Big Hole Watershed Committee

Monthly Meeting Minutes

October 21, 2026 – 7:00 pm at the Divide Grange

Zoom option also provided

In Attendance

In-person: Pedro Marques, BHWC; Tana Lynch, BHWC; Nolan Salix, BHWC; Kim Wheatley, BHWC; Luke Lutz, DNRC; Roy Morris, GGTU/BHWC; Lance Robertson, Rancher; Andy Bobst, MBMG; Diane Hutton, Wisdom Resident/BHWC; Kristina Kennedy, MFWP; Jim Griffin, resident (Butte); Dean Peterson, Rancher/BHWC; Amber Burch, Beaverhead County; Kevin Sheridan, BLM Butte Field Office; Clayton Marxer, Madison County; JM Peck, Rancher/BHWC; Jim Keenan, BSB Water/BHWC; and Mark Kambich, Rancher/BHWC.

Zoom: Steve Luebeck, sportsman/BHWC.

Meeting Minutes

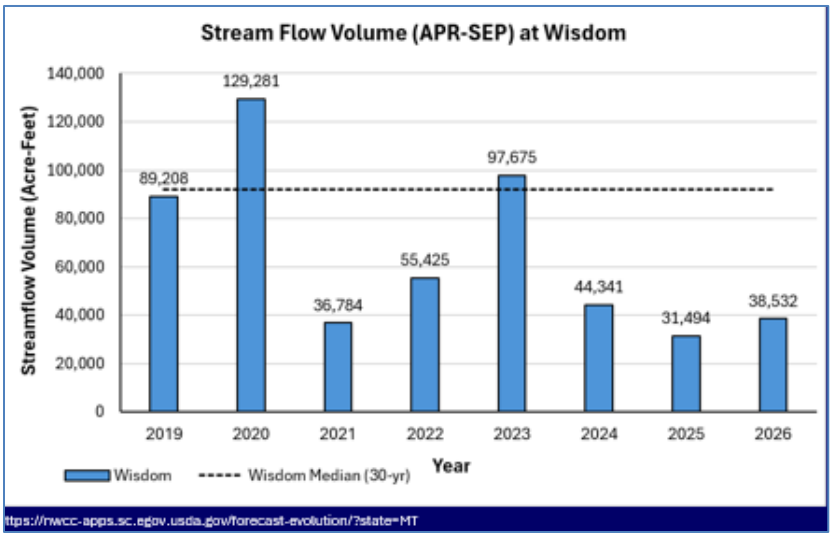
BHWC monthly meetings are held at the Divide Grange with a virtual (Zoom) option provided thanks to Southern Montana Telephone Company, who donated the internet service. Meeting minutes and recordings are available at https://bhwc.org/monthly-meetings/ (scroll down for meeting minutes archive). Printed 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.

- The September 16, 2026 meeting minutes were approved.

Reports

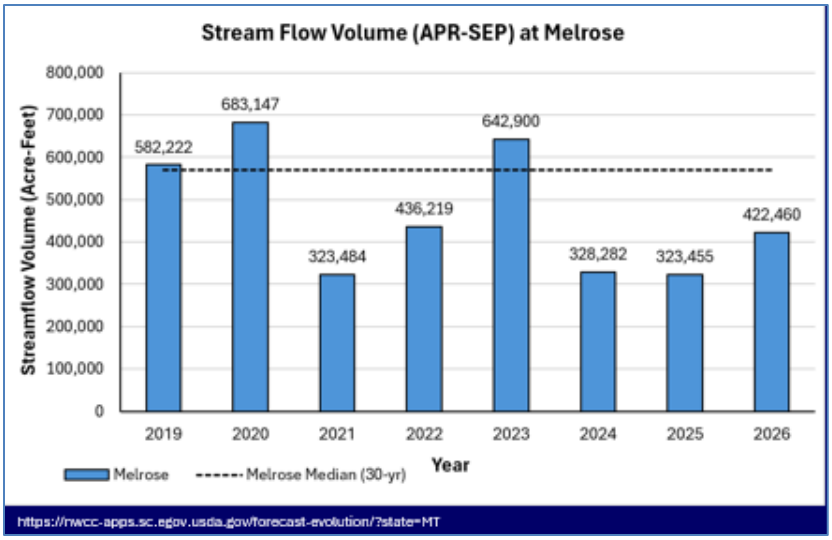
Water Year 2026 Review: Snowpack and Streamflow Conditions – Luke Lutz, Department of Natural Resources and Conservation

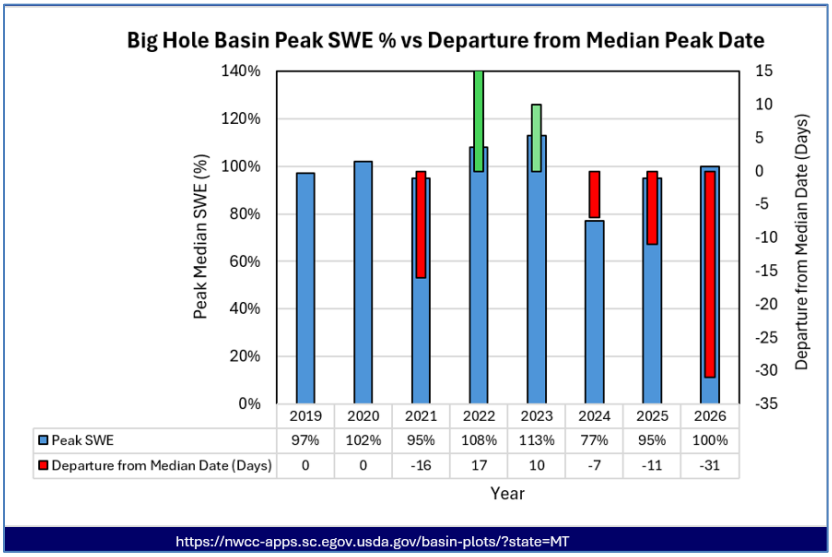
- DNRC Stream and Gage Explorer (StAGE): https://gis.dnrc.mt.gov/apps/stage/. Luke reviewed water year 2026 snowpack, runoff timing, precipitation, streamflow, drought conditions, and climate outlooks.
- April–September streamflow volume at Wisdom: 38,532 acre-feet in 2026, compared with the 30-year median of approximately 92,000 acre-feet.

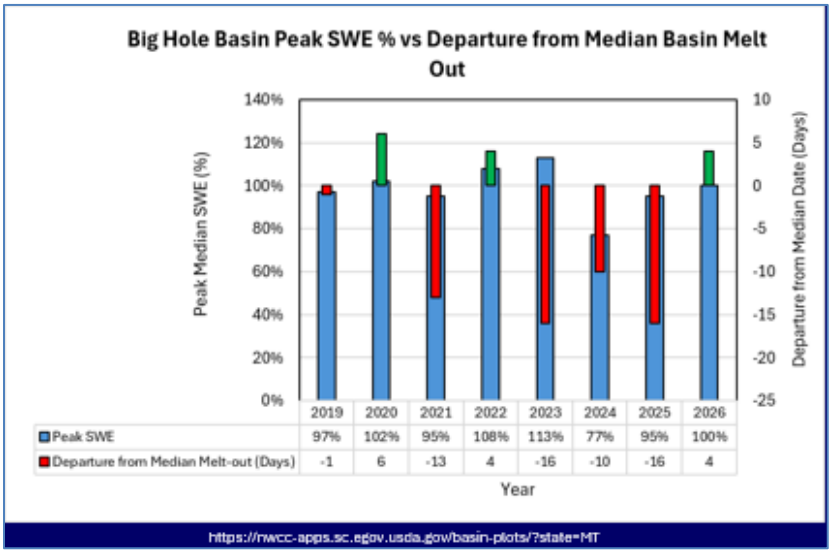


The presentation compared annual volumes from 2019–2026, including 31,494 acre-feet in 2025 and 97,675 in 2023.

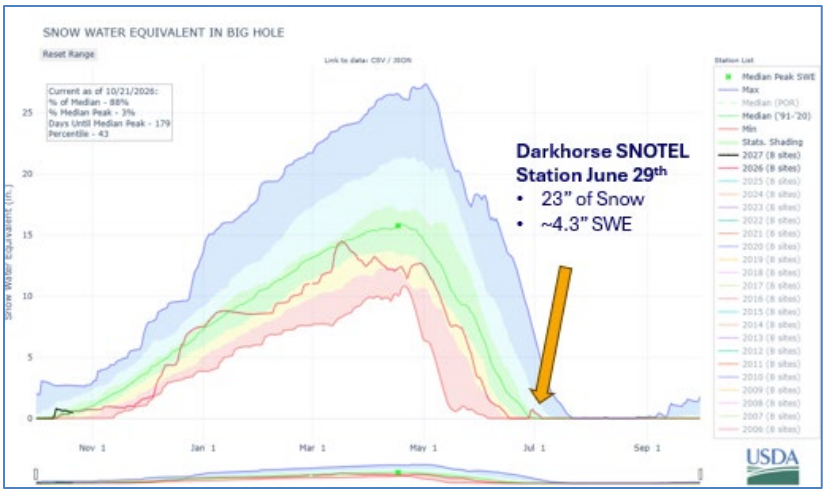
- April–September streamflow volume at Melrose: 422,460 acre-feet in 2026, compared with the 30-year median of approximately 570,000 acre-feet. For comparison, the 2025 total was 323,455 acre-feet and the 2023 total was 642,900 acre-feet.
- Snowpack: The median date of peak snow water equivalent (SWE) in the Big Hole Basin is April 17; the median melt-out date is July 1. Luke compared the timing of peak SWE and melt-out with historical conditions and reviewed basin SWE and precipitation graphics. The Darkhorse SNOTEL station still showed approximately 23 inches of snow (~4.3 inches SWE) on June 29.
- Drought Management Plan (DMP) section review:
    - Section I – Wisdom: 60 cfs CCAA target/prepare for conservation; 40 cfs conservation; 20 cfs FWP closure. The slide noted drought closure restrictions lifted October 20.
    - Section II – Dickie Bridge: 170 cfs CCAA target/prepare for conservation; 140 cfs conservation; 100 cfs FWP closure. The presentation displayed 278 cfs.
    - Section III – Maiden Rock: 250 cfs prepare for conservation; 200 cfs conservation; 150 cfs FWP closure. Spawning closure October 1–April 1.
    - Section IV – Melrose and Glen: 250 cfs prepare for conservation; 200 cfs conservation; 150 cfs FWP closure. Spawning closure October 1–April 1.
    - Section V – Below Hamilton Ditch: 250 cfs prepare for conservation; 200 cfs conservation; 100 cfs FWP closure. Spawning closure October 1–April 1.

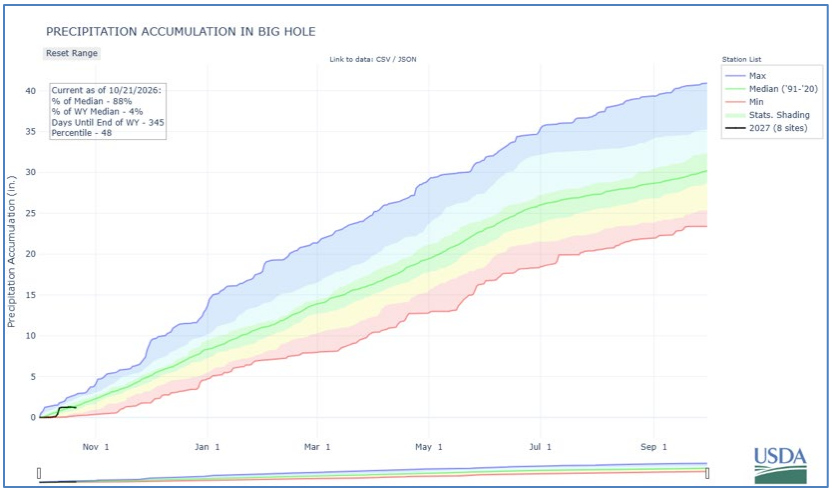






- Climate and drought outlook: Reviewed NOAA two-week and seasonal forecasts, including the developing El Niño winter outlook, and the U.S. Drought Monitor map.





Director's Report – Pedro Marques, Executive Director

- Project reviews: DEQ Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL) Implementation Evaluation (TIE). The presentation also featured a North Fork Big Hole tributary to Smith Springs.
- Funding: High Stakes Foundation update.
- Interagency Development Standards Board: Need to reactivate the board.
- Speaking and upcoming conferences: October 27 – Gallatin Water Collaborative (Pedro); October 28 – Restoring the Headwaters at River Film Fest, Missoula; November 3–4 – IECA Regional Conference, Salt Lake City (Nolan); February 24–27 – IECA National Conference, Reno (Pedro and Nolan).
- Water quantity and drought: Flow measurement summary and discussion.

Steering Committee Report – Dean Peterson, Chairman

- The steering committee met day prior to this meeting: reviewed financials, discussed Sand Creek and Bobcat Lake fires, discussed variance request with BSB County Planning Dept., anticipating reduced availability of federal funds.

Communications and Wildlife Report – Kim Wheatley, Communications Coordinator and Tana Lynch, Associate Director

- Communications:
  - BeaverCON 2026: Held September 28–October 1 in Minneapolis, Minnesota. The fourth biennial gathering, convened by the Beaver Institute, brought together approximately 500 researchers, practitioners, land managers, policymakers,



educators, and advocates under the theme “Widening Perspectives & Bridging Boundaries.”
    - Sessions addressed Indigenous stewardship, beaver ecology, wildfire resilience, water storage, wetland restoration, and policy. Presentations included work on 47,000 beaver dams, beavers and wild rice, and the role of beaver-related restoration in water systems.
    - BHWC presentation: Pedro Marques co-presented with Laura Ziemer of Culp & Kelly LLP, “From Practice to Nationwide Change,” describing how beaver-related restoration informed Army Corps regulatory approaches. Examples included more than 800 beaver-mimicry structures installed over five generations of work on California Creek, approximately 3–4 feet of streambed uplift, and hundreds of tons of sediment captured. At Mt. Haggin, EPA accepted beaver mimicry in 2023 as part of the Superfund sediment and metals remedy; regulatory barriers outside the Superfund framework were also discussed.
  - Upcoming monthly meetings: November 18 – Wisdom Managed Aquifer Recharge update (MBMG), 6:00 pm at the Divide Grange; December – no meeting; January 20 – Annual Governing Board meeting at Fairmont Hot Springs Resort (board and staff only).
  - Shop to Support BHWC: Branded merchandise is available at bhwc.org/shop-to-support; proceeds support the Big Hole Conservation Fund. Suggestions for additional products are welcome.
- Wildlife:
  - Carcass Removal and Composting Program: BHWC offers free livestock carcass pickup for Big Hole and Grasshopper Valley ranchers and transports carcasses to the compost facility on Highway 278 near Wisdom. The dump trailer was returned to Western States Cat for the season. Thirty-one carcasses were collected in 2026. Eric Lewis, the Melrose-based Conflict Reduction Coordinator, was hired in February 2026. Fall pickup needs were discussed as a question for producers. Funded by the Montana Livestock Loss Board and the America the Beautiful Challenge grant (Heart of the Rockies Initiative/FWP).
  - Range Rider Program – 2026 summary: Expanded to two additional allotments and started one month earlier, June 1. Observations included decreased grizzly bear activity and sporadic wolf activity; fewer wolves have been observed in recent years than previously. The Sand Creek Fire affected the season. Chet Robertson located one wolf depredation confirmed by Wildlife Services, an important finding for documenting the loss and supporting producer reimbursement. Chet also attended and presented at range riding workshops in Colorado.



Restoration Report – Nolan Salix, Restoration Specialist

- Adson Creek Restoration, along the Scenic Byway outside Wise River: Aspen improvement project developed with the Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest (B-DNF).

The Forest Service brings permitting, oversight, landscape management, and fire expertise; BHWC contributes identification of resource issues, ecological knowledge, project development, and implementation flexibility.
    - Adson Creek project phases:
        - Phase 1 – Conifer reduction underway; 14 contractor sawyers working with chainsaws.
        - Phase 2 – Prescribed burning unit anticipated spring 2028.
        - Phase 3 – Resolve access.
        - Phase 4 – Potential low-tech process-based restoration (LTPBR) and beaver habitat restoration.
    - Adson Spring Creek Water Storage Project: Site has evidence of historical beaver dams, relatively easy access, and opportunities for off-channel spring development.
- Moose Creek, Highland Mountains south of Butte: Eight beavers were transplanted in August and September. On October 5, Heide Anderson and Taylor Kaltenbach (The Nature Conservancy), Kevin Weinner (Beaverhead Forest Service), and Nolan Salix (BHWC) surveyed for evidence of beaver activity. They found scattered willow chewing, minor dam-building activity in several locations, one dam, and one bank lodge; two camera traps were installed. The presentation noted that additional activity may have been missed.
- Conferences: IND Hemp event in Belgrade, October 8; International Erosion Control Association regional conference in Salt Lake City, November 3–4.
- Notable project updates: DEQ Nonpoint Source Focus Watershed Area Grant; Western Native Trout Initiative grant work (Kamperschroer); Smith Sage Springs Phase II, with the first portion close to permitted.

New Business

- *Prescribed Burning Association – Read by Pedro Marques on behalf of Sean Claffey, The Nature Conservancy / Southwest Montana Sagebrush Partnership*
    - Addressing conifer expansion: Restoring natural ecological processes, particularly fire, is essential to limiting conifer encroachment into high-elevation sagebrush habitats. Sean emphasized the need to increase the scale of prescribed burning across southwestern Montana.
    - Private lands and landowner leadership: Expanding prescribed burning on private lands will be critical to achieving the scale needed. Federal partners alone cannot be expected to provide sufficient capacity. Landowner-led cooperatives elsewhere in the country, including Prescribed Burn Associations (PBAs), offer potential models.
    - Potential southwestern Montana association: Partners are exploring the creation of a local prescribed burn association or similar cooperative. Its name, structure, membership, and direction have not yet been determined and will be shaped by local participants. An introductory video describing the PBA model is available at https://youtu.be/FxwFKeIrqpQ?list=PLBX_xiiFGiPJ22rrHE5-IFx1qfY6CdOpi.
    - Steering committee: An initial core group is being assembled to help guide development of the proposed association. Participation from BHWC and/or individuals in the Big Hole watershed is encouraged; representatives may be ranchers, land managers, or other community members and do not need to represent BHWC formally.
    - Initial organizational meeting: Thursday, December 17, 2026, at a location to be determined, likely Dillon. Interested individuals are invited to attend and learn more. Although the steering committee is expected to remain relatively small, the broader association would offer

opportunities for additional members. Attendees can decide whether steering committee participation is appropriate for them.

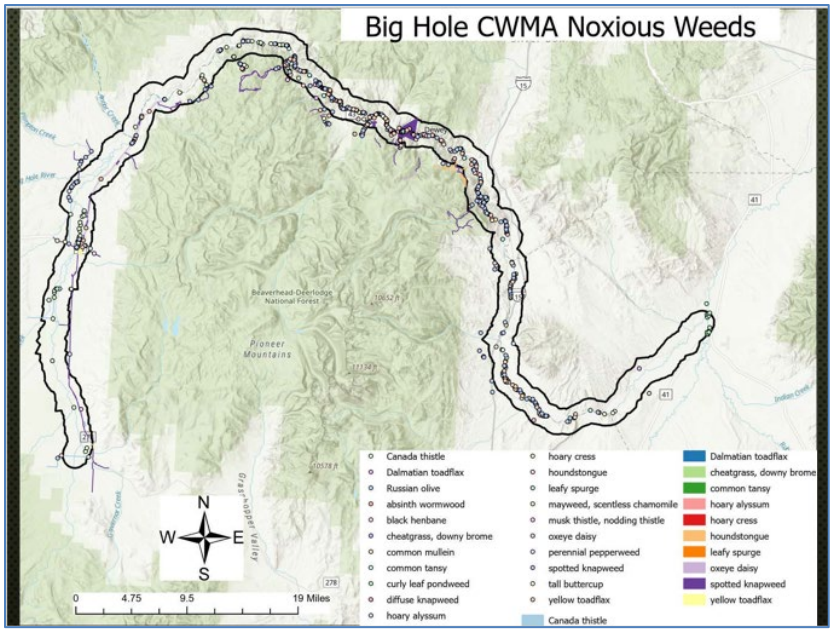
Break

Special Topic:
Invasive Weeds in the Big Hole Watershed

Presented by: Amber Burch, Beaverhead County;
Kevin Sheridan, BLM Butte Field Office; and
Clayton Marxer, Madison County

Amber Burch – Beaverhead County Weed District

- 2026 accomplishments: Two commercial applicators hired to treat a 100-foot corridor; 14 community spray days; approximately 650 wetted acres treated.
- Commercial applicator treatment locations included Trail Creek/Trail Ridge Fire (mule deer habitat), Alder Creek (mule deer habitat), Sawlog Fire, Grouse Fire, Trail Creek and Pintler timber salvage areas, and the Wisdom Ranger District backcountry.
- Other efforts: New-invader projects with the National Wild Turkey Federation and Forest Service; private applicator training; and mapping/reporting with EDDMapS. A map illustrated noxious weed observations within the Big Hole Cooperative Weed Management Area.
- Priority/new invader species discussed: leafy spurge, absinth wormwood, common St. Johnswort, blueweed, yellow hawkweed, orange hawkweed, and rush skeletonweed. Photos compared invasive rush skeletonweed with a similarly named native rush skeleton plant to assist identification.
- 2027 plans: Continue treating the 100-foot corridor along the Big Hole and Wise rivers; treat highways,





county roads, fishing access sites, BLM and Forest Service lands as funding allows; offer education and private applicator training; provide landowner cost share/support using Weed Whackers Ball funds; monitor rush skeletonweed and other new-invader sites; and hold community spray days.
- 19th Annual Weed Whackers Ball: Raised more than $24,000 after expenses. Proceeds support commercial applicator work along the Big Hole River, landowner cost share, herbicide for Big Hole spray days, and education. The 2027 Weed Whackers Ball is scheduled for Saturday, September 18.

Kevin Sheridan – Bureau of Land Management, Butte Field Office

- Presented on invasive weed management on BLM lands in the Big Hole watershed.
    - 2026:
        - Tie Creek: worked with locals to find priority areas
        - Jerry Creek, Dickie Bridge, Divide Creek
        - MCC Crew – cost effective and great to work with.
        - Spray day at Chaulk Buff: Not seeing as much yellow toadflax/knapweed. CA thistle is the main problem.
    - 2027: Jerry Creek, Tie Creek, Foothills West allotment at Wise River, Chaulk Buff spray day
    - Kevin is responsible for 330,000 BLM acres across 8 counties. Please support him by reaching out if you see things on BLM land or would like to help with spray days.
        - Has had most engagement in this area.
        - Contact information: ksheridan@blm.gov or (406) 533-7641

Clayton Marxer – Madison County

- Described Madison County's weed management program, including upgrades to vehicles and equipment, digital mapping of weeds throughout the county, and ongoing weed control efforts.
    - Clayton is 2 years into his role as the Madison County Weeds Coordinator.
        - Treated all County roads, every public access into BLM, etc.
        - Spray date with USFS Custer-Gallatin NF
        - Updating equipment, including vehicles, UTVs, etc. (2 new trucks in 2026)
        - Has a cost share program similar to Beaverhead County.
        - In April, held a drone workshop with 130 people.
        - Held a training for realtors with info packets to give to home buyers.
        - Initial inspections for subdivision development
    - Has a partnership with OnX Offroad – maps everywhere they treat weeds
        - Provides data on date, time, speed, etc. at which sprayed, prevention practices, road inventory
    - Hoary alyssum in the lower Big Hole
        - Toxic to horses – causes sever edema/lameness

Upcoming Meetings

- November 18, 2026 – 6:00 pm at the Divide Grange and via Zoom: BHWC Monthly Meeting
    - Montana Bureau of Mines and Geology presentation on the Wisdom Managed Aquifer Recharge Project.
- December 2026 – No monthly meeting.

Adjourn