

Tuesday, November 5, 2013 12:00 am



FREEFLOW students assist with study on Viking Creek

By HEIDI DESCH Whitefish Pilot

Whitefish Lake Institute and a group of Whitefish High School students recently collaborated on a water quality study on Viking Creek.

The students, who are members of the school's FREEFLOW program, worked alongside professionals from WLI doing field research and data analysis. Results of the study are expected to be released later this fall.

"It was a great opportunity for the students to collaborate with professionals," teacher Eric Sawtelle said. "Being in the field is powerful — out there doing science. They were able to do all the processes and steps of being a scientist."

The institute in 2012 released results from a study that confirmed the presence of septic contamination in Whitefish Lake with one of the areas of concern being where Viking Creek enters the lake.

WLI was awarded a Soil and Water Conservation Districts of Montana, Inc. education grant to pursue a water quality study on Viking Creek. The grant allowed WLI to further extend its previous research and bring on the students to assist with the work.

The students and WLI worked during the spring and summer to gather water samples upstream along Viking Creek. A core group of about 15 students were involved in the entire process and roughly 25 overall participated.

Mike Koopal, WLI executive director, said the testing was targeted at trying to isolate where contamination is coming from along Viking Creek and then entering into the lake. The grant allowed WLI to partner with FREEFLOW and work with students on a particular study, while the institute continues to work with students on an ongoing basis.

"Part of our mission is education," Koopal said. "This was a chance for us to mentor them in science while in the field. A survey of the students showed that their interest in the profession increased after participating."

Students learned the reasons behind selecting specific testing sites, how to test water and how to prepare samples to send to the laboratory. This fall students have worked on data analysis and preparing for the presentation of their findings to various groups in December.

The Viking Creek study results will serve to provide information for the Whitefish Community Wastewater Management Program, which was developed by a city ad hoc committee to provide options for dealing with septic contamination in Whitefish Lake.

"We wanted to tie up the loose string," Koopal said. "We wanted to look at each location further and isolate where the source is coming from."