

FLATHEAD BASIN COMMISSION

June 20, 2018

Action Item: Septic Leachate Study Bill- Consideration by Water Policy Interim Committee

Purpose

This study would investigate methods to address septic waste system impact to Flathead Basin lakes. The investigation would explore the barriers (physical, financial, jurisdictional, and community) that result in reluctance among nearshore residents Flathead, Whitefish and Echo Lakes) to abandon their use of aging and failing septic waste systems and connect to community sewer systems, or other engineered alternatives. This study would be conducted by Legislative Services Division and reported to the Water Policy Interim Committee in 2020.

Background

Continued growth in unincorporated areas of the Flathead Basin pose an ever-increasing potential for septic waste to influence the current high quality of these lakes. Studies by DEQ (monitoring, water quality standards development, and TMDLs), Flathead Lake Biological Station (long-term monitoring in Flathead Lake), and Whitefish Lake Institute (study of septic influence to Whitefish Lake) have demonstrated that failing septic systems do indeed impact water quality. Comprehensive efforts to engage nearshore residents in pollution control from septic systems have been frustrated by physical, financial, jurisdictional, or individual reluctance to take the steps necessary to protect the primary amenity (high water quality) of these shared public resources. Delay in addressing this issue will further stress the water quality and ecology of these lakes with potential impact to our local and state economies. Results from the Flathead and Whitefish Lakes study will inform solutions to address this issue for other Flathead Basin lakes, and waterbodies statewide.