

**MONTANA WATER COURT  
UPPER MISSOURI DIVISION  
BIG HOLE RIVER  
BASIN 41D**

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**FINDINGS OF FACT AND CONCLUSIONS OF LAW  
FOR THE INTERLOCUTORY DECREE OF  
THE BIG HOLE RIVER (BASIN 41D)**

The Water Court issued the Temporary Preliminary Decree of the Big Hole River Basin (Basin 41D) on April 6, 2007. These Findings of Fact and Conclusions of Law are issued as the Interlocutory Decree for the Big Hole River Basin (Basin 41D), as authorized by §§ 3-7-224(2), 85-2-231, MCA. Although this Decree includes water rights within the hydrologic boundaries of Basin 41D, it does not include all the water rights in the Basin. The purpose of this Decree is to adjudicate water rights not included in the Temporary Preliminary Decree in Basin 41D, water rights not included in a decree involving a federal or tribal compact, and any previously-decreed water rights with unresolved issue remarks.

**FINDINGS OF FACT**

DESCRIPTION OF BASIN

1. Basin 41D encompasses the Big Hole River drainage, including its tributaries and groundwater located within the basin. The Big Hole River is a tributary of the Jefferson River, which is formed by the confluence of the Big Hole River and the Beaverhead River near Twin Bridges in Madison County. The Jefferson River is one of the three forks of the Missouri River. Basin 41D includes portions of Beaverhead, Madison, Deer Lodge, and Silver Bow Counties. The basin boundaries are depicted on the attached map.

DECREE ABSTRACTS AND INDEX

2. In addition to these Findings and Conclusions, this Decree consists of abstracts for 627 claims in Basin 41D. Accompanying the Decree are six Indexes

designed to facilitate research on water rights included in the Decree. The six Indexes are as follows:

- Water Right Claim Identification Number Index
- Owner Name Index
- Priority Date Index
- Point of Diversion Index
- Source Name Index
- Issue Remark Index

3. Copies of the Decree and six Indexes are available on the DNRC's Water Rights Adjudication webpage (<https://dnrc.mt.gov/Water-Resources/Water-Rights/Basin-Status>).

#### UNRESOLVED FACTUAL AND LEGAL ISSUES

4. Objections filed to the claims in the Temporary Preliminary Decree and most issue remarks appearing on the claims in the Temporary Preliminary Decree have been addressed and resolved. Any claims from the Temporary Preliminary Decree with unresolved issue remarks or claims within the Basin not included in the Temporary Preliminary Decree are included in this Decree.

5. Claims included in the Temporary Preliminary Decree were examined pursuant to the Water Right Claim Examination Rules adopted by the Montana Supreme Court on July 7, 1987, as amended. Except as otherwise specified, the claims in the Temporary Preliminary Decree are not included in this Decree based on the Court's Amendment to 2012 Reexamination Order dated June 26, 2024. (Case SWO-0002-WC-2012, Doc. 5.00).

6. Parties may file objections ONLY to the water rights in this Decree. Issues may also be raised by the Water Court on its own initiative. Rule 8, W.R.Adj.R.

7. Unresolved factual and legal issues have been noted by issue remarks on claim abstracts. The Issue Remark Index combines the issue remarks into a list arranged numerically by water right claim number. Searching the Issue Remark Index by water right claim number will identify issue remarks on individual claim abstracts. Issue

remarks not resolved through the objection process will be resolved pursuant to § 85-2-248, MCA.

8. Water users within this Basin and other interested persons will be mailed a Notice of Entry of Interlocutory Decree and Notice of Availability contemporaneously with the filing of these Findings and Conclusions. The Notice of Availability explains the objection process and sets a deadline for filing objections with the Water Court.

9. Claims for water rights reserved under the laws of the United States of America are included in the Montana general adjudication of water rights. The State of Montana, through the Reserved Water Rights Compact Commission, engaged in the negotiation of reserved water rights compacts with the federal government and Indian tribes. Sections 85-2-701 through 85-2-708, MCA. There may be claimed tribal reserved rights and federal reserved rights in this basin that are not reflected in this Decree. Resolution of any claims in this basin made by the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes of the Flathead Reservation (“Tribes”) or the United States of America on behalf of the Tribes currently is stayed and such claims are not addressed in this Decree. Those rights may be issued in a separate decree.

### **CONCLUSIONS OF LAW**

1. This is a general adjudication of existing water rights. An existing water right is a right to the use of water which is protected under the law as it existed prior to July 1, 1973. Section 85-2-102(13), MCA.

2. Certain claims were exempt from the statement of claim filing process but could be voluntarily filed. These exempt rights were for stock or domestic uses from instream or groundwater sources. The Montana Legislature later created a process to file claims for existing water rights that were exempt from filing in the statewide water right adjudication. Section 85-2-222(2), MCA.

3. The Montana Water Court has jurisdiction to enter an Interlocutory Decree of the Big Hole River Basin (Basin 41D) pursuant to Title 85, Chapter 2, Montana Code Annotated. *Arizona v. San Carlos Apache Tribe*, 463 U.S. 545 (1983); *State ex rel. Greely v. Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes*, 219 Mont. 76, 712 P.2d 754 (1985).

4. These Findings of Fact, Conclusions of Law, and abstracts define these 627 existing water rights under Montana law in Basin 41D and comprise an Interlocutory Decree in accordance with § 85-2-231, MCA, and Rule 4, W.R.Adj.R.

**ELECTRONICALLY SIGNED AND DATED BELOW.**

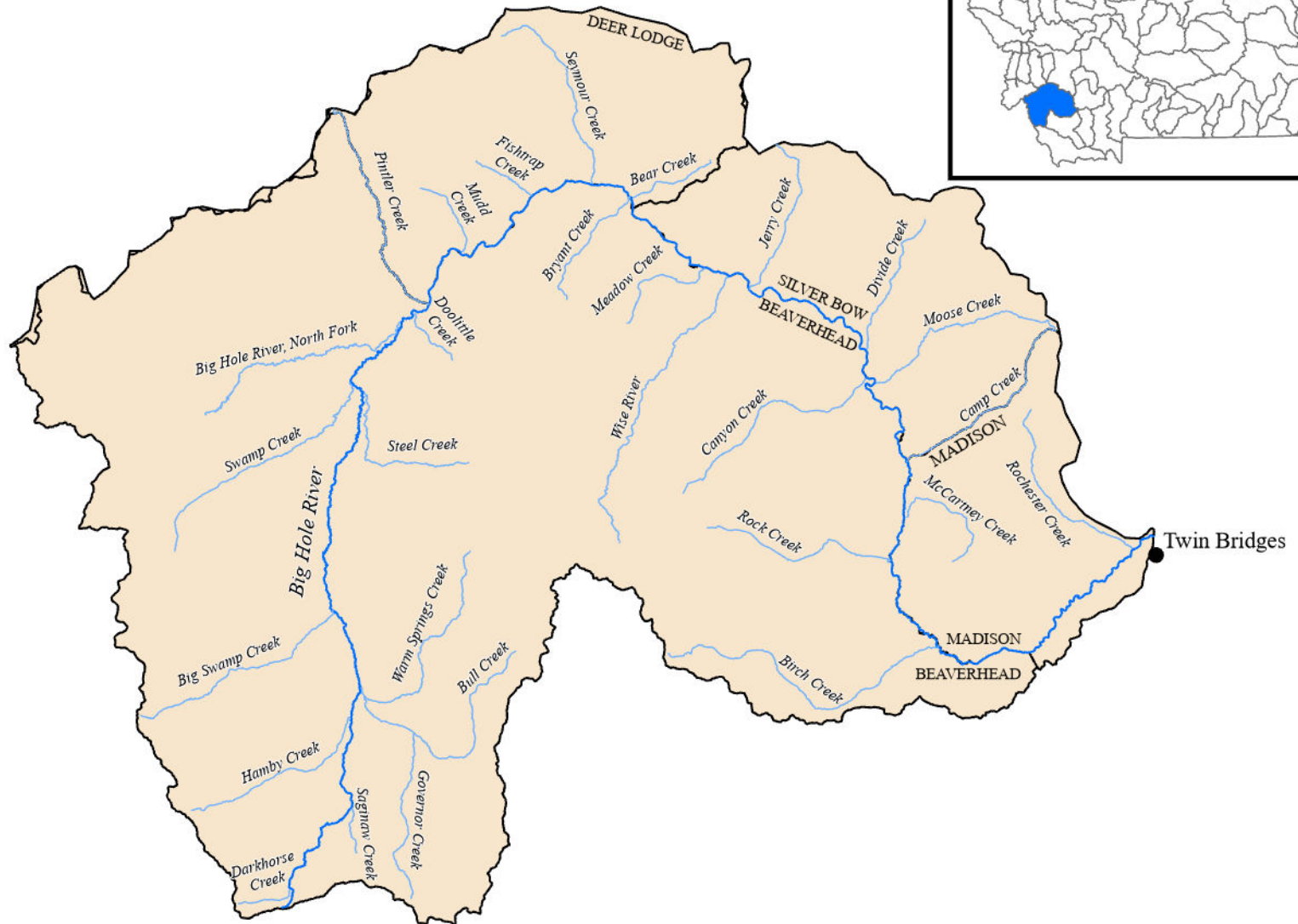
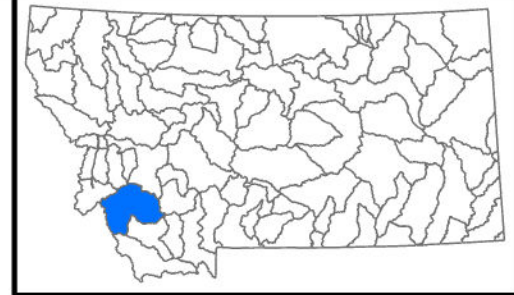
**Service via Electronic Mail:**

Montana DNRC, Water Resources  
Todd Netto, Adjudication, Enforcement and Distribution Bureau Chief  
Shannon Buswell, Water Rights Data Quality & Standards Program Supervisor  
Jeremiah Hughes  
Brandy Gray  
TNetto@mt.gov  
Shannon.Buswell@mt.gov  
Jeremiah.Hughes@mt.gov  
Brandy.Gray@mt.gov

DNRC Bozeman Regional Office  
DNRCBozemanWater@mt.gov  
kstrasheim@mt.gov  
jackson.alvey@mt.gov

DNRC Helena Regional Office  
DNRCHelenaWater@mt.gov  
jdaly2@mt.gov  
kirsten.walsh@mt.gov  
jason.larsen2@mt.gov

# BASIN 41D - BIG HOLE RIVER



## Legend

- Towns
- Big Hole River

- Streams
- Basin 41D Boundary



0 5 10 Miles

A scale bar is located at the bottom right of the map. It is a horizontal line with tick marks at 0, 5, and 10 miles.