

LONG-AWAITED COW CREEK RESTORATION UNDERWAY

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For years, organizations, researchers and other stakeholders have pinned Cow Creek in Whitefish as being in dire need of restoration to improve the stream's water quality that has — as its name would suggest — been degraded due to livestock overuse.

After extensive efforts from multiple conservation groups in the valley, restoration plans to fence off most the creek, add hardened crossings for livestock and plant native vegetation in trampled riparian areas are finally coming to fruition.

Last week, fencing was erected along the creek on two private properties and designated livestock crossovers, constructed from rock and special "geo-textile weed fabric" were added. The upgrades allow livestock only minimal access to the water.

"We essentially created safe passages for the cattle so they can get there and drink, but won't further degrade the water," said Hailey Graf, a resource conservationist for the Flathead Conservation District.

And beginning next week, a crew from the Montana Conservation Corps will plant vegetation in the creek's riparian area, which Graf said has suffered years of trampling by livestock. The 1,400 plants are all native and include aspen, willow, cottonwood and dogwood trees among many others.

"This is the culmination of more than five years of planning with landowners and everyone else that was needed to get a stream restoration project of this size off the ground," Graf said.

According to a 2015 water resources report prepared by the Whitefish Lake Institute, "Cow Creek is in definite need of restoration to improve water quality" and "all total phosphorus and total nitrogen values exceed the Montana Wadeable Streams and Rivers Nutrient Criteria."

Cow Creek is a primary tributary to the Whitefish River that has been deemed "impaired" by the Montana Department of Environmental Quality, primarily for its warmer temperatures. Water-quality samples collected by the Whitefish Lake Institute since 2008 show the stream, which is also warmer in temperature than it should be, contains high levels of nitrogen and phosphorus.

Officials say the projects will help improve the water quality of Cow Creek and, in turn, the water quality in Whitefish River and protect native fish and other aquatic species, according to Cynthia Ingelfinger, the science and education coordinator for the Whitefish Lake Institute.

The three projects were funded by a grant from the Montana Department of Environmental Quality in the amount of \$72,000. The funding was secured by the Flathead Conservation District, but partners include the Whitefish Lake Institute, the city of Whitefish, Natural Resource Conservation Service, Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks, and River Design Group.

"The stream has always, for as long as I can remember, come up as a targeted creek for improvement," Ingelfinger said. "I think this project has been a great model of a lot of partners coming together to accomplish a larger-scale project that no one partner could have done on their own."

Other important players include the private landowners who gave the initial nod for the work to happen on their properties. Once the two families — the Barnes and Erbes families — came on board, Graf was able to apply for funding from the state.

"We have known that Cow Creek was in trouble for a while, but because the ownership of the stream is almost exclusively private, we had to get them on board," Graf said. "They have been a huge, important part of this and we are grateful they allowed us to do these restoration efforts."

According to a 2017 letter addressed to the Montana DEQ from Dale and Tina Barnes, the two offered their support for the project, stating their property has been in our family since 1933, and they "are committed to the best possible stewardship of the pasture and water resources."

While completion of the restoration projects at Cow Creek is a noteworthy milestone, Ingelfinger emphasized there is still a lot of work to be done.

"It's nice to think that once we finish planting next week we could just move on, but this will be an ongoing project for multiple years to come," Ingelfinger said. "We will continue to collect data to hopefully capture those improvements in water quality. It feels like a half-way mark."

She also said the organizations hope to partner with existing and future landowners as Cow Creek "continues to be developed."

The Institute's water-resources report evaluated satellite imagery of stream and found that "since 1987, the Landsat image shows that Cow Creek, just like the upper Whitefish River, had extensive urban and agriculture use, with an expansion of urban area and a decrease of agricultural area by 2011."

Ingelfinger said relationships with landowners are going to be critical moving forward as more of the valley faces development. She explained one of the largest threats to water resources is nonpoint source pollution in which rainfall and snowmelt picks up and carries pollutants such as fertilizers to bodies of water.

"If I could say anything else, it would be leave the native vegetation on your property, don't mow your lawn to the edge of the water and don't put pesticides and fertilizers in your yards," Ingelfinger said.

Reporter Kianna Gardner can be reached at 758-4407 or kgardner@dailyinterlake.com