



***FLATHEAD BASIN COMMISSION  
2012-2016 STRATEGIC PLAN***

Amended November 2011

## PREAMBLE

The Flathead Basin is one of the last best places in Montana and the northwest. Nestled within the heart of the Crown of the Continent ecosystem, it is one of the few remaining places in the lower 48 with a relatively intact ecosystem. The Basin is still home to all of the carnivores that roamed this landscape thousands of years ago and the waters are still considered some of the cleanest in the world. The Flathead Basin Commission (FBC) was created in 1983 to protect the waters that flow into and out of the Flathead Basin. In part, the FBC was created to address the environmental and economic threats posed by strip mining projects being proposed in the headwaters of the Flathead River in British Columbia. The FBC worked for almost 30 years to protect the Flathead from the adverse impacts associated with strip mining, and in 2010 a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between British Columbia and Montana was finally brought to fruition, and mining in the B.C. Flathead was permanently banned. This MOU, and the subsequent Provincial legislation that followed, is a testament to the value of the Commission and the things that it can accomplish. However, the MOU is only the first step on the path to success. We must now work with British Columbia as well as federal, state, tribal and local partners in Montana to ensure that the MOU is implemented in a meaningful way on-the-ground.

With the adoption of the MOU, the Flathead Basin is in an enviable position as compared to many other parts of the country and the world in terms of its environmental integrity. However, it is clear that we cannot simply rest on our laurels. While water quality remains high, monitoring indicators are demonstrating that over time, year by year, water quality slowly continues to be degraded. While the changes on an annual basis are almost imperceptible, the decline is evident when examining data over a period of 30 years. Similarly, while air quality remains quite good overall, indicators show that toxins in the air have contaminated even the most pristine high alpine lakes. While the grizzly population has rebounded, other species such as Pika are on the brink of extirpation within the Basin. And while tourism in the Flathead continues to boom, and hydropower operations continue to produce some of the cheapest electricity in the country, we are on the edge of an economic crisis as the likelihood of a zebra mussel infestation increases each year.

What does all this mean? It means that we have to continue to be vigilant in protecting our natural resources – the resources upon which our children, our ecosystems, and our economies rely. While the risks before us are real, they are not insurmountable if we chose to act. The indicators show that problems are ahead, and we need to tackle those problems before they become unmanageable, and cause adverse economic and environmental impacts. The goal is to manage and address issues now, rather than waiting until governmental regulation is required, economic growth is impinged upon, or water quality is irreversibly impaired. While the FBC has had some incredible success over the last couple of years, it is also faced with new challenges, including assisting in: the prevention of Aquatic Invasive Species; addressing landscape level changes; and implementing a transboundary MOU – all of this while the FBC continues to manage its historic responsibilities related to water quality monitoring and education and outreach. We must face up to these challenges, as there simply is too much at stake. The FBC, working with all of its partners in the Basin, will continue to work to protect the resources that define the Flathead Basin – its clean water, its intact landscape, and the diversity of wildlife – all of which make the Basin a truly unique and special place.

Chas Cartwright, Chair, Flathead Basin Commission

## THE FLATHEAD BASIN

The Flathead River Basin is truly one of the unique watersheds of North America. The creation of what today is known as the Flathead Basin can be traced to momentous geological activity that led to the formation of the Rocky Mountains 150 million years ago. About 3 million years ago, glacial activity began with a series of “ice ages” in the Northern Rockies, gradually shaping the physical character of the land and sculpting the river valleys and mountain ranges into what we today know as the Flathead Basin. Such significant geological attributes as Flathead Lake and the glaciers in Glacier National Park are living reminders of the end of the last ice age, a mere 10,000 years ago.

Located in northwest Montana and southeastern British Columbia, the watershed encompasses 8,587 square miles—approximately six million acres. The Basin is larger than the combined territory of Puerto Rico and the states of Delaware and Rhode Island. The long, north-south axis stretches 175 miles, while the maximum width is 88 miles. The Flathead River drainage is the largest tributary to the Clark Fork River, part of the extensive headwater of the Columbia River. The Flathead’s three forks—North, Middle and South—together supply 80 percent of the water carried within the watershed. Other rivers in the Basin include the Stillwater, Whitefish and Swan. The Lower Flathead River—that portion below the outlet of Flathead Lake at the town of Polson—empties into the Clark Fork River at the town of Paradise at an elevation of 2,500 feet above sea level.

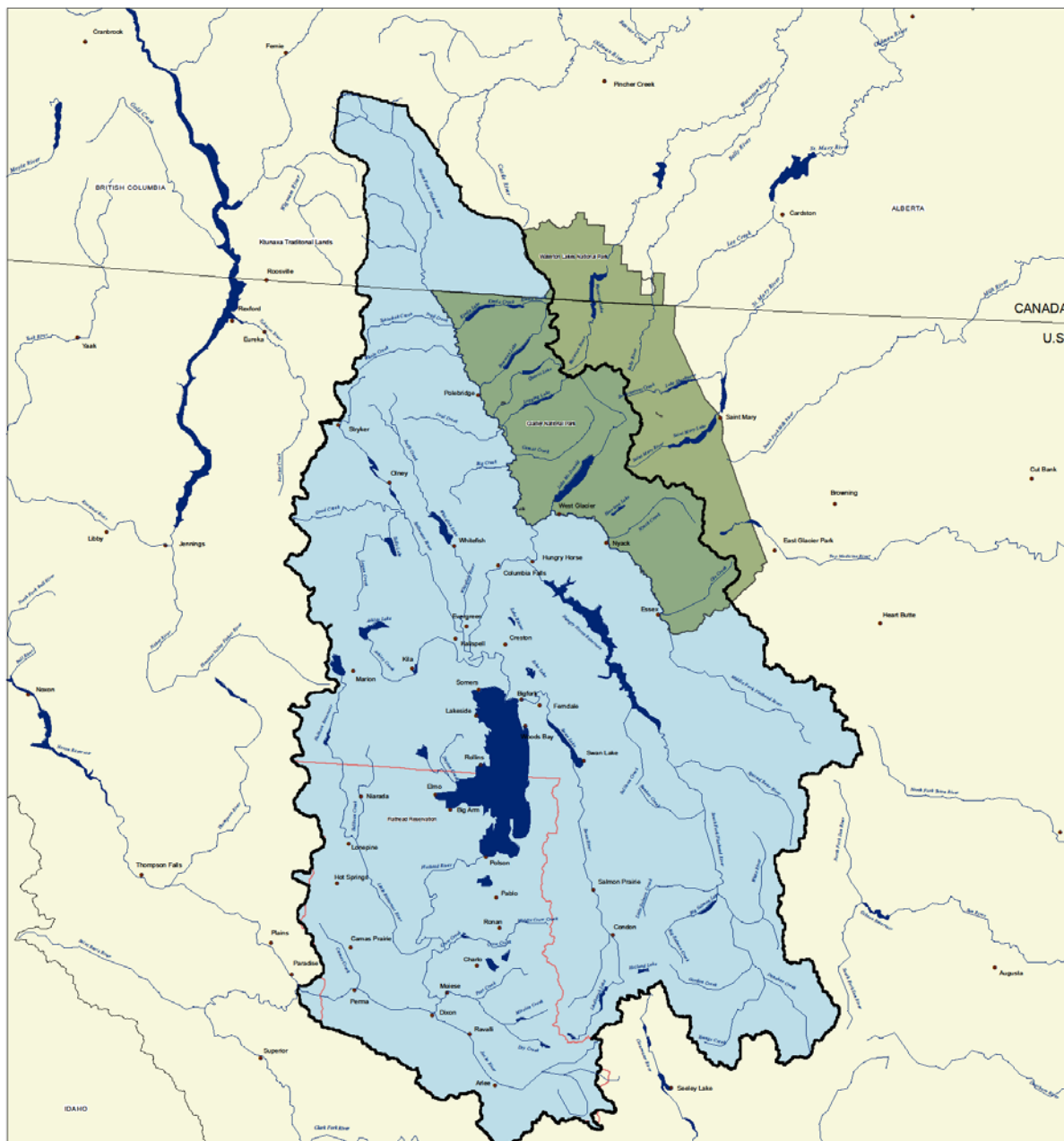
Elevations elsewhere in the watershed range from Mount Cleveland in Glacier National Park at 10,466 feet to 2,893 feet at Flathead Lake, the Basin’s major catchment. The Lake is one of the 300 largest lakes in the world and the largest body of fresh water in the U.S. west of the Mississippi River, with a full pool surface area of 126,000 acres. The Basin’s approximately 500 other lakes range in size and character from nearly inaccessible alpine lakes of only several surface acres to such other significant large water bodies as Swan, McDonald, Whitefish, Tally, and the Little Bitterroot Lakes.

For millennia, human beings have been part of the Flathead Basin environment. Over the past two centuries the nature of that relationship has changed dramatically as tribal ways of life that had long shaped the region’s ecosystems were marginalized and an industrialized market economy became predominant.

The Flathead Basin Commission was formed to come to terms with that complex legacy and to help chart a path toward a more sustainable future. In doing so the Commission is fortunate to draw from a vibrant and diverse community, spanning an equally diverse political landscape that includes virtually all of Flathead and Lake Counties; a segment of Missoula County; the entire Flathead Indian Reservation of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes; the portion of Glacier National Park west of the continental divide; parts of three wilderness areas; millions of acres of forest land under federal, provincial, state, tribal and corporate management and; tens of thousands of acres of privately owned property.

The watershed today maintains remarkably pristine bodies of water and diverse communities of plants and animals that depend on clean water, including over 300 species of aquatic insects and 22 native and introduced species of fish. Yet warning signs are evident, reminding us of the urgency of our work. The water quality of Flathead Lake as measured by TMDLs, oxygen levels and algae blooms is experiencing a deteriorating trend due to increased nutrient pollutant runoff from populated areas and deposition of wind-carried smoke and dust particles. Food web changes have been caused by the introduction of non-native species of invertebrates and fish. Invasive species of non-native plants deleterious to the health of the native ecosystem have been introduced. Shallow groundwater tables are showing increasing levels of contamination putting at risk drinking water and human health. Finally, wildlife habitat is shrinking—the grizzly bear, bull trout and Canada Lynx are currently listed as threatened under the federal Endangered Species Act, and wolverine are listed as a candidate species. ⇐

# Flathead River Watershed



## FORWARD

The Flathead Basin Commission (FBC) was created in 1983 by the Montana Legislature to monitor and protect water quality and the natural resources in one of the State's most important watersheds. The FBC is a uniquely structured non-regulatory organization that works to accomplish its mandate in a consensus-building manner, stressing education, cooperation, broadly based community involvement, partnerships with agencies and nonprofit groups, and the voluntary participation of Basin residents. Consistent with the duties of the Commission as stated in the establishing statute the Commission considers its role in the Basin to:

- Coordinate water quality protection and monitoring activities
- Working with our partners, ensure that water quality, economic, land use and natural resource data is gathered, analyzed, interpreted and disseminated to the public and responsible agencies
- Facilitate policies and actions that have a positive result on water quality and natural resources
- Provide leadership in making the case for Basin water quality and protection of its natural resources

The twenty-three member Commission represents a cross-section of citizens and local, state, tribal, federal and provincial agency representatives who strive to identify the Basin's water quality and natural resources problems and work collectively to implement the most effective solutions. The Agency members of the Commission are prescribed in statute; the Governor appointed- members are selected for four-year staggered terms.

The Flathead Basin Commission has become a model of successful citizen and inter-agency cooperation in a geographically vast and ecologically diverse watershed characterized by its overall pristine character, international dimension, and multi-jurisdictional nature.

## THE COMMISSIONERS

Dan Bangeman, Flathead County Conservation District

Tom Bell, BC Ministry of Environment

Susan Brueggeman, Lake County Environmental Health Dept.

Chas Cartwright, Glacier National Park

Jasmine Courville-Brown, Governor appointee

Julie Dalsoglio, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency

Pam Holmquist, Flathead County Commissioner

Kate Hunt , Governor Appointee

Rich Janssen, Confederated Salish & Kootenai Tribes

Jon Jourdonnais, Pacific Power & Light

Joe Lamson, Montana Department of Natural Resource Conservation

George Mathieus, MT Dept. of Environmental Quality

Jan Metzmaker, Governor Appointee

Dennis Philmon, U.S. Bureau of Reclamation

Jack Potter, Governor Appointee

Mark Reller, Bonneville Power Administration

Bob Sandman, MDNRC Northwestern Land Office

Jim Satterfield, Montana Dept. of Fish, Wildlife & Parks

Jim Simpson, Lake County Conservation District

Thompson Smith, Governor Appointee

Margaret Sogard, Governor Appointee

Mike Volesky, Office of the Governor

Chip Weber, Flathead National Forest

## **THE FLATHEAD BASIN COMMISSION STRATEGIC PLAN**

### ***MISSION***

To protect the existing high quality of the Flathead Lake aquatic environment; the waters that flow into, out of, or are tributary to the Lake and; the natural resources and environment of the Flathead Basin.

### ***VISION***

The Flathead Basin Commission, working with our communities and stakeholders, is leading efforts to improve and protect water quality and the natural resources in the Flathead Basin and is realizing measurable results.

### ***DUTIES, GOALS and ISSUES***

The Flathead Basin Commission uses duties, goals and issues to establish and prioritize work objectives. Duties are mandated in the enabling legislation establishing the Flathead Basin Commission. Goals are described in terms of measurable accomplishments derived from the mandated duties to be achieved at specific times in the future. Issues are described as concerns that the Flathead Basin Commission plans to address.

### ***DUTIES MANDATED BY FBC ESTABLISHING LEGISLATION***

- (1) to submit to the governor and, as provided in 5-11-210, to the legislature a biennial report that includes:
  - (a) a summary of information gathered in fulfillment of its duties under this section;
  - (b) information on monitoring activities within the Flathead basin concerning the condition of the basin's natural resources, with particular emphasis on Flathead Lake;
  - (c) the identification of land use and land development trends in the Flathead basin;
  - (d) any recommendations the commission considers appropriate for fulfillment of its duties and for continued preservation of the Flathead basin in the present high quality of its aquatic resources; and
  - (e) an accounting of all money received and expended, by source and purpose, for the period since the last report;
- (2) to meet at least semiannually within the Flathead basin, alternating the meeting site between the cities of Kalispell and Polson; and
- (3) to achieve the duties described in the FBC's enabling legislation 75-7-304.

## ***KEY GOALS AND ISSUES***

- (1) Continue efforts to prevent and contain Aquatic Invasive Species (AIS), focusing on zebra and quagga mussels, and invasive aquatic plants.
- (2) Continue efforts to work cooperatively with Canadian and American partners to protect the headwaters of the Flathead River.
- (3) Continue monitoring efforts currently in place, including the collaborative surface water monitoring plan, groundwater monitoring efforts and the volunteer monitoring program for the purpose of understanding long-term water quality trends in the basin.
- (4) Continue addressing issues and policies relating to growth and development in the Basin that affect water quality and other long-term natural and economic interests.
- (5) Promote civil discourse and factual, objective discussion of the issues with which we engage both inside the Commission and with the other agencies and organizations with whom we interact, and to be known as a source of accurate information about those issues.
- (6) Foster co-operative work with and among other agencies and organizations in the Flathead and to build coalitions where possible to further the objectives of the FBC.
- (7) Develop ways to improve capacity and increase the effectiveness of the Flathead Basin Commission, including but not limited to the provision of adequate funding and staffing.
- (8) Address other issues and opportunities that are of importance to the Basin as a whole and where the FBC has a clear and unique capacity to make a positive contribution, as FBC time and resources permit.
- (9) Foster voluntary efforts to improve water quality in the basin, including but not limited to volunteer monitoring, education and outreach and AIS-based efforts.
- (10) Work with federal, state, tribal and local government to address landscape level changes.

## IMPLEMENTATION

The development of Action Plans for each strategic goal is both critical to success and the most difficult component of the strategic planning process to accomplish. It is especially difficult for volunteers with limited time to spend on Commission business and a Commission with limited staff for development of draft ideas, strategies and proposed objectives for committee consideration. Nonetheless, without Action Plans the Strategic Plan has little meaning.

The Flathead Basin Commission has restructured its standing committees to better accomplish the implementation of its Strategic Plan. Each member of the Commission serves on one or more committees.

### STANDING COMMITTEES

- Executive Committee
- Monitoring Committee
- Education and Outreach Committee

Project orientated committees will be formed as needed to complete discrete tasks. Such committees will be formed for a specific duration of time as determined by the FBC membership.

An Action Plan(s) prepared by the Executive Director will be reviewed and approved by the Commission annually.

Each Action Plan could include the following components:

- A description of the **desired outcome** (s) and how the outcome(s) will be measured
- A description of the **strategy(ies)** the committee determines to be the best course of action for achieving the outcome(s)
- **Measurable objectives** that will be used to evaluate performance along the way
- **Identification of, and strategies for, involving stakeholders** critical for success—either because they are policy or decision-makers, potential supporters of the process or outcomes, or potential partners with which information can be shared, goals pursued, problems solved, tasks completed or resources leveraged
- **Timelines** for accomplishing objectives and achieve desired outcomes
- The fiscal, technical and administrative **resources** required to complete the tasks
- Identification of potential **funding sources** such as grants, stakeholder partnerships or Commission member organizations with a programmatic stake in the Action Plan

## ACHIEVING THE VISION

What will the Flathead Basin look like when our Vision is achieved?

Decisions affecting the quality of life and economic development will be guided by the understanding that all aspects of life—human, plant and animal—in the Flathead Basin are interconnected, interdependent and cumulative. The state, counties, cities, tribes and province of the Basin will be mindful of the needs of future generations when goals and policies are set to promote safety and security, economic vitality, a clean environment and conservation of natural resources. The state, counties, cities, tribes, and province, as well as the agricultural, silvicultural, business interests, and community organizations will collaborate to coordinate programs, integrate information to pursue goals, solve problems and leverage resources. Progress in achieving our goals will be measured by the recognized quality of our economy and natural resources.

The Basin's negative water quality and natural resources deterioration trends will be reversed. Throughout the Basin water quality will be at least as pristine as it is today and will continue to be improved wherever possible. Growth and economic development will have been successfully managed to attain a state of sustainable equilibrium with public health, water quality, natural resources and quality of life values.

Throughout the Basin we will all understand and appreciate that the Basin's people are fundamental to a robust economy, as well as to the successful stewardship of our natural resources. If the well-being of our citizens and natural resources is improved and protected through individual and collective initiative, a diverse, thriving and sustainable economy and a healthy environment for the entire Basin will ensue.

We are poised at a critical moment in the history of the Flathead Basin. What we do – or fail to do- in the next few years will [to a significant degree] determine whether the still abundant and pristine natural resources of the area will be preserved for future generations. It is crucial that we meet this challenge.