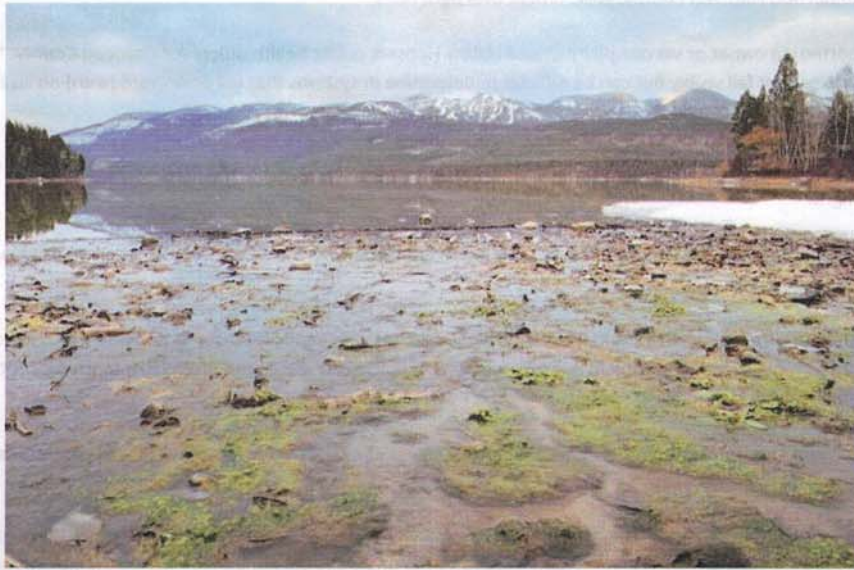


COMMITTEE AIMS TO ADDRESS LEACHATE PROBLEM

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The Flathead Valley's ongoing battle with septic leachate, or the liquid that remains after wastewater drains through septic solids, was a primary topic of conversation at a recent Flathead Basin Commission meeting in which members and guests agreed not enough is being done to address the problem.

The conversations eventually spurred the formation of a septic leachate committee comprised of biologists, tribal representatives, community leaders and others that will operate under the auspices of the Flathead Basin Commission. The committee's focus is simple: identify ways, through research, outreach and other means, to make the issue of septic leachate a priority among residents, homeowners and local and state governments.

"I don't think there has been anybody that I have talked to that doesn't want good water quality and I think many people acknowledge that septic leachate is a part of degradation," said Mike Koopal, executive director of the Whitefish Lake Institute. "If we don't come to a community consensus that we have an issue and need to address it, we won't move the needle."

Flathead County officials first began permitting septic systems in 1970 and to date, more than 25,000 permits exist in Flathead County — a tally that increases year after year.

According to Tom Bansak, assistant director for the Flathead Lake Biological Station, researchers and others in the community are feeling more of a sense of urgency to address the issue than they have in the past as more of those permitted systems begin to fail.

He said over the past few decades, other issues of equal importance have taken precedence over how to address septic leachate. For example, multiple stakeholders have spent years working to address the valley's stormwater pollution, or runoff gathered from rain and snow melt that collects pollutants and carries them downstream, often to lakes, rivers and streams.

A few years ago, the city of Kalispell received a stormwater management program permit from the Montana Department of Environmental Quality. The city is required to "implement and enforce a new post-construction stormwater management program that includes annual inspections of both public and private stormwater facilities."

Although the strides to manage stormwater and other environmental feats in the last few decades are certainly worth celebrating, the attention has now turned to septic leachate — stormwater's uglier and less widely understood relative.

"It's time to get to it. It was not a top priority for a while, but now it is," Bansak said.

Septic leachate is a form of nonpoint source pollution, meaning it comes from many diffuse sources and is not always obvious to homeowners or researchers.

"No one really knows how to deal with nonpoint source because it's not coming out of a pipe directly in front of your eyes," Bansak said.

Such is the case with septic pollution seeping insidiously toward the valley's water systems, rivers and lakes.

Homes on Flathead and Whitefish Lakes — many of which were built between the 1960s and 1980s — contain outdated and failing septic systems. Bansak said he knows of some homes that have been on Flathead Lake for more than 50 years and is unsure if those homes' systems, meant to last around 25 years, have been replaced.

The systems consist of individual tanks that receive household effluent water from toilets, sinks, showers, that's then directed to a drainfield. But many homeowners don't know their septic system needs to be replaced, let alone that it needs regular routine maintenance such as periodic pumping of the septic tank. But when a system is not properly maintained the results are poor drainage, surface ponding and surface and

groundwater contamination.

Koopal, Bansak and others say the responsibility of monitoring and maintaining one's system is entirely in the hands of the homeowner. Once a septic system gets the initial nod Flathead County, government oversight halts.

"Failing systems are reported via owner or via complaints," said Hillary Hansen, public health officer for Flathead County. "This [the reporting] happens primarily in systems that fail visibly but can be difficult to determine in systems that fail downward [with] no visible sign of failure, but adequate treatment may not be occurring due to age or saturation."

Identifying the failing systems is only half the battle. Finding the means to financially fix or replace one, sometimes to the tune of about \$15,000, is the second half of that fight.

The unexpected price tag can be jarring to most, but Bansak said there are some who have expressed an interest in replacing their system but aren't in a financial position to do so.

Those who are unable to afford the replacement and those who simply do not view septic leachate as an issue worth investing in, then push the problem to the back burner. From there, the problem not only worsens, but also is one that can often fall into the laps future homeowners who are unaware they've been sold a home with a failing system.

"If I could wave a wand, I would ask for two things: inspections upon transfer of ownership and more accessible programs for people who want to do the right thing but can't afford it," Bansak said.

Part of the new septic leachate committee's mission is to identify ways in which Flathead County can explore such regulations — a feat that involves the thumbs-up from property owners and local government leaders. Other goals include finding funding for additional research to continue to explore the extent of septic leachate and use those findings for public education in the Flathead and beyond.

"This is an emerging issue. No one has developed a policy or regulation that can be carpet-applied," Koopal said. "Because this is now an issue that is being talked about as more science comes out, there is still the question in the community in regards to the science."

A summary of septic leachate studies and mitigation efforts in Montana compiled by the Flathead Basin Commission states, "There exists a preponderance of evidence locally, regionally and nationally that septic systems create water quality issues."

The U.S. Census Bureau has indicated that at least 10% of onsite systems are no longer working, with some communities reporting failure rates as high as 70%. Studies throughout the decades show the Flathead is no stranger to this.

The Whitefish Lake Institute conducted research on septic leachate at Whitefish Lake in 2012 as one of the most recent research undertakings. The report provided a scientific basis for identifying ecological threats to the lake, economic threats to the community and potential public health risks resulting from water quality impacts. Septic contamination was confirmed at City Beach Bay, Viking Creek and Lazy Bay. The study also found medium to high potential for contamination in additional areas of the lake.

"One can say that we definitely have cause for concern here in Whitefish, and the findings of that study corroborated that," Koopal said.

While more recent research has been conducted on Whitefish Lake, it has been more than 20 years since an in-depth study on shoreline nutrients and septic contamination has been performed on Flathead Lake — a body of water that consistently ranks as one of the most pristine in the nation.

"We are overdue for a septic leachate study on Flathead Lake," Bansak said.

The last study wrapped up in 1996 and noted even back then that onsite septic systems were accounting for as much as 6% of the total nutrient loading into Flathead Lake. Sources of nutrient loading — or what is essentially pollution that can stimulate algal bacteria growth — can include surface runoff from farms and pastures and discharges from septic tanks.

"The amount of nutrients in a lake matter significantly," Bansak said. "If human caused nutrients enter a water body, you can see very immediate effects. It can cause a body of water to turn green very quickly."

Now, two decades later, many of the properties that were the study subjects of the 1996 report, built mostly in the 1970s and 1980s, are still standing. And lots of new homes and subdivisions have been erected.

But the troubling two-decade information gap is not there for lack of wanting a study done, as multiple stakeholders in the valley, most notably those in the science arena, have said one needs to be performed for years.

It's because these studies take time, manpower, cooperation from residents, government input on multiple levels, and money. Lots and lots of money.

"We need a big slug of money to do a study on that," Bansak said. "These answers don't magically appear."

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