Partnerships Forging Progress

Public and private partnerships make good use of our natural resources while providing benefits to rural communities. We accomplish more by including all watershed stakeholders in finding consensus and implementing solutions on the ground. This ensures the solutions are sustainable because they come from the people. Trust builds when partners work together.

The inclusive, consensus approach works. Founded in 1993, early partners efforts focused on weed management. By continuing to facilitate open and productive communication between public and private resource managers, conservation outcomes have been recognized nationally as a model for community-based cooperation.

The Blackfoot Watershed of western Montana lies within the only intact ecosystem in the lower 48 states, home to all of the wildlife that inhabited the 1.5 million-acre watershed when Meriwether Lewis traveled here in 1806. Nearly forty years of community-based leadership has conserved the valley and wetlands, providing a critical connection between the wilderness areas to the north and west, and the Garnet Mountains to the south. This landscape provides a refuge for wildlife, including grizzly bears, Canada lynx, fisher, gray wolves, bull trout, and attracts breeding and migratory birds including trumpeter swan. This special place inspired the late author Norman MacLean to write A River Runs through It.

Avoiding the rapid land use changes facing many other valleys in the West, the Blackfoot remains working and wild, much like it was when the early pioneers put down their roots. This is no accident. Those who visit or call the Blackfoot home, who love it and whose livelihoods depend on it, have built partnerships to conserve the rural and natural values of this special place.

A History of Working Together

The Blackfoot Challenge grew out of the early cooperative efforts of landowners to work together to protect and share this valuable area and resource. These public and private partnerships were formalized in 1993. The mission then-as today-follows a consensus-based approach to include all public and private stakeholders, and coordinating efforts that conserve and enhance the natural resources and rural way of life in the Blackfoot Watershed.

We build trust and partnerships between local landowners, public managers, conservation groups, private companies and other stakeholders by facilitating communication and participation. By participating on the regional and national level, we support grassroots efforts to address landscape conservation, and create the right set of incentives and opportunities for federal agencies to be effective through partnerships and incentives.
Partnerships Keeping Landscapes Working for All
Sharing information and discussing strategies for landscape conservation and stewardship helps partners keep working landscapes and the rural way of life in the watershed intact. Private landowners, land trusts and public agencies working together have conserved more than 285,000 acres to date, including 110,000 acres of perpetual conservation easements.

The Blackfoot Community Project, a partnership between The Nature Conservancy and the Blackfoot Challenge, purchased 89,257 acres of Plum Creek Timber Company land to retain its conservation benefits through new private and public owners. This project resulted in ownership by the Blackfoot Challenge of the 5,600-acre Blackfoot Community Conservation Area “core,” featuring mid-elevation forest, native grasslands and free flowing streams. A 15-member council made up of varied community interests meets monthly to cooperatively steward a larger 41,000-acre area for multiple use objectives.

Conservation Accomplishments
- 89,000 acres of corporate timberland kept working and accessible to hunters
- 110,000 acres under conservation easement, available for agriculture and wildlife
- 32,000 acres approved for new State Forest in 2009
- 75% of watershed in working status
- 41,000 acres of public and private land managed by community council

Stewardship Accomplishments
- 94% reduction in grizzly bear conflicts from 2003-2010
- Over 2,300 carcasses removed from 50 ranches since 2003
- 61,000 ft electric fence to protect calving areas & beehives
- Range Riders since 2008
- 120 residents in neighborhood network
- Over 500 acres private forests thinned for fire safety zone each year
- 50% of the irrigation systems participating in the irrigation/energy efficiency program

Landscape-level Public and Private Coordination
Forest Restoration and Fire Management The Greenough/Potomac and North Powell Fuels Task Forces work with public and private landowners to create fire-safe communities and improve fire management. Bringing this cooperation to a landscape scale, the Lolo and Lincoln Working Groups of the Montana Forest Restoration Committee, Multiagency Integrated Restoration Strategy Blackfoot Project, and the Southwestern Crown Collaborative Project are integrating the efforts of private landowners and public land managers.

Weed Management Integrated weed management practices are applied annually to approximately 11,000 acres in the Blackfoot Watershed by agencies and landowners. Perhaps the best example of collaborative, cross-boundary weed management is along the Blackfoot River where since 2011, the Blackfoot Leafy Spurge Project has treated more than 40 miles of the Blackfoot River.

Restoration Accomplishments
- 13 community-based vegetation management areas
- Off-site water, restoration systems improve range
- Landscape-level restoration of public forested land
- Restoration of 320 acres of grassland parks and forests
- 120 trumpeters released, 30 returned & cygnets fledged!

Education Accomplishments
- Monthly Pre-K days for pre-schoolers
- Wiley Weasel Program for K through 3rd graders
- Youth Field Day Program for 4th through 6th graders
- Adopt-A-Swan Program for 7th and 8th graders
- MT Natural Resources Youth Camp for 9th-12th graders
- Community Education Program for adults and families

Outreach Programs
- 2,000 annual visitors learning community-based values
- 2 years participating in North Fork Fish Camp

Education Programs 2 years participating in North Fork Fish Camp

sustaining COMMUNICATION, TRUST BUILDING AND FORGING PARTNERSHIPS for future generations by conserving natural resources and rural communities in the Blackfoot Watershed of western Montana

Sustaining Working Land
As grizzly populations expand in the Blackfoot, conflicts have decreased due, in part, to an array of practices. Wolf populations have dramatically increased since 2007, yet livestock losses have been moderate thanks to ranchers who work with range riders who closely monitor herds, wolf activity, and take precautions to reduce depredations.

The irrigation efficiency program conducts maintenance evaluations, updates systems, monitors energy consumption, schedules water use, and hosts maintenance workshops. We continue water quality and quantity monitoring, and coordinate partner responses to drought through shared use.

Reaching All Ages
The Blackfoot Challenge reaches the eleven schools and seven communities in the Blackfoot Watershed to provide quality, place-based education. Beginning in 2009, we provided programming for all age groups.

We have developed a Community Education Program with hands-on workshops that engage adults and provide family-friendly programs. Workshops cover a wide range of topics, including native plants, small acreage weed management, community-based process, wolf management, outdoor photography and geology.