2025 News Articles

From speaking up for strong clean water protections to carrying out restoration work on key tributaries, the Clark Fork Coalition appeared in regional news throughout 2025. Explore the stories that highlight the importance of safeguarding clean, abundant water in the Clark Fork River watershed — and the community action driving that work forward.

CLARK FORK COALITION

Celebrating 40 Years • 1985 - 2025

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The twain shall meet: Good for trout, good for irrigators

Three federally funded watershed restoration projects were recently announced in southwest Montana, each aimed at benefiting trout habitat, improving stream health, while also supporting the sustainability of agriculture. These include the Upper Jefferson Channel Restoration, the Flint Creek Watershed Resiliency, and the Racetrack Lake Dam Improvements projects.

Tin Cup Creek a restoration success story

Thanks to a partnership between the Clark Fork Coalition and the Tin Cup Water & Sewer District, continuous flows have been restored to Tin Cup Creek—a vital win for the fishery and local irrigators. The Montana DNRC is now processing a water rights change that will officially secure this success for years to come.

The great groundwater debate reemerges at Montana Legislature

A legislative hearing in February 2023 addressed a bill (House Bill 642) aimed at expanding developers' access to groundwater, which faced significant opposition from agricultural producers and conservationists.

Grant Creek Restoration Project Set to Begin in March

A major restoration project on Grant Creek in Missoula is set to begin in early 2025, aiming to realign the creek into a more natural, meandering path and restore riparian habitat. The project includes new floodplain easements, trail improvements, and extensive plantings to improve ecological function while opening some adjacent lands for development.

Federal funding freeze leaves Montana businesses and restoration projects in limbo

A freeze on federal grants has left Montana small businesses and conservation groups—including stream restoration contractors—in financial limbo, with invoices and future funding uncertain. This pause puts hundreds of millions in Biden-era environmental and infrastructure money at risk, threatening jobs and critical restoration projects across the state.

EPA budget cuts: Slouching toward days of the Copper Kings?

Montana's Clark Fork River Superfund cleanup faces uncertainty after proposed federal budget cuts could slash EPA funding by 65%, raising concerns about oversight, enforcement, and the pace of remediation. Local leaders and environmental groups warn that reduced EPA capacity could benefit polluters, hinder community-based monitoring, and put public health and the environment at risk.

Diverse stakeholders testify against selling state land

A controversial bill (HB 676) would allow the sale of roughly 1.25 million acres of isolated state trust land to adjacent landowners, sparking strong opposition from wildlife groups, public land advocates, and school trust stakeholders. Critics warn it gives special access to a few buyers, undermines public trust land, and could weaken existing water compacts.

Worth it in the end': Superfund cleanup resumes on Clark Fork River

After more than a century of contamination, Superfund cleanup on the Clark Fork River has resumed, with Phase 7 addressing 1.4 miles of polluted floodplain near Racetrack Pond. While remediation progresses gradually, officials are balancing habitat preservation, budget limits, and public safety concerns, including potential arsenic exposure at Arrowstone Park.

Don't fix what isn't broken; Governor should veto HB 664

House Bill 664 would repeal Montana's proven numeric nutrient standards, replacing them with vague narrative standards that could weaken water protections. Environmental groups and water advocates warn that numeric standards are scientifically sound and essential for keeping rivers fishable, swimmable, and safe to drink.

County inks partnership agreements for river ambassador program

Missoula County and partner agencies, including the Clark Fork Coalition, are expanding the River Ambassador Program to help manage growing recreation on the Clark Fork and Bitterroot Rivers. The Coalition will oversee seasonal staff who provide on-river education and support, alongside a revived summer shuttle.

Missoula shuttle for Clark Fork River floating returns this summer

The Clark Fork River shuttle will return this summer, providing free transportation from the University of Montana to Milltown State Park and Sha-Ron access points. Part of the Missoula Valley River Ambassador Program, the shuttle and river ambassadors help manage growing recreation demand, reduce traffic, and provide education, equipment, and safety guidance to river users.

Experts seek to find solution to Upper Clark Fork brown trout decline

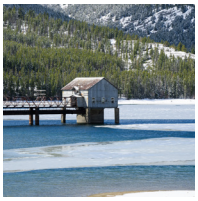
Biologists are working to solve a troubling decline in brown trout on the Upper Clark Fork River, particularly near Warm Springs, where numbers have dropped dramatically since around 2015. Research suggests that while many young trout come from tributaries, their survival in the mainstem may be limited by factors like water quality, loss of vegetation, and impacts from the Superfund cleanup.

WTF: Angling for answers for brown trout decline in upper Clark Fork

A public meeting in Deer Lodge explored the dramatic decline of brown trout in the upper Clark Fork River, where populations have dropped over 90% since 2015. Scientists and agency officials are investigating multiple factors, including water quality, habitat loss from past Superfund remediation, and survival of juvenile fish, while DEQ adjusts cleanup methods to preserve native vegetation and fish habitat.

Montana artists explore effects of mining during six-week residency

Montana artists Eric Jensen and Lane Chapman explored the environmental legacy of mining along the Upper Clark Fork River during a six-week residency, creating paintings and ceramics that reflect contamination, habitat, and wildlife. Their work, now on view at the Missoula Public Library, engages viewers with the impact of mining and Superfund cleanup through color, form, and ecological symbolism.

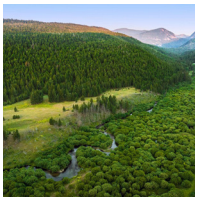


Reservoir water releases scheduled to help upper Clark Fork flows

To support fish in drought-stressed summer conditions, Montana has secured an agreement to release up to 32 cubic feet per second of water daily from Silver Lake into Warm Springs Creek, bolstering flows in the upper Clark Fork River. The instream flow release is designed to maintain safe river levels for fisheries and help cool water temperatures that can become dangerously warm for trout.

Volunteers needed to collect Clark Fork recreation data

Volunteers are needed this summer for the 2025 Clark Fork River Use Count, helping tally river users (floaters, swimmers, fishermen) from key Missoula access points. Data collected by citizen scientists will inform future river-management decisions by local and state agencies.



Conservancy group helps protect about a mile of Racetrack Creek

The last major private inholding along Racetrack Creek has been conserved and conveyed to the Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest, protecting 131 acres of prime fish and wildlife habitat and improving public access. The Clark Fork Coalition's work to secure instream flow rights complements this effort, helping the creek maintain cold-water refuge for trout and bolster its connection to the upper Clark Fork River.

Attorneys argue review board's ruling on DEQ selenium standard

Montana's DEQ is in court over how it set a site-specific selenium standard (0.8 µg/L) for Lake Koocanusa, with conservation groups arguing it's more stringent than federal guidelines. The case revolves around how the "stringency statute" was interpreted and whether DEQ overstepped or under-protected aquatic life.

Coalition renews work on Clark Fork River restoration plan

The Clark Fork Coalition is restarting work to develop a formal restoration plan for the central stretch of the Clark Fork River (from Drummond to the Flathead confluence), targeting impairments like heavy metals, sediment, nutrient pollution, and low flows. The plan, which builds on earlier stakeholder efforts paused by COVID-19, will divide the river into eight sub-basins for prioritized restoration projects and help unlock Clean Water Act grant funding.

Lolo Creek fish kills point to need for water conservation

Drought has pushed Lolo Creek to dangerously low levels, leading to widespread fish kills of brown trout, rainbow trout, whitefish, and crayfish in shrinking, isolated pools. Water rights holders are voluntarily reducing diversions, but aquifer drawdown and increasing groundwater use are still drying critical habitat. Conservationists argue that the crisis highlights the urgent need for a Lolo Creek drought plan—and shared sacrifice in water use.

Dead fish and low water: Lolo Creek is experiencing 'climate weirding'

Lolo Creek ran dry near its mouth in late August, causing major fish kills not seen since 2017. A mix of drought, low snowpack, heavy withdrawals, and past stream alterations contributed. Local irrigators are cutting use, and groups like the Clark Fork Coalition are pursuing long-term solutions, but experts warn that climate-driven low flows may become more common.

Culvert replacement project set for upper Gold Creek area

The Lolo National Forest, in partnership with the BLM and the Clark Fork Coalition, is replacing four undersized culverts along upper Gold Creek. The new culverts will improve flood resilience, restore natural stream function, and significantly enhance fish passage for native species like westslope cutthroat trout.

EPA to look at wood-industry pollution in local rivers

The EPA has agreed to analyze water and fish-tissue data from the Clark Fork, Bitterroot, and Blackfoot Rivers to investigate contamination linked to local wood-processing plants — including the former Smurfit-Stone pulp mill. The study will look for dioxins, furans, and PCBs, which may be entering the rivers from multiple historic industrial sites, not just the mill.

Lolo Creek drying up – local groups tackle issue

Local groups are working to develop a drought-management plan for Lolo Creek, responding to worsening dry conditions and recent, more severe fish kills. The Lolo Watershed Group, backed by the Clark Fork Coalition, is collaborating with irrigators and agencies to find water-saving solutions and build community resilience.

Are Beavers Montana's Latest Transplants?

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks is proposing a Beaver Transplant Program to relocate beavers from areas where they conflict with people into better-suited habitats, leveraging their dam-building abilities to restore wetlands and improve water storage. The goal is to reduce lethal removals and use beavers as natural ecosystem engineers — helping rivers heal, increasing resilience to drought and wildfire, and boosting biodiversity.

A new Grant Creek: Missoula officials tout restoration project

The Grant Creek restoration near the Missoula airport is returning the stream and floodplain to a natural state, improving habitat for wildlife and native fish like bull trout. Led by the City of Missoula, the Clark Fork Coalition, and partners, the $2.5 million project also reduces flood risk, improves water quality, and sets aside land for future development.

Damming evidence: Citizen scientists track beavers through Lolo National Forest

Citizen scientists joined the Clark Fork Coalition for a "Beaver Blitz" along Lolo Creek in Lolo National Forest, collecting on-the-ground data on beaver dams, chewed branches, and other signs of beaver activity. Volunteers logged their findings into a statewide database to help researchers understand beaver movement and their role in storing water in the watershed. Experts say beavers can be a powerful tool for restoring stream health, especially amid pressures from drought and climate change.

Group sues the state over law used to bring water to rural subdivisions

A broad coalition including the Clark Fork Coalition, municipalities, farmers, ranchers, and conservation groups has sued Montana over its "exempt well" law, accusing the state of allowing unchecked groundwater development without proper permitting. Plaintiffs argue that the loophole undermines senior water rights, harms rivers and aquifers, and lacks transparency and public oversight.

Montanans sue over state's water permitting loophole

A coalition of conservation groups, farmers, ranchers, cities, and water users — including the Clark Fork Coalition — has sued Montana over its "exempt well" law, claiming it allows unchecked groundwater development without proper permitting. Plaintiffs argue this loophole harms senior water rights holders, reduces streamflows, and lacks transparency because exempt wells are approved without public notice or mitigation.

Federal funding cuts, layoffs threaten stream restoration work

Federal budget cuts and layoffs are threatening stream restoration work in Montana, including key projects funded by the Forest Service. The Clark Fork Coalition, which runs restoration on creeks like Lost Horse, faces a $900,000 shortfall after promised funding was canceled — creating uncertainty for future work and local contractors.

Facing the facts on water: New lawsuit challenges 'exempt wells law'

A broad coalition — including the Clark Fork Coalition, Montana Environmental Information Center, and Trout Unlimited — has filed a lawsuit challenging Montana's "exempt well" law, arguing it allows unlimited groundwater pumping without proper oversight. They warn that the law is depleting aquifers, hurting senior water-rights holders, and damaging rivers, lakes, and wetlands.