



STRATEGIC PLAN

2023 – 2027



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Photo: Mark Alan Wilson

Our Watershed

Forming the eastern headwaters of the Columbia River, the Clark Fork is Montana's largest river by volume.

THE COALITION FORMED IN 1985 to protect and restore the Clark Fork River basin—a 14 million-acre area spanning nearly all of western Montana and a portion of northern Idaho. For tens of thousands of years, this river system was a central focus of life for the earliest inhabitants of the land – the Séliš and Qlispé tribes – whose elders speak of the river's abundance, and how “by [its fish and wildlife], we were wealthy from water.”

The “wealth” of this river still surrounds us today. Forming the eastern headwaters of the Columbia River, the Clark Fork is Montana's largest river by volume. It rises out of mountains along the Continental Divide and captures water from 28,000 miles of creeks and streams on its 320-mile journey to Idaho's largest natural lake, Lake Pend Oreille.

Flowing through a landscape that sits at the junction of two of the last remaining large and intact ecosystems—the Greater Yellowstone and the Crown of the Continent—the Clark Fork and its tributaries supply some of the richest and wildest habitat in the lower 48.

These waterways provide food, shelter, and vital pathways for grizzly bears, lynx, wolverines, bull trout, golden eagles, elk, and myriad other species that have evolved in sync with the rhythms of this vast, vital riverscape. They also sustain human communities, connect people, and serve as the focus for civic life and the engines of local agricultural and outdoor economies.

During the previous century of European settlement and industrial development, the Clark Fork was the backbone of major industries: mining, smelting, logging, pulp and paper making. Many of these were large-scale and intensive enterprises that left a legacy of pollution and ecological damage that the Clark Fork Coalition is tackling to this day.

Healthy rivers are the foundation for life. They're what make all living communities resilient and vibrant, and allow people and nature to thrive. In fact, the link between community vitality and watershed health is the primary organizing principle behind everything we do at the Coalition. For nearly four decades, we have protected clean water and restored historically hard-working streams for the benefit of people, nature, and the diversity of life in the Clark Fork watershed.

Our success is built on science-driven advocacy, public education and outreach, and rich, diverse partnerships. We bring all of these elements together so that we can take on the technically complex, politically thorny, and socially challenging issues facing the watershed, unite people around the cause for the river, and deliver concrete results. This combination of expertise and a commitment to the long view makes the Coalition a unique and trusted force for conservation in the region.

*Right: Clark Fork watershed
map by Emily McGuirt,
Clark Fork Coalition*

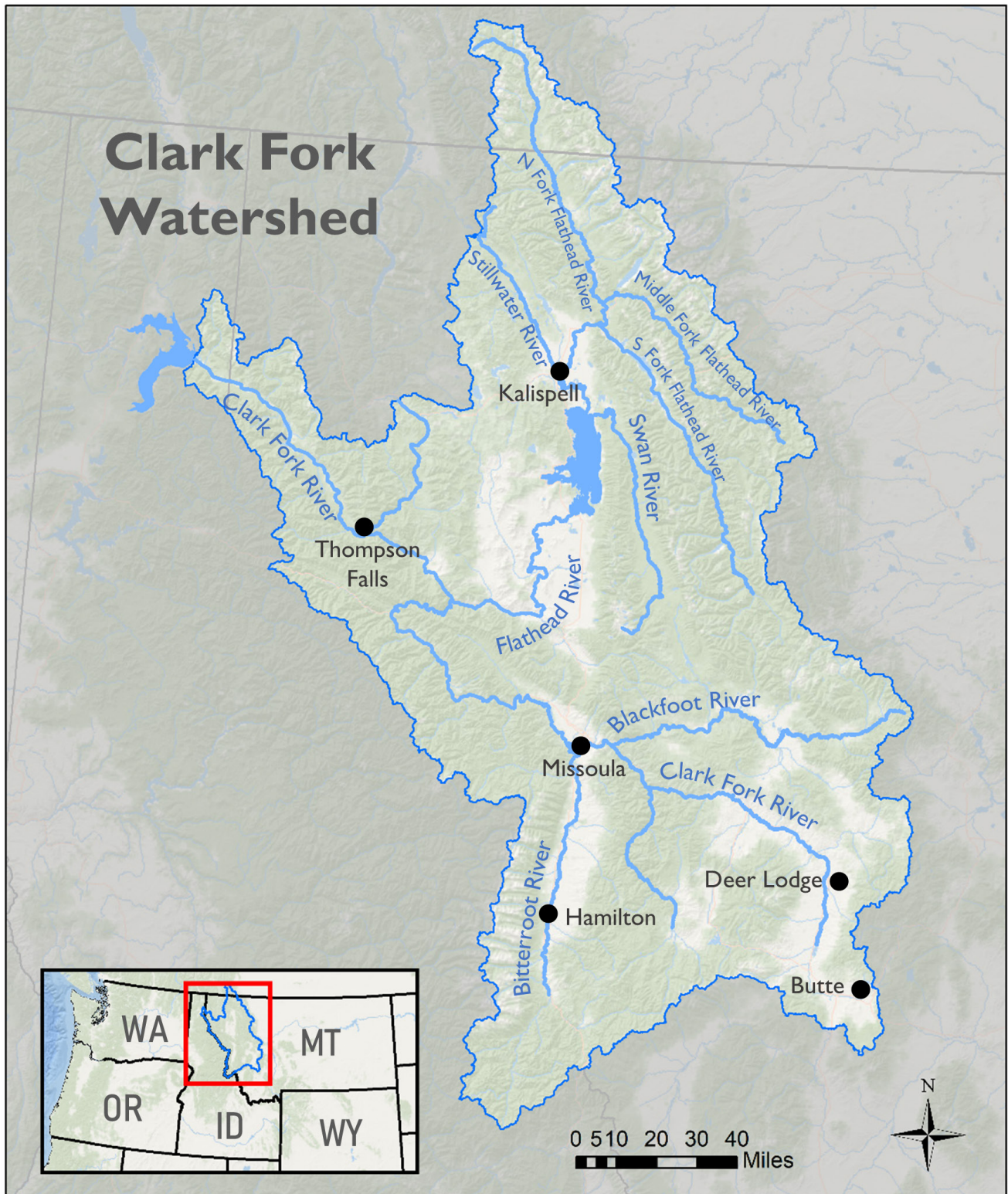




Photo: Larry Javorskey



Photo: Tom Bowler



Photo: Robin Poole



The Clark Fork Coalition

VISION: We work toward a future where the Clark Fork River and its tributaries flow with clean, cold, and abundant water, ensuring the people, fish, and wildlife of the region flourish for generations to come.

MISSION: *The Coalition protects and restores the Clark Fork watershed.*

VALUES: Our values form the foundation of the Coalition's existence. They represent what we stand for and how we behave in the world.

Equity, Diversity, Inclusion: We are committed to working toward equity and inclusion across all elements of our organization so that we cultivate the diversity that is essential for delivering on our mission.

Scientific Integrity: We bring the best science and practices to our work to address the needs of the watershed.

Awareness of Connections: People and water are interconnected parts of a greater whole, and we solve problems by recognizing those connections and all their moving parts.

Collaboration: We seek input from diverse stakeholders and believe the work on behalf of the river will only succeed and endure when diverse teams, partners, local communities, and tribes work together, based on mutual benefit, respect, and trust.

Optimism: We believe that—by focusing on clean water and healthy rivers—we can ensure the best possible future for the river and the people, fish, and wildlife it sustains.

Taking Stock & Driving Forward



Photo: Mark Alan Wilson

IN DEVELOPING OUR 2023–2027 STRATEGIC PLAN, we sought out the advice and perspectives of many stakeholders, partners, and supporters. This included gleaning input via four focus group conversations (organized geographically by sub-basin), a board/staff questionnaire, and a membership survey answered by 185 individuals from diverse sectors (e.g., agriculture, outdoor recreation industry, water managers, urban planners, elected officials, conservation nonprofits, funders). We asked these constituents to reflect on the state of the watershed, threats and opportunities on the horizon, and areas where the Coalition might focus effort and resources for maximum impact in the years ahead.

This input revealed several interconnected macro-level trends that are intensifying in the Clark Fork basin, including:

- o **Climate Change:** The impacts of climate change are accelerating, further aggravating the problem of flow depletion stemming from over-appropriated water supplies in western Montana.
- o **Legacy Contamination:** Cleanup of legacy contamination is proceeding painfully slowly. At many sites, cleanup is either under-funded or mired in ponderous investigations, meaning all too many unremediated sites are functioning as hot-spot sources of ongoing pollution to the river.
- o **Outdated Regulations:** The frameworks that guide water management in Montana have not evolved with the realities of climate change and over-appropriation of water supplies, and clean water protections are routinely under attack.
- o **Growth and Sprawling Development:** Growth and development in many parts of the watershed are skyrocketing, with building concentrated along rivers and streams and encroaching on fragile and vital riparian corridors. The science is clear on this point: the rivers and streams flowing out of the heavily glaciated mountains of the Clark Fork watershed are among the most ecologically important habitats on the continent. Alter them, and we see far-reaching effects, leading to long-term ecosystem decline.



How should the Coalition confront these complex problems, and how can we respond at the pace and scale needed? We will do so by carrying out core strategies around which the Coalition has built expertise, reputation, and partnerships over the decades—particularly stream restoration, policy advocacy, and community engagement—applying them to our highest restoration and clean water priorities:

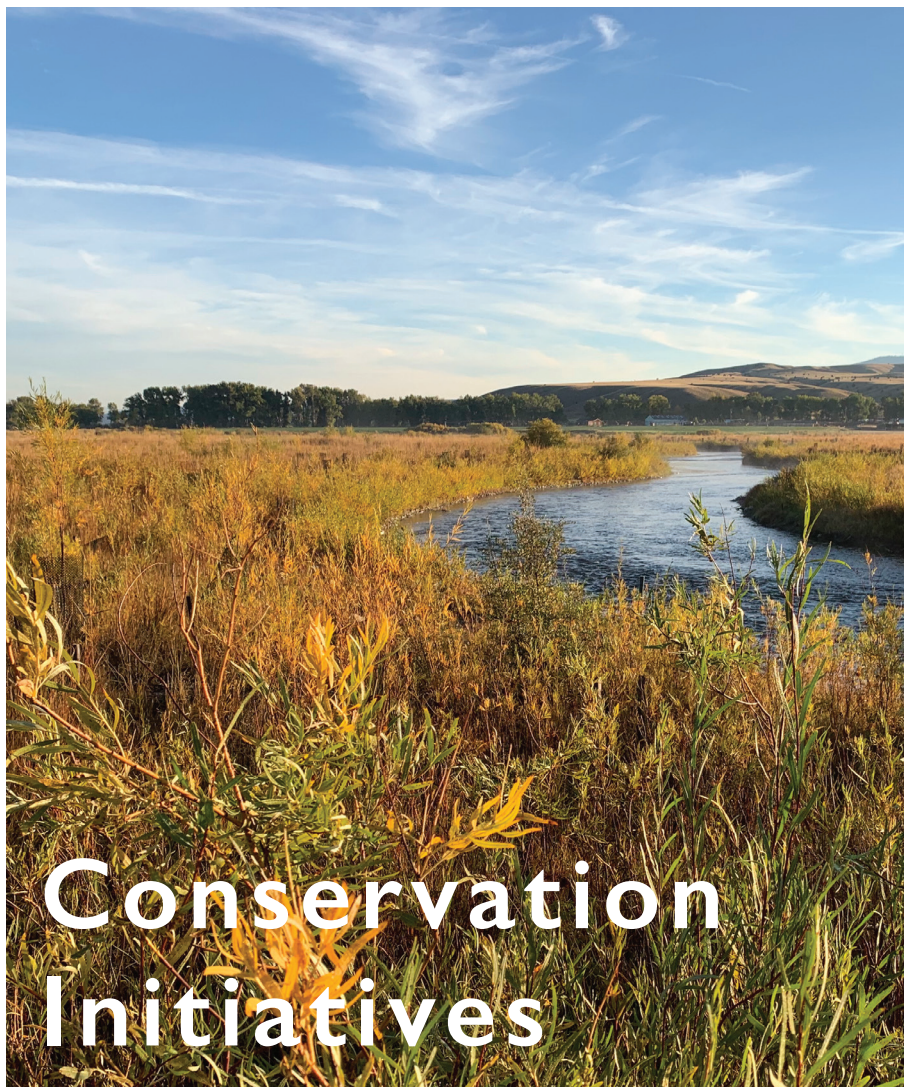
CURRENT MAJOR THREATS TO THE WATERSHED

Strategies	Climate Change	Legacy Contamination	Outdated Regulations	Growth & Sprawl
Stream Restoration	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Increase flows• Reconnect tributaries• Restore habitat and stream function• Reduce stressors	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Conduct field research• Contribute to cleanup knowledge base• Pursue restoration projects that complement cleanup	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Showcase projects that demonstrate the need for regulatory reform	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Restore habitat, stream function ahead of development
Policy Advocacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Bring water management into the 21st century	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Track, advocate for science-based, community-driven, permanent, effective cleanup	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Improve water management policy framework• Defend bedrock clean water laws• Track, weigh in on legislation	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Track, advocate for stream corridor protections• Promote river-centric planning
Community Engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Share knowledge• Build support for climate action	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Inform, engage, and motivate community stakeholders	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Catalyze public participation	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Inform, engage, and motivate community stakeholders

In the plan outlined here, we have bundled these three core strategies in different ways to deliver conservation results in all six of the general regions comprising our vast 14-million acre watershed. The 2023–2027 planning horizon presents especially timely and unique openings for impact in the following reaches of the basin: the Upper Clark Fork, the Bitterroot, and the Middle Clark Fork. This plan recognizes the critical work being done by partners, local watershed groups, and conservation allies in the other sub-basins that make up the Clark Fork basin. As a result, we are funneling the bulk of our energies

into three sub-basins, while supporting, complementing, and augmenting the work of our partners where possible, and carrying out specific long-term commitments that we have elsewhere in the watershed.

The board and staff of the Coalition believe this plan reflects what our constituents look to us to provide, and sets a positive and proactive conservation agenda focused on water. Furthermore, we believe this plan will allow us to deepen our impact for the benefit of people, fish and wildlife now and into the future.



Conservation Initiatives

THE UPPER CLARK FORK

THE UPPER CLARK FORK served as the backbone of Montana's industrial development during the late 1800s and well into the 20th century. During that time, the river was integral to the massive mining and smelting enterprises centered in Butte and Anaconda, as well as the large-scale logging, agricultural development, and road- and rail-building that this era of extraction set off. These sustained and intensive uses had profound impacts on this headwaters reach of the Clark Fork watershed, on hundreds of miles of feeder creeks and streams, and on surrounding communities. It also left vast amounts of pollution and environmental damage behind. Because a 1908 flood carried metals-laced waste from the mines downriver and spread the pollution across its flood-

plain, the entire 120-mile Upper Clark Fork River corridor is a federally designated Superfund site—the nation's largest. (The Coalition spearheaded the effort to secure the designation as a way to bring dollars and resources to help the river heal.) Cleanup of these complex contamination problems has been underway for decades, and much work remains. Yet rivers are active systems and—because of climate change—the Upper Clark Fork can ricochet from parched, low flows to flash flood conditions overnight. As long as un-remediated, unrestored stretches sit exposed to Montana's dynamic climate, they will be a source of continual contamination to the Clark Fork and its riverside agricultural communities.

Our Focus: Bring about the best possible cleanup and restoration of the mining-damaged Upper Clark Fork, resulting in a healthy river and thriving communities

For this reason, cleanup of the Upper Clark Fork—the headwaters of the entire Clark Fork River system—has been a top priority for the Coalition since forming as an organization. Our integrated approach in this sub-basin bundles cleanup advocacy, flow policy, on-the-ground restoration, and community engagement into a single campaign to achieve the best possible outcomes for the river and its people. Here are our core strategies:

Cleanup:

- o **Promote a world-class cleanup:** Ensure that Superfund cleanups of priority sites are scientifically top-notch, fully funded, and focused on areas of greatest risk to human health and the environment
- o **Support adaptive management through field research:** Collaborate with scientists and academic institutions on studies that assess the river's response to cleanup, help identify lessons learned, and inform and improve the design of and approach to upcoming cleanup phases
- o **Help communities shape the future:** Ensure that local community members are engaged and have a voice in Superfund decisions by bolstering the work of citizen advisory groups, organizing community events that spotlight hot topics and water-related issues of importance, and developing and partnering on research, education, and community learning focused on the history of the Upper Clark Fork and its restoration story

Flows:

- o **Increase streamflows:** Develop water projects and explore new approaches that substantially increase streamflows and improve the reliability and availability of water, such as headwaters storage, water leasing, an instream flow fund, and beaver on the landscape
- o **Engage more partners in fixing flow challenges:** Solidify and diversify partnerships to tap local expertise and knowledge about the complex hydrology of the Upper Clark Fork, and to accelerate action on the widespread and persistent problem of low flows
- o **Overhaul instream flow policy:** Advocate for, and participate in, efforts to reform Montana's currently cumbersome water management processes so that they address the intensifying problem of chronic dewatering in rivers like the Upper Clark Fork in a more effective and timely way

Habitat:

- o **Revitalize and reconnect:** Develop habitat, fish passage, and aquatic connectivity projects in high-priority tributaries to amplify mainstem cleanup and revitalize the Upper Clark Fork's riverine ecosystem
- o **Ensure long-term restoration success:** Monitor and maintain completed stream and habitat restoration projects to assure their long-term vitality; track the biological response to our conservation efforts; and improve and evolve restoration techniques

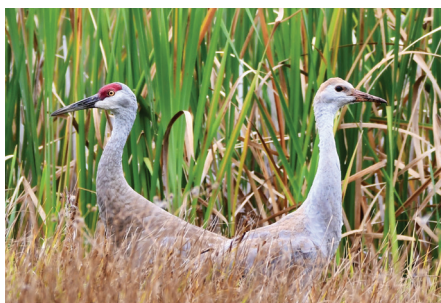
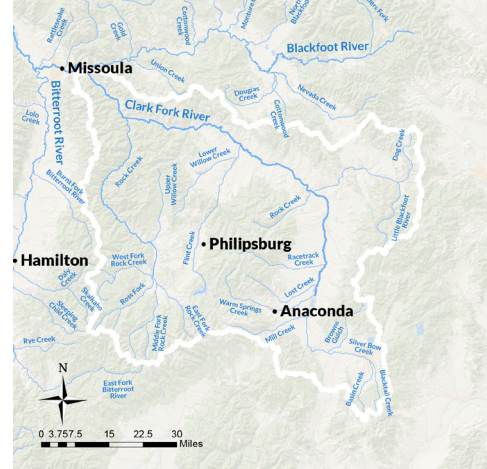


Photo: Tom Bowler



urbanization and a pattern of hotter, drier, longer summers have further stressed the basin's ecological functioning. The major threats that are now putting the Bitterroot at risk are dewatering, sediment pollution, habitat degradation, severed tributary-mainstem connections, and fish passage barriers and entrainment hazards.

Photo: Mark Allan Wilson

THE BITTERROOT

THE BITTERROOT VALLEY is a place where mountains meet the river and wild landscapes connect, providing rich habitat for species to interact in a place shaped by fire, floods, and wind. Today, the Bitterroot's wetlands and riparian areas are recognized as important bird areas, its rugged tributary corridors support myriad wildlife, its farmlands are some of the best in Montana, and it remains a stronghold for threatened bull trout and other native fish. But more than a century of logging, road-building, and extensive irrigation left deep scars and altered the river system's natural function. More recently, rapid

Our Focus: Boost the health of the Bitterroot River system through integrated strategies that improve overall resiliency, connectivity, and flows in key tributaries

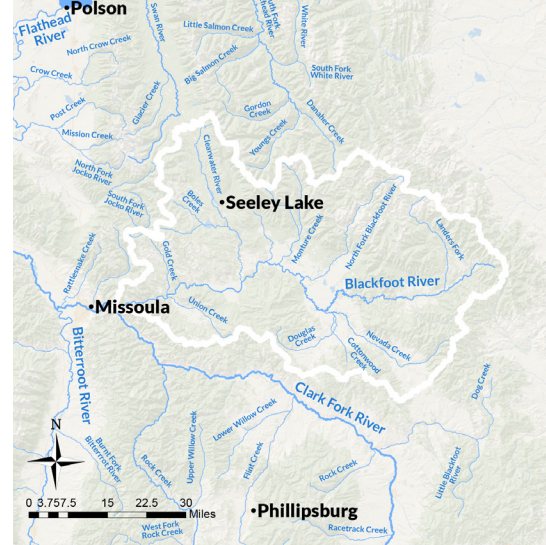
The Coalition is addressing these threats by pursuing headwaters-to-mouth restoration projects on the highest priority streams, while pressing for stronger, more flexible water policy tools, and creating a culture of care for the river. Here are our core strategies:

Flows:

- o **Boost flows in key tributaries:** Restore flows in tributaries with high-yield opportunities and existing native trout strongholds by brokering water transactions on Tin Cup, Lost Horse, Blodgett, Big, Kootenai, Lolo, Miller, and O'Brien creeks
- o **Pursue innovative strategies to keep water in streams:** Pursue innovative solutions – such as headwaters storage, private water leasing agreements, and beaver on the landscape – that will keep water in streams for fish, wildlife, and recreation, while meeting the out-of-stream requirements of local communities and agriculture
- o **Overhaul instream flow policy:** Advocate for, and participate in, efforts to reform Montana's water management processes so that they better address the intensifying problem of chronic dewatering in rivers like the Bitterroot more effectively and efficiently

Habitat:

- o **Rehabilitate tributaries:** Develop and implement complementary restoration projects that achieve multiple ecological benefits on priority streams, including riparian habitat and stream function improvements, tributary-mainstem reconnections, and removal of fish passage barriers and entrainment hazards
- o **Ensure long-term restoration success:** Build watershed literacy and community engagement around caring for completed projects, by sharing restoration needs and successes with the public and training volunteers to monitor stream health, collect data, maintain projects, and document the impact of stream restoration activities
- o **Expand restoration impact basin wide:** Strengthen coordination and knowledge-sharing among nonprofit and agency partners to ensure the Bitterroot's needs are being addressed and the work is in sync, and elevate these collaborations in the public eye to increase community investment in the Bitterroot's future



Cleanup:

- o **Return eroding forest roads to their natural state:** Decommission dense networks of legacy forest roads that are a source of sediment pollution to headwater streams and native trout spawning grounds
- o **Prevent activities that degrade the river:** Track emerging threats and engage as needed on proposed projects and development proposals that would reverse gains made in river health, or become future impairments or sources of pollution to the Bitterroot's waterways





Photo: Larry Javorskey

THE MIDDLE CLARK FORK

THE MIDDLE CLARK FORK and specifically Missoula—its most populated urban area and home base for the Coalition—are experiencing significant growth pressures. Because of constraints imposed by mountains, along with the lure of water, development continues to concentrate in river valleys and along ecologically vital waterways—even those that are still suffering pollution problems from a hardworking past. However, streams and rivers, their riparian buffers, adjacent wetlands, and floodplains are also the most ecologically important and imperiled habitats in the Middle Clark Fork. When healthy and high-functioning, these areas are

huge biodiversity engines with multiple moving parts, providing food, shelter, and travel routes for more than 80% of Montana's wildlife species. If development keeps paving over, encroaching on, or removing those moving parts, eventually the engine stops. This is especially true in a climate-stressed world.

For these reasons, the Coalition will focus on building a strong water ethic, pioneering tools that fast-growing communities can use to repair, revitalize, and preserve river reaches and stream corridors ahead of, or in tandem with,

Our Focus: Foster and advocate for a community-wide water ethic that makes cleanup, restoration, and protection of community waterways a central goal in the face of rapid growth and landscape change

future development.

Ultimately, we want to see communities make the restoration and protection of their hometown rivers and backyard streams a central goal, not an afterthought. Here are our core strategies:

River-Smart Planning:

- o **Promote river-based land-use planning:** Collaborate with academic partners, legal experts, and planners to analyze current land-use regulations in Missoula County and develop and promote a new model that accommodates growth while directing it away from sensitive habitats; reverse poorly informed development from the past; and preserve the integrity of the whole river system, including connections to its feeder creeks and streams
- o **Develop a river management plan:** Work with partners to create a comprehensive river management, recreation access, and restoration plan for high-use stretches of the Clark Fork, Lower Blackfoot, and Northern Bitterroot rivers within Missoula County

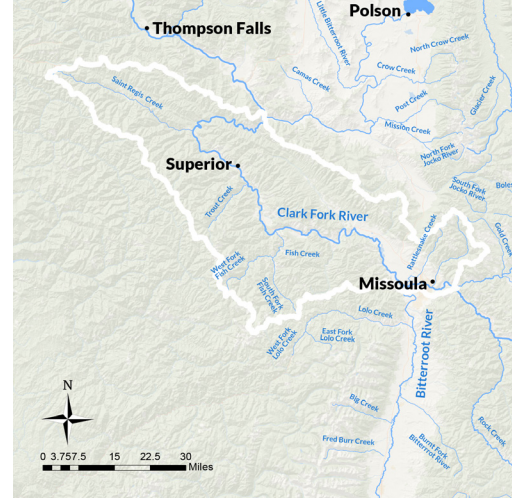
Cleanup:

- o **Clean up toxic pollution:** Address the Middle Clark Fork's most polluted site, the shuttered and contaminated Smurfit-Stone pulp mill, by catalyzing diverse stakeholders and the public to compel the Environmental Protection Agency to clean up the waste dumps, remove the berm, and restore the Clark Fork
- o **Address non-toxic pollution:** Assess opportunities to reduce sediment pollution through decommissioning of networks of unmaintained and eroding forest roads

- o **Prevent activities that degrade the river:** Track and engage in any large-scale or precedent-setting proposals that would reverse gains made in river health, or become future impairments or sources of pollution to the Middle Clark Fork's waterways

Restoration:

- o **Boost flows:** Broker water transactions that restore flows in dewatered reaches of the Middle Clark Fork
- o **Rehabilitate streams:** Implement projects that model "river-smart growth" by restoring healthy stream function, riparian habitat, and tributary connections on targeted streams and river reaches in Missoula County, particularly Grant Creek, Bitterroot Natural Area, and stretches of the Clark Fork and Northern Bitterroot
- o **Strengthen bonds around stream care:** Build watershed literacy and community around caring for completed projects, by engaging and training volunteers to monitor stream health, collect data, maintain projects, and document the impact of stream restoration activities



Watershed Literacy:

- o **Engage the next generation:** Deliver dynamic youth education programs (middle- through high school) and create college research projects that are grounded in science, connected to real-life issues in the Middle Clark Fork, and add to our understanding of issues affecting the river
- o **Activate and empower people:** Use diverse communications platforms and events to raise awareness of the central importance of clean water; develop a deeper understanding of river ecology and trends in watershed science, and activate participation in shaping local policies and advancing solutions affecting the health of the watershed
- o **Strengthen bonds around river care:** Organize river cleanups, stream-care workdays, data collection outings, and project monitoring to foster a sense of community and connection around the river

Photo: James R. White



THE BLACKFOOT, FLATHEAD, & LOWER CLARK FORK

ALTHOUGH THIS PLAN has the Coalition focusing activities in the Upper Clark Fork, Bitterroot, and Middle Clark over the next five years, we are still carrying out specific long-term commitments and continuing our deep-rooted history of support for well-established partners in the Clark Fork basin's other three reaches. This includes:

- o **Boosting flows, assessing and** developing solutions for forest road pollution, and watchdogging mine exploration in the Blackfoot
- o **Supplying water policy assistance** and standing up to poorly planned development in the Flathead
- o **Protecting wilderness waters** from massive copper mines in the Lower Clark Fork

- o **Advocating for improved water** management frameworks and defending bedrock environmental laws at the state level

Our work in these areas is informed by the reality that rivers unite us and we are all connected by water. Furthermore, when it comes to protecting and restoring the watershed, there are no solo acts. As a result, the Coalition will carry out the activities outlined, and remain on alert to help our partners respond to threats and opportunities as they arise.

Our Focus: Boost watershed health, resilience, and protection in other sub-basins by carrying out long-standing commitments and providing technical and policy support to partners, as needed



Tracking Our Progress

THE COALITION HAS HIGH ASPIRATIONS

for our work on behalf of the Clark Fork watershed in the coming five years:

- o **In the Upper Clark Fork**, we want to bring about the best possible cleanup and restoration of the mining-damaged Upper Clark Fork, resulting in a healthy, protected river.
- o **In the Bitterroot**, our goal is to measurably boost the health of the Bitterroot River system through integrated strategies that improve overall resiliency, connectivity, and flow in key tributaries.
- o **In the Middle Clark Fork**, we aim to foster and advocate for a community-wide water ethic that makes cleanup, restoration, and protection of community waterways a central goal in the face of rapid growth and landscape change.
- o **And in the Blackfoot, Flathead, and Lower Clark Fork**, we want to boost watershed health, resilience, and protection by carrying out long-standing commitments and provide technical and policy support to partners, where needed.

How will we know if we're moving in the right direction and making headway toward these goals? Over the years, we have developed strong processes for measuring and evaluating our progress, as a way to maintain focus in executing strategies, and promote learning, adjusting, and evolving tactics as we go. Each year, the Coalition conducts an annual review of progress against our five-year strategic plan and develops an annual action plan for the coming year that includes critical milestones and performance benchmarks. We then conduct quarterly reviews throughout the year within each strategic initiative, where staff update one another about progress, share lessons learned, identify any dynamics that affect the strategy, and determine what must change about our approaches. Importantly, the Coalition's board of directors keeps strategy front and center, with quarterly board meetings that focus the board on strategic issues.

The Clark Fork Coalition



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Our Conservation Partners

NO SINGLE ORGANIZATION can meet all of the challenges facing our watershed. That's why the Coalition collaborates with partners throughout the Clark Fork River basin to protect the clean water and aquatic life that is here, and restore what should be here and is not. We recognize the importance of investing in these networks and organizations. By coming together and coordinating essential work, we can collectively elevate the vision of a clean, healthy, whole Clark Fork. It's because of these partnerships that the Coalition can selectively choose to do what we do best and most effectively, which we then amplify for greatest impact across the watershed. From grassroots organizations and local landowner groups to national partners, we can work together to create a better future for the river and the people, fish, and wildlife it sustains.

A Final Note

THIS STRATEGIC PLAN lays out an ambitious set of activities for a watershed with many challenges. However, we are continually awed by the resilience of the river and the capacity of people to bring about positive change on its behalf. In our 38 years of work to reverse the impacts from the Clark Fork's hardworking past, we're seeing the vital signs of the river bounce back. One project at a time, the Coalition, our partners, and friends of the river upstream and down are writing a new story for the Clark Fork River.





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