

Blackfoot Drought Committee

2023 Annual Meeting Notes

December 19, 2023

10:00am – 12:00pm

Lubrecht Experimental Forest & Zoom

Attendees: Patrick Uthe, Jed Whiteley, Michael Downey, Stephen Begley, Aaron Fiaschetti, Amanda Spencer, Eric Hull, Frank Maus, Valerie Kurth, Barry Dutton, Pat Kane, Morgan Case, Robert Ray, Amy Groen, Randy Arnold, David Mannix, Heather McAdams, Kyle Kelley, Clancy Jandreau

Action Items/Next Steps

- FWP and CSKT will keep the Committee apprised as they come out with a draft Milltown Implementation Plan
- Clancy will work with DNRC to schedule a time in the new year for presentations to the Drought Committee on the hydrologic studies conducted in the watershed

Agenda

- Welcome & Introductions
- 2023 in Review
- Stream Monitoring Update
- Work Group Updates and 2024 Work Plans
 - Milltown Implementation Work Group
 - Restoration and Resiliency Work Group
- Partner Updates

Meeting Notes

1. Clancy started the meeting with a presentation that provided an overview of 2023 drought response and stream monitoring
 - Some discussion followed on how variable the number of new participants and call letters that go out each year are
 - The state reported that since the new call protocol was implemented a couple of years ago, the number of call letters going out in the Blackfoot has been pretty stable
 - The presentation ended with a quick look at current snowpack conditions in the Blackfoot watershed which are presently the lowest observed during the period of record beginning in 1979.
 - Committee members noted that despite the slow start, conditions are highly variable and difficult to predict. Previous years that started with low snowpack ended near normal due to late season storms and there are now indications that El Nino conditions may begin to ease by next spring.

2. Clancy and other members of the Milltown Implementation work group gave the Committee updates on drafting new language for the Drought Response Plan to incorporate the Milltown Water Right.
 - Most updates are straight forward replacing text and adding in context and information about the Milltown water right
 - The more complicated changes that will need more Committee discussion are the ways that call on the Milltown and the Murphy water rights will be implemented. Since certain sideboards surrounding enforcement of the Milltown water right are set in statue and the same is not the case for the Murphy right, FWP, CSKT, and the Committee will have to decide what the call process will look like between these two water rights.
 - o Both the State and CSKT expressed a desire to be consistent and not confusing
 - o Whatever is written into the Drought Plan will need to reflect what is written in FWP and CSKT's Milltown Implementation Plan which they hope to have a draft of in late winter/early spring
 - The Implementation Plan will establish a menu of options for implementing Milltown for the public to give feedback on
 - o Members of the Committee expressed some anxiety about not knowing how the implementation process will go and encouraged FWP and CSKT to work in unison in enforcing their water rights so that it is clear for water users who they are answering to
 - FWP and CSKT expressed a desire to develop the plan sooner than later to let people know what they can expect, but they realize that the implementation plan will be a living document that will be adapted as they learn more and grow from the first year or two of implementation
 - o The Committee discussed a goal of bringing the Updated Drought Plan to next year's annual committee meeting for approval
3. Clancy introduced to the Committee a draft Protocol for Approving Drought Plans under the Milltown context
 - Committee member feedback was supportive of the draft protocol
4. Clancy and other Restoration and Resiliency Work Group members updated the Committee on their progress towards creating a framework for assessing the relative fishery habitat benefits of restoration projects for inclusion into individual drought plans.
 - Work Group members explained that this conversation has been in the works for years and the current draft Restoration Assessment Form represents the latest version after lots of back and forth discussion
 - One of the more difficult aspects of the framework is all the context and nuance that surround each project, but Work Group members feel that with the current assessment form, we have reached the point where it is better to move forward with what we have realizing that it can be adapted as we learn more rather than continuing to talk in circles trying to anticipate every nuance we may face.

- Committee Member feedback was positive about the Assessment Form as long as it is able to recognize and take into consideration good active management and not just reward fixing problems

5. Several partners gave updates to the Committee

- DNRC: The new state-wide Drought Management Plan was finalized and released this month. Valerie and Michael handed out hard copies to Committee Members present in the room. The full plan is available to read on the newly launched website: drought.mt.gov
The Water Sciences Bureau performed three synoptic runs on the Blackfoot from Lincoln to the mouth in July, August and November. Canal seepage work was performed on North Helmville Canal and Douglas Creek Canal. Six synoptic runs were performed throughout the season on Nevada Creek from the reservoir to the mouth. DNRC plans on presenting all the above to the Drought Committee during a TBD meeting in the new year.
- CFC: The Clark Fork Coalition is currently seeking to fill two new Project Manager Positions in the Clark Fork Basin (1 for on the ground construction projects and 1 focusing on instream flow). Applications are due January 12. Job Descriptions and directions to apply can be found here: <https://clarkfork.org/about/employment/>
- USGS is restructuring its Montana offices into Northwest and Southwest offices. The changes aren't expected to affect any on-going coordination or work with the Drought Committee
- Committee members commended Barry Dutton's work again this year and stated how valuable the weekly information provided is
 - Barry commented on his growing supposition that the Blackfoot sees its best production when we have cool-wet springs because irrigation is more effective and irrigators can more easily keep up with crop water demand
 - The Committee briefly discussed whether the reference to the September 15th end date of drought response in the Drought Plan should be removed as it seems that more and more irrigation demand is extending well into September if not October
 - No decision was made, but the Committee seems pretty supportive of removing any specific date mentioned in the Plan