

Building partnerships and trust

Over the past five years, FWP has been trying to determine the size, range, and genetic health of the grizzly bear population in the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem (NCDE). We're making great progress, but we could not have accomplished much without our essential partners: local ranchers and other landowners, the U.S. Geological Survey, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, U.S. Forest Service, Blackfeet Nation, Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes, Glacier National Park, and University of Montana.

In the Musselshell River Basin, we're seeing results from years of collaboration between FWP and farmers, ranchers, communities, water user associations, the Department of Natural Resources and Conservation, several federal agencies, five counties, and the Musselshell Watershed Coalition. Through those partnerships, new irrigation systems are being built, more water is making its way down the river, towns are receiving critical flood-remediation funding, and native fish are working their way upstream for the first time in decades.

We accomplish an enormous amount of work here at FWP. But we do so much more when working with others. As the department's new director, I'm making partnerships a top priority for this agency.

Partnerships produce results by bringing a wide range of individuals or groups together to share expertise and viewpoints. The most effective draw on different perspectives and skills that provide partners with an array of ideas and problem-solving tools. The tools help them tackle increasingly complex natural resources issues that require both traditional and new approaches.

Partnerships also build relationships. When FWP game wardens, biologists, and parks managers work with landowners, sportsmen's clubs, or communities, everyone involved begins to recognize their shared core values, and, in time, to trust each other.

Trust. That's something you can't earn with an e-mail or text message. When we work on specific projects together, we learn to rely on each other by working side by side to get work done. Shared sweat, toil, and problem solving strengthen relationships and increase mutual trust and respect.

No doubt, partnerships can be challenging. The more players involved, the more difficult it is to set up and run meetings, coordinate communication, and, especially, reach consensus.

But the alternative is less public support and, as a result, a less effective FWP. As Ron Aasheim, the head of the FWP Communications and Education Bureau who recently retired after an invaluable 42 years with the department, liked to say, "With public support, FWP can accomplish a lot. But without it, we can't do much at all."

That's because FWP is a public agency that serves the public's interests. Key to that is being open, inclusive, and helpful—to our traditional hunting and fishing stakeholders, of course, but also to anyone interested in fisheries, wildlife, or state parks conservation and management. By helpful I mean we always try to offer assistance when asked. Our default answer to any inquiry becomes, "Tell me more about your concern, and let's see if we can help." That doesn't mean we do things that compromise the department's core values or interfere with the work we need to do. But it does mean that even if we can't rescue orphaned fawns and baby birds, or post

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Building trusting relationships in the upper Big Hole River

signs warning of every river boating hazard, we at least take time to explain the rationale behind our decisions.

Mountains, rivers, prairies, trout, elk, walleye, pheasants, grizzly bears, Makoshika State Park, Wild Horse Island—these are the essence of Montana and Montanans. As the public agency responsible for managing these and other resources, we are responsible also to the citizens of this state. Montanans look to FWP for stewardship and leadership. They want to know what we do and why we do it, and to participate in decisions that affect their recreation, livelihood, and communities.

Making that happen isn't just about FWP becoming more transparent and fair. As our employees working in the NCDE, along the Musselshell River, and elsewhere across Montana can attest, building partnerships is about making us an even stronger and more effective agency.

—Martha Williams, Director, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks