



Rooted

Fall Newsletter



This restoration project at Skalkaho Bend Park is almost ready to be released from its protective fencing.

Fall 2025



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DIRECTOR'S NOTE

As you read this, I hope you'll join our celebration of what we've achieved together—and accept our invitation to shape what comes next.

This year, our community delivered real conservation wins: restoring habitat along Tolan and Cameron Creeks in Sula, breathing new life into the Burnt Fork in Stevensville, and inspiring people across the Bitterroot to join in Water-Wise landscaping and river stewardship.

These achievements show what's possible when our community comes together for clean, cold water and healthy streams. Every story in these pages exists because of you, and the countless others who show up for our waters.

But even as we celebrate, a new challenge is taking shape. The proposed mine in the headwaters of the Bitterroot River — once a distant worry — is now a credible threat. An Executive Order to fast-track mining, combined with support from a Montana Congressman, makes this a real risk to our headwaters and the people, wildlife, and communities that depend on them.

For more than 30 years, the Bitterroot Water Partnership has been guided by science, grounded in collaboration, and committed to reason over rhetoric. That's why we'll track the facts, consult with experts, and share what we learn. We invite you to stand with us as we build a community ready to rise to any challenge—protecting the Bitterroot today, and ensuring clean, ample water for the future.



In a time of uncertainty and mounting pressures on our natural resources, your support matters more than ever. Conservation wins don't happen by accident, and they don't happen overnight. They require people who care, who show up, and who stay committed.

Sincerely,

Heather Barber
Executive Director



Protect the Bitterroot

Why The Bitterroot is at Risk

A potential mine in the Headwaters of the Bitterroot River threatens to devastate our clean waters, harm working lands, and degrade iconic wildlife habitat.

Since 2022, US Critical Materials has sampled Sheep Creek lands for rare earth elements (REE). They claim high concentrations and intent to develop the mine. REE mining typically involves strong acids and produces toxic byproducts that are discharged to tailing ponds, which can endure for decades and often leak toxic water.

REE Mines and their managing companies have a track record of harming communities and degrading environments; “irrevocably [changing] the lifestyles of residents” by leaving permanent acidic waste and other pollutants in drinking and natural waters, among other impacts.

The waters that found our cornerstone economies – recreation, tourism, and agriculture – are already threatened by increasing temperatures, decreased availability, and greater extraction. Political and legislative actions like Executive Order 14241 to ‘fast-track’ the permitting process and the \$1 billion of Department of Energy funds to advance mining development create a landscape ripe for irresponsibly quick decisions around this ill-placed mine.

bitterrootwater.org/HeadwatersMineWatch

Preventing a Mine from Destroying our Bitterroot Headwaters

We know opposing a mine will be a long and complex process. That’s why we must invest now—building the knowledge, strategy, and local stewardship to stand against this threat while strengthening our ability to protect Bitterroot waters for the long term.

We have to stop this before it starts.

The timeline of mine development is unknown and unpredictable. Our best line of defense is to prepare now to establish an informed, engaged, and empowered community .

Because the proposed mine site is in the headwaters—just upstream of the Painted Rocks Reservoir, which provides water for working lands, fish, and wildlife—any negative impacts could spread downstream through nearly our entire watershed. This would negatively affect agriculture, recreation, drinking water, and the local economy. Once degraded by mining, these waters and habitats could never be fully restored.

How You Can Engage:

Knowledge is power. Stay informed and remind your friends to subscribe to our newsletter and stay in touch.

Right now, our priority is fact-finding and raising awareness about potential impacts of a mine in Bitterroot headwaters. By learning and staying informed, we’re strengthening our ability to act decisively when the time comes. Together we can build a community ready to protect our waters.

150 acres of Wetland Restoration at Tolan Creek, East Fork Headwaters

Project Background

Prior to abnormally intense degradation from successive fires and floods, the Tolan Creek area was a thriving wetland, providing the cold, clean water to the East Fork of the Bitterroot River. In its degraded state, it was instead dumping dozens of tons of sediment into the River, clogging aquatic breeding habitats along the way. Keeping the East Fork clear and cool is a priority for the Water Partnership. Restoring a healthy wetland at Tolan Creek that could store and filter clean cool water - while providing lush breeding habitat for elk, moose, eagles, and more - presented an outstanding opportunity to improve the East Fork and beyond.

In partnership with the high-power Bitterroot National Forest Team, the Bitterroot Water Partnership helped:

- *Re-habitat ~9 miles of degraded dirt roads*, returning them to natural habitat that absorbs water, keeping tons of sediment from leaking off the roads and into streams
- *Remove 16 failing culverts*, returning natural stream flows and habitat connectivity
- *Install 40 'beaver dam analogues' across 20 acres* that slow water, recharge groundwater, trap sediment and return natural stream flows, and lead to plant growth to help keep waters cool

The National Forest restored thousands of native plants to barren hillsides and the meadow area.

How Many Beavers Did it Take to Complete This Project?

No actual beavers were involved in this project, but loads of beaver wisdom and techniques were central to success. Volunteers with Two Wolf Foundation, a veterans service group, spent a warm July week



See how water is pooled on the upstream side of the BDA? These dams slow water, so the landscape has time to soak it up like a sponge. The dams also act as natural filters by catching sediment, or fine dust debris, preventing it from settling into downstream fish breeding areas and suffocating eggs and aquatic life.

installing these 40 beaver dam mimics (pictured above). By restoring a healthy headwaters habitat, we can positively influence miles of habitat downstream.



Scan here for a video on Phase I at Tolan Creek and the partnerships that made it possible.



The extent of degradation caused this area to lose many of the features that make it a 'wetland'. For example, instead of slowly meandering, water just rushes off the drying land in straight, jetting streams. And, since the area can no longer hold onto water, you'll find miles of dust-dry streams. Without proper moisture, plant life declines, sending the habitat into an even drier state. The 'BDAs' are a proven, powerful catalyst in wetland recovery.



BDAs will hold onto water for a slower release, so we can keep more cool water in the Bitterroot across our hot, dry summer.



Volunteers collected thousands of limbs, pounded dozens of posts, and intricately wove greenery and mud to make these solid, natural 'dams'.

We're proud to have partnered with the Bitterroot National Forest and Two Wolf Foundation to complete Phase 1 of this project.





Cameron Creek, Sula

Fence Defense

How a fence can clean our River: Cameron Creek Case Study

Agriculture is a cornerstone of our Bitterroot communities, culture, and economy. Some agricultural practices, like flood irrigation, also play a critical role in *water conservation* in the Bitterroot. In fact, many farmers and ranchers are conservation-minded and opt for practices that protect habitat and water. Sometimes this includes reversing the decisions of their predecessors, which included misguided actions like straightening streams, adding rip-rap to naturally meandering waterways, and allowing cattle to graze unchecked near and in streams. One way landowners are protecting their streams today is with fencing, managing against cattle grazing - and the Bitterroot Water Partnership is glad to help them do it.

The Bitterroot needs open-land cattle ranches, and cattle need healthy forage and water. However, cattle that are left to erase critical streamside vegetation can cause damage to our waters and habitats that takes years to reverse. Without strong roots to hold the land together, streams without vegetation are bound to erode, dumping tons of sediment into the water, muddying it and clogging aquatic breeding habitats. Then, sun-exposed creeks (see picture) across the Bitterroot are warming, threatening fish survival.

This year, we joined long-time partners at Shining Mountain Ranch in a massive protection effort: fencing off $\frac{3}{4}$ mile section of Cameron Creek, prohibiting cattle grazing in this degraded system. To jumpstart recovery, volunteers transplanted 10,000+ native willows. Calculations suggest this restoration will prevent 17 tons, or three dump trucks full, of sediment from entering the stream and River each year!

Cameron Creek is one of the warmest creeks entering the Bitterroot. In a few years shade from this healthy vegetation will help keep these waters cool - *and fish and other wildlife alive.*



Collecting Conservation Impacts

North Burnt Fork Creek, Stevensville

There's a complex math to successful conservation. Central to the formula is the concept that any one act is *powerful*, and alone cannot create the ultimate solution. Each act needs to be added with others in a strategic way - to make the greatest sum of the many parts. Representatives of the Bitterroot Water Partnership would be the first to tell you there are *a thousand ways* we could improve our water-y habitats - and that there's no way we can do it *all*. Based on extensive water quality studies from the Montana Department of Environmental Quality, we can calculate which stream sections are *most* degraded, and where restoration will be *most* impactful. For example, over 90% of North Burnt Fork Creek is in poor condition, meaning it's restoration is critical, and engaging local landowners in that years-long effort is a number-one priority.



A bare streamside, like what you see at this 2025 restoration site (Wild Fowl Lane), is typical of the North Burnt Fork. Most of the creek is missing natural streamside vegetation. Pulsing water flows eat away at surrounding land, dumping that soil and sediment into the water. As waterways widen, they're more exposed to hot summer sun that warms waters and degrades quality fish habitat.



Streamside with no roots to fortify them crumble in high flows.

+ 4 Restoration Partnerships on North Burnt Fork ... and counting!

Since 2019, BWP has led four restoration projects with North Burnt Fork landowners, totaling ½ mile of restored stream. This year, volunteers restored 300 native plants and ~900 willow transplants across 350 feet (a football field) of the creek, near Wild Fowl Lane. Support from people like you makes this collection of conservation impacts possible.



Community Perspective:

Investing in the Future of Our Bitterroot Waters

A portion of our conversation with Dan Kerslake, Owner and Operator of Kerslake Ranch in Stevensville, MT; Father and Husband; Supervisor with the Bitterroot Conservation District; Friend of the Bitterroot Water Partnership. Photos taken by students from MAPS Media Institute.

Alex: How has water shaped your life and experiences in the Bitterroot?

Dan: Everything we do, our lifeblood in a sense, day to day, agriculturally, is surrounded by water. Without water, our lands aren't productive, our crops aren't productive, our livestock don't thrive, and therefore our families don't thrive. In a sense, our entire community doesn't thrive... Everything we do revolves around the waters that are provided by our rivers, our streams, our mountains, our snowpack, our springs. So it's intricately tied to day to day survival, and feeding our children, and paying our bills, and providing good quality of life and employment for the employees that work for us, and their families.

WATER IS CONNECTED

Alex: What values or principles guide your views on water management?

Dan: Heritage. Lifeblood. Being surrounded by water, and having respect for that water, and all the things that come with it. The wildlife, the things I get to see day to day, whether that's ducks, beavers, the habitat this water provides. And it provides us the resource for agriculture and domestic use for our home.

And I guess that hits home to me equally as deep as the water we're using to grow our crops and money to feed our families. *It's such a wide-reaching aspect here; it makes this Valley really productive in so many ways. It makes wildlife productive, fisheries productive. We're renowned for our fisheries here. We're renowned for the amount of irrigated acreage this county has.*



Alex: So you appreciate the connectedness of our waters and how important it is for all aspects of productivity in the Bitterroot. And through understanding how water influences so many areas, you want to take care of those other areas, too. And what you do here affects all of that.

Dan: It does have that massive effect. And that's something that's very apparent to me in our use of water daily. I know for a fact that the water [upstream irrigators] use, say, up above, aquifer-wise, is the same water we reuse down below. We've seen those studies. We've watched that happen.

SHARED BELIEFS: WATER IN THE BITTERROOT

Alex: Are there specific values or beliefs about water you believe are shared among people in the Bitterroot Valley?

Dan: Water here is used in so many different ways. We each have our own view of what is most valuable to us with the use of water. Whether that is like: water is only for fly fishing, water is only for boating, water is only for riparian habitat, only for fisheries. But, at the core heart of that: water quality, quantity, and stewardship is at the heart of all those people's thinking. [...]

I'm in this, I'm immersed in this. It's part of me. I don't want water that has poor quality, whether that's toxins, heavy metals, high nitrates. You can say the same for somebody that enjoys aquatic habitat in the riversides, or watching ducklings flourish during the spring. Their idea of quality of water, quantity of water, stewardship of water is the same as mine, it's just for a different purpose. All in all we still have that same goal in mind.

It's keeping that water protected, keeping it plentiful, and making sure we don't ruin it, because once we lose it, we can't get it back.

[...] Full interview at bitterrootwater.org/updates



WATER STORAGE IN THE BITTERROOT

Alex: We've spoken a lot about the importance and challenge of keeping more water in the Bitterroot, for the Bitterroot. What else would you add about the importance of water storage?

Dan: On a bad year, we rely on snowpack. And we have certain amounts of storage here... You have Painted Rocks, Lake Como, Wilderness lakes on the West Side.

In our drainage, the Burnt Fork, this is a huge area that drains a tremendous amount of forest land, or drains our snow storage. But on a year like this year, where we have limited snowpack, we can only store so much, and our storage is not enough for us in this drainage to get through a year. It's not.

We're going to be faced with water shortages sooner this year. Moving forward, the task of creating water storage [is critical]. [...] Some capacity to store snowpack that would otherwise melt off fast, rage our rivers, blow our streams out but then be gone, downstream and out of our Valley. Storage is beneficial for all uses.

A slow let out of water through an entire season of summer is better for fisheries, it's better for aquatic habitat, it's better for recreation. It's better for every player that is involved with water, agriculture included.

If we had some capacity to save even a portion of it, and let that out equally over a summer, our groundwater aquifers would be better. [...] If we don't figure that out and we continue to move towards a warmer, drier climate, we're going to see decreases in ag land. We're going to see a decrease in food production. Fisheries quality, we're going to lose things that matter to us here, and we won't have that to pass on to the next generation.

I hope we figure that out.

Our Community in Conservation

The Bitterroot Water Partnership engages people in conservation and appreciation of our waters. Here's a glimpse of what that looks like.



Responsive Community Restoration

Some projects can take years to plan and implement. With flexible funding, willing landowners, and a committed team of volunteers, some can be completed in months. This crew planting 90 willows along North Burnt Fork Creek includes a board member, volunteers, an AmeriCorps member, staff, and even a family member visiting from Florida.



Connections to Place = Connection to Conservation

We maintain that the River connects us all. So, we're in the business of *connecting with all* - and bringing more conservation-minded community members into our work. This year, our River Ambassadors helped host unique community connection events, like Riverside Yoga!



Conservation in the Classroom: Local Curriculum

We can't sustain healthy waters & habitats for the next generation if they aren't *excited* or *prepared* to maintain this legacy. We're partnering with Teller Wildlife Refuge, Montana Natural History Center, and local educators to build locally-based conservation curriculum that's easy for teachers to integrate. In 2026 we'll have 30 conservation lessons for K-8 Bitterroot classes, each relating to local species and places. Learn more at conservationintheclassroom.org



Community Science & Observation

A new community science monitoring station, called a 'Chronolog', at Skalkaho Bend Park allows us to track growth in the restoration area as well as movement of the riverbend as it endures rapid erosion. The station invites people to take active note about their surroundings, building them up as observant stewards, not just passersby.

Submit a monitoring photo on your next visit!



Water-Wise Landscaping Initiative

When we started our Water-Wise Workshop in 2022, we were pressed to find a 'demonstration garden' to show people just how a home Water-Wise landscape works - and how brilliant it can be!

Today, you'll find four Water Partnership demo gardens. You'll find dozens more in home yards, transformed by a Water-Wise Plant Pack or creative grit.

Our 2025 Water-Wise Workshop was full with 25 participants who helped install this demonstration garden at the City of Hamilton Parks and Urban Forestry office on 3rd St.

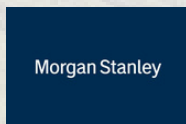


We're counting on public examples like this, and our growing cohort of confident Water-Wise Landscapers, to lead Bitterroot homeowners toward landscape decisions that save water. Through our partnership with Great Bear Native Plants, we've distributed 140 Plant Packs (*thousands* of native, drought-tolerant plants) and dozens of pounds native seed. These transitions could save up to 150,000 gallons of water each summer.

Special Thanks

2025 Conservation Sponsors

These sponsors are invested in helping us care for our Bitterroot waters. They support conservation engagement and restoration efforts through financial and physical donations, discounts, event partnership, and so much more! To join as a conservation sponsor or business partner, please contact Telsie@bitterrootwater.org



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*Strategic giving protects what matters most.
Whether through a bequest or Qualified
Charitable Distribution (QCA) from your IRA,
your planned contribution to the
Bitterroot Water Partnership ensures our waters
& communities will thrive for generations.*

*"Knowing my gift will help a kid enjoy fishing
the Bitterroot fifty years from now bring me a
little peace of mind."*

Doug N.

Partner Spotlight

This year we hosted nearly 200 guests at our first River Rooted: a celebration of the River that connects us all. Over 40 local producers, businesses, volunteers, and other partners contributed to make a fun, meaningful community gathering that raised power and funds for conservation.

Find the full list of contributors at bitterrootwater.org/RiverRooted



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