

***FLATHEAD BASIN COMMISSION  
2016-2020 STRATEGIC PLAN***

Amended November 2015

## PREAMBLE

In September 1960, John Steinbeck embarked on a journey across America. For all the wonders of that road trip, Steinbeck felt something different when he reached Montana. "I'm in love with Montana," he wrote. "For other states I have admiration, respect, recognition, even some affection. But with Montana it is love."

For those of us who have the honor of serving on the Flathead Basin Commission, it's easy to imagine that Steinbeck wrote those words after seeing Flathead Lake for the first time. This great sheet of water, and the drainage system that surrounds it, is not only a place of staggering beauty. It also remains one of the cleanest large lakes in the world, and among the most ecologically intact regions in North America. Almost every native species that was here two hundred years ago still inhabits the Flathead. We have some of the strongest remaining populations of numerous carnivores, cold-water trout, and other plants and animals.

For thousands of years, the native peoples of our area have taken care of this special place with the respect it deserves. Today, all the diverse communities of the Basin cherish it as one the last best places on earth. In virtually everyone it has touched, the Flathead has given rise to a fierce desire to protect it, to ensure that this greatest of natural treasures be kept healthy and pristine.

That was why the Montana Legislature, in an overwhelming bipartisan consensus, established the Flathead Basin Commission in 1983. And it is why both Republicans and Democrats have stood together to support the FBC for over thirty years. They have given their support in recognition that the environmental quality of our area, most of all the continuing high water quality of Flathead Lake, remains by far the greatest driver of the area's economy.

The legislature created the FBC largely due to concerns over proposed energy development in British Columbia, along the headwaters of the North Fork of the Flathead. In 2010 — after decades of diligent work by many parties, including the FBC — that threat was finally removed, when British Columbia and Montana reached a Memorandum of Understanding giving permanent protection to the B.C. Flathead. In December 2014, the U.S. took similar action on our side of the border with passage of the North Fork Watershed Protection Act.

While industrial development of the North Fork is now off the table, there remains a great deal of work to be done in ensuring that the provisions of the MOU are fully implemented, that monitoring is carried out in a comprehensive and scientifically sound manner. The FBC will remain involved and vigilant, working cooperatively with Canadian and American partners.

In addition, in recent years the FBC has been working hard to meet other challenges to the well-being of the Basin. Two are of greatest immediate concern to our members.

One is the continuing threat of Aquatic Invasive Species (AIS), including Eurasian watermilfoil, curlyleaf pondweed, and zebra and quagga mussels. The mussels, once established, can reproduce in unimaginable

numbers, coating any hard surface — rocks, docks, boats, pipes — with a suffocating blanket of tiny, razor-sharp shells, quickly devouring the base of the aquatic food chain. The cost of prevention today is a tiny fraction of the expense of managing them if they become established. The FBC has long been among Montana's leaders in advocating for stronger protections. Thanks to the tireless initiative of our Executive Director and consultants, the FBC has not only helped educate the public and policy makers, but we have raised funds, staffed, and operated sorely needed boat inspection stations, supplementing the statewide effort of Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks. In 2015, we partnered with the Blackfeet Tribal Council to open an inspection station in Browning. In the first 1 week of operation, we intercepted an AIS-infested boat at that station. By the end of the season, 40% of the AIS-contaminated vessels found in Montana in 2015 were stopped at this station operated by the FBC.

The second clear and present danger to the waters of the Flathead Basin is the daily rail transport of hazardous materials, including trainloads of oil from the Bakken fields and Alberta tar sands. One derailment, one spill of these especially toxic, volatile fuels could devastate the Flathead system, wiping out decades of efforts to protect it. The issue is made more difficult by the national levels at which rail regulations are developed. As a local entity, however, we have special knowledge of the resource, and we are doing everything in our power to work with Burlington Northern, government agencies, and other stakeholders to help reduce the risk to the Middle Fork and other waters.

The FBC continues to work on many other fronts — more than can reasonably be expected of a non-regulatory body with a single full-time staff member. We continue to address growth and development policies in the Basin as they affect water quality and other long-term environmental and economic interests. We continue to be involved with the monitoring of water quality, with wastewater management issues, and — of greatest long-term concern — with the burgeoning problem of climate change.

The FBC focuses on acting where we have a unique, constructive role to play, engaging our stakeholders in respectful, productive, solution-oriented discussions of the problems we face, providing clear scientific basis for policy decisions, and bringing together a broad cross-section of the Basin to solve problems and secure a more sustainable future for the basin.

There are twenty-three members of the Flathead Basin Commission. We include citizen members, and diverse representatives from both the private and public sectors: hydroelectric providers, the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes, county governments, and state and federal resource management agencies. Serving on the Commission is an honor and a privilege for every one of us. We take seriously our responsibility to meet the simple but daunting mission defined by the enabling statute: "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."

I began with a quotation from John Steinbeck. In closing, let's consider the words of another beloved observer of Montana — Charles M. Russell: "Guard, protect and cherish your land, for there is no afterlife for a place that started out as Heaven."

Thompson Smith  
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



*In Glacier National Park, Ansel Adams, 1941*

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.

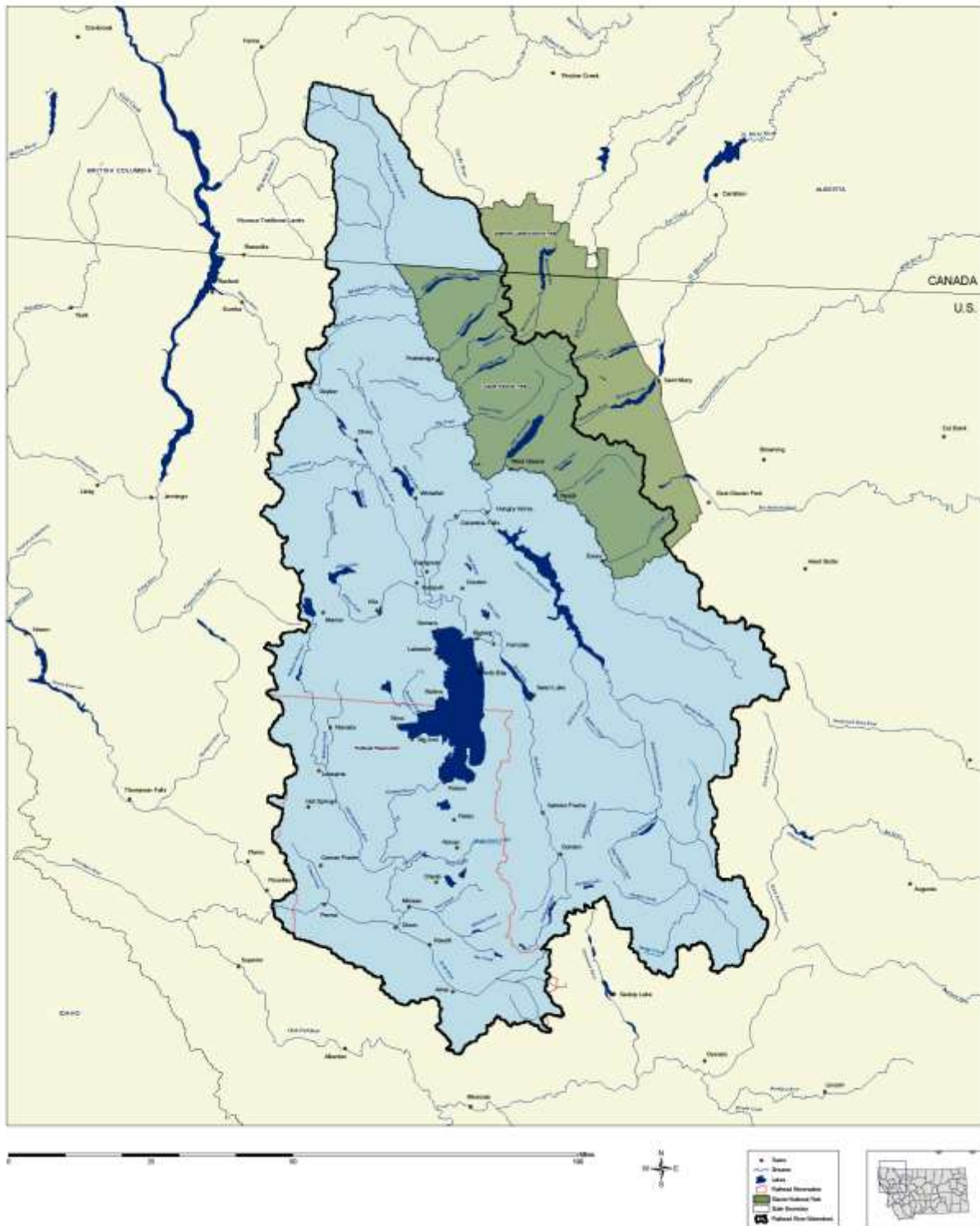
The watershed today maintains remarkably pristine bodies of water and diverse communities of plants and animals that depend on clean water, including over 300 species of aquatic insects and 22 native and introduced species of fish. Yet warning signs are evident, reminding us of the urgency of our work. The water quality of Flathead Lake as measured by Total Maximum Daily Loads (TMDLs), oxygen levels and algae blooms is experiencing a deteriorating trend due to increased nutrient pollutant runoff from populated areas and



*Canada Lynx, Jeremiah John McBride,  
Flickr Creative Commons*

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, on-the-ground action 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

Dean Sirucek, Flathead County Conservation District	George Mathieus, MT Dept. of Environmental Quality
Tom Bell, BC Ministry of Environment	Jan Metzmaker, Governor Appointee
TBD, Lake County	Dennis Philmon, U.S. Bureau of Reclamation
Jeff Mow, Glacier National Park	Jack Potter, Governor Appointee
Jasmine Courville-Brown, Governor appointee	Mark Reller, Bonneville Power Administration
Julie Dalsoglio, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency	Steve Frye, MDNRC Northwestern Land Office
Phil Mitchell, Flathead County Commissioner	Jim Williams, Montana Dept. of Fish, Wildlife & Parks
Kate Hunt, Governor Appointee	Jim Simpson, Lake County Conservation District
Rich Janssen, Confederated Salish & Kootenai Tribes	Thompson Smith, Governor Appointee
TBD, Northwestern Energy	Chas Cartwright, Governor Appointee
Ray Beck, Montana Department of Natural Resource Conservation	Tim Baker, 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) Partner with Burlington Northern Santa Fe, governmental and other stakeholders to facilitate the development and/or strengthening of pro-active prevention and emergency response plans related to the transport of hazardous materials via rail.
- 4) Undertake targeted monitoring efforts based upon programmatic needs. To the extent possible, support 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.
- 5) 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.
- 6) 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.
- 7) 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.
- 8) 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.
- 9) 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.
- 10) Foster voluntary efforts to improve water quality in the basin, including but not limited to wastewater management, education and outreach and AIS-based efforts.
- 11) Work with federal, state, tribal and local government to address landscape level impacts associated with climate change, by facilitating adaptive management efforts, including but not limited to drought planning.



## 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 structured 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.

