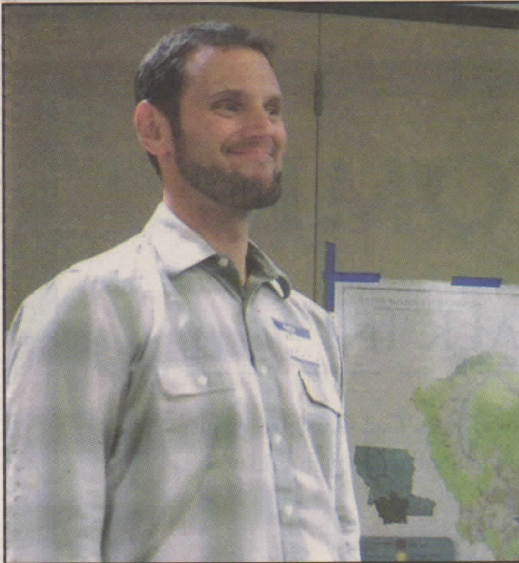


River watch: Preserving Montana's waterways

By Eleanor Guerrero
CCN Senior Reporter

On Wednesday, Oct. 16, Montanans for Healthy Rivers met to discuss the future of Montana's rivers. It was not a presentation, but a forum to listen, held by a coalition of citizens, businesses and groups. Especially praised were the "last, best, free-flowing rivers in Western Montana" but the forum welcomed discussion about all local rivers and all local concerns. Facilitator, Jennifer Boyer of Future West ran the event.

The idea was to create a series of workshop challenges for the attendees to discuss and prioritize both rivers and qualities that they would like to see



Mike Fiebig, Associate Director of American Rivers, Northern Rockies division.

Photo by Eleanor Guerrero

protected. Mike Fiebig, Associate Director of American Rivers, Northern Rockies division gave a short talk about the need to get the community's input and ideas. "What do our rivers need? Our waters are clean, cold and copious,"

always be welcomed."

He gave some updates on the rivers around the state. He said there is a lot of pressure on rivers statewide and the goal is to make them resilient. Priorities that the locals listed included

he declared. Three of the Greater Yellowstone river drainages run through Montana: waters from the Colorado, the Columbia and the Missouri.

"These ideas will go to your congressmen," he promised. Although he hoped local agencies such as the USFS would support any proposals he said, "Congress does what it wants to do; public support is crucial. The support of the USFS and other agencies would

maintaining rivers for recreation, cleanliness, access, good water flow, good habitat and scenic qualities among many others.

Possible threats were viewed as over use by the public and private entities, damming and economic impacts such as oil/gas development. Future goals included education of future caretakers of the river and guarding against out of state water transfers.

"Rivers connect people to nature; they bring tourist dollars into the state," said Fiebig. "They let people recreate, hang out, they irrigate our crops, provide habitat for our native species and big game species such as grizzlies in our high altitude meadows and wide, open spaces. Rivers course through our towns in both private and public lands. There is a lot of continuity in its needs. It provides a lot of power. Now is the time to decide which rivers to preserve; which to

develop. We want citizens to have a choice. It's part of our livelihood and our legacy for our children and the next generation to enjoy. Back East," he said, "Many won't let their child play in the water because of the quality-not in Montana."

He noted that 97 percent of existing dams do not have hydropower-only 3 percent do. There are 80,000 large dams (over 50 feet high) in the United States and 3-4,000 in Montana.

A combined incentive-based initiative was the framework. Discussion encompassed both private and public land rivers which would have separate tools. Private land Tools included channel migration zone mapping; flood plain easements, invasive weed eradication, floodplain reconnection and instream

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flows. Public tools included collaborative partnerships such as with federal and state agencies and the Wild and Scenic River Act-little used and most powerful.

The goal was to maintain Montana's values and to explore those values.

The group discussed private land tools such as conservation easements and the funding of treatment plants. There is a Water Resource Development Act that just passed the senate under Senator Max Baucus. The goal is to help states nationwide, but could especially help Montana and Idaho conserve their headwaters.

"We have beautiful mountains here," said Fiebig, "which is why we are a headwater state."

Any landowner, municipality or agency could apply for funding. He said it could help communities seek funding for point source pollution regulation, often urgently needed. Whether it will be federally or locally administered should it pass, has not yet been determined but funds will be available. Such funds, said Fiebig, could bring Montana \$45 million dollars. Of that amount, the feds would match 65 percent, and \$15 million would come from state or private funds. It is preferred that the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation administer it.

Four such forums were held around the state this fall, part of over 60 such gatherings to collect public input over the last three years.