



Comprehensive Water Review Stakeholder Working Group

DNRC's Comprehensive Water Review Stakeholder Working Group spent 15 months collaborating on policy recommendations for water resource administration in Montana. The group developed six bills that will be introduced during the 2025 Legislative Session.

WHAT IS DNRC'S COMPREHENSIVE WATER REVIEW?

Five decades after the passage of the **Water Use Act**, Montana is at a crossroads in water management and administration. The State needs to protect existing uses while still ensuring reliable supplies for growing communities and economies. Beginning in 2021, DNRC set out to listen and learn from water users to determine what is and is not working in water administration in Montana.

"The State needed a comprehensive review to ensure that water administration and management is still serving the current and future water needs of Montana," explains DNRC Director Amanda Kaster. "The Administration and DNRC decided to undertake that review , alongside our stakeholders: the water users of Montana."

In what is now known as the **Comprehensive Water Review**, DNRC collaborated with stakeholders to identify and prioritize key challenges to ensure streamlined and consistent administrative processes, improved customer service, and responsible and innovative development of Montana's water resources.

WHAT IS THE STAKEHOLDER WORKING GROUP?

In 2022, DNRC formed a Stakeholder Working Group (SWG) to tackle priority challenges through intensive, constructive, and deliberative dialogue. The group produced two bills introduced during the 68th Legislative Session, one of which, HB 114, ultimately passed. After the 2023 session, DNRC reconvened the group to address remaining priority issues. This time, membership was decided through an application process, rather than by invitation, to ensure that members were committed to collaboration and representative of the geographic and sector diversity of Montana water users. The group boasted representatives from the following sectors:

SECTORS REPRESENTED AND NUMBER OF STAKEHOLDERS FOR EACH SECTOR



Stakeholder Working Group Members' Reflections on the Collaborative Process...

"Very grateful for DNRC's commitment and allowing SWG members to drive the process and outcomes."

"Thankful for the diversity of interests represented in the group and in the bills."

"The bills reflect the inclusivity of everyone in the room."

"Montana way – approaching problems to find inclusive solutions."

"Grateful for everyone's commitment."

"Excited to keep the conversations going."

"Felt heard and respected."

"Montana way – have tough conversations and we can remember that we are in this together, respect each other, and we can maintain the relationships."

THE COLLABORATIVE PROCESS

In Montana, conversations about water can be contentious and complex. To ensure meaningful and productive conversation amongst stakeholders, DNRC engaged a neutral facilitator to support monthly stakeholder meetings. The process included time and space for:

- open and honest dialogue
- exploring data and examples and lessons learned from other states
- inclusivity of diverse interests, perspectives and experiences
- opportunity to explore a variety of possible solutions
- transparency between DNRC, SWG members, and the public.

The group held listening sessions and meetings in various regions throughout Montana (Lewistown, Kalispell, Miles City, and Glasgow). All meetings were open to the public, and DNRC created continual opportunities for asking questions and sharing feedback.

This process resulted in creative proposals, unexpected partnerships, and inclusive solutions. Although the group did not achieve consensus on every recommendation, even members who voted "no" on one or more bill drafts explained that they felt heard and understood because of the process and expressed gratitude for their inclusion.

"We learned so much about our stakeholders and how our work impacts their lives and livelihoods," explains DNRC Water Resources Division Administrator Anna Pakenham Stevenson. "Unlocking those relationships will improve our service far beyond the legislative session."

LEARN MORE:

To learn more about the Stakeholder Working Group and its recommendations, visit: <https://dnrc.mt.gov/Water-Resources/Comprehensive-Water-Review>.