-term planning for natural water storage.

This year’s field team includes Noah Dowler, a junior at Montana Technological University; Cora Johnson, a recent graduate of University of Montana; Simon Shepherd, a senior at the University of Texas at Arlington; and Madelyn Hanson, a junior at Montana State University.

BHCW is providing a rental truck for the crew throughout the field season, with a mix of weekend housing donated by a landowner and field-based camping. The combination of backcountry camping and periodic return to town base helps maximize time in the field while maintaining safety and logistical support in challenging terrain.

“We’re really excited to have this group of passionate young people under our wing this summer,” BHCW Restoration Specialist Nolan Salix noted. He supervises the efforts, bringing decades of experience mentoring students and young professionals through his previous work with University of Montana Western and the Youth Employment Program. Nolan has helped shape many early-career natural resource practitioners in the region.

In addition to the field crew, BHCW will also be joined this season by Mount Haggin Intern Marieke Jeffrey, who will be coordinating work on that Superfund project.

Together, these efforts reflect a season centered on learning, collaboration, and hands-on stewardship of some of the most important headwater landscapes in the Big Hole. In the process, we hope to create meaningful work experiences for these inspiring young professionals that fuel their commitments to work for the health of lands and waters.



Above: BHCW’s 2026 Summer Field Crew. Left to right: Noah Dowler, Cora Johnson, Simon Shepherd, Madelyn Hanson. Below: Crew with Restoration Specialist Nolan Salix assessing conditions of a 2019 restoration project.



Big Hole Watershed Committee

Fish & Water

River Renewal at Lazy S Ranch

Revegetating Streambanks near Wise River

A major restoration project is nearing completion on the Lazy S Ranch, establishing woody riparian vegetation along the Big Hole River. The project is funded through the DEQ's Section 319 Nonpoint Source Pollution Program and will restore nearly 1.3 miles of river corridor.

Crews from Watershed Restoration Group (WRG) repaired damaged riverbanks and planted tens of thousands of native willow cuttings. As these willows grow, they will help hold soil in place, reduce erosion, provide shade to keep water cooler, and create better habitat for fish, birds, and other wildlife. Willow cuttings came from mature willows on the ranch and willows on the Wise River Club property.

To help protect these improvements, Iron Horse Fencing is installing more than two miles of fence designed to keep livestock out of the most sensitive areas while still allowing access to water at designated locations. The project also includes over 5,000 square feet of fenced areas that will protect future plantings of cottonwoods and aspens that will eventually shade the river.

Healthy streamside vegetation plays an important role in the overall health of our river. Strong riverbanks, cooler water, and thriving plant communities all help support fish and wildlife while making the river more resilient during both droughts and floods. Once finished, this will be one of the largest streamside restoration projects completed in the watershed in recent years and is a great example of what can be accomplished when we bring together landowners, contractors, funding partners, and conservation organizations to work together for the Big Hole River.

Thank you to our project partners: Lazy S Ranch, DEQ, WRG, Iron Horse Fencing, and the Wise River Club.



Helping Heal California Creek

Investing in Sediment Capture, Upland Restoration

If you've spent time in the Big Hole watershed, you know that healthy streams don't just happen by accident. They depend on healthy uplands.

That's why restoration work continues at California Creek on the Mount Haggin WMA. For many years, historic logging and smelter emissions left this landscape deeply eroded, quickly transporting sediment with rain and snow-melt through these damaged areas into California Creek and eventually the Big Hole River.

This summer, crews from Timberland Excavating installed large check structures to slow that erosion and help the land recover. The project will capture soil in every gully of this basin, slowing runoff and creating better conditions for native plants to establish and begin to cover ground that has been bare for over 100 years.

Healthier uplands mean cleaner water, more stable streams, better wildlife habitat, and a stronger watershed overall. It's another example of how investing in the headwaters today helps protect the rivers, fisheries, ranchlands, and outdoor traditions that make this place special for tomorrow.

Thank you to our project partners: MFWP, NRDP, Water and Environmental Technologies, and Timberland Excavating.



Fish & Water

Hemp Yeah!

Restoring Mt. Haggin Slopes with Innovation & Montana-made Natural Materials

We've been continuing restoration work on degraded slopes within the Mount Haggin Wildlife Management Area, where historic logging activity and past smelter emissions left portions of the landscape unstable, deeply eroded, and prone to sediment loss.

On a routine maintenance visit, every previous structure built in the gullies of Cabbage Gulch were full of sediment, which was overtopping and re-entering the stream. We quickly mobilized our nearby contractors to the site with logs from the California Creek project. Coincidentally, we had been in contact with IND Hemp, an industrial hemp grower in Fort Benton that is developing erosion control products from waste hemp fiber, and the company generously donated three semi-loads of hemp bales for use in our restoration projects!

The hemp bales were incorporated into dry-land check dams and Beaver Dam Analogs (BDAs) to slow water, trap sediment, and retain moisture. Unlike many erosion-control products that are imported from overseas, these hemp fibers are processed in Fort Benton from Montana-grown hemp, creating a locally sourced restoration material that supports both watershed health and Montana agriculture.

Over time, these structures will help rebuild soil, support native vegetation, and restore moisture to the site. We're excited about the potential hemp bales offer as a sustainable restoration tool and look forward to expanding their use in future projects.

Thank you to our project partners: MFWP, NRDP, Timberland Excavating, and a HUGE thank you to IND Hemp for supporting our projects with your generous donation!



Above: A hemp bale check dam in Cabbage Gulch.

Ongoing Projects

Other Ways We're Maintaining and Enhancing the Watershed

- Continuing design work at the historic Elkhorn Mine to remove contaminated soils and treat Acid Mine Drainage.
- Reconnecting Smith Sage Springs to the North Fork Big Hole River (Smith Sage Springs Phase 2).
- Improving spawning habitat in a spring creek near Wise River.
- Planning for potential beaver reintroduction to Upper Moose Creek headwaters in the Highland Mountains.
- Draft designs completed for Pennington Bridge Phase 2. Next step: reviewing and discussing with landowners.
- Fencing Aspen, removing juniper, and stabilizing headcuts in the Eastern Pioneers.

Big Hole Watershed Committee

Wildlife Conflict Reduction

Welcome, Eric!

Reducing Wildlife Conflict & Supporting Working Lands through Composting

We are excited to welcome Eric Lewis to the BHWC team as our new Conflict Reduction Coordinator. Eric joins us at an important time as we continue expanding our efforts to support livestock producers, reduce conflicts with wildlife, and promote a shared working landscape across the Big Hole Watershed.

In addition to his work with BHWC, Eric is also a Good Neighbor Authority Forester for the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC), bringing valuable land management and field experience to the role.

At BHWC, Eric helps coordinate on-the-ground conflict reduction efforts, support ranchers and landowners, and advance programs focused on reducing bear and wolf conflicts while improving outcomes for both wildlife and rural communities. One major component of this work is BHWC's Carcass Removal and Composting Program, which helps proactively reduce attractants for predators on working lands.

This year, BHWC rented a dump trailer from Western States CAT to help haul carcasses to our compost site outside of Wisdom. The Carcass Removal and Composting Program is funded through grants from the Montana Livestock Loss Board and an America the Beautiful Challenge grant through the Heart of the Rockies Initiative and Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks.

Eric hit the ground running this season. As of the time of publication, he had picked up 31 carcasses.

Eric is based in Melrose but will pick up carcasses anywhere in the Big Hole or Grasshopper Valleys that is accessible. Ranchers simply need to meet him with equipment capable of loading carcasses into the trailer. The service is free and currently available February-June.

If you would like to schedule a pickup or learn more about the program, Eric can be reached at (307) 343-3803 or elewis@bhwc.org.

Donations to help support the program are always appreciated and can be made at bhwc.org/#donate.



Wildlife Conflict Reduction

As the Season Begins

Clearing Trails, Monitoring Wildlife, and Preparing for Summer

The 2026 range riding season is officially underway, and our range rider, Chet Robertson, has been busy preparing for another summer on the landscape.

Before livestock began moving onto summer range, Chet spent the first week of June clearing trails, hanging wildlife cameras, and assessing conditions across portions of the upper Big Hole watershed. Winter winds left a significant mark on the forest this year, with roads and trails throughout the area blocked by extensive blowdown. Much of the week was spent cutting fallen trees and reopening access routes that will be critical throughout the grazing season.

While covering country in the Englegard, Hamby, Miner, Gravelle, and Little Lake Creek areas, Chet documented abundant elk sign and installed cameras that will help monitor wildlife activity throughout the summer. He also investigated a large canine track that was likely made by a wolf, highlighting the importance of maintaining an active presence on the landscape as livestock and wildlife begin sharing the range once again.

The early season work may not be as visible as range riding itself, but it lays the foundation for a successful summer. Clearing access routes, monitoring wildlife activity, and maintaining a consistent presence in grazing allotments all help support coexistence between livestock operations and native wildlife.

Before the season began in earnest, Chet also spent a week in Grand Junction, Colorado, attending a Range Rider Workshop hosted by the Western Landowners Alliance (photo below). The workshop brought together range riders, ranchers, conservation practitioners, and wildlife professionals from across the West to share experiences, discuss emerging challenges, and learn from one another.

In recognition of his years of experience in the Big Hole watershed, Chet participated not only as a student but also as an instructor, sharing practical lessons learned from decades spent working on the ground with livestock producers and wildlife. His participation helped showcase the Big Hole's collaborative approach to coexistence and highlighted the value of local knowledge in shaping effective range riding programs.

As the grazing season progresses, Chet will continue monitoring wildlife activity, documenting observations, assisting producers when needed, and helping maintain communication between landowners, agencies, and conservation partners. We look forward to sharing updates throughout the summer as the season unfolds.

The goals of BHCW's Range Rider program are to help prevent livestock depredation by wolves and grizzly bears and to contact USDA Wildlife Services to initiate investigations for reimbursement when carcasses are found.



Photo: Lara Tomov



Big Hole Watershed Committee
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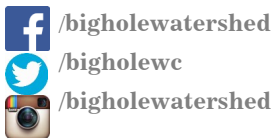
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SPRING 2026 NEWSLETTER



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E-mail: info@bhwc.org



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Visit bhwc.org and click
the “Donate” button.

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.*