



CHANNEL MIGRATION EASEMENTS IN MONTANA: HOW CONSERVATION EASEMENTS AND RIVERS CAN WORK TOGETHER

ABSTRACT

Channel Migration Easements are a unique and effective conservation strategy designed to enable large rivers and their floodplains to function at their fullest potential. They are a pragmatic tool that can achieve conservation at a large scale by compensating landowners in return for giving up their right to install features such as armor, levees, dikes, or flow deflectors that reduce a river's ability to naturally migrate and access its floodplain. The use of Channel Migration Easements (CMEs) as a means to ensure long term river and floodplain function is not well understood by practitioners, as only two such easements have been successfully implemented in Montana. The purpose of this paper is to articulate the benefits of allowing a river to freely migrate, provide an explanation of various mechanisms available to preserve riverine corridors and functions, define how Channel Migration Easements differ from previously utilized conservation strategies, answer frequently asked questions, and provide examples of CMEs developed through Montana Aquatic Resources Services' (MARS) Channel Migration Easement Program. The audience for this paper includes agencies interested in funding drought resilience and river conservation efforts, land trusts, Conservation Districts, attorneys, biologists, mitigation practitioners, and landowners interested maintaining riverfront property in its natural state. While a basis for advocating the use of CMEs in Montana is provided in the main body of this paper, additional details including legal and technical considerations, planning frameworks, and case studies are provided as appendices.

