CLARK FORK COALITION

Impact Report

2024

CLARK FORK COALITION

Protect the best.

Team Protect

Andrew Gorder
Legal Director

Sam Carlson
Staff Scientist

Eric Hull
Streamflow Project Manager

Emily McGuirt
Monitoring & Data Program Manager

Protecting the Clark Fork watershed requires vigilance on multiple fronts. In 2024, your support enabled us to serve as a powerful voice for clean water, pushing back against threats to stream health while advancing policies that safeguard our watershed's future. Through strategic legal action, careful monitoring of streamflow, strategic management of water rights for instream flow, and active participation in key policy decisions, we worked to ensure that the Clark Fork River's interests were represented at every table where conversations about its future took place. Whether providing critical data for responsible watershed management, building coalitions with partner organizations, or engaging our members in grassroots advocacy, we remained steadfast in our commitment to defend and improve Montana's water protections. This comprehensive, year-round approach to watershed advocacy, continues to be impactful in laying the groundwork for policy solutions that will protect our waterways for the long term.

Advocacy:

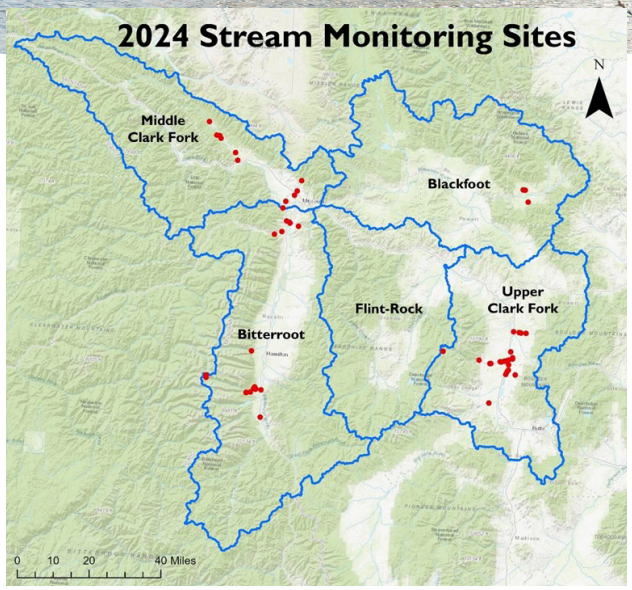
- **We pushed for protective water and land use policies at the local, regional and state levels.** CFC tracked and weighed in on a number of key management plans and policy revisions to ensure that these policies are protective of water quality and quantity. From the Lolo National Forest Plan revision process to Missoula's revised 20-year Land Use Plan, CFC engaged and advocated on behalf of the watershed. At the state level, we remained diligent in defending Montana's federally-approved and science-based water quality standards for nutrient pollution. We also participated in a diverse stakeholder working group focused on reforming and updating Montana's water policies. CFC served as a representative of conservation interests on this group and sought to ensure that Montana's water policies protect our ground and surface waters from depletion and degradation, particularly in areas of high population growth and development. Collectively, the group helped draft numerous water bills package that were introduced during the 2025 legislative session.

- **Our team represented CFC at the Annual Meeting of the Montana Chapter of the American Water Resources Association** (AWRA). Staff Scientist, Sam Carlson, presented ideas on using fundamental relationships between streamflow and stream temperature to better understand changing conditions of the Clark Fork, and to prioritize areas for flow protection or restoration. The response to this presentation and to CFC's presence at the meeting (Sam and Emily McGuirt, Monitoring and Data Program Manager) was overwhelming—we are respected for our ability to engage basic science and advocacy work, and the water science community across Montana wants to work with us!

- **We continued to monitor and contribute to the planned Superfund cleanup at Smurfit-Stone.** Sam also sits on the Smurfit Technical Working Group. Through participation in this group, we have established a constructive relationship with both the EPA and DEQ regarding Smurfit. We have critiqued workplans and suggested improvements, and some of these suggestions have been incorporated into the latest field sampling plan. CFC is currently one of the only groups able to constructively engage with the public, stakeholders, and the agencies on Smurfit, and we're watching the investigation carefully, waiting for an opportunity to move the needle.

Flow & Monitoring:

2024 was a busy year for flow monitoring following a winter of below average snowpacks throughout the Clark Fork basin. We collected over 220 manual discharge measurements on streams and ditches across the Bitterroot, Blackfoot, Upper Clark Fork, and Middle Clark Fork watersheds. We also deployed over 40 continuous monitoring stations which collected hourly stream depth and temperature data to create rating curves and hydrographs at each of our sites for future flow analysis. The data we collected were vital for ensuring our instream flow rights were in compliance, for developing and prioritizing projects, and for gaining a deeper understanding of flow regimes in complex, dewatered systems.



Lost Horse Creek

Photo Left: CFC Maintenance and Monitoring Technition, Ben Masters, installs a new stream flow gauge on an irrigation ditch along Lost Horse Creek while Emily takes flow measurements including water depth and velocity at approximately 15 points across the ditch. These measurements, taken throughout the summer, help us get a full picture of the amount of water that is flowing through the system throughout the monitoring period. The data collected is crucial to developing and funding projects to help improve deteriorating irregation systems and put more water back into the creek.

Upper Clark Fork River:

In August 2024, our flow monitoring revealed troublingly low water levels in the Upper Clark Fork River. At our upstream site near Galen Road, we recorded a flow of 52.5 cubic feet per second (cfs), but just downstream at Gemback Road, it dropped to only 4.8 cfs. Flows briefly rebounded to 16.7 cfs below Racetrack Creek before falling again to 6.8 cfs at Sager Lane. These were some of the lowest flows we've seen in recent years, approaching record lows from 2016. Compounding concerns, water temperatures hit 75°F in Deer Lodge that day—nearing temperatures that endanger aquatic life. These findings underscore the critical need for continued conservation and restoration efforts to protect our rivers.

Tin Cup Creek

Thanks to a long-term partnership between the Tin Cup Water & Sewer District and the Clark Fork Coalition, Tin Cup Creek now flows year-round, reversing a history of late-summer dry spells. CFC's water lease agreement, established in 2012, secures 400 acre-feet of water annually for instream flow, ensuring a healthier fishery while also benefiting irrigators. Now, with the state's approval process complete, this water right change will make the arrangement official. This success story serves as a model for future collaborations to restore streamflows and modernize aging irrigation infrastructure across the watershed.

Restore the rest.

Over the past year, our restoration team completed more projects than they have ever completed in one year, a historic accomplishment for CFC. In addition, restoration staff acquired over $3M in project funding to continue our work in the coming year and beyond, including headwater storage, fish passage, sediment reduction, and instream flow projects. The team continues to focus on our developed projects and ongoing restoration strategies in the Bitterroot and Upper Clark Fork Rivers, with recent expansion to Gold and Belmont Creeks in the Lower Blackfoot.

Miller Creek, Missoula

We restored one-third of a mile of Miller Creek by stabilizing streambanks with **1,700 feet of woody brush matrix**, **removing 2,050 cubic yards of excess materia**l, and **planting 1,300 willows** with help from **88 volunteers**. Despite a late start, the project was secured before winter, with more restoration—cottonwood plantings, fencing, and stream realignment—planned for spring. Project Manager, Gretchen Watkins, reflected, "Collaboration on this project—with citizen scientists, willow collection volunteers, regulators, and landowners—was incredibly uplifting. It was inspiring to troubleshoot and adapt alongside such dedicated individuals!"

Granite & Lee Creeks, Lolo

Project Manager, Adam Switalski, has been hard at work continuing to remove passage barriers in the Upper Lolo Creek watershed. In 2024, we upgraded an undersized culvert to facilitate aquatic organism passage (AOP) on a tributary of Granite Creek and completed designs for 3 more AOP's in Lee Creek. The larger, bottomless arch culvert will support predicted large future flows and allows fish and other aquatic species to pass through.

Lost Horse Creek, Darby

Clark Fork Coalition's Stream Restoration Director, Jed Whiteley, partnered with the Bitterroot National Forest and irrigators to tackle the issues of low flows, fish entrainment and sediment pollution on Lost Horse Creek. Final designs were completed for a 150 cfs fish screen while project development moved forward on projects to increase headwater storage, screen 3 more irrigation diversions, increase irrigation efficiency and decrease sediment inputs to the creek.

Team Restore

Jed Whiteley
Restoration Director

Andy Fischer
Project Manager

Adam Switalski
Project Manager

Gretchen Watkins
Project Manager

Upper Clark Fork River

Clark Fork Coalition staff participated in a tour of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes' water infrastructure and restoration projects in the Jocko Valley. The tour was organized by the Upper Clark Fork Streamflow Group of which CFC is a member along with CSKT, state agencies, conservation organizations, and landowners' groups. The projects viewed included water diversion upgrades and fish passage facilities as well as water conservation and restoration projects along the Jocko River. The goal of the tour was to see the extraordinary scope and scale of water conservation and fishery restoration work undertaken by the Tribes and to strengthen relationships between irrigators and water managers across the subbasins of the Clark Fork River watershed.

Lower Blackfoot River

Adam collaborated with the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) to design aquatic organism passage (AOP) projects on three tributaries of Gold Creek in the Lower Blackfoot. Working alongside BLM engineers, hydrologists, and fish biologists, we focused on ensuring that the new, larger culverts will not only accommodate stream flows but also support habitat connectivity—allowing fish and other aquatic species to move freely, as if the road above didn't exist.

Sager Lane, Deer Lodge

Project Manager, Andy Fischer, oversaw the successful completion of the Sager Lane diversion improvement project on the mainstem Clark Fork River creating better recreational and fish passage, and saving 5cfs of previously diverted flow. This is the 5th major fish and recreation passage project completed to date working with our partners at Trout Unlimited (TU) and MT Natural Resource Damage Program (NRDP).

Browns Gultch, Butte

Gretchen Watkins and Andy Fischer oversaw the installation of 3 Coanda fish screens as part of a fish passage project for Browns Gulch on the Balentine Ranch near Butte, that includes 4 total fish screens on diversions. The landowner wanted to find a way to utilize his water with as little harm to the native fish as possible and our restoration was able to meet his request..

Engage the community.

Team Engage

Lily Haines
Community Programs Manager

Morgan McNeill
Communications Manager

The heart of river conservation beats strongest when an entire community comes together to protect its waters. In 2024, we witnessed this firsthand as unprecedented numbers of community members stepped up to learn, volunteer, and advocate with us. Our popular River News & Brews series drew record crowds, creating vibrant opportunities for the public to learn about pressing watershed issues and critical work being done to address them. In the summer float season, the River Ambassadors program—a collaborative initiative between CFC, the City of Missoula, Missoula County, and MT FWP—continued to evolve, empowering recreational river users to become stewards of the places they love. Whether you attended an event, collected vital water quality data as a community scientist, or volunteered to replant streamside vegetation or clean up streambanks, your enthusiasm for hands-on river stewardship energized and inspired us. Our growing partnerships with individuals, organizations, and agencies didn't just expand our reach – they fundamentally transformed how our community connects with and cares for the Clark Fork watershed. Thank you!

Community Science

In 2024, the Clark Fork Coalition expanded its community science efforts with a focus on beaver conservation and watershed restoration. Volunteers took part in the Beaver Blitz program, collecting data on beaver activity in the Lolo National Forest, continuing previous surveys to track beaver occupancy trends. Additionally, volunteers contributed to stream habitat assessments and surveys of riparian vegetation and noxious weeds along O'Brien and Miller Creeks. These hands-on projects provided valuable data for land management and restoration efforts. Community science programs like these are essential for the health of the watershed, empowering local volunteers to directly contribute to the long-term monitoring and preservation of vital ecosystems.

River Ambassadors

CFC's dedicated seasonal team of River Ambassadors hit their stride in 2024—engaging with floaters, promoting responsible recreation, and fostering a culture of care for the watershed. From conducting River User Surveys that help shape river management and conservation practices to assisting emergency response crews after last summer's destructive windstorm, the Ambassadors again played an integral role in protecting Missoula's urban river corridor. Additionally, they worked with partner organizations on projects including pulling invasive weeds, improving fish passage, and organizing river experiences accessible to people of all ages and abilities. These comprehensive efforts helped increase Missoula's watershed literacy, inspire individual action, and ensure that this treasured section of the Clark Fork River is strategically protected for future generations.

Community Education

Throughout the year, we engaged the community through educational presentations and discussions on critical environmental issues. We partnered with local officials and residents in Mineral County to discuss the Smurfit-Stone Superfund site, addressing concerns about contamination, flood risks, and the cleanup process. We also presented to the Sapphire Coalition, providing information on water quality and quantity challenges, including policy solutions related to exempt wells in the Bitterroot Valley. Our "River News & Brews" events brought together the community to explore important topics such as water rights, beaver-focused stream restoration, and efforts to protect instream flows in our watershed.

1,559 Learning Hours
provided to 4-12th grade students

227 Volunteer Hours
dedicated to community science projects at 8 different locations

3 TONS of trash
removed from the Clark Fork River during the 22nd Annual River Cleanup

Fund the work.

Team Sustain

Dr. Brian Chaffin
Executive Director

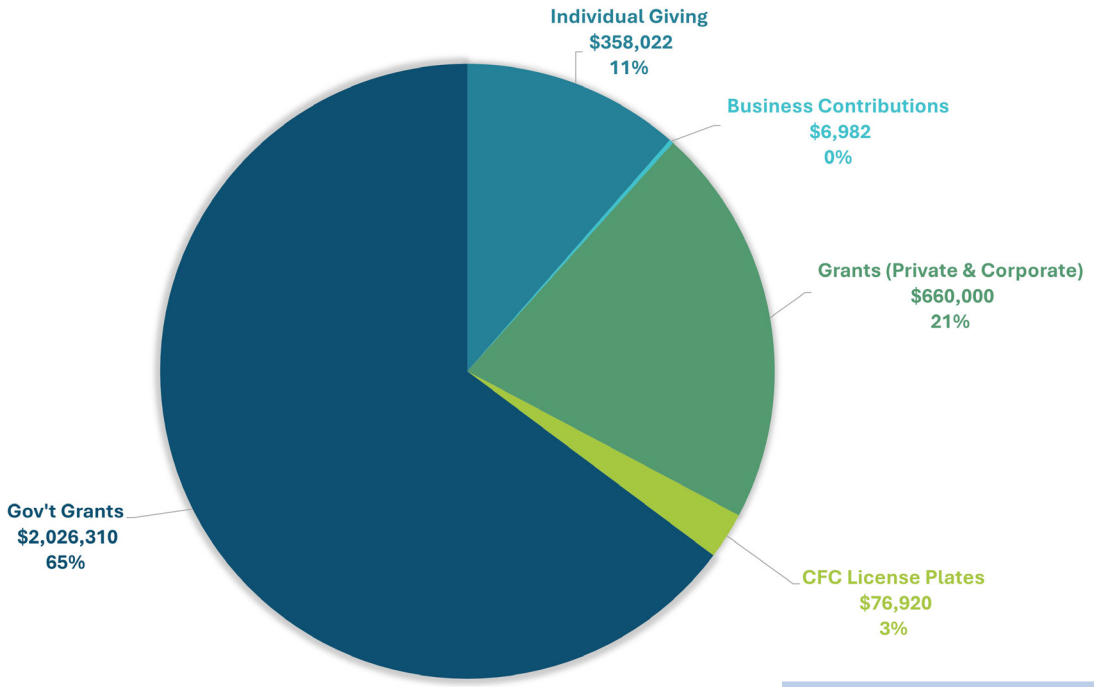
Chloe Gibson
Accounting/HR Manager

Liz Murphy
Development & Special Events Manager

Jess Walter
Development & Community Engagement Director

In a year when our rivers faced unprecedented low flows and water quality challenges, your support made it possible for us to restore damaged streambanks, protect critical habitat, inspire community members to take action, and bring more young people to the water's edge to fall in love with their home river. Every time you renewed your membership, bid on an auction item, or donated to a CFC appeal, you helped write another chapter in the Clark Fork River's story of recovery and resilience. As you read through this report, we hope you felt a very personal sense of pride in what we've accomplished together—because every restored stream mile, fish barrier removed, cfs we kept in the river, and student who now feels connected to the waterways in their community, all represent your dedication to keeping the Clark Fork wild, clean, and thriving for generations to come. As we forge ahead in an ever-changing and difficult funding landscape, we cannot overstate our gratitude for every dollar donated. From all of us at CFC—*thank you!*

2024 Private Revenue Breakdown



Thank you to our Business Sponsors:

Bechtold Law Firm
Bedrock Sandals
Blackfoot River Outfitters
Clark Fork Yacht Club
Clearwater Credit Union
Cognizant Technology Solutions
First Security Bank
The Trail Head
Good Food Store
NorthWestern Energy
Patagonia
Providence St. Patrick Hospital
River Design Group/SWCA Environmental Consultants
Western Montana Clinic

Huge thanks to the **409 DONORS** who supported our work!

$1.1 MILLION WAS GENROUSLY DONATED TO THE CLARK FORK COALITION BY INDIVIDUALS, BUSINESSES, AND FOUNDATIONS

CLARK FORK COALITION
Celebrating 40 Years • 1985 - 2025

PO Box 7593
Missoula, MT 59807

140 South Fourth Street West
Missoula, Montana 59801
(406) 542-0539
info@clarkfork.org
www.clarkfork.org

Invest in the future.

Dear Friend of the Clark Fork,

Whether you floated, fished, paddled, waded, dipped, swam, soaked, or simply walked a creekside trail in 2024, the river was there for you– a steadfast companion, regardless of the hour, weather, or season. The Clark Fork River still suffers from legacy pollution, fragmented fish habitat, and dangerously low flows during critical times for the survival of aquatic life. The river also faces emerging threats such as climate change, rapid growth and sprawl, new mining proposals, increased recreation, groundwater over-extraction, outdated policies, and more.

The good news? The Clark Fork Coalition has been tackling seemingly impassable obstacles like these since 1985. **In many cases, we have accomplished what many believed was impossible**—from preventing catastrophic mining in wilderness areas, to driving the removal of Milltown Dam, to keeping tens of thousands of fish and countless cfs in the river

Not only are we staying the course for the long haul, but we're also growing our impact– from that first shoestring budget to projects, programs, and partnerships that reach across the entire Clark Fork basin.

Our passionate and expert staff can only deliver on the extraordinary work planned for 2025 with your support. Every donation counts. Join us in restoring impaired streams, defending clean water, and inspiring an ever-expanding community of water stewards.

If each person reading this contributes $50, a spectacular thing will happen: individual action will turn collective, and we will meet a major summer season fundraising goal—a crucial step to a successful 2025 field season.

Donating is simple. Scan the QR code, visit clarkfork.org/donate, or use the enclosed envelope. Thanks in advance for doing your part to preserve our communities' most precious resource—clean, cool, and abundant water.

Together, we can protect the best and restore the rest.

With much gratitude,

Jess Walter
Development Director

SCAN ME