

MINUTES
MONTANA GROUND-WATER ASSESSMENT
STEERING COMMITTEE MEETING
GROUNDWATER INVESTIGATIONS PROGRAM
JUNE 17, 2009

Attendance:

Amy Bamber	Montana Department of Agriculture
Joe Meek	Montana Department of Environmental Quality
Eric Regensburger	Montana Department of Environmental Quality
Russell Levens	Montana Department of Natural Resources
Gerry Daumiller	Montana Natural Resources Information System
Bill Schenk	Montana Department of Fish Wildlife and Parks
Joe Kolman	Environmental Policy Office- Montana Legislature
Alan English	Gallatin Valley Local Water Quality District
James Swierc	Lewis and Clark County Water Quality Protection District
Jon Harvala	Missoula County Local Water Quality District
Myra Shults	Montana Association of Counties
Tom Harrington	Jefferson County Extension Affiliate
Bob Sims	Jefferson County
Katie Tackett	Beaverhead Watershed Committee
Jim Forseth	U.S. Bureau of Reclamation
John Larson	U.S. Environmental Protection Agency
Kyle Blasch	U.S. Geological Survey
Ginette Abdo	Montana Bureau of Mines and Geology
Julie Ahern	Montana Bureau of Mines and Geology
Ed Deal	Montana Bureau of Mines and Geology
John LaFave	Montana Bureau of Mines and Geology
John Metesh	Montana Bureau of Mines and Geology
Tom Patton	Montana Bureau of Mines and Geology
John Wheaton	Montana Bureau of Mines and Geology

Amy Bamber opened the meeting and welcomed those attending. At this meeting the Steering Committee will discuss the new Groundwater Investigations Program (GWIP), review project prioritization criteria, and prioritize the first GWIP projects. Amy asked everyone to introduce themselves. After the introductions, Amy asked John Metesh (MBMG) to introduce the Bureau and GWIP. John Metesh told the committee that the Bureau is a non-regulatory, applied research agency within the University System. The Bureau's organizational structure is relatively flat; the new program will be within the Research Division along with most other Bureau programs including the Groundwater Assessment Program (GWAP). GWIP and GWAP are separate programs but there will be areas of overlap in long-term monitoring and data management. GWIP resulted from actions of the 2007 Legislature's Water Policy Interim Committee (WPIC). WPIC introduced HB52 which will become law on July 1, 2009. John reviewed HB52's Legislative history and amendments as the bill moved through the Legislative process. The end result was that GWIP is funded at \$4.2 million per biennium—roughly based on \$600 thousand per each 1-3 year study, and that about 7 studies would be ongoing at any time. The focus is clearly on the seven closed basins but the statute allows projects to be selected statewide.

Amy Bamber directed the committee's attention to the minutes of the October, 3, 2008 regular, the October 24, 2008 GWIP Subcommittee, the December 3, 2008 special Steering Committee, and the May 27, 2009 GWIP subcommittee meetings. Copies of all the meeting minutes were sent via email for review prior to today's meeting. Amy asked for corrections and/or additions. The minutes were approved as presented.

Amy referred those attending to the GWIP subcommittee minutes of May 27, 2009 which include a report detailing proposed ranking criteria for GWIP project areas. The ranking criteria include identification of problems/issues within a proposed project area and further characterizing of the problems/issues by taking into account the factors listed in the subcommittee report. Amy asked the committee to discuss the ranking criteria and their development to insure that the full committee is comfortable with the proposed procedure.

Discussion points included:

- How growth and subdivision build-out was considered. Some members thought that some areas may be at maximum levels – other suggested that we don't understand the impact of past growth.
- Economic development – growth trend analysis may be available at the University of Montana's O'Connor Center.
- How the current project list of about 30 sites was developed – most project areas were suggested by agencies based on problems faced by their programs.
- How to solicit information for future/additional projects – the Bureau should prepare a press release – WPIC and others may help distribute.
- Differences between GWIP and GWAP – GWIP is issue focused where GWAP is resource focused. Steering Committee responsibility to GWIP is prioritizing study areas – GWIP/GWAP funding and personnel are separate but there is overlap in areas such as support of the Ground Water Information Center (GWIC).
- Legislative changes – if any – related to water development. No major new policies on line.
- Water rights enforcement and impacts of exempt wells.

Following the discussion, Amy Bamber asked John Wheaton to present the trial project ranking matrix developed at the request of the GWIP subcommittee. John said that MBMG had experimented with most of the ranking values, adjusting them to see if different projects would come out highest. The ten highest priority sites consistently scored high regardless of the criteria adjustments. The committee discussed many aspects of the trial ranking including:

- Nearby locations of some project areas – could be combined into one project to produce efficiencies. Combinations are possible; however, we do not want project topics to get too broad. Studies need to be able to answer a question(s) within short time frames – studies need to be geographically small and manageable.

- There was strong committee consensus that Montana would benefit from getting issue-specific monitoring started in selected areas. For example, establishment of monitoring at ‘pinch points’ in sub basins will provide background data for model calibration. Additional stream gauging may be appropriate at project scales.
- The use of groundwater flow models. Most studies will benefit from models but these tools are not the end products. Models will be created in conjunction with overall GWIP interpretative reports about resources and issues. Many studies will focus on surface water groundwater conjunctive use issues. There are differences between building and using models – answering questions requires additional steps.
- Potential for various project rankings to change based on updated information from counties and others.
- How issues and characteristics were related to develop a rank. Points awarded for each criterion were added to get a total. Ecological value of water and other criteria values could use more input – Fish Wildlife and Parks and others are willing to help.
- Impacts from growth – including exempt wells on stream discharge.
- Potential cost share from federal agencies (Bureau of Reclamation) in areas where there are federal water interests.
- How were TMDL and sole source aquifers considered in the ranking criteria? TMDLs were not considered in detail – Missoula Valley which is a study area, is the only sole source aquifer in Montana.
- Economic development impacts of GWIP studies. Committee members were warned that GWIP must keep away from regulatory perceptions. The program must be focused on doing good science and providing reliable data. However, regulatory agencies will use the data/tools to make decisions.
- The review process for the scientific data – will there be peer review? There will be at least internal MBMG review of reports/data.

As the discussion continued, Tom Patton restated that the rankings were a trial matrix to evaluate the criteria and rank the potential study areas. Based on the discussion, there is room for improvement but the Bureau needs to get some projects on the ground as soon after July 1, 2009 as possible. GWIP projects need to get started so there is time to complete as many as possible this biennium. There will be time to refine the selection process for future projects as we go. Amy Bamber proposed that the committee agree on the top priority sites so that MBMG has something to get started on (i.e. the top 4 project areas, or so) and because they have remained at the top of the list despite changes in ranking criteria values, then re-rank remaining sites as any additional project areas come to light, and the criteria evolve. Amy suggested that the committee tentatively accept the top 10 projects to allow for some flexibility regarding project management decisions by the bureau. These projects beyond the first 3-4 can be reevaluated as necessary at the October steering committee meeting. Alan English and Russell Levens agreed.

The Steering Committee agreed that:

- It would accept the top ten ranked projects as priority on the preliminary ranking. These projects are: **North Hills** (Lewis and Clark County), **Four Corners** (Gallatin County), **Belgrade** (Gallatin County), **Scratchgravel Hills** (Lewis and Clark County), **Lower Beaverhead River West** (Beaverhead County), **Flathead Valley** (Flathead County), **Florence** (Ravalli County), **Hamilton** (Ravalli County), **Manhattan** (Gallatin Valley), and **Three Forks** (Gallatin, Madison, and Broadwater Counties).
- MBMG will start on 6-7 of the top 10 projects as they are able.
- MBMG will begin long-term monitoring in prioritized study areas as soon as possible so that adequate data to evaluate groundwater modeling results become available.
- MBMG will prepare a press release announcing GWIP and seek additional data to improve ranking criteria. As additional information becomes available, projects not underway by the fall Steering Committee meeting could be re-ranked.
- MBMG will look for points of consolidation, but combining projects depends on geographic location and similarity of issues.
- The Steering Committee will continue to work on GWIP ranking Criteria.

Joe Meek asked how many projects would be started. John Metesh said that by the numbers the Bureau would start on seven projects but now needed to develop work plans and budgets. At that point it would determine how many projects could actually begin. Ed Deal said that the Bureau wants to get people on the ground as soon as possible but won't be starting in seven areas. MBMG will have to build capacity and then maintain a steady level. The Bureau cannot staff up for a couple of years and then cut back.

Joe Meek pointed out that the Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) moves a lot of money through a revolving fund and awards grants on a competitive basis. The DEQ granting process has so far survived lots of scrutiny. He suggested that the Steering Committee investigate how the DEQ process might apply in ranking future GWIP projects.

At 12:00 p.m. Amy Bamber suggested that the Steering Committee take a lunch break. When the committee reconvenes at 1:00 p.m. it will hear reports, budgets, and work plans for the Ground Water Assessment Program.