



Dear Drought and Water Supply Committee,

The Montana Watershed Coordination Council (MWCC) has authored this letter on behalf of the non-governmental participants in a stakeholder group assessing the coordination opportunities of stream gauge information. The stakeholder group is seeking to offer support to the Governor's Drought and Water Supply Committee, as well as some historical context and ideas for the directive arising from Senate Bill 32, "An Act Creating a Stream Gauge Oversight Work Group; Revising Duties of the Drought and Water Supply Advisory Committee." Our group is looking forward to assisting the committee in the development of a work group, including providing potential work group members, and working to continue to generate broad support for work group activities and outcomes.

Background

The concept of coordinating information and entities regarding Montana's stream gauge infrastructure emerged as a question to State of Montana agency directors at the MWCC 2018 Annual Meeting. Since that time, MWCC has been taking part and facilitating the discussion among stakeholders including watershed coordinators, local producers, and state and federal agency personnel on a process and outcome for coordinating stream gauge information and planning for the sustainability of critical stream gauge infrastructure. This group was at the center of drafting and demonstrating broad stakeholder support for the revisions to § 2-15-3308, MCA. in the 2019 Legislature. Because the group envisioned a work group that was overseen by the Governor's Drought and Water Supply Committee, tasking this committee with the directives of Senate Bill 32, does not, from our perspective, depart significantly from the original intent of the legislation.

Broad stakeholder involvement, including citizen involvement, has been at the heart of this effort throughout its development and legislative process. The original bill proposed a "composed of those with a stake in the collection and distribution of stream flow information." The bill went through multiple variations that proposed varying levels of representation from the people on the ground working most directly with our water resources. All of the legislative history on the bill, including remarks from Representative Fitzgerald who carried the bill on the house floor, articulated a vision for an interagency work group that works with stakeholders to define the current stream gage network and develop solutions for maintaining the network into the future.

Stakeholder involvement is no coincidence in this effort. A work group partially composed of local and non governmental stakeholders will ensure that work group outcomes are consistent with the need identified those by stakeholders. A collaborative stakeholder approach has been central to this issue so far because it has been recognized as the best approach to ensuring solutions that will work where we need them most- with on the ground resource managers.

We hope that the Committee will find it feasible to direct the formation of a work group similar to what was originally envisioned-and building upon the groundwork accomplished through many hours invested by the stakeholder work group the last year.

The members of this group would like to assist in every way possible to hit the ground running to accomplish the goals and intent of Senate Bill 32. As part of the legislative process, our group coordinated participation and support from agricultural interests, stock growers, irrigation districts, municipalities, conservation districts, conservation groups, and watershed organizations. And we would like to continue to cultivate the support of those interest groups moving forward.

Coordination Objectives

The stakeholder group envisioned the following objectives in a work plan for the Stream Gauge Oversight Work Group:

- (1) Develop a tool and process for stream gauge data & information sharing (Year 1)
- (2) Explore alternative stream gauge funding scenarios (Year 1 & 2)
- (3) Identify policy needs (optional) (Year 2+)

Our group would like to see progress made towards achieving the objectives above in 2019.

Work Group Participation

Of utmost importance to our group is that there continue to be broad stakeholder representation moving forward. Specifically, that membership of the future group not be limited to agency personnel such that the needs and interests of Montana citizens can be prioritized in the coordination activities and outcomes. Montana DNRC, FWP, local DES, additional local government entity (county or city), conservation district, irrigator/water commissioner, recreation industry, watershed groups, and USGS are all critical to generating valuable results from the work group. One of our reasons for suggesting the work group be under the purview of this Committee is to take advantage of the Committee's composition to contribute to the work group where appropriate- perhaps including where direct work group involvement may not be necessary but information sharing is essential.

We are also aware of the need to balance inclusivity with reduced bureaucracy. Our perspective is that, in order to function, the group should be no larger than 12 representatives.

Financial Support

Finally, we hope the Committee acknowledges citizen involvement requires an independent investment in time and money. Should funding be allocated to this work group, we request a significant portion of support be directed towards facilitation and participation, in the form of contracted services and travel reimbursements.

Thank you for your time and consideration. With your support, the current work group is prepared to begin work plan development and would like to see this effort move forward with the momentum developed in the 2019 legislative process.

Sincerely

Erin Farris-Olsen, Executive Director, Montana Watershed Coordination Council

Jessica Makus, Soil & Water Conservation Districts of Montana

Laura Nowlin, Rancher and Musselshell Water Coalition Coordinator

Bill Milton, Rancher, Musselshell Watershed

Jennifer Schoonen, Blackfoot Challenge Water Steward

Jennifer Downing, Big Hole Watershed Committee