

Exempt Wells, Water Planning, and Growth Data
Comprehensive Water Review Stakeholder Working Group
Focus Aquifers
Executive Summary

The Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC) provided maps, data, and information to the Comprehensive Water Review Stakeholder Working Group (SWG) during FY24 in support of the SWG’s efforts to understand exempt wells, water use planning, and municipal growth. The SWG’s purpose was to understand existing data and policies and then collaborate on recommendations to update those policies. The following is a summary and highlights of data provided to the SWG.

Focus Aquifers

The DNRC took previous data and identified focus aquifers that warranted further discussion and investigation. This was a preliminary analysis to spur further conversation, yet the concept of focus aquifers became central to the SWG’s conversations and recommendations. Focus aquifers allowed the SWG the opportunity to address issues related to exempt wells, planning and growth within limited geographic scope, instead of proposing changes that would impact the entire state. The focus aquifers were identified based on the following criteria:

1. Aquifers with high concentration of exempt wells, where density could have cumulative impacts.
2. Surface Water Basin Closures, or lack of surface water legal availability.
3. Aquifers with known hydraulic connection to surface water.
4. New ground water permitting is likely to require mitigation, if there is surface-groundwater connectivity, potential to deplete surface waters resulting in adverse effect.

Six aquifers were selected that met all of the above criteria and included: Billings Alluvial Aquifer, Gallatin Valley Aquifer, Helena Valley Aquifer, Bitterroot Aquifer, Missoula Valley Aquifer, and Flathead Valley Aquifer.

Aquifer	Basin Size (square miles)	Population over Basin¹	Exempt Wells	GW Permits	GW Availability Concerns	SW Legal Availability Limitations
Gallatin	352	113,608	8,498	192	No	Yes
Helena	87	73,115	4,586	273	No	Yes
Bitterroot	391	62,202	13,434	176	No	Yes
Missoula	51	99,158	2,312	133	No	Yes
Billings	27	76,887	1,767	27	Monitor	Some
Flathead	344	97,750	7,584	305	no	Some

