

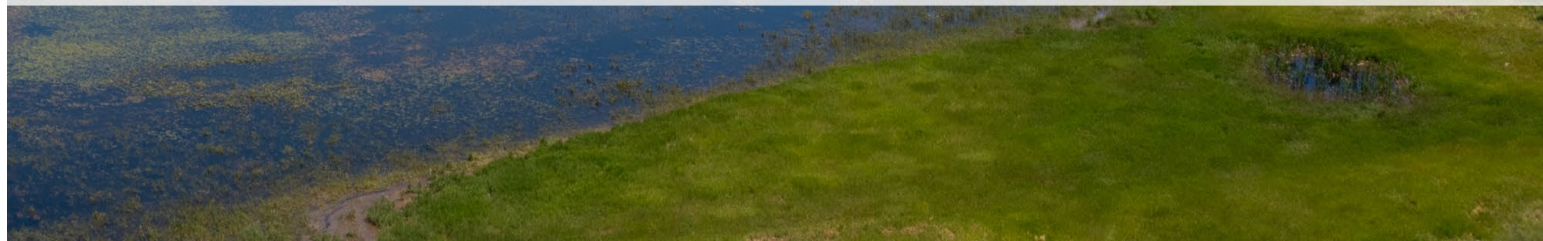


# Biennial Report

2024



WESTERN MONTANA  
**Conservation  
Commission**



## Table of Contents

List of Acronyms.....	2
Message from the Chair.....	3
Message from the Vice-Chair.....	4
Message from the Executive Director.....	5
Western Montana Conservation Commission Members & Staff.....	6
Who We Are	
About WMCC.....	11
Legislative Duties.....	12
Values & Pillars.....	13
First Year Timeline.....	14
Committees.....	16
Where We Serve.....	20
What We Do	
Coordination & Collaboration.....	22
Aquatic Invasive Species.....	24
Nonpoint Source Pollution.....	26
Education & Outreach.....	28
EPA Columbia River Basin Toxics Reduction Lead Grant.....	30
Financials.....	32

## List of Acronyms

AIS	Aquatic Invasive Species	FLBS	Flathead Lake Biological Station
BOR	U.S. Bureau of Reclamation	FRGI	Flathead Rain Garden Initiative
BSWC	Big Sky Watershed Corps (AmeriCorps)	FWP	Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
CRB	Columbia River Basin	GSI	Green Stormwater Infrastructure
CSKT	Confederated Salish & Kootenai Tribes	MCDEE	Missoula County Department of Ecology & Extension
DEQ	Department of Environmental Quality	NPS	Nonpoint Source Pollution
DNRC	Department of Natural Resources & Conservation	UC3	Upper Columbia Conservation Commission
EPA	U.S. Environmental Protection Agency	WLI	Whitefish Lake Institute
FBC	Flathead Basin Commission	WMCC	Western Montana Conservation Commission

## Message from the Chair

We are pleased to provide the first Western Montana Conservation Commission (WMCC) biennial report detailing our activities in fiscal year 2023-2024. WMCC was created by the 2023 Montana Legislature and effectively combines and replaces the roles and jurisdiction of the Flathead Basin Commission (FBC) and the Upper Columbia Conservation Commission (UC3). I would like to thank all former FBC and UC3 members and staff for their dedicated service to Montana, and for laying the foundation for our work. We hope to honor their vision and build upon their successes as we tackle aquatic resource issues and monitor aquatic invasive species in western Montana.

WMCC is administratively attached to the State of Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC). The commission is non-regulatory and convenes a wide cross-section of insightful citizens and local, state, tribal, and federal agency representatives. By building community, we hope to lead through consensus.

We are supported by an exceptional staff of dedicated professionals. Their support to the commission is crucial since our mission can seem daunting. The rivers of western Montana meander through 22,653 square miles of iconic mountain ranges, agricultural valleys, and over 75 communities.



Now, more than ever, increasing pressures and competing interests on the landscape warrant a thoughtful and measured approach to growth. We need to keep in mind that our resources are equally breathtaking and fragile. It's important to engage in a conversation to broker solutions that sustain our shared resources while supporting prosperous communities.

This report highlights our accomplishments, projects, sources of funding and expenditures during our busy first year of existence. Highlights include a \$7M grant from the Environmental Protection Agency to address toxics reduction, establishing our guiding documents, and our work to launch committees for key issues.

In the next two years, our level of impact will be deeply rooted in collaborative efforts with land managers and communities to turn the complex issues we face into opportunities. We hope to foster a forum that encourages thoughtful and respectful discourse to honor our natural resources and cultural histories. We must keep an eye on protecting our resource amenities for future generations.

I'm humbled by the opportunity to Chair WMCC. It has been a great honor to work alongside and collaborate with the talented staff and my fellow commissioners. We are all here to serve the communities and treasured natural resources of western Montana

**Mike Koopal, Chair**

Western Montana Conservation Commission  
Executive Director, Whitefish Lake Institute

## Message from the Vice-Chair

The Western Montana Conservation Commission (WMCC) is a testament to Montana's commitment to maintain the high quality of our waters. Consolidating the Flathead Basin Commission (FBC) and the Upper Columbia Conservation Commission (UC3) into WMCC increases efficiency and expands these great efforts to all waters west of the Continental Divide in Montana.

Building on the strong foundation from the prior Commissions' work on septic leachate and aquatic invasive species, WMCC's first year has been focused on strengthening programs and strategizing the future of our commission. Identifying aquatic resource issues and collaborating with partner organizations are at the core of the work, guided by WMCC's strong staff.

As a former UC3 member, and admirer of FBC's efforts, this exciting transition in the first year of WMCC has been rewarding. I am invigorated by the inter-agency cooperation as WMCC becomes a key player in protecting our waters.

### Onno Wieringa, Vice-Chair

Western Montana Conservation Commission



Photo: Blackfoot River, Montana Office of Tourism and Business Development

## Message from the Executive Director

As we look back on our inaugural year at the Western Montana Conservation Commission, I am deeply grateful for the exciting journey we have embarked upon together. Our organization, building on the great work of the former Flathead Basin Commission and Upper Columbia Conservation Commission, was created with a shared commitment to preserving the beloved waters of our region and has made significant strides in a short time.

In our first year, we focused on forming a solid foundation. We reinforced old and established new partnerships with local communities, watershed groups, and government agencies laying the groundwork for collaborative water conservation and protection efforts. Through these partnerships, we have continued past and begun implementing new strategic projects aimed at ensuring the long-term health of our shared water resources.

Of particular excitement for WMCC was the award of an EPA Toxics Reduction Lead Grant for \$7 million. These funds will catalyze the impact WMCC can have in western Montana over the next six years. With community engagement central to our mission, the funds will support local programs and projects to reduce stormwater and septic leachate pollution as well as having a strong focus on associated education and outreach.

Looking forward, we are excited about the opportunities that lie before us. Our commitment to protecting western Montana's waters remains steadfast, and we're dedicated to expanding our impact through innovative projects and initiatives. By continuing to foster partnerships and collaborative efforts, we are confident we will achieve our goals of preserving water quality for future generations.

I want to extend my heartfelt thanks to all of you who have helped develop the Western Montana Conservation Commission in its first year. We couldn't do the work we do without our Commission Members and partners. Together, we are making a meaningful difference in the future of western Montana's waters.

### Casey Lewis, Executive Director

Western Montana Conservation Commission  
Montana Department of Natural Resources & Conservation



Governor Appointed Voting Members



**Mike Koopal, Chair**

Flathead Representative  
*Executive Director*  
*Whitefish Lake Institute*



**Arthur Potts**

Hydropower Utility Representative  
*Terrestrial Program Manager*  
*Avista*



**Matthew Peterson**

Private Landowner Representative  
*Civil Engineer*  
*NewFields*



**Sandy Beder-Miller**

Private Industry Representative  
*Pulp & Paper Process Engineer*  
*Retired*



**Phil Matson**

Private Citizen Representative  
*Research Coordinator*  
*Flathead Lake Biological Station –*  
*University of Montana*



**Onno Wieringa, Vice-Chair**

Upper Clark Fork & Blackfoot  
Representative  
*Recreation Business Owner & Manager*  
*Retired*



**Duane Braaten**

Electric Cooperative Representative  
*Trustee*  
*Flathead Electric Co-op*



**Ron Pifer**

Lower Clark Fork & Bitterroot  
Representative  
*Environmental Scientist*



**Lech Naumovich**

Kootenai Representative  
*Director & Ecologist*  
*Greater Than Image, LLC*

Voting Members



**Randy Brodehl**

County Representative  
*Commissioner*  
*Flathead County*



**Rae Lynn Hays**

Conservation District Representative  
*Lincoln Conservation District*



**Julie Spencer**

Wastewater Utility Representative  
*District Manager*  
*Bigfork Water & Sewer District and*  
*Woods Bay Water & Sewer District*



**Rich Jansen Jr.**

Confederated Salish & Kootenai Tribes  
Representative  
*Department Head*  
*Natural Resources Department CSKT*



**Josh Letcher**

County Representative  
*Commissioner*  
*Lincoln County*



**Scott Rumsey**

Conservation District Representative  
*Flathead Conservation District*



**Tracy Campbell**

Stormwater Utility Representative  
*Superintendent*  
*Stormwater Department of Public*  
*Works & Mobility, City of Missoula*

## Non-voting & Advisory Members



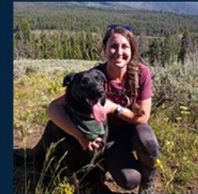
**Senator Janet Ellis**

Montana Senate  
SD41



**Senator Mike Cuffe**

Montana Senate  
SD1



**Sara Edinberg**

Assistant Research Hydrogeologist  
Montana Bureau of Mines & Geology



**Martin Charlo**

CSKT Tribal Council Member  
Confederated Salish & Kootenai Tribes



**Representative Tom France**

Montana House of Representatives  
HD94



**Representative Neil Duram**

Montana House of Representatives  
HD2



**Peter Brumm**

Hydrologist – Regional TMDL &  
Columbia Basin Coordinator, Region 8  
U.S. Environmental Protection Agency



**Chris Savage**

Renewable Resource Management  
Director  
U.S. Forest Service



**Lindsey Krywaruchka**

Water Quality Division Administrator  
Montana Department of Environmental  
Quality



**Jim Ferch**

Regional Manager, Water Resources  
Montana Department of Natural  
Resources & Conservation



**Heidi McMaster**

IPM & Invasive Species Program  
Coordinator, Environmental  
Compliance Division  
U.S. Bureau of Reclamation



**Melissa Schaar**

Associate Director of Research &  
Investigations, Wyoming-Montana  
Water Science Center  
U.S. Geological Survey



**Tom Woolf**

AIS Bureau Chief  
Montana Fish, Wildlife, & Parks



**Tom Martin**

Environmental Services Bureau Chief  
Montana Department of  
Transportation



**Greg Hoffman**

Senior Fishery Biologist  
U.S. Army Corps of Engineers



**Kate Wilson**

Montana Liaison, Intergovernmental  
Affairs  
Bonneville Power Administration



**Galen Steffens**

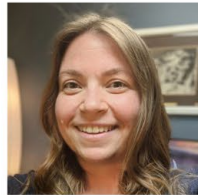
Community MT Division Administrator  
Montana Department of Commerce



**Dr. Jim Elser**

Professor of Ecology & Director  
Flathead Lake Biological Station –  
University of Montana

## Staff



**Casey Lewis**  
*Executive Director*



**Emilie Henry**  
*Program Coordinator*



**Heidi Fleury**  
*Grant Program Specialist*



**Krista Lammers**  
*Grant Administrative Specialist*



**Stephanie Murphy**  
*Communications Coordinator*



**Kelly Hendrix**  
*Program Coordinator*



**Kristen Jordan**  
*Grant Program Specialist*



**Mark Bostrom**  
*Division Administrator  
Conservation & Resource  
Development Division*

## Big Sky Watershed Corps Members



**Katie Lynch-Dombroski**  
*2022-2023*



**Clarissa Orton**  
*2023-2024*

## Who We Are About WMCC

The Western Montana Conservation Commission was created during the 2023 Montana Legislative Session with the passage of Senate Bill 83 and effectively combines and replaces the roles and jurisdictions of the Flathead Basin Commission and the Upper Columbia Conservation Commission to increase management efficiency and broaden the scope of work.

The mission of the Western Montana Conservation Commission is to protect and improve the quality of western Montana's aquatic resources including water quality and quantity, recreational and scenic values, and fish and other wildlife, including the prevention and management of aquatic invasive species.

Clean water is essential to maintain our way of life. Our vision is for western Montana to be a leader in innovative natural and aquatic resource conservation. By fostering participation and collaboration, we envision responsible stewardship of aquatic resources to provide for future generations.






WMCC Staff at the 2024 Clark Fork Science Forum

### We strive to:

- 1 Reduce point and nonpoint sources of water pollution
- 2 Prevent the spread of aquatic invasive species
- 3 Maintain, enhance, restore, expand, or benefit the aquatic natural resources of Western Montana
- 4 Emphasize community participation, education, outreach, and engagement

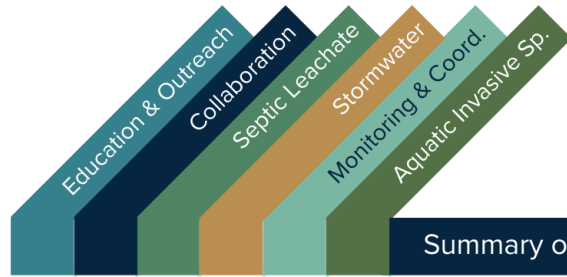
### WMCC Meetings

This biennial report summarizes WMCC's activities and initiatives in the 2024 fiscal year. Meetings were held in the following locations across western Montana:

-  Missoula, MT  
November 2-3, 2023
-  Polson, MT  
February 7-8, 2024
-  Kalispell, MT  
June 4-5, 2024

## Legislative Duties

WMCC's enabling legislation outlines the duties of the commission, guiding the work undertaken. See MCA 85-1-9 and MCA 2-15-3311 to learn more about our enabling legislation.



### Summary of Duties

Duty	Education & Outreach	Collaboration	Septic Leachate	Stormwater	Monitoring & Coord.	Aquatic Invasive Sp.
1. Monitor & collaboratively develop a monitoring strategy for natural resources	●		●			
2. Support aquatic invasive species prevention program						●
3. Promote cooperation among federal, state, provincial, tribal, and local managers	●	●	●	●	●	●
4. Promote international coordination with British Columbia	●					●
5. Provide targeted support for the Flathead Basin	●		●	●		
6. Support resource-conscious economic development	●	●	●		●	
7. Investigate and hold hearings about resource utilization	●		●	●	●	
8. Create public-private partnerships to:	●	●	●	●		●
a) Reduce point and nonpoint source pollution	●	●	●	●	●	
b) Prevent the spread of aquatic invasive species	●	●				●
c) Benefit aquatic resources in western Montana	●	●	●	●	●	●

The purpose of the Western Montana Conservation Commission is to protect the existing high quality of western Montana's aquatic resources.

MCA-85-1-902

## Values

The Principles that Guide Our Work



### Respect for and Utilization of Local Knowledge

The Séliš, Qlispé, & Ksanka tribes, land and water stewards, and other local knowledge-holders in Montana have extensive experience and vital knowledge important to conservation efforts.

We respect generational knowledge and diverse knowledge systems, while equitably integrating and prioritizing local knowledge in conservation practices.



### Innovative Leadership

Foster a culture of innovation by promoting research, pilot projects, and the exploration of novel, science-based technologies to solve emerging challenges in resource conservation.

Share successful strategies, best practices, and innovative solutions with partners and other organizations to make local and national conservation efforts more successful.



### Continuous Learning & Improvement

Embrace a culture of continuous learning, encouraging staff and commission member development and capacity building to improve practices and outcomes.

Continuously learn from and with partners and community members to adaptively respond to natural resource challenges and opportunities.



### Ethical Standards & Integrity

Uphold high ethical standards in all activities, fostering transparency, accountability, and integrity in decision-making processes and interactions with other parties.

## Pillars

The Work We Do

### Aquatic Resource Protection

**Goal:** Support existing and create new programs and projects to have positive, on-the-ground impacts.

#### Foundations

- Aquatic invasive species prevention
- Water quality protection through point and nonpoint source pollution reduction

### Inclusive Education & Outreach

**Goal:** Inspire action for responsible water stewardship and provide resources for consistent messaging.

#### Foundations

- Diverse, engaged partners
- Culturally appropriate messaging
- Outreach that inspires public participation & water stewardship

### Collaboration & Facilitation

**Goal:** Convene partners to collectively identify and address resource challenges and opportunities.

#### Foundations

- Sharing and creating knowledge with partners
- Support and enhance existing efforts



## First Year: at a glance



Photo: Seeley Lake; Montana Office of Tourism and Business Development



## Committees

### AIS Committee

Chair: Phil Matson (Flathead Lake Biological Station)  
Vice Chair: Tom Woolf (Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks)  
Staff: Emilie Henry



Aquatic invasive species (AIS) are plants, animals, and pathogens not native to Montana. AIS can cause ecological and economic harm by outcompeting native species, damaging infrastructure, and diminishing the quality of recreational experiences. WMCC is committed to supporting and strengthening the State's AIS prevention program in western Montana.

The goals of the Committee include:

- Working with partners to identify gaps and needs in current AIS efforts
- Pursuing projects to fill gaps and address partner needs
- Enabling and empowering local partners to do work on the ground
- Exploring technologies and novel strategies to promote compliance with mandatory inspection laws
- Conducting education and outreach on AIS topics
- Pursuing thoughtful, strategic legislative engagement

### Monitoring and Coordination Committee

Chair: Lech Naumovich (Greater Than Image, LLC)  
Staff: Kelly Hendrix



The Monitoring and Coordination Committee focuses on the monitoring of aquatic resources in western Montana. The committee also promotes coordination among federal, state, provincial, tribal, and local resource managers to establish consistent conservation practices, comprehensive monitoring, and effective data collection and interpretation. These efforts are vital for protecting and sustainably managing Montana's natural resources.

The goals of the Committee include:

- Communicate monitoring efforts and the condition of the aquatic resources
- Develop a 5-year monitoring strategy with input from all land and water agencies in western Montana with a focus on aquatic resources (per statutory duties)
- Foster collaboration among all resource managers to align conservation practices and strategies (per statutory duties)
- Identification of land use, land development, and economic trends in western Montana (per statutory duties)
- Identify potential monitoring gaps and propose solutions
- Evaluate trends in the conditions of western Montana's natural resources, with a focus on aquatic resources

### Education, Outreach, and Communications Committee

Chair: Kate Wilson (Bonneville Power Administration)  
Staff: Stephanie Murphy



The Western Montana Conservation Commission (WMCC) emphasizes community education, outreach, and engagement to increase public awareness of water quality issues threatening western Montana. By providing leadership and support on public and partner engagement, we can inspire residents and visitors to take pride and responsibility in conservation efforts and increase awareness of natural resource threats and solutions.

The goals of the Committee include:

- Communication, education, and outreach support for WMCC and all committees, as needed (per statutory duties)
- Support Montana Waters: Clearly Connected campaign: priorities, budget, and expansion
- Advertising and marketing needs
- Help plan and support engagement across Upper Columbia Basin
- Support development and maintenance of WMCC website, newsletters, and social media
- Support development and finalization of biennial reports to legislature (per statutory duties)
- Assist with writing of RFPs and contracts for communication, outreach, and/or education related needs



Photo: Flint Creek, Montana Office of Tourism and Business Development

## Committees-in-Development

WMCC established a process for committee development to ensure clarity, engagement, and effective goal setting. This preliminary phase allows for comprehensive planning before formalizing the committee, fostering a sense of ownership and commitment among participants. Once a Committee-in-Development has established goals and structure, it is brought to the full Commission for official review and vote.

### Onsite Wastewater Treatment Committee

Co-Chairs: Mike Koopal (WLI) and Ron Pifer  
 Vice-Chair: Nanette Nelson (FLBS)  
 Staff: Heidi Fleury



The Onsite Wastewater Treatment Committee's primary goal is to develop a shared strategy, through a collaborative process, to manage onsite wastewater treatment systems to protect public health and water quality in western Montana.

The goals of the Committee include:

- Increase public knowledge of existing standards and processes for onsite wastewater management in western Montana
- Identify any knowledge gaps, data needs, and/or barriers to onsite wastewater management
- Explore options for increasing performance and sustainability of onsite wastewater treatment management
- Identify emerging solutions and appropriate compliance mechanisms to reduce risk to water quality degradation
- Develop recommendations for approaches or actions related to onsite wastewater treatment management to WMCC for consideration

### Stormwater Advisory Council

Commission Members: Tracy Campbell, Matt Peterson, Tom Martin  
 Staff: Kristen Jordan



The Stormwater Advisory Council, driven by requirements in WMCC's EPA Toxics Reduction Lead Grant, is in the early stages of development. The group serves as an advisory team of stormwater experts from the region with a mission to "advise and collaborate to develop resources that promote and support a sustainable green stormwater infrastructure program in Montana." This group of stormwater experts will identify useful resources, documentation, and programmatic direction that will benefit entities in Montana to further utilize green stormwater infrastructure. The determined outputs are funded by the EPA grant.

“

Western Montana waters are more than just rivers and lakes. They are the lifeblood of its ecosystems and the heart of its communities. We rely on them to sustain biodiversity, fuel economic prosperity, and provide boundless recreational opportunities. Protecting these waters is not just a responsibility; it's an investment in the future—a pledge to preserve the natural wonders that define western Montana's spirit and soul.

”

**Gina Hodges**  
 former City of Kalispell Environmental Coordinator



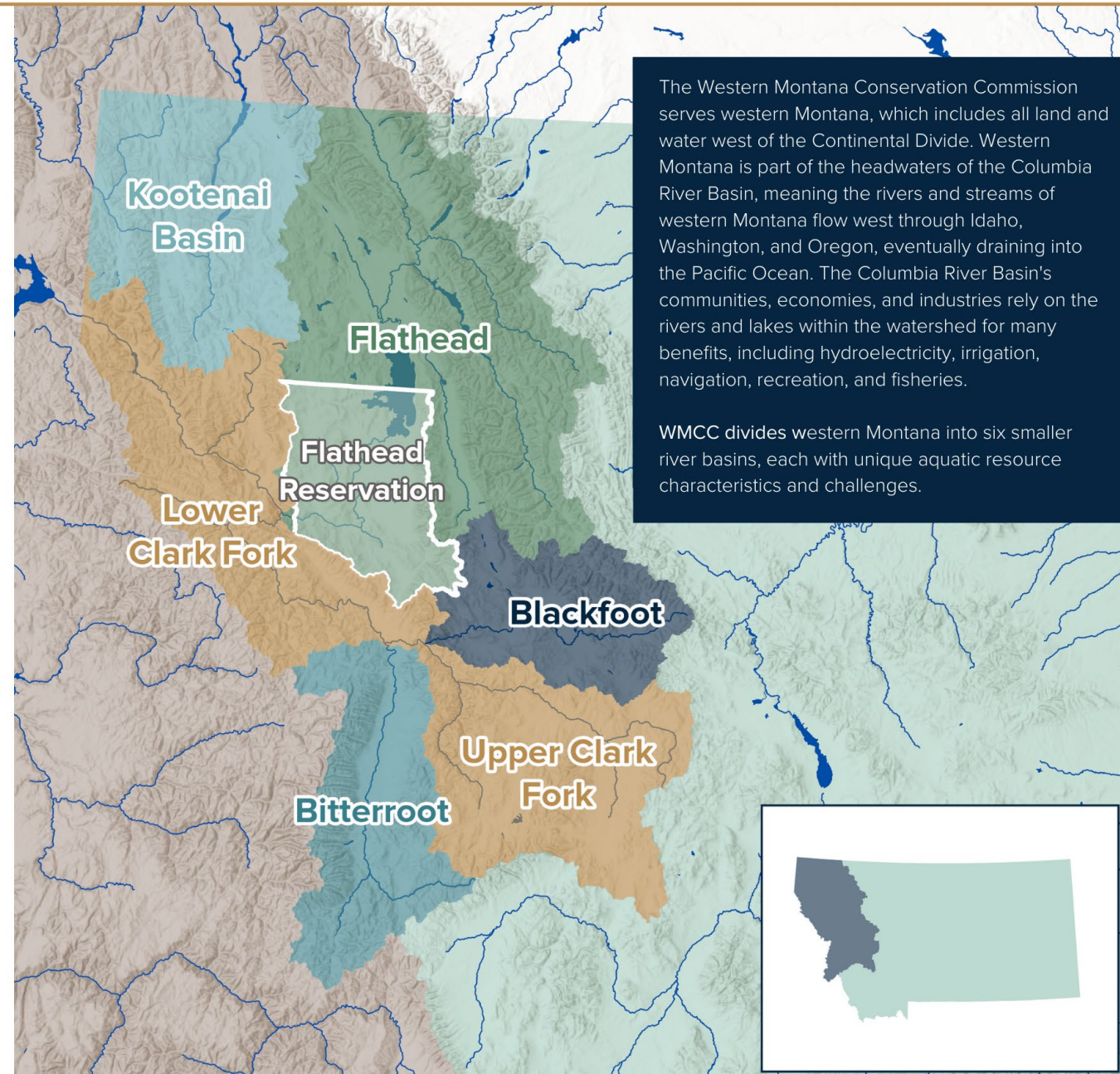
“

As upstream users, we have legal and moral obligations to protect water quality—not only for future generations, but for everyone who lives downstream.

Nonpoint source pollution is one of the biggest threats to the sustainability and resiliency of our water resources. We must focus on solutions that mitigate the cumulative impact of stormwater runoff.

”

**Tracy Campbell**  
 City of Missoula Stormwater Superintendent



**Kootenai Basin**

Originating in British Columbia, the Kootenai River flows south through Eureka and west toward Idaho. The Kootenai Reservoir, created by the Libby Dam, provides hydroelectric and recreation opportunities. Historical and active mining along the Elk and St. Mary rivers pose challenges to water quality and fish health.

**Flathead Basin**

Originating north of the border in British Columbia, the Flathead Basin is comprised of forests, agricultural land, and towns. The Stillwater, Swan, and Whitefish rivers join with the three forks of the Flathead River to feed Flathead Lake. The Flathead Reservation lies in the southern portion of the basin, home to the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes. Glacier National Park and the Bob Marshall Wilderness offer vast recreation opportunities, and the Hungry Horse and Seli's Ksanka Qlispé dams provide hydroelectric power to the region. Rapid development, increasing recreation trends, and aging infrastructure put pressure on the beautiful natural resources of the Flathead.

**Upper and Lower Clark Fork Basins**

Beginning as Silver Bow Creek around downtown Butte, the Clark Fork River moves northwest to its confluence with the Blackfoot River east of Missoula before flowing through the city. The Clark Fork receives inputs from the Bitterroot and lower Flathead Rivers, eventually crossing the Idaho border. A history of mining has presented a host of water quality challenges for the watershed, leaving the Upper Clark Fork as the largest superfund complex in the U.S.

**Blackfoot Basin**

The Blackfoot River converges with the North Fork near Ovando and flows westward where it is joined by the Clearwater River carrying water from Seeley Lake and other neighboring lakes. The Blackfoot Basin remains largely undeveloped and rural compared to other watersheds in the region. Historical impacts from livestock grazing, logging, and mining have impacted the basin's water quality, as well as a loss of intact landscapes to support fish and wildlife populations.

**Bitterroot Basin**

The two forks of the Bitterroot River unite south of Darby and flow north through Hamilton and Lolo. As it flows, the Bitterroot River receives inputs from many tributaries before it converges with the Clark Fork River. In the northern portion of the watershed, Lolo National Forest offers wilderness and recreational opportunities as well as habitat for keystone species. High rates of development and population growth put pressure on the basin's natural resources.

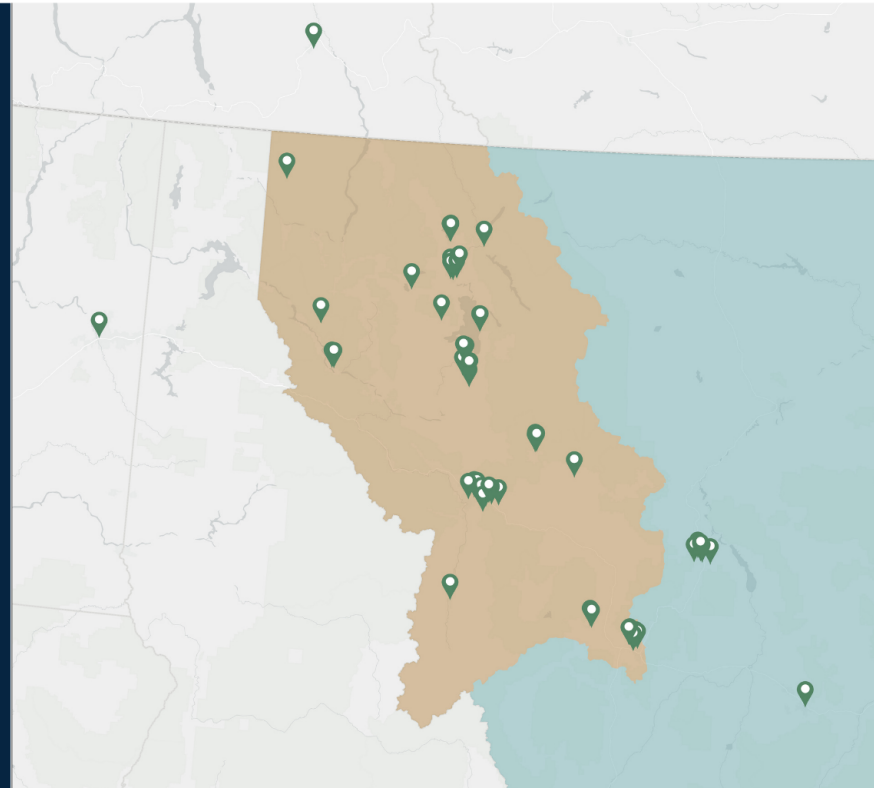
## What We Do

### Coordination & Collaboration

The Western Montana Conservation Commission plays a crucial role in coordinating and collaborating with organizations across western Montana. We support and strengthen partner programs' efforts to protect the region's water quality through financial assistance, education and outreach, staffing support, and more.

#### Meeting with partners

In our inaugural year, WMCC has successfully engaged with over 50 partner organizations, agencies, and individuals fostering strong collaborative relationships and establishing a foundation for future initiatives. These meetings have allowed us to gather diverse perspectives and insights, enhancing our understanding and approach to natural resource management in western Montana; furthering us towards fulfilling our statutory duties.



#### Sponsored Events

WMCC sponsored regional events to bolster community engagement, share our mission, and support our partners through collaborative endeavors.



Whitefish, MT  
Montana Lakes Conference  
October 18 - 20, 2023



Missoula, MT  
Aquatic Invasive Species Short Course  
March 4 - 6, 2024



Butte, MT  
Clark Fork Science Forum  
April 24 - 25, 2024

### Partner organizations and agencies engaged with in 2024

#### Federal Agencies:

- US Geological Survey
- Environmental Protection Agency
- Bureau of Reclamation

#### Montana Counties:

- Flathead County
- Lake County
- Missoula Dept. of Ecology & Extension
- Sanders County Aquatic Invasive Plant Task Force

#### Montana State Agencies:

- Dept. of Environmental Quality
- Fish, Wildlife, & Parks
- Dept. of Natural Resources & Conservation
- Montana Invasive Species Council
- Montana Bureau of Mines & Geology

#### Conservation Groups:

- Flathead River to Lake Initiative
- Bob Marshall Wilderness Foundation
- Blackfoot Challenge
- Ripple
- Flathead Lake Biological Station
- Gallatin River Task Force
- Watershed Education Network
- DNRC Native Plant Nursery
- Yaak Valley Forest Council
- Montana Association of Conservation Districts
- Midwest Assistance Program

#### Conservation Districts:

- Flathead CD
- Missoula CD
- Lake County CD

#### Tribal:

- Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes

#### Additional Groups:

- Flathead Basin Wastewater Partners
- WGM Group
- Montana Lakes Conference
- Flathead Community of Resource Educators
- Public Lake and Water Access Association
- Butte Citizens' Technical Environmental Committee
- NeighborWorks
- WET: Water & Environmental Technologies
- Glacier Country Tourism

#### Montana Cities:

- City of Missoula Stormwater
- City of Kalispell Stormwater

#### Watershed Groups:

- Flathead Lakers
- Little Bitterroot Lake Association
- Montana Watershed Coordination Council
- Clearwater Resource Council
- Friends of Lake Mary Ronan
- Upper Columbia Lakes Network
- Upper Clark Fork Streamflow Working Group
- Bitterroot Water Partnership
- Crown Managers Partnership
- Whitefish Lake Institute

## Aquatic Invasive Species

Aquatic invasive species (AIS) are plants, animals, and pathogens not native to Montana that live in aquatic environments which can hitch a ride on boats, kayaks, and equipment and spread across waterbodies. Preventing the spread of AIS requires public action, especially cleaning, draining, and drying boats and gear. WMCC supports the State's AIS prevention program, in partnership with Fish, Wildlife, and Parks (FWP), by engaging the public on AIS topics, educating them on the dangers of AIS and what they can do to protect our waters.



Fly Anglers: Protect Our Waters From Aquatic Invasive Species  
Montana DNRC  
142 subscribers

WMCC AIS PSA video on Youtube



WMCC  
Video  
Playlist

Continuing the work of UC3, WMCC produced three AIS outreach videos for both the general public and targeted audiences in partnership with MT FWP. The first, an instructional training focused on monitoring for AIS to build community science efforts in western Montana. The second, an awareness and education video focused on the impacts of AIS and the State's AIS prevention program that water-based industries can use in seasonal training of staff, prompting action to prevent the introduction and spread of AIS and provide accurate information to staff, customers, and clients. Finally, a public service announcement (PSA) video specifically targeting fly-fishing and wade anglers for preventing the spread of AIS.

In August 2023, WMCC celebrated the third annual Watercraft Inspector Appreciation Week. Watercraft inspectors are our first line of defense against AIS, working long days in the heat to inspect and decontaminate any watercraft looking to launch on Montana's lakes and rivers. Watercraft Inspector Appreciation Week allows WMCC and partners to thank our inspectors for their hard work and raise public awareness of the difficult and important job they do.



Watercraft Inspectors at the Ravalli Station

Industry Outreach visit at Kingfisher Fly Shop in Missoula

In 2024, WMCC jointly hosted a Big Sky Watershed Corps (AmeriCorps) member, Clarissa Orton, with the Missoula County Department of Ecology and Extension (MCDEE). Clarissa's primary responsibilities include serving as an ambassador in WMCC's industry outreach program, conducting education and outreach on AIS topics, and supporting MCDEE's projects through fieldwork and data acquisition.

In March 2024, Clarissa and Emilie Henry, WMCC's Program Coordinator, presented at the Western AIS Short Course hosted by MCDEE. The presentation focused on WMCC's role in larger state AIS prevention efforts, primarily centered on community education, outreach, and engagement. Audience members learned how regional organizations or commissions can successfully supplement a state's AIS program.



Emilie Henry (WMCC Staff) and Clarissa Orton (BSWC) speaking at the Western AIS Short Course

To fund our AIS work, WMCC is utilizing two grants from the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, totaling \$125,797. Originally awarded to UC3 in 2021, the first grant in the amount of \$58,255 funds a contract with the Upper Columbia Lakes Network to support community science initiatives and three years of AmeriCorps member host site fees from 2022-2024. A second grant in the amount of \$67,542 funds an AmeriCorps host fee for a 2025 BSWC member, billboards, video production, and advertising material to spread the Clean, Drain, Dry message.

As it continues to gain traction, WMCC's AIS Committee will inform and support these efforts.



As the 2024 Big Sky Watershed Corps member with WMCC and the Missoula County Department of Ecology & Extension, I have been able to travel across the western portion of the state spreading awareness of AIS and sharing what I've learned about their prevention and management. Prior to this position, the only work experience I had that related to aquatics was as a raft guide. So it's no surprise that my first few months had a steep learning curve. I have learned so much in such a short amount of time and met so many excited and engaged people - I can't believe I'm a couple months away from being done. I have been able to try new things and build skills that will benefit me in any future position. I feel very grateful for this opportunity and all the support of my supervisors and greater community.

Clarissa Orton



## Nonpoint Source Pollution

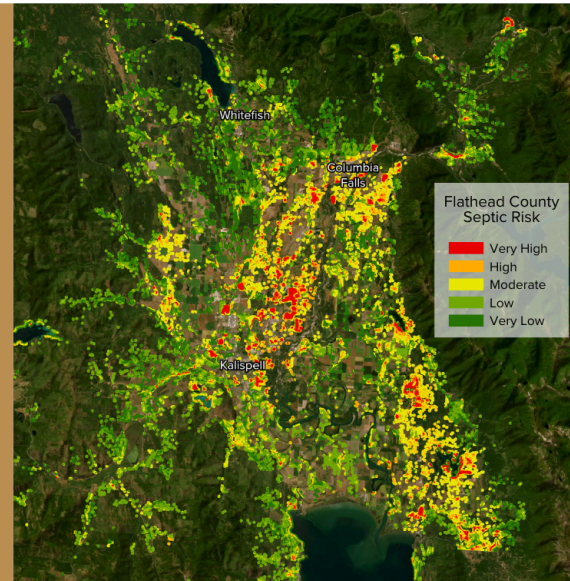
Nonpoint source pollution comes from many dispersed sources across the landscape, making it difficult to regulate. One effective way to reduce nonpoint source pollution is providing ways for individuals to mitigate their impact and resources to better understand how they can make a difference. Two sources of nonpoint source pollution that WMCC currently works to address are stormwater and septic leachate.

### Septic Leachate

Septic systems are underground structures that treat wastewater from homes or businesses not connected to a sewer system. Solid waste settles out in the septic tank, and the liquid is slowly released into the drain field to be treated by microbes in the soil. When properly installed, operated, and maintained, septic systems can provide adequate wastewater treatment. However, aging and underperforming septic systems can pollute surface and groundwater with nutrients, bacteria, and other pollutants.

Beginning in 2020, the former Flathead Basin Commission developed a septic risk model for Flathead County that identifies areas at high risk for septic leachate pollution to water resources based on physical landscape and existing septic system characteristics. Continuing this work, WMCC held conversations with CSKT and Lake County Commissioners and staff to discuss expanding this model to the southern part of the Flathead Watershed. WMCC is committed to supporting the expansion of this project, as the model serves as a useful tool for informing development and reducing water pollution.

WMCC staff also collaborated on a National Science Foundation grant application submitted by the Flathead Lake Biological Station to investigate septic leachate pollution and its nearshore impacts on Flathead Lake. If awarded, WMCC's role in this project will be outreach to communities across western Montana about septic leachate pollution and the tools available to better understand and address it, including the Flathead Basin Septic Risk Model.



Septic pumping



WMCC has continued a long-term partnership with the Flathead Basin Wastewater Partnership, a group dedicated to supporting and improving the Flathead Basin Septic Maintenance Reimbursement Program. In 2022, the Flathead Basin Commission initiated a contract with Lake County Conservation District to provide funding for the program, a contract that WMCC continued and finalized this year. WMCC continues to engage with the partnership on ways to improve and expand outreach and impact.

## Stormwater

Stormwater is water that runs across hard surfaces such as rooftops and roads when it rains or snow melts. As it flows, it can pick up pollutants on the landscape, including oil from leaky cars, chemicals from pesticides, and nutrients from pet waste. In Montana, stormwater flows directly into streams and rivers often without treatment, bringing with it any pollutants it may have picked up.



Glacier High School students planting a rain garden



Eve Hunter (FRGI participant) with her daughter in her rain garden

The Flathead Rain Garden Initiative (FRGI) is a collaborative program with the Flathead Conservation District, the City of Kalispell, and WMCC that empowers residents of Flathead County to reduce stormwater pollution by building rain gardens on their property. Rain gardens are designed to capture, filter, and absorb dirty stormwater and keep it out of waterbodies.

In 2023, WMCC jointly hosted a Big Sky Watershed Corps (AmeriCorps) member, Katie Lynch-Dombroski, with the City of Kalispell to support FRGI and conduct stormwater-related education and outreach.

During her term, Katie managed a \$7,000 mini-grant from the Montana Association of Conservation Districts that supported FRGI program development, including radio and newspaper advertisements, targeted postcard mailings, and promotional graphics and video creation. Grant funding also supported a community rain garden project at Glacier High School in Kalispell along with associated educational materials and signage. Students designed and helped to plant the garden, and countless students and community members can benefit from this project for years to come! Katie also organized two educational walking tours during which participants visited rain gardens in downtown Kalispell and learned about their benefits.



Shannon Freix (FRGI participant) presenting her rain garden to tour participants



Promotional postcards for FRGI targeted mailing



Gina Hodges (City of Kalispell) and Katie Lynch-Dombroski (BSWC) helping to plant rain garden

## Education & Outreach

WMCC's education and outreach efforts aim to expand public knowledge and support partner organizations. Our multifaceted outreach efforts include social media, newsletters, press releases, community events, and outreach campaigns that support aquatic invasive species prevention, nonpoint source pollution mitigation, and community stewardship. In 2024, WMCC reached over 2,300 people across western Montana at a variety of community outreach events. WMCC programs, events, and meetings were highlighted in 15 different news stories, reaching a total online and print audience of over 48,000 people. Transitioning from FBC and UC3 to WMCC, a new website was written and designed to provide information about the Commission, our programs, the region we serve, and upcoming events.

### 2024 Events

- Rain Garden Walking Tours
- Northwest Montana Fair & Rodeo
- Flathead Waters Clean Up
- Workshop for Building Drought Resilience in a Changing Climate with Upper Columbia and Missouri Basin Tribes
- Montana AIS Partner Meeting
- Montana Lakes Conference
- Montana Outdoor Recreation Summit
- Free the Seeds
- Home & Garden Showcase
- Western AIS Short Course
- Montana Plant Conservation Conference
- Crown Managers Partnership Forum
- Montana Watershed Coordination Council's Annual Meeting
- Flathead Earth Day
- WildFest – International Wildlife Film Festival
- University of Montana Sustainability Fair
- Clark Fork Science Forum
- Family Forestry Expo
- North Flathead Yacht Club Launch Party
- Big Fork Whitewater Festival
- Intro to Fly Fishing Clinic
- Clark Fork River Market
- Columbia River Basin Restoration Program Working Group Meeting



Krista Lammers, Kelly Hendrix, Casey Lewis (WMCC Staff) and Mike Koopal (Chair) at Flathead Earth Day



Emilie Henry (WMCC Staff) at the Clark Fork River Market



Clarissa Orton (BSWC) and Stephanie Murphy (WMCC Staff) at Wildfest



In August 2023, WMCC co-hosted the 3rd annual Flathead Waters Cleanup event with Flathead Conservation District, Flathead Rivers Alliance, Flathead Lakers, Lake County Conservation District, and the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes. The goal was to encourage volunteers to clean up trash and debris in and around the waterbodies of the Flathead Basin. Volunteers are invited to an afterparty at Sacred Waters Brewing Company and Glacier Brewing to dispose and weigh their trash and to qualify for amazing prizes donated by community sponsors. The event garners tremendous community support and has become a tradition in the Flathead. To date, the Flathead Waters Cleanup has engaged 534 volunteers, removed 9,770 pounds of trash, and improved 330 miles of riverbank and lakeshore.



Volunteers and WMCC Staff at the 2023 Flathead Waters Cleanup



Montana Waters: Clearly Connected is an umbrella education and outreach campaign that seeks to increase public awareness of water quality issues in Montana, ultimately enhancing personal behaviors and inspiring residents and visitors to take pride and responsibility in conservation efforts. The campaign seeks to foster coordination and collaboration among partners working on water quality issues in western Montana by increasing consistency of messaging, improving accessibility and awareness of available resources, and enhancing partnership opportunities.



The campaign was originally developed and soft launched by the Flathead Basin Commission. When FBC and UC3 were consolidated into WMCC, WMCC took ownership of the Montana Waters: Clearly Connected campaign, launching the website and social media in July 2023.

### Social Media: by the numbers

	WMCC Facebook	Montana Waters Facebook	Montana Waters Instagram
<b>Reach</b> Reach is the number of unique people who viewed content posted on our page.	<b>10,300+</b>	<b>9,900+</b>	<b>4,400+</b>
<b>Followers gained</b> The total number of followers gained from July 1, 2023 - June 30, 2024.	<b>↑ 68</b>	<b>↑ 94</b>	<b>↑ 166</b>

## EPA Columbia River Basin Toxic Reduction Lead Grant

Reducing Stormwater and Septic Leachate Toxic Pollution in the Headwaters of the Columbia River Basin

In September 2023, WMCC was awarded a \$7 million grant from the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Columbia River Basin Toxics Reduction Work Group. Grant funds will be used for subawards and staff support of programs to help increase the capacity for local governments, agencies, and watershed groups to tackle some of the most pressing nonpoint source pollution issues surrounding stormwater and septic leachate concerns in western Montana. These community programs and projects will directly address one of WMCC's essential legislative duties set forth in MCA 85-1-904, to create public-private partnerships that result in projects to reduce point source and nonpoint source pollution.

### Programs & Projects:

\$2.1 Million

#### Showcase Green Stormwater Infrastructure

Projects designed to mitigate pollution and reduce runoff while highlighting co-benefits.

\$1 Million

#### Flathead County Septage Treatment Facility

Supports the planning and design costs associated with the facility.

\$488,000

#### Residential Septic System Education and Maintenance

Develop or expand residential septic maintenance programs that provide cost-share, outreach, and programming on water quality.

\$325,000

#### Community Research and Education

Professional services to identify resident baseline knowledge, guide outreach plans, and host a partner marketing workshop.

\$239,000

#### Community Green Stormwater Infrastructure

Regional GSI program development such as rain gardens or rain barrel programs.

\$200,000

#### Wastewater Connectivity Upgrades

Projects that benefit local water quality by replacing septic systems or connecting to sewer systems.



Photo: Bitterroot River, Montana Office of Tourism and Business Development  
2024 Western Montana Conservation Commission (WMCC) Biennial Report

By the end of January 2024, three grant funded staff were hired, and the Stormwater and Septic Leachate Competitive Grant Program build began. We began developing quality assurance project plans to guide and inform our grant-related research and reporting. To bolster nonpoint source pollution outreach and education in western Montana, we organized a Community-Based Social Marketing Workshop that will be held in November 2024, and began the request for proposals process for a marketing and communications firm to conduct community research and assess overall impact of our grant program outreach. We've begun to develop programmatic materials and collaborate with partner organizations across western Montana.

\$434,000

#### Green Stormwater Infrastructure Programmatic Development

The Stormwater Advisory Council will advise and collaborate to develop resources that promote and support a sustainable green stormwater infrastructure program in Montana.

At the June WMCC meeting, the Commission approved funding to support the Flathead County Septage Treatment Facility. To establish our Stormwater and Septic Leachate Grant Program, we drafted the grant program guidelines and held the first partner information meeting. Guidelines are tentatively set to be approved by the full commission in September 2024. Once the guidelines are approved and programs are solidified, an open application period will tentatively begin in January 2025. Grant subawards will start to be awarded to support on-the-ground work in Spring 2025. Subaward funds expire in 2029.



# Financials

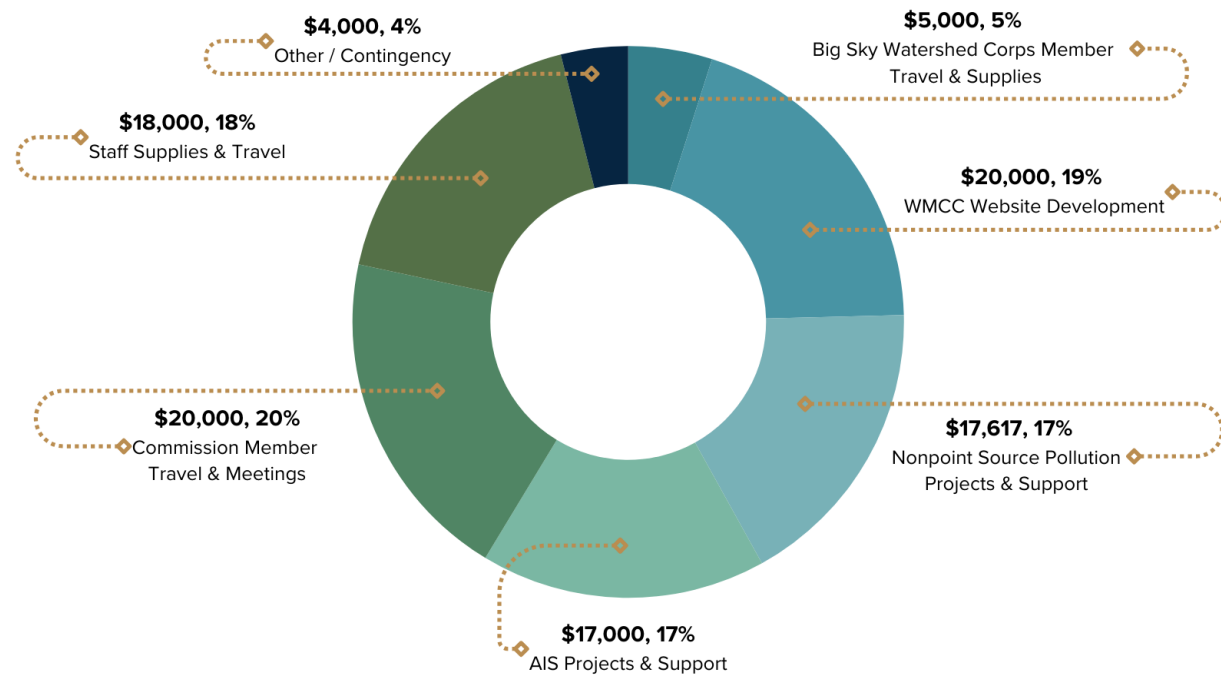
## Fiscal Year 2024

The Western Montana Conservation Commission was created July 1, 2023; therefore, this biennial report only includes financial information from FY24. WMCC's budget was not finalized until December 2023 since it required consolidating the former Flathead Basin Commission's and Upper Columbia Conservation Commission's funds.

### Total FY24: \$478,363 – Fully Expended

Operations: \$101,617.20

#### FY24 Operations Expenditures by Category



#### Personnel: \$376,745.80



Personnel funds support 4 staff for WMCC. Previously, FBC and UC3 had two shared staff between the two commissions and one additional staff specifically working for FBC. With the consolidation, the missions of both previous commissions were consolidated and applied to the larger area, western Montana. Due to the increased area and mission, it was decided to utilize funds to support 4 staff to ensure the commission had adequate capacity to meet its legislative duties.



### Supplemental Federal Grants: \$7,130,873

WMCC, and formerly FBC and UC3, actively work to obtain supplemental grants to expand the Commission's impact. During FY24, WMCC had four active federal grants that provide staff support and direct funds for projects to improve or maintain water quality in western Montana.

\$6,998,075	\$67,542	\$58,255	\$7,000
<b>EPA Columbia River Basin Toxics Reduction Lead Grant</b>	<b>Bureau of Reclamation Quagga Mussel Prevention</b>	<b>Bureau of Reclamation Quagga Mussel Prevention</b>	<b>MT Association of Conservation Districts</b>
Project Period 10/23 - 9/29	Project Period 5/22 - 9/25	Project Period 8/21 - 11/24	Project Period 11/22 - 11/23
Supports 3 additional staff, septic leachate and stormwater toxic reduction projects, and associated education and outreach	Supports clean, drain, dry campaign and WMCC's Industry Outreach project and associated Big Sky Watershed Corps member	Supports Upper Columbia Lakes Network AIS Monitoring and 3 years of Big Sky Watershed Corps members to run WMCC's Industry Outreach project	Federal subaward supporting WMCC's Big Sky Watershed Corps Member's stormwater projects



Photo: Glacier National Park  
2024 Western Montana Conservation Commission (WMCC) Biennial Report



WESTERN MONTANA  
**Conservation  
Commission**



The Western Montana Conservation Commission is administratively attached to the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation.



[DNRCARDDWMCC@mt.gov](mailto:DNRCARDDWMCC@mt.gov)



Western Montana Conservation Commission  
Montana Waters: Clearly Connected



[@clearlyconnectedmt](https://www.instagram.com/clearlyconnectedmt)