

# currents

your voice for clean water | summer 2013



## A RIVER ON THE MEND



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## CLARK FORK COALITION

140 S. 4th W., Unit #1 · Missoula, MT 59801  
 mail: PO Box 7593 · Missoula, MT 59807  
 T 406 542 0539 | F 406 542 5632

[www.clarkfork.org](http://www.clarkfork.org)

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## DEAR FRIEND OF CLEAN WATER:

I've been reminded this spring about connections—those that link people living along the Clark Fork to each other, and those that link people to their river.

Our 10th annual river cleanup in April drew an astounding 900 volunteers, including one community member who described the event as “an antidote” to the despair she felt following the horrific attacks at the Boston Marathon.

A few weeks later, a flotilla of celebratory boaters navigated the newly opened Clark Fork-Blackfoot confluence, toasting the restoration now well underway at Milltown. We shared the float with former Coalition leaders who initiated the dam removal and now continue their work as allies in other capacities. I was fortunate to share a boat with Chuck Erickson, who owns land adjacent to the restoration area and is a passionate volunteer working to create a new community park and clean up industrial waste in

the Blackfoot near the old Bonner Mill. He shared with me his love for the river and his gratitude for the hard work that got us here.

Dedicated river advocates like these make it possible to pursue the big vision of a fully restored river, which now requires a major push to clean up the 100+ miles connecting Milltown to Silver Bow.

Getting there will take a lot of effort, but we are already hard at work re-watering tributaries to help them through another hot summer; training and deploying our new Volunteer River Corps; educating people about the river; and protecting Montana's water resources through vigilant work at the legislature (big thanks to Gov. Bullock for vetoing several bills that would have hurt our rivers and streams).

Even as we cultivate new relationships throughout the basin, we treasure the ones we've enjoyed for decades. Sadly, we lost one of our great river champions in March, when Dr. Pat Robins passed away. Pat's leadership of the Coalition board during the Milltown campaign was one of his proudest achievements.

We honor Pat's memory as we push forward to ensure the best possible future for our river and its people.



Sarah Bates, Board President







# CLEANUP BEGINS IN THE UPPER CLARK FORK

**For 150 years** the Clark Fork River has served Montana's industrial and cultural needs, picking up some pretty nasty scars in the process. It's taken some prodding - and quite a bit of patience - but after decades of meetings and planning, the money is flowing, dirt is moving, and cleanup is finally beginning on 43 miles of the Upper Clark Fork (UCF) – a rare second chance for a hard-working river.

This is a time like no other in the river's history. In the headwaters, the once-highly contaminated Silver Bow Creek has been restored, and 120 miles downstream, Milltown Dam has been removed and the Blackfoot and Clark Fork are flowing free. Between these two remarkable restoration bookends the Upper Clark Fork is finally getting its turn, as the first tangible steps are taken to bring a river back to life. *Let the healing begin.*



## WHAT'S HAPPENING NOW: Cleanup Near Warm Springs



Phase I of the cleanup started in early 2013 on a state-owned 1.6-mile stretch of river downstream of Warm Springs that's highly contaminated with arsenic, cadmium, copper, lead, and zinc. Cleanup at this site will continue through early 2014 and entails:

- Removing contaminated soils from the river's streambanks and floodplain (excavated material will go to the BP-ARCO repository in Opportunity, where it will be capped and revegetated).
- Replacing soils with clean sediment.
- Lowering the floodplain and reconnecting it with the river and the water table, allowing for lush growth of native willows.

### CLEANUP BY THE NUMBERS

**\$123 million**  
in cleanup funds

**56 miles** of river

**900 acres**  
of floodplain

**10-12**  
years of cleanup

**1 RIVER, ON THE MEND**



## NEXT UP: Dry Cottonwood Creek Ranch



Dry Cottonwood Creek Ranch is a working cattle ranch located at the upper end of the Superfund cleanup zone that contains heavily contaminated floodplain soils. The Coalition and its partners purchased the ranch in 2005 as a learning site that would allow us to experiment with restoration techniques and figure out how to do cleanup on a working ranch in a way that minimizes short-term impacts and maximizes long-term gains.

Why is that so important? Because this complex, large-scale Superfund cleanup is occurring in one of Montana's most important agricultural valleys, where lives and livelihoods are inextricably linked to land and water resources. With much of the restoration activity taking place on working ranches, cleanup must be carried out in a way that works *with* agriculture, not against it. Here's what's in store for the ranch:

- Removing and rebuilding highly-contaminated sections of riverbank
- Backfilling excavated sections with native floodplain material from elsewhere on the ranch, and restoring the "borrow" areas as wetlands.
- Making necessary adjustments to keep the agricultural operation running during and after cleanup, such as moving fencing, realigning ditches, and providing off-site water for cattle.

Once cleanup is underway, the Coalition will host tours of the ranch for Deer Lodge ranchers and residents to share restoration techniques and lessons learned.



# FROM HEALING TO WELLNESS: A HEALTHY WATERSHED NEEDS MORE THAN CLEANUP

Removing heavy metals and other toxic contaminants from streambanks and floodplains is critical to healing the Clark Fork. But we also need to ensure it is healthy, whole, and resilient for the long haul. From destabilized streambanks to loss of floodplain connectivity, the Clark Fork and its 28,000 miles of tributaries face a number of historic and emerging threats.

The Coalition is working to address many of these issues, one of which is chronic and seasonal dewatering of creeks and streams. More than 900 miles of waterways in the Clark Fork basin suffer from low flows or even dry up completely in the late summer and fall due to lack of snowpack, early run-off, hotter summers, inefficient irrigation, and over-allocation of water rights (when more water can be removed from creeks than is actually available).

The impacts are substantial: compromised water quality due to increased water temperatures, higher

nutrient concentrations, and decreased dissolved oxygen; harm to fish and aquatic life, including fish being stranded in hot, stagnant pools; and reduced resiliency as creeks are severed from their mainstems and riparian habitat is starved for moisture.

Fortunately, a lot can be done to rewater thirsty streams, such as improving irrigation to reduce water loss and increase efficiency, enhancing natural water storage in headwaters, and compensating water users for leaving water in-stream instead of irrigating.

**More than 900 miles of streams in the Clark Fork basin suffer from low flows or even dry up completely each summer**

The common thread through these strategies is **private landowners**, who own the majority of land through which dewatered creeks and streams flow. The Coalition works hand-in-hand with landowners and water users across the basin, currently managing 18 projects that restore consistent streamflow, reconnect creeks to mainstems, and add water during the driest times of year. We explore two of these projects on the next page.



**BEFORE & AFTER:** Water leases, like those on Placid and Three Mile Creeks, can have a huge impact on creeks and streams, sometimes literally bringing them back to life.



## 1. A PARTNERSHIP FOR PLACID CREEK

Placid Creek flows into the Clearwater River in the Blackfoot valley, providing critical spawning habitat for bull trout, and supporting abundant native westslope cutthroat trout. But decreasing snowpack and increasing development pose significant threats to streamflow in Placid Creek.

To keep more water in the creek and ensure adequate flow during the driest times of year, the Burgess family entered into a voluntary “split

season” five-year lease with the Coalition, agreeing to forego irrigating during the second half of each summer. The leased water will be managed by CFC so that **340 gallons of water per minute** will remain in Placid Creek at the time of year when it needs it most.

Thanks to the far-sightedness of the Burgess family, this native trout stronghold will be healthier and more resilient in the face of changes to come.



## 2. A BITTERROOT TRIBUTARY COMEBACK

Many waterways combine across a 22,000-square mile watershed to make the Clark Fork Montana's largest river by volume. The health of each tributary – from tiny creeks to classic trout streams – contributes to the health of the entire basin. One of those small waterways is Three Mile Creek, which enters the Bitterroot River near Stevensville after passing through the Lee Metcalf Wildlife Refuge.

For decades, this creek suffered from high sediment loads, dewatering, and loss of floodplain connectivity from overgrazing, bank alteration, over-allocation of water rights, and destruction of riparian habitat. The result was excessive sediment flowing into the refuge, and at times, turbid, unfishable waters in the Bitterroot, some 10 miles downstream.

Starting in 2003, a partnership of landowners, ranch managers, conservation groups, and restoration contractors designed a plan to restore the drainage that included keeping cattle away from creek banks, rebuilding severely damaged sections of the stream, and planting new native riparian vegetation. The Coalition augmented these efforts by securing a water lease at the lower end of the creek that adds 85 gallons per minute to the stream during spring and fall.

Today, Three Mile Creek is visibly transformed, providing better trout habitat, cleaner, cooler water to the Bitterroot, and a promise of more healing to come. It's proof not only of the impact one small creek can have on a watershed, but also of the power of partnerships in the work for clean water.

SUMMER 2013 CURRENTS



# MEANWHILE, DOWNSTREAM: **WHAT'S HAPPENING AT MILLTOWN?**



SUMMER 2013 CURRENTS

## **NEW MILLTOWN STATE PARK? NOT QUITE YET.**

**M**illtown Dam is gone, the Clark Fork and Blackfoot Rivers are flowing free, and the former reservoir has been restored to a wide floodplain with a meandering river. The site is well on its way to becoming one of the few Superfund sites in the country to be converted to a state park, but unfortunately the opening of Milltown State Park has hit some snags. Until MT Fish, Wildlife, and Parks can acquire a key parcel that will provide a way for the public to enter the area, the park cannot be developed.

We recently asked the Governor to move forward with a different option for public access until the land acquisition issues can be resolved. With the Clark Fork now re-opened to floating and fishing, it's imperative to establish walk-in river access, parking, and toilet facilities in order to take pressure off neighbors near uncontrolled river access points, and to prevent new riparian plantings from being damaged.

The Coalition will continue to monitor the situation and advocate for the earliest feasible opening. Stay tuned.

Volunteers work to remove saw blades and other hazards from the lower Blackfoot.

## **WHEN CAN I FLOAT THE BLACKFOOT?**

**A**s the Blackfoot continues to adjust to its new post-dam digs, ghosts of Milltown's namesake have resurfaced in its muddy banks, including saw blades, shattered glass, concrete, sinker logs, and other dangerous debris. This spring Missoula County and local community volunteers pulled more metal scraps from the river, but many hazards remain, and not just from razor-sharp rusty relics. The big I-90 bridge piers, which were reconstructed to accommodate the Milltown cleanup, also pose potential hazards to floaters during high water.

This summer, state agencies will remove the last of the old Bonner dam, and at the same time clean up more debris from the bed of the river. It's progress, but unfortunately the Blackfoot will remain closed to floating, boating, and swimming for at least another year. The Coalition has asked FWP to immediately engage the public to devise a proactive strategy to address the bridge pier hazard, so that the river might be safely opened in 2014.

For more info, visit [stateparks.mt.gov/milltown](http://stateparks.mt.gov/milltown).



Michael Kustudia



# DIRTY HANDS, CLEAN RIVER

## THE VOLUNTEER RIVER CORPS

**W**e've been fortunate, humbled, and simply blown away at the response to our new **Volunteer River Corps**, a diligent team of river stewards working to restore streams and protect clean water throughout the Clark Fork basin. In just four months VRC members have:

- **trekked 12+ miles on snow shoes** (twice!) to monitor snowpack at an official Snowtel site in the Bitterroot
- **collected 1,400 willow cuttings** on Graves Creek in the Bitterroot for use in future riparian planting projects
- **planted 250 willows** at the mouth of Rock Creek
- **pulled countless weeds** from riparian areas along Miller Creek in Missoula

The VRC is just getting warmed up. Future projects include stream assessments, restoration projects, and more. Want to be a part of it? Email [clara@clarkfork.org](mailto:clara@clarkfork.org) to join the Volunteer River Corps today!

Members of the Volunteer River Corps spent a spring Saturday pulling weeds along Miller Creek.



### HERE TO STAY: MILLTOWN-TO-DOWNTOWN FLOAT & MISSOULA RIVERFEST

It's official: Milltown State Park will open for one special preview day this summer for the revival of the popular 'Milltown-to-Downtown' float – the first ever on the restored confluence.

Join us on **August 3rd** to float from the old dam site straight on down to Missoula, where you can hop out, join in the Missoula RiverFest party at Caras Park, and celebrate our river's remarkable recovery!

Get your float on! Save the date for Milltown-to-Downtown and RiverFest on Saturday, August 3.



# HONORING **A RIVER HERO**

**I**n March, the Coalition lost a strong ally, close friend, and dedicated former board president, Pat Robins. He was an energetic and passionate friend of the river—a bright light in the world of water. With his easy grace, caring ways, and diplomatic instincts honed from a Butte, MT upbringing, Pat helped bring about path-breaking fixes for mining contamination problems facing the watershed.

Pat was particularly inspired by the vision of a free-flowing and cleaned up river where the Clark Fork and Blackfoot join and put his considerable talents and energy to work in the Coalition boardroom, at hearings, in letters, at social events, and on the streets to help make that a reality.

To honor Pat's contributions, his partners at Missoula Bone & Joint and Surgery Center, family, and friends are contributing to a special memorial fund established in his name. The fund will be dedicated to long-term support for clean water and to ensure that the work to make the river clean, healthy, and whole carries on.

Pat's generosity was substantial, remarkable, and inspiring to us all. We are honored to have worked with him, and will miss him deeply.



### **PAT ROBINS MEMORIAL FUND**

If you'd like to contribute to this special fund honoring Pat's legacy, just write "Pat Robins Memorial Fund" in the memo of your check and mail to CFC, PO Box 7593, Missoula, MT 59807. For online contributions click on "Donate Now" on our website, and indicate the fund in the "Dedication" field of the donation form.

## BE A PART OF **SOMETHING BIG**

**L**arge-scale restoration of the Clark Fork is finally underway. Be a part of this remarkable story of recovery with a gift for clean water today.

**GIVE BACK TO THE RIVER AT CLARKFORK.ORG**







# CLARK FORK RIVER CLEANUP 2013

*Thank you*

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## GET YOUR FEET WET

**SEE OUR FULL LIST OF EVENTS  
AT [CLARKFORK.ORG](http://CLARKFORK.ORG)**

**JUNE 15**  
**Volunteer Corps /  
Restoration Workday**  
Three Mile Creek, Stevensville

**JUNE 19**  
**Community Unite Pint Night**  
Northside Kettlehouse,  
Missoula

**JULY 17**  
**Affinity Float for Youth**  
Alberton Gorge

**AUGUST 3**  
**Milltown-to-Downtown  
& Missoula RiverFest**  
Milltown State Park and  
Caras Park

