

## Clark Fork Symposium 2000 Panel Report

The Clark Fork River basin in western Montana has recently become the focus of several watershed restoration initiatives aimed at improving the river's ecological health and function. These initiatives include a nutrient reduction program, remediation of metals contamination, dam mitigation, and fish habitat restoration projects. These concurrent restoration initiatives offer an unprecedented commitment of people power and financial support to improve the condition of the river.

However, these initiatives may also present communication and coordination challenges for the agencies and individuals responsible for implementing projects on the ground. The purpose of the panel discussion was to review the ongoing restoration initiatives in the Clark Fork basin and to offer recommendations on how those efforts can be coordinated to maximize their effectiveness and minimize the duplication of effort amongst the various entities involved.

The panel included Geoff Smith (Clark Fork-Pend Oreille Coalition), Kathy Hadley (Upper Clark Fork River Education and Advisory Council), Chris Brick (University of Montana Geology Department), Chris Frissell (University of Montana Flathead Lake Biological Station), Dennis Workman (Trout Unlimited), and Billy Swaney (Confederated Salish Kootenai Tribe). These basin citizens offered the following recommendations to those in charge of the various restoration initiatives.

### Recommendations

Coordination between the various entities doing work in the basin is critical to the successful completion/effectiveness of the restoration initiatives. At least a dozen regulatory, public, and private entities will be working in the Clark Fork basin over the next decade. These include the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Federal Energy Regulatory Commission, U.S. Geological Survey, U.S. Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, Montana Department of Environmental Quality, Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks, Montana Natural Resource Damage Program, Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation, Confederated Salish Kootenai Tribes Butte-Silver Bow/Anaconda-Deer Lodge/Missoula counties, Clark Fork River Technical Assistance Committee, Clark Fork-Pend Oreille Coalition, local conservation districts, individual citizens, private organizations and businesses. It is imperative that the lines of communication between these entities remain open so that one group does not undo or duplicate the work of others.

For example, the Superfund remedy for streamside tailings deposits may call for in-place treatment and revegetation. However, that effort makes no sense if the NRD restoration plan calls for removing those same tailings and replacing them with clean fill. As another example, many proposed 'restoration' efforts will likely focus on bank stabilization; however, structural bank stabilization is often very harmful to fish habitat and interferes with river processes that continually create a diversity of riparian habitats critical to many forms of wildlife. Some restoration efforts may be putting in bank stabilization structures while others are pulling them out. Effective communication and coordination will make us aware of such conflicts, and ecological understanding will (hopefully) resolve them.

One way to improve communication between different entities working on restoration in the basin would be to have a clearinghouse for restoration related information. A web site and/or listserv could provide notices of availability and short summaries of documents describing plans or actions that affect the condition of the basin – particularly those likely to have a significant effect on basin restoration goals. Possible host web pages include the Clark Fork Symposium web page or the TriState Water

Quality Council web page. In addition each of the major restoration initiatives featured in this symposium should develop an annual report of its activities and post it on this clearinghouse web page.

One of the most influential entities in the restoration process on the Clark Fork River is Montana's Natural Resource Damage Program (NRDP). The NRDP sued the Atlantic Richfield Company for mining damages in the Clark Fork and recently reached a partial settlement for nearly \$250 million. Another \$190 million in claims are still pending. This money is specifically earmarked to restore or replace natural resources damaged by past mining activities in the basin. While the NRD program plans to begin funding restoration activities in the Clark Fork basin in 2001, they have not developed a comprehensive restoration plan to guide these efforts.

The panel believes it is extremely important for the NRD Program to develop a comprehensive restoration plan to guide those efforts. Such a plan should have specific restoration goals—i.e., number of trout per mile, acres of riparian habitat restored, cubic feet per second of water dedicated to instream flow augmentation— as well as time frames for achieving those goals. Such a plan would help assure that restoration projects funded with settlement dollars will in fact help to achieve the State's restoration goals. If such a plan is not developed, folks requesting funding for projects will drive what type of restoration occurs, rather than having the restoration plan determine what types of funding requests are submitted. The panel believes developing a comprehensive restoration plan with specific goals and objectives will help to address this problem.

In addition to developing a comprehensive restoration plan for the basin, it will also be important to develop a comprehensive monitoring program to evaluate the effectiveness of the various restoration initiatives. A great deal of monitoring has already occurred on the Clark Fork. However, much of this data collection was intended to identify significant sources of metals in the floodplain, to quantify seasonal and annual variations in flow regime, and to determine the fate and transport of metals and nutrients in the river.

Monitoring during the restoration phase needs to build on this existing monitoring network. Specifically, the focus of monitoring needs to shift from characterization of problems to evaluation of the effectiveness of various restoration techniques—i.e., how they affect the physical, biological, and chemical characteristics of this ecosystem. Little work has been done to help predict how this system may respond to different restoration techniques. Without better information on those issues, restoration will be a make-it-up-as-you-go-along approach. Different entities will have very different ideas about what types of restoration activities will most efficiently and effectively achieve restoration goals for the Clark Fork. Having a comprehensive restoration monitoring program in place will allow decision-makers to learn from past successes and failures which approaches are most likely to be successful in addressing specific sites and problems.

While the panel urges the NRDP to develop a comprehensive restoration plan and monitoring plan and to initiate restoration-effectiveness studies, we caution against paralysis by analysis and stagnation by coordination. We do not wish to see on-the-ground action stagnate while seeking an elusive comprehensive plan that spells out specific projects that everyone can agree to. Comprehensive planning should be ongoing and adaptive, and individual projects can proceed that fit in with broad, ecologically-based goals—goals that emphasize the restoration of natural river processes (such processes are the surest means of restoring the river). An emphasis on restoring processes can suggest many worthwhile small projects that could provide large benefits, like restoring old meander channels that have been cut off by the highway and/or railroad.

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, the panel believes that the local communities along the Clark Fork corridor must be included in the restoration planning and implementation process. Many local scientists, landowners and river users have critical experience to share in the restoration planning process. These folks have an intimate knowledge of the Clark Fork and its problems and can use their experiences to help make the restoration effort succeed. Developing a comprehensive restoration plan and monitoring system is obviously important, but if the groups trying to implement the restoration initiatives don't have the support of local communities, the restoration effort will likely fail. The panel strongly encourages all of those entities who will be working in the restoration field to seek input from the local communities early and often.

The panel thanks all citizens and government units for their efforts to date on restoring the Clark Fork Basin and wishes them the best of luck in the future with this monumental challenge.