

2002 Critical Lands Workshop Report

June 20, 2002
Flathead Lakers

The third Critical Lands Workshop was held on May 7, 2002 to develop protection and restoration strategies and projects for previously identified priority critical lands. The focus of the workshop was on the North Flathead Valley as agreed at the 2001 workshop.

Despite an unexpected snowstorm, a total of 20 representatives of 14 government agencies, non-profit organizations, and land conservation groups attended (see *Critical Lands Workshop Participants*). Of those, half participated in last year's workshop and half were new participants (five new agencies). Four past project participants who were unable to attend provided comments and suggestions prior to the workshop.¹

Constanza von der Pahlen, Critical Lands Project Leader, presented a review of the project, the Critical Lands Status Report² and Sensitivity Analysis Maps.

Project summary

Project participants agreed to focus initially on the N. Flathead Valley since:

- it contributes the most pollution to Flathead Lake
- it has largely functional riparian corridors, wetlands and floodplain areas, which are important for maintaining water quality as well as providing valuable wildlife habitat and recreational opportunities, and
- it is one of the most rapidly growing areas in the basin.

Using criteria developed by project participants and with their guidance and assistance, the Flathead Lakers evaluated critical lands in the North Flathead Valley, including riparian corridors, wetlands, and floodplain areas.

The Critical Lands Status Report² evaluates and prioritizes areas along the Flathead River and adjacent lands where several ecological values converge.

The Flathead Lakers contracted with the Flathead Lake Biological Station to produce a series of GIS maps of the North Flathead Valley that help describe the resources and land use issues. These maps are available upon request.

¹ Bonnie Ellis, Flathead Lake Biological Station; Gael Bissell, Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks; Bill Swaney, Salish & Kootenai College; Phil Lehner, Flathead Lakers.

² The Critical Lands Status Report will be made available to the public through the Flathead Lakers' website (www.flatheadlakers.org) following the incorporation of comments and suggestions by project participants.

Project goals:

- to protect or restore lands and waters critical to the quality of Flathead Lake and its tributaries,
- to increase collaboration among key resource managers and research professionals from state, federal and tribal government agencies and conservation organizations, and
- to inform the public about the importance of conserving lands critical to maintaining and improving water quality

Participants were sent a copy of the Critical Lands Status Report and a list of ideas for potential conservation strategies prior to the workshop³.

Strategy development

Anita Dupuis facilitated the development of strategies for protection and restoration of critical lands in the North Flathead Valley.

Small groups developed conservation strategies triggered by the question: "What practical and innovative strategies, interventions, projects, or actions should we undertake in the next one to five years to protect and restore the identified critical lands in the North Flathead Valley?" (Appendix A)

A discussion of suggested strategies and projects resulted in five main categories: 1) promote adoption of policies to protect water quality; 2) develop, implement and promote specific land protection projects; 3) develop education programs and promote incentives to protect critical lands; 4) coordinate communication and planning efforts to protect critical areas; 5) ensure Montana receives a fair share of hydropower mitigation funding.

³ Handout provided to project participants: "*List of Potential Conservation Strategies*".

Participants indicated which strategies they believe to be most important and which they would be willing and able to participate in working groups to implement.

Emphasis was placed on the need to develop and implement policies for protecting water quality. However, most participants did not feel they could undertake action to implement policies at this time due to time constraints, the political climate and/or organizational mandates and constraints.

Strategies in the policy category were prioritized as follows:

- 1) Pursue adoption of riparian corridor protection regulations requiring greater setbacks.
- 2) Educate landowners about septic system maintenance and technology.
- 3) Support other watershed groups for TMDL development.

There was also strong support for land protection projects.

Defining Initial Implementation Steps

Participants formed small groups and determined implementation steps needed for specific projects. Representatives of agencies and organizations who could not commit to working on a project at this time chose to help with one of the project groups.

Groups used a form provided by Dupuis (Appendix B) to help determine implementation steps. Groups were aware that follow-up would be needed to complete project action plans.

Specific implementation steps were proposed for the following strategies (Appendix C):

1. Land Protection & Demonstration Projects: Focus on existing projects (Weaver Slough Project) and identify future model projects.
2. Protect Riparian Corridors: Pursue adoption of riparian corridor protection policies.
3. Reduce Impacts of Septic Systems.

Partnership proposal

The Flathead Lakers proposed that organizations participating in the project form a partnership to strengthen collaborative protection and restoration efforts, and to share information about existing projects and financial and technical assistance available for protection and restoration activities⁴.

Support for this idea was mixed. Several past project participants were in favor of it, as it could generate support for ongoing projects. Benefits of the partnership include generating support from other agencies and organizations as well as public support for projects through the members of nonprofit organizations. A few participants did not support the proposal at this time. Several new participants were uncertain about the benefits of a partnership to advance their work. The group decided to take time to further review the proposal and consider it at a later date.

DRAFT Outline for a resolution or letter of support for a proposed partnership to strengthen collaborative efforts: The Flathead Watershed Partnership to protect and restore critical lands in the Flathead Watershed (*benefits section only reprinted here*)

Benefits

- ◆ increased protection and restoration achievements in the Flathead Basin
- ◆ improved public awareness of values provided by critical lands
- ◆ collaborative planning taking advantage of resources and talents of various agencies, institutions, organizations and individuals
- ◆ shared information and resources
- ◆ leveraged resources
- ◆ improved coordination among various conservation efforts
- ◆ increased support for projects (i.e. ability to promptly request letters of support from partners)
- ◆ ability to evaluate cumulative impacts of conservation efforts in the basin
- ◆ opportunity for participants to propose projects for collaborative conservation action.

⁴ Handouts provided at workshop: “DRAFT Outline for a resolution or letter of support. A proposed partnership to strengthen our collaborative efforts” and “SAMPLE Resolution or elements to include in a letter of support.”

Recommendations

- Work in small teams during the year on specific projects and hold an annual meeting to share project progress.
- Evaluate proposed partnership to protect & restore critical lands in the Flathead Basin.
- Evaluate how the Flathead Lakers can be most helpful in facilitating collaborative efforts.
- Review the previous Flathead River Partnership: What didn't get done? What was learned? It was suggested that the Flathead Lakers provide leadership in reviving the river partnership with assistance from the National Park Service Rivers, Trails & Conservation Assistance Program.
- Evaluate who is missing from this group who needs to be included.
- Mail out results of this meeting and gather additional input.
- Distribute information about the Critical Lands Project
 - Distribute Critical Lands Status Report
 - Develop a public outreach and education program including presentations to public officials
- Continue facilitation of Critical Lands Project meetings to help develop more projects and communication about projects.
- Update Critical Lands Status Report to measure progress periodically.
- Assist in crises intervention
- Participate in the development of Bonneville Power Administration's (BPA) Flathead Sub-Basin Plan. The Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes and the Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks are leading this effort. Several projects discussed could be funded by BPA under this plan (proposed completion date: May 2003).

Conclusion

Based on the proposed strategies and actions identified at this workshop and participants' recommendations, the Flathead Lakers will convene a few key groups, willing and able to implement projects, to complete action plans and start project implementation. All workshop participants will be informed about proposed projects and tasks and be invited to participate in project implementation.

Initial action plans that will be further refined include (Appendix B):

- ◆ Complete Weaver Slough project.

- ◆ Select next protection/restoration project with high feasibility & high ecological value as described in the Critical Lands Status Report. Suggestions include: 1) stream rehabilitation and riparian revegetation demonstration projects; 2) Sekokini Springs education and demonstration project; and a 3) Flathead Audubon Society's project to secure a conservation easement for the Owen Sowerwine Natural Area.
- ◆ Conduct education and outreach in neighborhoods where critical lands have been identified to increase grassroots support. Emphasize programs that bring agencies, organizations and institutions together and help achieve common goals.
- ◆ Review the Flathead River Partnership and the need for reviving it. Evaluate the capacity of participating agencies and organizations to revive the partnership at this time.
- ◆ Develop brochure to educate landowners about riparian corridors.
- ◆ Work with the Montana Smart Growth Coalition (MSGC) on a proposed Riparian Corridor Bill to improve setbacks in agricultural and urban areas.
- ◆ Participate in development of BPA's Flathead Sub-Basin Plan.
- ◆ Promote NRCS' Conservation Reserve Program.
- ◆ Evaluate the capacity of participating agencies and organizations to implement the strategies proposed to reduce impacts of septic systems.

There was sufficient enthusiasm and support for creating an e-mail network to facilitate sharing information and requesting support on specific projects. The Flathead Lakers will launch this network during the summer. The value of the E-mail network will be assessed a year after its inception.

Several participating agencies and organizations are already implementing conservation projects that help protect or restore critical areas. Critical Lands Project participants could help with projects such as these to expand protection and restoration to areas with community support and multiple ecological values.

The Flathead Lakers would like to thank everyone who participated in the workshop, as well as others who have contributed to the Critical Lands Project with their time, suggestions and resources.