Big Hole Watershed Committee

Monthly Meeting Minutes

September 16, 2026 – 7:00 pm at the Divide Grange

Zoom option also provided

In Attendance

In-person: Tana Lynch, BHWC; Nolan Salix, BHWC; Kim Wheatley, BHWC; Luke Lutz, DNRC; Tom Bowler, Butte resident; Betty Bowler, Butte resident; Paul Siddoway, Sportsman/BHWC; Roy Morris, GGTU/BHWC; Tom Caddy, Resident; Jeanne Caddy, resident; Joyce Mueller, resident; Wayne Mueller, resident; Dave Duffy, resident; Chet Robertson, BHWC; Diana Morris, resident; Jim Keenan, BSB Water/BHWC; Dan Geiger, Billings; Jim Griffin, resident (Butte); Carole Lowman; Mike Wilkinson, resident (Wise River); Katelin Killoy-Zenga, MFWP; Andrew Oscar, IND Hemp; Ed Scott, The Allemall Foundation/resident (Wise River); Julie Golla, People and Carnivores; and Diane Hutton, Wisdom resident/BHWC.

Zoom: Marilynn Mehmke; Jim Hagenbarth, Rancher/BHWC; and Pedro Marques, BHWC.

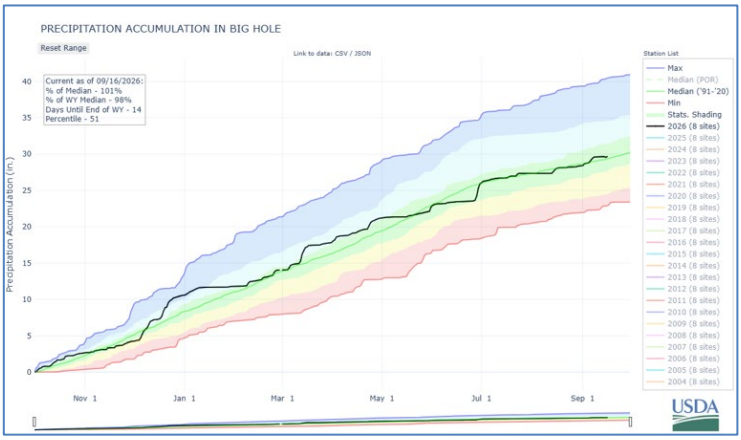
Meeting Minutes

BHWC monthly meetings are held at the Divide Grange with a virtual (Zoom) option provided thanks to Southern Montana Telephone Company, who donated the internet service. Meeting minutes and recordings are available at https://bhwc.org/monthly-meetings/ (scroll down for meeting minutes archive). Printed copies are available during in-person meetings. Contact Tana Lynch, BHWC Associate Director, at tlynch@bhwc.org or (406) 267-3421 to suggest additions or corrections.

Reports

Streamflow and Snowpack Report – Luke Lutz, Department of Natural Resources and Conservation

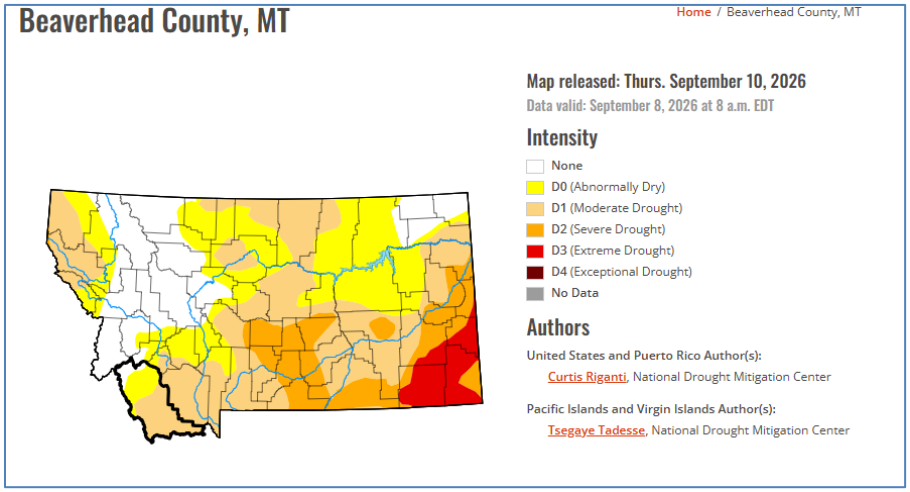
- *Stream And Gage Explorer (StAGE):* https://gis.dnrc.mt.gov/apps/stage/
- *Precipitation:* 101% of median
- *Streamflow*:
    - Section 1 – BHR near Wisdom: 13.5 cfs
    - Section 2 – BHR near Wise River: 158 cfs
    - Section 3 – BHR at FWP Maiden Rock: 243 cfs
    - Section 4:
        - BHR near Melrose: 235 cfs
        - BHR near Glen: 246 cfs
    - Section 5 – BHR bl Hamilton Ditch: 135 cfs



- *Climate Outlook (NOAA)*:
  - *Outlook*: The 8-14 day outlook predicts slightly above normal temperatures and slightly above normal precipitation.
  - *Seasonal Outlook*: The seasonal outlook predicts equal chances of above or below average temperatures and slightly above normal precipitation.
    - El Niño is strengthening, with a greater than 90% chance of a very strong event during the Northern Hemisphere fall and winter 2026-27 (10 Sep 2026, https://www.cpc.ncep.noaa.gov/).

Station	Network	Elev. (ft.)	Obs	NRCS Median	% NRCS Median
Barker Lakes	SNOTEL	8,250	32.5	32.2	101%
Basin Creek	SNOTEL	7,120	17.6	22.9	77%
Bloody Dick	SNOTEL	7,570	24.6	24.4	101%
Calvert Creek	SNOTEL	6,410	23.2	18.2	127%
Darkhorse Lake	SNOTEL	8,930	45.6	43.2	106%
Moose Creek	SNOTEL	6,170	33	30	110%
Mule Creek	SNOTEL	8,300	27	29	93%
Saddle Mtn.	SNOTEL	7,890	33.7	34.8	97%
Slagamelt Lakes	SNOTEL	8,600	*48.1*		
Basin Index					101%

- *U.S. Monthly Drought Outlook:* Drought is predicted to persist in the Big Hole Watershed during the month of September 2026.
- *U.S. Drought Monitor:*
  - The Big Hole watershed is characterized as none (no drought) to moderate drought depending on location in the watershed as of September 8, 2026.



Director's Report – Pedro Marques, Executive Director

- Project Reviews
  - Tour of Lower French, Smith Springs and Lazy S w/DEQ
- Funding
  - Submitted over $2 million in grant funding requests last week
    - Pennington Bridge (BoR)
    - BLM Butte Office Wildlife Projects
    - High Stakes Foundation – Renewed Funding Request
    - Elkhorn Biofiltration (DNRC)
- LOS/Speaking
  - Erik Kalsta at 2026 Grazing Expo- Billings- Thank you!
  - Sept. 27-Oct. 1: BeaverCON, Minneapolis. (Supported by the Broad Reach Foundation in Msla)
  - October 8: Hemp Symposium Belgrade
  - Oct. 27: Gallatin Water Collaborative- Pedro
  - Nov 3-4: IECA Regional conference Salt Lake City (Nolan)
  - Feb. 24-27: IECA National Reno (Pedro/Nolan)
- Water Quantity/Drought
  - Flow measurement summary and discussions
  - Thank you MBMG

- Clear need for continued measurement services
- DNRC Planning Grant Application?
- Summary stats from hydro tech measurements:
  - 35 distinct locations
  - 99 measurements
  - 12 ownerships

6	Private	5	4 Ditch/irrigation	0	NA	6	in June 11th readings; 40% of that May volume
7	Private	6	3 Tributary	5	89% of total flow stayed in channel to river early July; 93% of total flow in channel in late July	2	Headgate shut- all measured water back to Big Hole. 20 and 17cfs in June and July, respectively
8	Private	7	4 Ditch/irrigation	0	NA	3	39% of late June flows in ditch in late August
9	Private	8	4 Ditch/irrigation	1	NA	2	26% of late June flows on 8/22
10	Private	8	4 Ditch/irrigation	4	100% of diverted flows still in ditch DS in late June and late July	6	diversion volume decreased 35% from June-July, rose again in August to June levels. 21% of diverted water still in ditch lower down mid

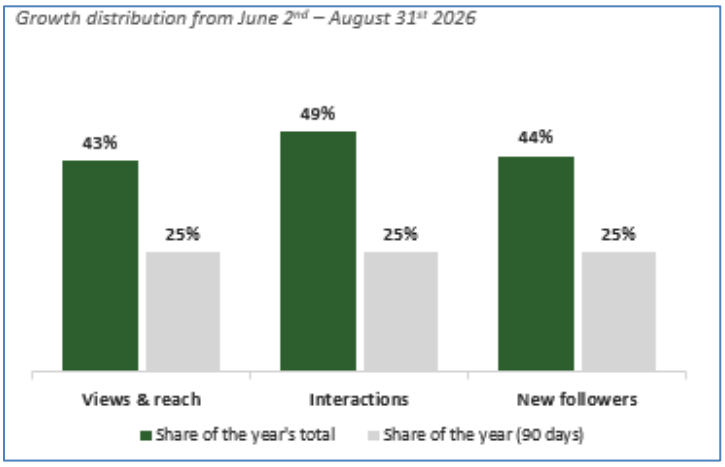
Steering Committee Report – Roy Morris, Secretary

- The steering committee is happy with the progress BHWC is making.

Communications and Wildlife Report – Tana Lynch, Associate Director

- Communications:
  - Digital Media & Social Outreach (Aug. ’25 – Aug. ’26)
    - 108,700 total views & reach (Facebook + Instagram + YouTube)
    - 3,883 interactions (likes, comments, shares & saves)
    - 665 new followers & subscribers across all four platforms (including LinkedIn)
    - The last 90 days accounted for approximately half of annual engagement and follower growth.43% of the year's total reach
      - 49% of total engagement
      - 44% of all new followers and subscribers





- Fewer channels, focused content:
  - Stepped back from X/Twitter: focusing time and resources on the platforms where our audience is most active and engaged.
  - Continuing high-quality posts, consistently: Field photos, reels, and shorts that show restoration work as it happens across the watershed.

        - A growing base of support: Growing awareness of Big Hole restoration translates into partners, volunteers, and donors.
        - *Have photos or story ideas from the watershed? Send them to Kim, our Communications Coordinator. Email: Kwheatley@bhwc.org*
    - Upcoming Meetings:
        - October 21 – Invasive Weeds (Big Hole counties & agencies)
        - November 18 – Wisdom MAR Update (GWIP)
        - December – no meeting
        - January 20 – Annual Governing Board meeting at Fairmont Hot Springs Resort (board and staff only)
    - Shop to Support BHWC and get your own BHWC gear at bhwc.org/shop-to-support



- Wildlife:
    - Carcass Removal and Composting:
        - BHWC picks up livestock carcasses from Big Hole & Grasshopper Valley ranchers free of charge. Carcasses are hauled to our compost site on Highway 278 near Wisdom.
        - Returned dump trailer to Western States Cat for now
            - 31 total carcasses (2026)
        - Eric Lewis, Conflict Reduction Coordinator
            - Based in Melrose
            - Hired Feb. ‘26
        - Supporting wildlife and a working landscape
            - *Need for Fall pickup?*
        - Funded by:
            - Livestock Loss Board
            - America the Beautiful Challenge grant (HRI/FWP)
    - Range Riding:
        - The topic of tonight’s presentation. Hear it from Chet!

Restoration Report – Nolan Salix, Restoration Specialist



- **Lazy S aka the Elkhorn Ranch Riparian Vegetation and Fencing Project:**
    - About the project: This project aims to restore degraded streamside habitat along the Big Hole River where historic grazing practices have contributed to sparse vegetation and a lack of mature cottonwoods and other native trees common along much of the river. Working with a conservation-minded new landowner committed to restoring the property for future generations, BHWC is installing riparian fencing, planting native trees and willows, and using biodegradable hemp materials to help reestablish healthy streamside vegetation, stabilize banks, and set this stretch of river on a path toward long-term ecological recovery.



    - Funded by the Montana Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) 319 Program
    - Status: Active – Implementation
    - Ranching with healthy rivers, reducing plastics in restoration through use of hemp materials generously donated by IND Hemp
    - Three techniques used:
        - \Exclosure: Large shade trees planted adjacent to the banks to cool water and hold together soil during high water.
            1. 350 Aspen, Cottonwood, Willow within exclosures
            2. Seven exclosure plots of varying sizes
            3. Hemp in and on top of planting holes to capture moisture and release nitrogen.



        - Riparian Fence: Protects streamside vegetation and soil profile.
            1. 7,005 feet of riparian fence currently installed
            2. 5 water gaps with portable gates
            3. Posts every 8 feet, five-wire fencing
        - Willow Trenches:
            1. Planted 40,000 willow whips
            2. Planted this spring
            3. An excavator dug approximately two feet down to wet cobblestone before the willow cuttings were buried.
            4. Mulched with 66 rolls of hemp

- **Mt Haggin:**
    - Mostly inactive
- **Upper Moose Creek:**
    - Volunteer day, July 7th
    - Active: Beaver Reintroduction
        - Trapping
        - Beaver-sitting (quarantine)
        - 8 beavers released in the last 2 weeks
- **Elkhorn Mine and Mill:**
    - Grant 202_RDGP Biofiltration Scale Up
- **Smith Sage Springs Phase 2-Reconnect:**
    - Awaiting Start Date (Fall)
- **McCartney – Burma Road**
    - DEQ 319 Permitted
    - Good for volunteer work
    - Re-apply for grants
- **East Pioneers LTPBR/Conifer Encroachment Projects**
    - Need contracts (Fall)
    - Active: RFQ/Contracting
- **Kamperschroer Spring Creek restoration:**
    - Fish habitat project
    - Active: Fundraising/Building
- **Montana Conservation Corps.:**
        - 5 Hitches
        - Beaver Dam Analogue Water Storage
        - Mostly inactive: clean-up



New Business

- None

Break – 10 minutes

Meeting Topic:

Range Riding and Grizzly Bears in the Big Hole Watershed

Presented by: Chet Robertson, Upper Big Hole Range Rider, Big Hole Watershed Committee

Background: The Big Hole Watershed Committee's Range Riding Program is a proactive, nonlethal approach to reducing conflicts between livestock and large carnivores, particularly wolves and grizzly bears, throughout the Big Hole watershed. The program supports local ranchers by maintaining a regular human presence on the landscape and monitoring livestock and predator activity. An equally important component of the program is locating livestock that may have been injured or killed by predators and promptly notifying producers. When a potentially depredated carcass is discovered, timely reporting allows Wildlife Services to investigate and determine the cause of death, which may make the producer eligible for state compensation.

During the 2026 grazing season, BHWC Range Rider Chet Robertson patrolled eight U.S. Forest Service grazing allotments used by seven livestock producers. Chet spends four days per week in the field, with a fifth day dedicated to reporting and documentation. His work includes observing livestock conditions, monitoring carnivore presence and activity, and documenting wildlife sightings and signs. He uses multiple game cameras to monitor wolves and bears, along with his extensive experience as a trapper to identify tracks, scat, and other evidence of predator activity. Chet has worked as a range rider for 16 years and remains deeply enthusiastic about the work.



Measuring the program's effectiveness remains a challenge, as it is difficult to demonstrate whether livestock losses were prevented by range riding or simply did not occur due to limited predator activity. Depredations occurred in the watershed before the program began and continue to occur on private lands outside the monitored allotments. While the program's direct impact on depredation rates is difficult to quantify, participating producers consistently express appreciation for its value to their operations.



BHWC intends to continue offering the Range Riding Program as long as participating producers find it valuable and funding remains available. The program complements BHWC's longstanding Carcass Removal and Composting Program and broader wildlife conflict-reduction efforts, helping support local ranching operations while sharing the landscape with native wildlife. **Funding for the 2026 Range Riding Program was provided by the Montana Livestock Loss Board and through an America the Beautiful Challenge grant subaward from the Heart of the Rockies Initiative in partnership with Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks.** BHWC sincerely thanks these partners for their support and commitment to collaborative, locally led wildlife conflict reduction.

<u>The Job</u>

- 2026 was Chet's 16th year of riding in the Upper Big Hole.
- He believes all range riding programs must be designed and operated unique to the area it is serving.
- Chet uses his trapping experience/knowledge to look for tracks/sign.
- He uses an ATV almost exclusively now (earlier in the program he did more via horse or on-foot, but found he can observe more by covering more ground more quickly.
- Unlike many range riders, Chet is focused on the location and behavior of the carnivores (wolves and bears) than on the cattle, although he does note the location and behavior of cattle he encounters.

Observations About Wolves



- Wolves are “neophobic”: they don’t like new things. So, Chet is constantly making small changes to keep them “on their toes”. Some examples including making small stacks of rocks in places he knows the wolves will be just to let them know he is there.
- Through his many years of riding, Chet knows the best places to put his cameras and the best places to look for tracks.
- Chet’s monitoring covers wolves in the Southwest side of the Big Hole (that’s where the allotments in the program are located).
- Prior to the program, had large wolf packs in this area (more than 5 total including pups).
    - Several wolf depredations in the watershed/calls to Wildlife Services.
    - Fewer wolves in the Upper Big Hole now due to multiple factors (condition of timber, presence of grizzly bears, Chet’s presence?, hunting/trapping)
        - Chet hasn’t seen a wolf pup in the Big Hole in the last 4-5 years.

Summer 2026 Recap

- Sand Creek fire burned in the area and may have impacted wolf behavior and location. Chet observed wolves in places he doesn’t normally see them.
- Thursday before the Sept. mtg, Chet located a dead cow in Saginaw. All but one hind-quarter had been eaten, and it very clearly showed bite marks from a wolf. Chet notified the producer, who called Wildlife Services. An investigation ensued and the producer was able to get the carcass confirmed as a wolf depredation. Confirmed depredations can be difficult to document because scavenging by bears and other wildlife may obscure evidence before Wildlife Services can investigate. This is only the 3rd confirmed depredation on enrolled allotments in the duration of our program. **Great work, Chet!**



Grizzly Bears in the Big Hole

- Although grizzly bear presence has been documented in the Big Hole watershed over the past decade, BHWC is not aware of any confirmed livestock depredations attributed to grizzlies within the program's monitored allotments. Chet saw decreased grizzly bear activity in 2026 (possibly due to the wildfires in the watershed).
- Chet’s observations:
    - 2016 – First confirmed photo of a grizzly bear in the Big Hole taken by one of Chet’s game cameras (based on physical appearance and time/location of bears on cameras).

- Over time, Chet's cameras and tracking efforts confirmed the presence of 3 distinct grizzly bears
- 2024 – Last confirmed photo of a grizzly bear.
- 2025 – Found grizzly bear tracks (fewer than previously) but no photos.
- 2026 – Chet saw no trace of grizzly bears in the watershed.

Upcoming Meetings

- Wednesday, October 21, 2026: BHWC Monthly Meeting
  - 7:00 PM at the Divide Grange Hall/Zoom – Topic: *Invasive Weeds in the Big Hole Watershed*

Adjourn