

**Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation  
Initial Screening Criteria for Providing Assistance to Watershed Groups  
January 2006**

**Purpose**

The following document is intended to establish criteria for DNRC staff use when evaluating a request for assistance from a watershed group. DNRC may be asked to provide technical, facilitation or financial assistance to what has become known as “watershed groups” or the “watershed process”. DNRC grant programs already have governing criteria.

**Need**

With the increased interest in the “watershed approach” and requests for DNRC support (funding, technical assistance and agency involvement in the individual watershed process), it has become necessary for DNRC to identify when and how DNRC resources will be committed to these citizen-based processes.

DNRC must be accountable for commitment and use of public resources placed in its trust. DNRC must be able to show that support provided to a watershed group falls within the agency mission, is in the public interest, and meets the agencies statutory obligations. This approach will increase the consistency and transparency of assistance by DNRC.

**Background**

Over the last 15 years, Montana has seen considerable growth and community interest in what has become known as “the watershed approach.” This approach focuses on problem solving and proactive resource management within a defined geographic area. The citizens who comprise the watershed group are not generally elected nor appointed, but rather are volunteers. As a group, watershed participants search for balanced and shared solutions to resource problems, typically through collaborative problem solving and often using consensus-based processes.

Local involvement, stakeholder representation and collaborative processes are the most visible and frequently touted attributes of the watershed process. Government involvement in the watershed process has ranged from that of stakeholder to provision of facilitation, funding, and technical support. Historically, DNRC has provided support services to numerous groups across the state.

At this time, the nearly 60 Montana’s watershed groups vary widely in their geographic scale, partnerships, issues addressed, and focus. These watershed groups are very individualistic. DNRC has aided in the formation of, participated in, funded and facilitated a wide range of these watershed groups.

Often these watershed initiatives define a landscape in which most interested residents and organizations can actively participate. These groups are very effective in building and implementing a shared community vision. The most common issues addressed by groups are weeds, water quantity, habitat restoration, wetlands and water quality. Solutions for these types of issues may include riparian management, channel restoration, drought management plans, integrated weed management, etc. Resource issues typically transcend private property boundaries and often require a community partnership to adequately address or resolve. Together, these groups attempt to collaboratively implement solutions to resource issues within their watershed boundaries using non-regulatory or voluntary approaches.

*Watershed efforts also serve to manage conflict between stakeholders by providing a forum in which the relevant parties can work together to build and implement a common approach to solving local natural resource issues. A variety of approaches are used by local efforts, including facilitation, dispute resolution and other techniques aimed at building and maintaining cooperation.*

The term “watershed group” also applies to partnerships sharing common interests or responsibilities. Such entities often utilize an advisory council such as a Resource Advisory Council (RAC) to incorporate the interests of basin stakeholders. The Missouri Conservation District Council, Yellowstone Conservation District Council and Clark Fork Watershed Restoration Council are such organizations. DNRC Conservation District Bureau, in having a mandate to provide technical, administrative, financial and legal assistance to Montana’s 58 conservation districts supports these collaborative CD councils. Statute provides that supervisors of two or more conservation districts, working cooperatively, have all the powers confirmed to an individual CD.

### **DNRC Watershed Approach Screening Criteria**

For DNRC, the chief challenge is to assist as many local efforts as possible, while ensuring the help provided is used effectively. In order to provide technical or financial assistance, DNRC will require verification of the following criteria:

#### **A Watershed Group must:**

- 1) Show that the watershed effort is helping to enhance conserve, protect and restore natural resources and sustain the high quality of life in Montana for present and future generations.***
- 2) Work in a defined geographic area.***
- 3) Not duplicate other efforts in geographic areas.***
- 4) Include local residents and appropriate stakeholder representatives that have an interest in natural resource and quality of life outcomes in the geographic area.***

- 5) *Invite appropriate stakeholder groups and welcome them to participate.*
- 6) *Have or be working to establish a statement of purpose, mission, and goals. Groups with a history greater than twelve months must produce a current action plan along with the statement of purpose, mission, and goals.*
- 7) *Hold open meetings and provide public notice. All entities that are supported by public funds or expend public funds must be open to the public MCA 2-3-203. To ensure public participation (MCA 2-3-103), notice is defined as a news story or advertisement in a newspaper of general circulation prior to the meeting. Posters, radio and television, and other means may be used in addition to newspaper in giving notice to the public.*
- 8) *Provide an annual report of its work and submit it to its DNRC contact person if a group has been established more than twelve months. At a minimum, the report will be a one-page narrative including: significant actions tied to the work plan, important accomplishments, a summary of participation, proposed activities. A current work plan should be attached. The annual report should focus primarily on DNRC related assistance.*
- 9) *Establish a clear decision-making and organizational structure.*
- 10) *Designate a formal sponsor (Conservation District, Municipality, Non-profit, etc.) or a formal fiscal structure (non-profit) within twelve months to receive assistance from DNRC.*

DNRC works with a broad variety of watershed efforts, including those that are just getting started. Initial local efforts are not expected to have every attribute on this list, but are expected to be working toward them and to achieve them within **twelve months** of initial creation. More seasoned groups will be held to a high standard within these criteria and are expected to be able to progressively document their ability to enhance natural resource decisions in their area.

These screening criteria do not imply that a group satisfying all of these requirements will receive financial or technical assistance. Rather, it is the first step. DNRC will make further determinations based on Agency and Division priorities and mandates and weigh the merits of a project against other requests.

DNRC recognizes that a watershed group's capacity is defined by many factors including size of the watershed, number of participants and their effectiveness in actively addressing their goals. These factors will be considered in the agency's evaluation of its participation or support.

Technical assistance from DNRC does not imply additional financial assistance. Similarly, a grant of funds from a DNRC program does not imply staff support and involvement in project implementation.