



2020

ANNUAL REPORT



TASK FORCE

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Vision

A healthy Gallatin River Watershed
for future generations

Mission

To partner with our greater community
to lead conservation and inspire stewardship
of the Gallatin River Watershed

▲ STORM CASTLE CREEK:

📷 David Tucker

◀ COVER PHOTO:

📷 Ken Takata

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Thank You.

Our work is made possible by
hundreds of individuals, dozens of
businesses, and countless partners—
together, we will keep the Gallatin
clean and clear for future generations.

BIG SKY

GALLATIN LAKE

A LETTER FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Twenty years ago, a small group of concerned citizens formed the Blue Water Task Force. They were worried about water quality in the Upper Gallatin Watershed, and they wanted to learn more about the challenges before them. At that time, Big Sky was rapidly developing and change was all around us.

The same can be said about Big Sky today, the difference being that we are now equipped with two decades of data that help inform our work. We're again at a point of rapid change, but we have the benefit of knowledge. What we do with that knowledge will determine what Big Sky and the Gallatin River look like 20 years from now.

Will we implement the entire Big Sky Sustainable Watershed Plan? Will we prioritize protecting our natural resources and repairing the damage already done? Will we recognize that our community and economy depend on clean water, functioning ecosystems, and open spaces?

If we rise to the occasion, think long term, and develop with sustainability not only in mind but at the forefront of all of our decisions, we can build resilience into our mountain town. We can bolster our water resources against the uncertainty of climate change. We can clean up streams and restore wetlands. We can save water in our homes and in our businesses. And we can landscape and irrigate in ways that help the environment instead of harm it.

As I write this, these efforts are already underway. In the last year, and with your support, we delivered major victories for our watershed's long-term health. With the passage of the 1% for Infrastructure tax, the Big Sky Water and Sewer District will be constructing a new, vastly upgraded wastewater-treatment facility. This will be a major improvement over our current plant, and the water processed there will be much cleaner, allowing for better reuse options. Our advocacy and community outreach played a major role in getting this project across the finish line, and our water-quality data has long served as a reminder that our

current facilities are inadequate. Along Hwy. 191, we completed the second major river-access restoration project at Upper Deer Creek, revegetating heavily eroded streambanks with native plants that provide vital trout habitat. This effort will also create sustainable boat launches for rafts and kayaks, decreasing the impact of recreation as more and more users take advantage of the Gallatin's easy access. With Upper Deer Creek complete, we turn our attention to the Porcupine / Beaver Creek area that is also in dire need of restoration and recreation management.

On a smaller scale, but with arguably a larger potential impact, the Big Sky Water Conservation program continues to grow with the expansion of our free showerhead swap and the introduction of our Trout-Friendly Landscaping program. Now, individuals and businesses are rewarded for their conservation efforts with cash rebates, saving money along with water and energy.

This year's progress is encouraging, but we have much work to do. A mid-summer algae bloom reminded us that the effort never ends, and that the resource is fragile. It will take constant vigilance to ensure we are successful in our mission to ensure a clean, cold Gallatin River for future generations. With your continued support, I am confident we will deliver on that promise.

Sincerely,
Kristin Gardner, PhD



TASK FORCE TIMELINE

In 2020, the Task Force celebrated 20 years of monitoring water quality in the Upper Gallatin Watershed. Founded in response to local concern about the potential impact of treated wastewater discharge on water quality, we've come a long way over the last two decades, with much to celebrate and much to look forward to.



STATE OF THE GALLATIN



DAVID TUCKER (2)

WHAT'S IN OUR WATER?

Look at the Gallatin on any given day and you might think that Big Sky has the cleanest water in the world. Most of the year, you can see clear to the bottom of the river, easily identifying specific rocks and sometimes spotting fish at quite a distance.

But just as with most things, there is more to the Gallatin than meets the eye. A variety of challenges face our backyard waterway, from a rapidly changing climate to a rapidly changing community.

It was a changing community that inspired the creation of the Task Force 20 years ago, and change is still the driving force behind our work. How will all this change change the river we love? That is the question we grapple with every day, because it is safe to say most of us don't want the Gallatin to change much. We love this river, and we want to share it with friends and family for generations to come.

In order to do that, we need to understand conditions on the ground, day to day, month to month, and year to year. Because this baseline data is so critical to protecting and restoring our watershed, it serves as the foundation for all the work we do at the Task Force.

From the data, we identify challenges. From the data, we derive solutions.

In the 20 years that we have been collecting water samples, one thing is clear: we still have a nutrient problem. Our most recent Water Quality Report shows excess nitrogen and phosphorus above state standards at certain times of year, a trend that has persisted and endured over the last decade. These pollutants cause a chemical imbalance that alters the aquatic environment and degrades household water quality.

This concerning pattern is precisely the reason that we are systematically implementing the priorities of the Big Sky Sustainable Watershed Stewardship Plan—these problems won't fix themselves. Without targeted projects, we will not see favorable outcomes.

Guided by the numbers, a path to restoration and conservation becomes clear. Clear like the river that inspires us daily. Clear like the choices we must make as a community to keep the Gallatin clean and our mountain town vibrant.



SCIENCE IN ACTION

For 20 years, the Gallatin River Task Force has monitored the water quality of the Upper Gallatin Watershed. What the data show is this: the Gallatin River and its tributaries are under siege.

Since the building boom of the late 1990s through the recent COVID-refugee migration, Big Sky has grown at a dizzying pace, often at the expense of environmental quality. Infrastructure and utilities have struggled to keep up with land development and population growth.

As an unincorporated entity, our destination community has not received vital funding, planning, and regulation, and one outcome of this neglect is three impaired streams flowing through the heart of our mountain town.

To date, the main stem of the Gallatin remains relatively clean, but wide-spread algae blooms from Yellowstone National Park to the Greek Creek campground are now an annual concern. The nightmare of official impairment looms large on the horizon, and if we do not act collectively and soon, this will become a disheartening reality.

To ensure this fate does not befall our beloved waterway, the Gallatin River Task Force stepped into the regulation void. In 2018, in partnership with the Montana Department of Environmental Quality, we launched a three-year study targeted at the drivers of algae growth. In some areas, it is likely related to nonpoint source pollutants; in others, higher than normal water temperatures might be to blame.

We know we have a pollutant problem in some areas—this study allows us to target our solutions. Without studying causes and their effects, we would be blindly groping in the dark. Instead, as we have since our founding, we continue to put our faith in science, confident this approach will yield the best results.

WASTEWATER UPGRADE

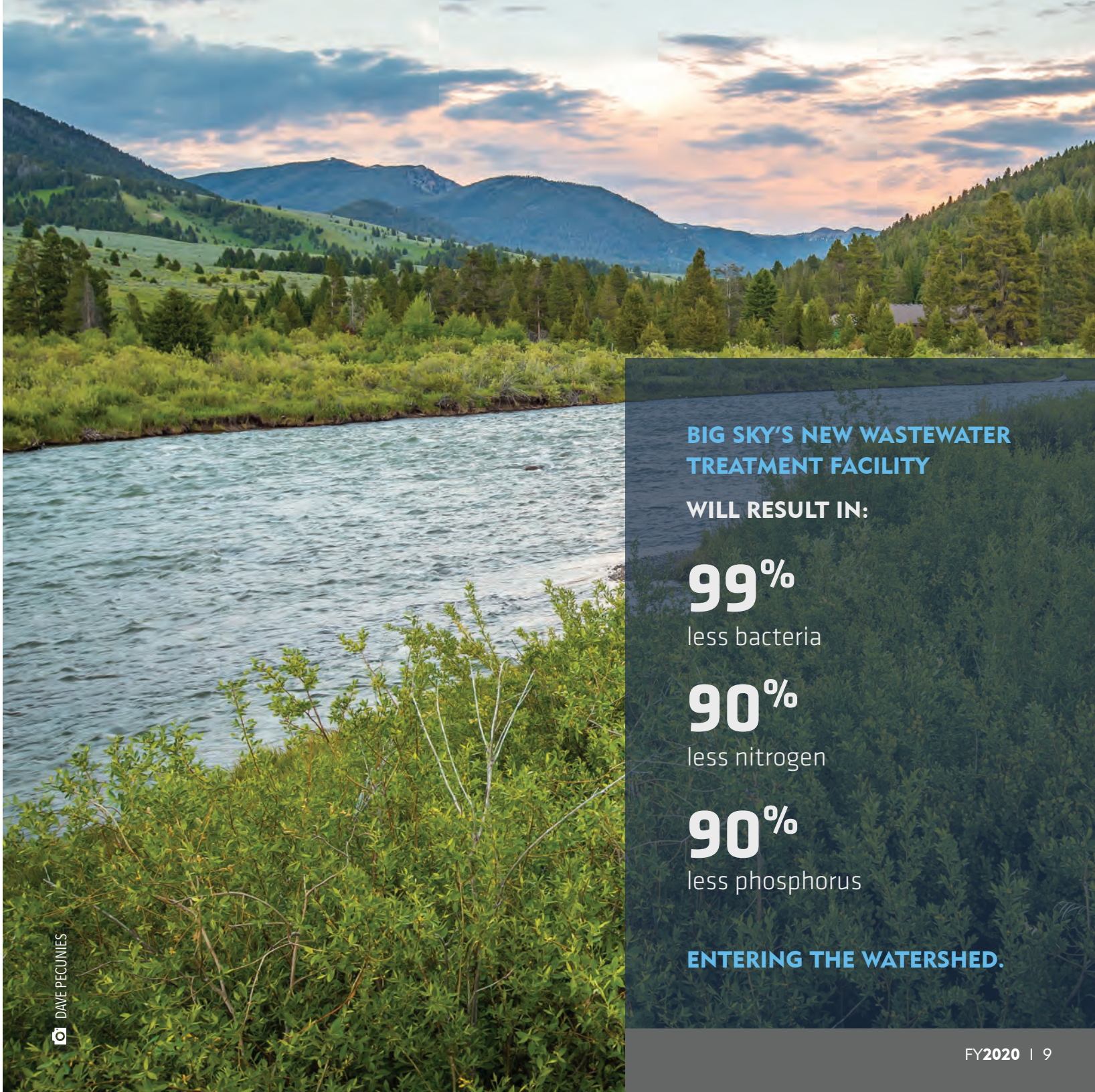
One such result is the newly approved and soon-to-be constructed wastewater treatment facility in Big Sky. Our water-quality data show the Middle Fork of the West Fork receives significant nutrient loading adjacent to and just below the Big Sky Golf Course, likely related to irrigation and development in the Meadow Village and Town Center. For years, in an effort to prevent effluent discharge into the Gallatin, the Big Sky Water and Sewer District has partnered with Big Sky Resort to irrigate the golf course using treated wastewater. However, the district’s current treatment facility does not treat to high enough quality levels, meaning concentrations of nutrients in the effluent, once combined with other nonpoint source pollutants, are still too high.

The Task Force was instrumental in providing the Water and Sewer district with the information they needed to act. As outspoken advocates for the 1% for Infrastructure Tax, we also provided vital education and community outreach to ensure passage and implementation of the modest increase.

Based on our baseline data collected over the last 20 years, the Big Sky Water and Sewer District now has a long-term solution to its wastewater problem. From a water-quality perspective, the importance of this upgrade cannot be understated. Big Sky’s facility will rival any in the Rocky Mountain West, and the Gallatin deserves nothing less.

DISTRICTING THE CANYON

While the West Fork’s nutrient imbalance is well documented, conditions in the canyon area are less well known, although we do have groundwater data that indicates increasing pollution as you move downstream. Projections indicate significant future land development between Doe Creek and the West



BIG SKY'S NEW WASTEWATER TREATMENT FACILITY

WILL RESULT IN:

99%
less bacteria

90%
less nitrogen

90%
less phosphorus

ENTERING THE WATERSHED.



Fork confluence, but we know little about the hydrogeology of this area and how our water resources will be impacted by this forthcoming growth. Without adequate planning, we can assume negative impacts to our surface waters and an inadequate supply of groundwater.

To learn more, the Gallatin River Task Force nominated this river corridor for a Ground Water Investigation Program (GWIP) study to be undertaken by the Montana Bureau of Mines and Geology. The goal of this study is to better understand how groundwater and surface water interact in the canyon, and how current and future water and sewer services could help or hurt water quality.

Based on what the bureau discovers, we'll have a clearer path forward for protecting and improving the canyon's water resources.

INDIVIDUAL ACTION

While large-scale projects like upgraded wastewater treatment in the Meadow and centralized services in the Canyon will be essential for cleaning up Big Sky's water, individuals also have an important role to play when it comes to reducing our community's pollutant problem.

To that end, we took major steps in 2020 to expand and improve the Big Sky Water Conservation program. Our indoor and outdoor water-wise rebate program grew, further reducing in-home water consumption by offsetting upgrade costs for homeowners when they switched to water-friendly appliances in their bathrooms, kitchens, and laundry rooms. To encourage irrigation-related water conservation, we launched our Trout-Friendly Landscaping certificate program, rewarding residents who traded their thirsty grass lawns for landscapes punctuated by native flowers and drought-resistant plants. These landscapes not only require less water, they need almost no fertilizer, meaning chemicals like phosphorus and nitrogen won't be making their way into our ground and surface waters.

Taken together, these nutrient-reduction and water-saving efforts form a framework for a sustainable Big Sky. To scale the impact, we need buy-in from every entity, big, medium, and small. Our research has identified the problems and outlined the solutions.

Now is the time for community action. 



ENTERING ITS FIFTH YEAR, THE BIG SKY WATER CONSERVATION PROGRAM

BOASTS SOME IMPRESSIVE STATS:

101
participants

197
fixtures installed

6,639,000
gallons of water saved

IMAGINE HOW MUCH
WATER WE COULD SAVE IF
EVERYONE SWITCHED?

DAVID TUCKER (2)

IMPACT REPORT

RESTORING A RIVER

Drive along the Gallatin on any given summer Sunday and you will surely notice one thing: the river is crowded these days. From Teepee Creek to Storm Castle, anglers, boaters, hikers, and climbers line the waterway, parked at pull-outs, trailheads, campgrounds, and day-use areas.

And who can blame them? Gallatin Canyon’s singular beauty and ample access make it a once-in-a-lifetime destination for many, and a home base for scores more. But what are the ecological implications of all this access? **Is our oft-touted recreation economy booming more than the river can handle?**

Simply put, yes—but the story doesn’t end there. With proper management, the river can thrive alongside the outfitters, guides, lodges, and restaurants. To that end, in partnership with **Trout Unlimited** and the **Custer Gallatin National Forest**, the Task Force has launched a long-term effort to restore riverside habitat while simultaneously enhancing recreation access.

2020 marked the next step forward in this journey toward restored river health. In late summer, crews broke ground on the **Upper Deer Creek Riparian Habitat and Access Restoration** project. This is the second large-scale project in Gallatin

Canyon, with the Moose Creek Recreation Area project finalized in early 2018.

The Upper Deer Creek project addresses significant vehicle-caused natural-resource damage. Over the years, river users have roughed in an unsanctioned network of double-track roads. As use has increased, the road system has taken its toll on native vegetation and riparian habitat. High levels of angler access have also contributed to harmful streamside erosion.

Without the natural filtration native plant species provide, higher than healthy concentrations of pollutants are making their way into the Gallatin. Streamside habitat that trout depend on for cover has been trampled to death, leaving fish without adequate protection from predators, avian, aquatic, and anthropogenic alike. This habitat also keeps water temperatures lower, providing shade during the hottest summer months when fish are most stressed.

The volume of recreation and degradation of vegetation at this site led the Task Force and our partners to prioritize restoration at Upper Deer Creek. In place of the double-track roads, there is now a sustainable network of accessible angler trails, all adhering to ADA standards. Two hard-surface boat

launches are now available for rafts and kayaks, and the site features an ADA-accessible fishing platform. Two large parking areas bookend the site.

Most importantly, this mapped wetland will once again return to a functioning riparian habitat, **addressing two priorities of the Big Sky Sustainable Watershed Stewardship Plan**—water quality improvement and water supply resiliency. Riparian areas act like sponges soaking up snowmelt and spring stormwater, slowly releasing it over the course of the summer. This supply goes a long way toward augmenting in-stream flows long after runoff subsides. Once streamside willows have been replanted in the spring of 2021, the riverbank will once again act as filter and foundation for pollutants and sediment.

DAVID TUCKER (4)



Restoration Prioritization

Along with the Moose Creek Recreation Area, Upper Deer Creek is just the tip of the restoration iceberg. In a 2015 assessment, the Task Force identified over 100 sites worthy of significant habitat improvement. Next on our list

is the Porcupine / Beaver Creek area, where two sizeable tributaries enter the Gallatin on opposite sides of the river.

Project design is underway, but the work will not be possible without your support. Work on Deer Creek alone was over \$300,000. While we hope to execute some low-cost, high-

return projects across multiple sites at once, there is no doubt that this endeavor will take significant financial buy-in from the Big Sky community. If you would like to support us, please contact director of development Ryan Newcomb to learn more about how to give. ryan@gallatinrivertaskforce.org



THE UPPER DEER CREEK PROJECT

INCLUDES:

1/4 MILE
of riparian buffer
enhancements

.6 ACRES
of native plantings

4/5 MILE
of user-created trails
restored to wetlands
and riparian habitat

FRIEND OF THE GALLATIN

LEAVING A LIQUID LEGACY

Volunteer. Sponsor. Board chair.

In his tenure as a Task Force supporter, Rick Donaldson has worn many hats. Whether collecting trash or approving organizational budgets, he's brought the same focus and passion to whatever role he's playing, and we're much better off today than we were before he joined our organization.

Not long ago, Rick was bestowed with a new hat—grandfather—and it has him rethinking conservation and recommitting to protecting our beloved Gallatin.

“Having my first grandchild born into the world and into my life has made

a profound change in how I view my conservation efforts,” Donaldson wrote in a previously published op-ed. “I’ve started thinking more long term and I’ve been searching for what can be done today to ensure that future generations could have and enjoy the amazing landscapes and river systems that are a part of our lives.”

With that thought in mind, Rick dove head first into his work with the Task Force. It became a second job, often requiring as much of his time as his primary gigs, grandfathering and helping his son Mike with his business, Gallatin River Guides, a local fly shop and guide service.



Rick became board chair at a time of rapid transition for both the Task Force and Big Sky, but that wasn't all he did. Gallatin River Guides and the Donaldson family committed financially to the organization, reinvesting in the river that provided for them, holding the business and themselves accountable to the resource. Rick led a team at the annual Gallatin River Cleanup, not afraid to get his hands dirty and unwilling to leave the hard work to someone else. He became a true champion and ambassador for the Task Force and our work, but more than that he led by example, showing the sacrifices that it takes to live and work more sustainably in this headwaters community.

Always the optimist, Rick hesitates before saying, “I’m worried about what’s next,” referring to increasing land development, questions about water supply, ongoing water-quality issues, increased usage, and our fragile watershed’s ability to absorb it all. “In just the last six months, the change is obvious, and it doesn’t appear to be slowing down.”

As a Gallatin River resident and landowner, Rick’s worry hits particularly close to home. It shows up unannounced over morning coffee; it stops by to visit the office while he’s pouring over balance sheets; and it rushes by him on the highway as he attempts to pull out of his driveway.

Rick knows that success will not come easy, but that doesn’t stop him from



being proactive and searching for solutions. “As I contemplate the challenges in dealing with the projected growth of our region, climate change, and potential threats to water quality and quantity, it is evident that we need to employ tools that will keep our watersheds healthy for centuries to come. This is the legacy that we can choose to leave behind for our children and their children.”

And this is the legacy that the Gallatin River Task Force is working to protect. Now that Rick is moving on from the board, we have big shoes to fill, but we also have a precedent. If Big Sky is going to adequately address our water issues, we will need hundreds of Rick Donaldsons. We will need every individual and every business and every visitor to commit to conservation and join Rick in thinking long term. It will take sacrifice and doing the hard work, but the reward comes in knowing future generations will also have this river to enjoy. 🏡

LEFT: COURTESY RICK DONALDSON; RIGHT: RICH ADDICKS PHOTOGRAPHY

SELFLESS CITIZENSHIP

If you’re interested in the water issues facing the Gallatin River and the Big Sky community, volunteering for a water-quality monitoring or stewardship day is a great way to learn more.*

Volunteer Kick-Off April 2

Each spring, the Task Force hosts a volunteer information session, presenting a variety of projects for the coming year.

gallatinrivertaskforce.org/events.

Cleanoff Runoff April 23

Join us as we partner with the Big Sky Community Organization to scoop as much poop as possible after snowmelt.

gallatinrivertaskforce.org/events.

Give Big Gallatin Valley April 29-30

For 24 hours, the Gallatin River community connects over our treasured waterway, committing to the financial support that is so vital to our mission.

givebiggv.org.

Farmers’ Market Wednesdays, June-August

If you’re looking to dive a bit deeper into water themes, check out our booth at the Big Sky Farmers’ Market.

gallatinrivertaskforce.org/events.

Water-Quality Monitoring July 26-29, August 23-26

Get your wet feet while conducting hands-on research into the current state of the Gallatin.

gallatinrivertaskforce.org/events.

Hooked on the Gallatin August 14

Once a year, we gather the entire Friends of the Gallatin network for one big day of fundraising. In 2021, no matter the format, the spirit of giving will be as strong as ever.

hookedonthegallatin.org.

Gallatin River Cleanup August 26-29

Put together a crew of friends or join a Task Force-led team as we head back out to collect riverside trash.

gallatinrivertaskforce.org/events.

**While these events are all going to take place in 2021, dates listed above are tentative and subject to change. Please visit gallatinrivertaskforce.org/events for the latest updates.*

THANK YOU DONORS & SUPPORTERS

Our work would not be possible without the community-wide support we receive from so many of our friends and neighbors. As always, thank you for ensuring a clean, cold Gallatin River. *This list reflects donors who gave to the Task Force in Fiscal Year 2020, from July 1, 2019 to June 30, 2020.*

\$5,000 & ABOVE

Ania Bulis
Bill Bruner
Bill Collins
Big Sky Resort Area District Tax
Boundary Expeditions
Eric Ladd
Gallatin River Guides
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James Corwin Fine Art
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Wendi Urie
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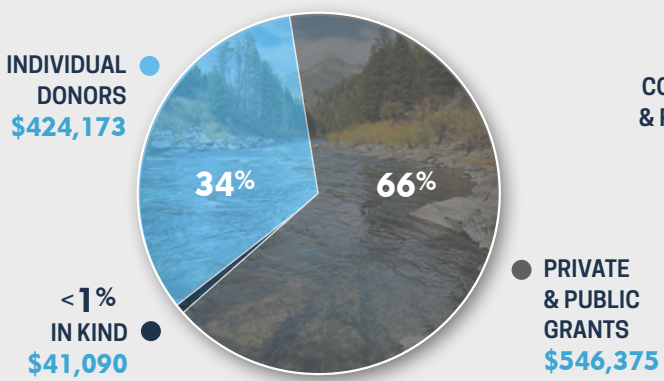
\$100 & UNDER

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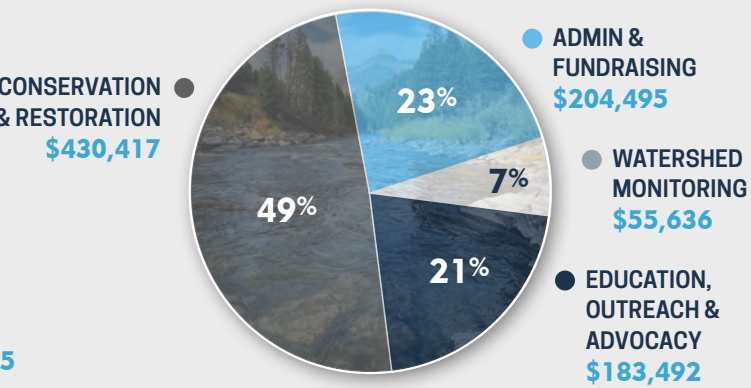
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Garrett Cook	Laura Seyfang	Rob Payn	Virginia Boyles
Grant & Fern Hilton	Laurie Stahle	Robert & Diana Carter	Walter Brophly

TASK FORCE FINANCIALS

INCOME: \$1,011,638*



EXPENSES: \$874,039



* Reflects all pledges made within FY2020.

Task Force Supporters show their commitment to clean, clear water in so many ways, from sponsoring events to sporting our license plates. How will you leave your mark?

Peak Flow Fund
When you run a river, success takes hard work, know-how, commitment, and enthusiasm. Running a successful conservation organization is no different. Now more than ever, we need your commitment to deliver for the Gallatin. To show your support, make a contribution to our Peak Flow Fund. Your general donation will ensure we stay at peak performance all year long. Give monthly to help us to sustain our work!

Friends of the Gallatin
Our annual membership giving program is a hassle-free way to give back to the river that gives you so much. Memberships start at just \$35 a month, and you get awesome Task Force and Patagonia swag, depending on your level of support. Become a Friend of the Gallatin Member today!

Rep the River
You’ve probably seen them at pull-outs, trailheads, parking lots, and driveways—our Friend of the Gallatin license plates. Get one for yourself at any time by visiting any Montana Motor Vehicle Department office.

Become a Sponsor
Throughout the year, there are ways your company or you as an individual can sponsor events like our annual Hooked on the Gallatin event, held each summer.

Create a Better Future: A Legacy Gift for the Gallatin
Do you want to make a significant gift that will transform the work of the Gallatin River Task Force and protect the Gallatin for generations to come? You can today, with a legacy gift. A charitable gift from your estate, will, or trust is a favored method of giving that enables you to achieve your financial goals and benefit the Gallatin River in ways that may not be possible through lifetime gifts. Contact us for more information.

The Gallatin River Task Force is a 501c3 Charitable Nonprofit. Donations are tax-deductible and our Tax ID# is 74-3127146.