



**Planning Proceeds Free-Flow:** Condit Dam was breached in October 2011 with an approved recreation plan as part of the hydropower decommissioning. PacifiCorp's plan included accommodations to ensure continued access for river runners on upstream reaches of the river that ended at the reservoir, as well as channel restoration to ensure navigability once the project was removed. Photo: Andy Maser

## Planning for Recreation in Hydropower Decommissioning

by Thomas O'Keefe

As hydropower decommissioning evolves from rare exception to recurring practice, recreation planning has emerged as a key element in achieving durable, community-supported outcomes.

Although the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) has noted that its authority to require recreation obligations ends with license termination, surrender orders routinely include one-time measures to address the effects of dam removal on public access and opportunities to enjoy the restored river.

These measures align with public interest mandates and reflect the growing recognition that restored rivers should remain accessible to the communities they flow through.

Four recent hydropower decommissioning projects illustrate how recreation planning can be effectively integrated into decommissioning proceedings, even amid uncertainties in long-term land ownership or site management, including: Condit (Washington), Dillsboro (North Carolina), Mill Pond (Washington), and Klamath (California/Oregon).

*(continued, page 6)*





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#### Editorial Policy

All contributions submitted for publication should be original, or reprinted with approval. Authorship implies responsibilities that can only be attributed to and performed by humans, rather than generative AI.

Articles are not edited for content and may not reflect the position, endorsement, or mission of RMS. The purpose of this policy is to encourage the free exchange of ideas concerning river management issues in an open forum of communication among the RMS membership.

## Executive Director's Eddy

### Celebration and Pause

This year has unfolded to deserve both celebration and pause, sometimes at once.

The 2025 River Management Symposium was a true success by all measures. I thank the many volunteer leaders and committee assistants who both created a good plan, and applied a boatload of flexibility to deliver the goods. I offer one more note of thanks to the Steering Committee leaders — Judy Culver, Helen Clough, Kristina Rylands, and Emma Lord; a special shout-out to Cheyenne Morgan, Hannah Volk, Becky Blanchard, and Kai Allen; and a sincere note of appreciation for the ‘can do’ RMS staff Bekah Price and James Major! Partnerships that have created opportunities for lasting relationships reminded us that river professionals wear name tags that are constantly evolving in specialty and scope.

We learned about the truly amazing capacity of [RES](#) (Resource Environmental Solutions), whose ‘guarantee’ to deliver their restoration deliverables on time and budget is beyond comprehension. We learned more about firms like [cbec](#), eco engineering specialists, and met Leif Embertson from [Natural Systems Design](#) in person after having “known” the the firm as a member for years. Plenary sessions led by, and connections with Yurok, Karuk, Hoopa, Klamath (including Modoc), and Shasta Indian Nation represented experiences, expertise, and resiliency that was appreciated for their significance. Seeing longtime friends of our nation’s rivers such as Richard Roos Collins, who (literally) [wrote the book](#) for citizens concerned about the effects of hydropower dams in 1989 was breathtaking. Learning about the future of dam removal — as a professional pursuit by Katie Schmidt, Virginia Commonwealth University’s own River Studies and Leadership Certificate graduate — was equally exciting.

Beyond the material presented, partnerships that were forged with a common end goal of success made



Risa Shimoda, RMS Executive Director

it possible to host our long-planned Symposium despite amazing headwinds. Here are a few highlights to follow.

Over sixty federal staff from the Bureau of Land Management and U.S. Forest Service had expressed interest in attending when the reduction of federal agency credit cards spending limits to \$1.00 reduced that number to only a small handful. Yet, while several federal presentations were canceled, a few resilient partners pre-recorded their presentations, and their videos were ‘hosted’ by a volunteer in attendance. One such colleague was our President Kristina Rylands, who hosted two sessions covering Wild and Scenic Rivers (WSR) subjects: her extensive WSR familiarity allowed her to respond to two groups’ questions with confidence. For a session regarding the slightly controversial building of fish barriers to protect native species on WSRs, federal presenters Matt O’Neill (Bureau of Reclamation) and Kate Day (U.S. Forest Service) joined Kestrel Kuntz (American Whitewater) live via a laptop and were able to interact with the audience.

In another act of graceful partnership, Mark Ivy, Senior Outdoor Recreation Planner at the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC), continued to partner with us in planning the workshop

for federally regulated hydropower dam operators and utilities, scheduled for the first two days of the Symposium week. Participants were able to sample the ‘regular’ Symposium program on its final day. Christy Churchill, Recreation Planner and Hydro Compliance Project Manager in Duke Energy’s Water Strategy, Hydro Licensing & Lake Services division, was our second heroic partner in command. She coordinated a group of fellow licensees to deliver new and important materials to over 30 of their colleagues. While they missed the chance to speak with FERC staff as planned, only a small handful of licensees decided to stay home, and the workshop feedback was positive.

The field trips to the Klamath River — envisioned to showcase two recently re-discovered reaches hidden beneath reservoirs since the dams dating as far back as 1908 — changed just days before the Symposium. A last-minute cancellation by a Shasta Indian Nation site host, elevated water levels unfamiliar to the outfitters, and the closure of the Klamath River Renewal Corporation necessitated a series of late-breaking adjustments. Lucky for us, our three Klamath River outfitters shifted as true professionals do. In addition, Dave Meurer from *RES* pulled out the stops for those on the driving tour, by enabling the group to both visit an almost-completed access — whose completion was slowed by the high level of winter and early spring precipitation — and to view the river from the very cool res office, uniquely situated atop the former Iron Gate Dam site.

Each of these examples of last-minute, program-saving developments was possible through much-appreciated relationships that were developed through months of planning. We are grateful.

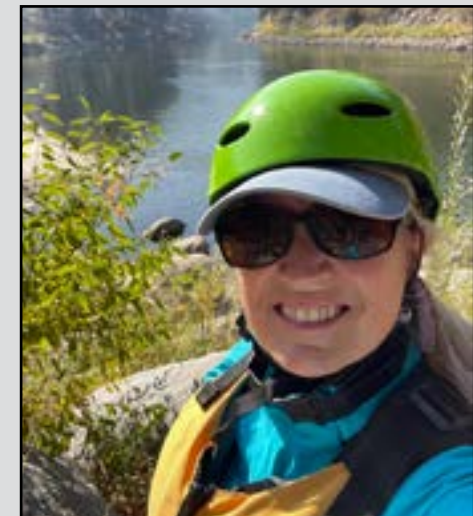
Then there is the pause.

Many long time professional colleagues of the River Management Society (RMS) — individuals who we have welcomed as members for decades and who have been employed by federal river administering agencies — have recently left their positions. You have no doubt heard about the reasons and process through which they have moved on.

Amidst these challenges, a slightly bright light for this unique time is that several RMS members who are now former federal employees maintain an interest in supporting RMS in new ways, as volunteers, organizational leaders, and instructors for the River Training Center! RMS will continue to [document the effects on public safety](#), a most important aspect of the recent austerity measures.

Risa Shimoda  
Executive Director

## President's Corner



Kristina Rylands, Interim RMS President

I remember coming back from my first RMS symposium in Nebraska, thinking I had found an instant group of outstanding colleagues and collaborators — and friends. The wheels on my flight had barely touched down in California when then-president Jim McCartney called, asking if I would consider serving as Pacific Chapter President. I was honored, knowing that the opportunity to rally our chapter and deepen my RMS engagement was something I could not pass up. This is my *Jim Moment* to you!

No matter how long you have been involved in RMS, your ideas and leadership matter and are needed. Consider deepening your involvement in RMS as a chapter or national officer. It is a meaningful way to connect with your fellow RMS members who come from diverse backgrounds in the river management field. My involvement in RMS has taken me to places and rivers I would never have experienced otherwise. Moreover, my chapter service has been an important part of my own professional growth and something that has made me more effective in my work.

This summer, we will hold elections for national officers. But there are also some chapters that have leadership needs. As an organization supporting river professionals, members move our mission forward. For a minimal commitment of time, you can make a huge difference. Check the journal pages here or ask Risa or a board member to see where there are vacancies. I am tapping ALL of you — no matter if you are a student member, new to RMS, or a Lifter like me. We need your ideas, passion, and expertise, and invite you to join us in strengthening RMS by taking on a chapter or national role. ❖

Kristina Rylands  
Interim RMS President



## RMS Journal - Northwest Chapter Focus

## Northwest



*Rivers of the Northwest Chapter mentioned in this issue. Map: James Major*

The Northwest Chapter of RMS includes five states that host remarkably diverse river systems. Rivers flow across the great plains of Montana, where it's not uncommon to find a bison skull over 200 years old, protruding from the eroded riverbank. In Wyoming and Idaho, jagged peaks hold onto snow well into the summer, providing cold, clear water for native cutthroat trout, as well as water for agriculture production through the growing season. Coastal streams of Oregon and Washington provide vital habitat and migration corridors for salmon.

Across the Northwest, rivers have been central to Indigenous heritage, providing abundant game for sustenance and serving as natural highways. River corridors enabled growth and commerce across the Northwest through the 1800s and attracted new settlement. Rivers provide important habitat and migration corridors for wildlife such as grizzly bears, waterfowl, and bats, as well as for native fish species like salmon, sturgeon, and cutthroat trout. RMS members in the Northwest Chapter manage these complex natural and heritage resources with the increasing recreational use along river corridors.

Balancing diverse — and often conflicting — interests that people have in river management is challenging. RMS provides a great network of professionals to build collaboration, provides training opportunities and educational information to expand our understanding through shared management experiences, and supports leadership within the field of river management.

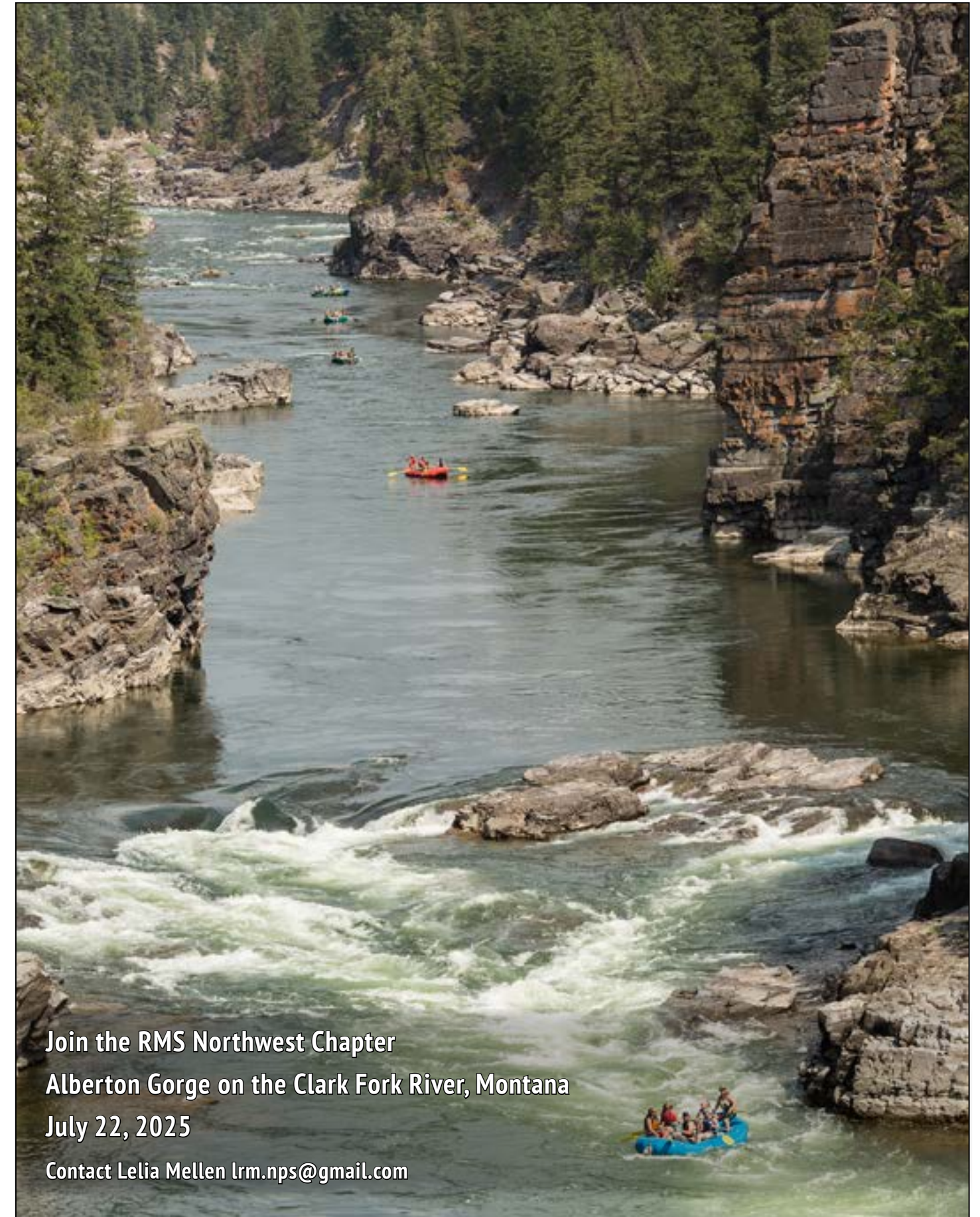
RMS members across the Northwest Chapter are involved with many agencies, organizations, businesses, and educational institutions that support river management. In fact, the Northwest Chapter has around 170 members, the largest chapter of RMS.

We were excited to host the 2025 River Management Symposium in Ashland Oregon, which turned out to be an inspiring and informative event with 220 participants from across the country.

The Northwest Chapter is looking forward to hosting this year's RMS River Rendezvous in on the Snake River in Jackson, Wyoming August 20-24. Join us for a few fun days on the river to meet fellow river rangers, program managers, field staff, and other river enthusiasts, while learning from professionals who work on and around rivers in the Rocky Mountain West.

The Northwest Chapter will also host a river trip on the Alberton Gorge on the Clark Fork River in Montana on July 22.

For more information about the Northwest Chapter and upcoming opportunities, reach out to our chapter officers, visit the RMS website, or check out the chapter-focused articles within this journal. Have a great summer river season, and I hope to see you out on the river! ❖

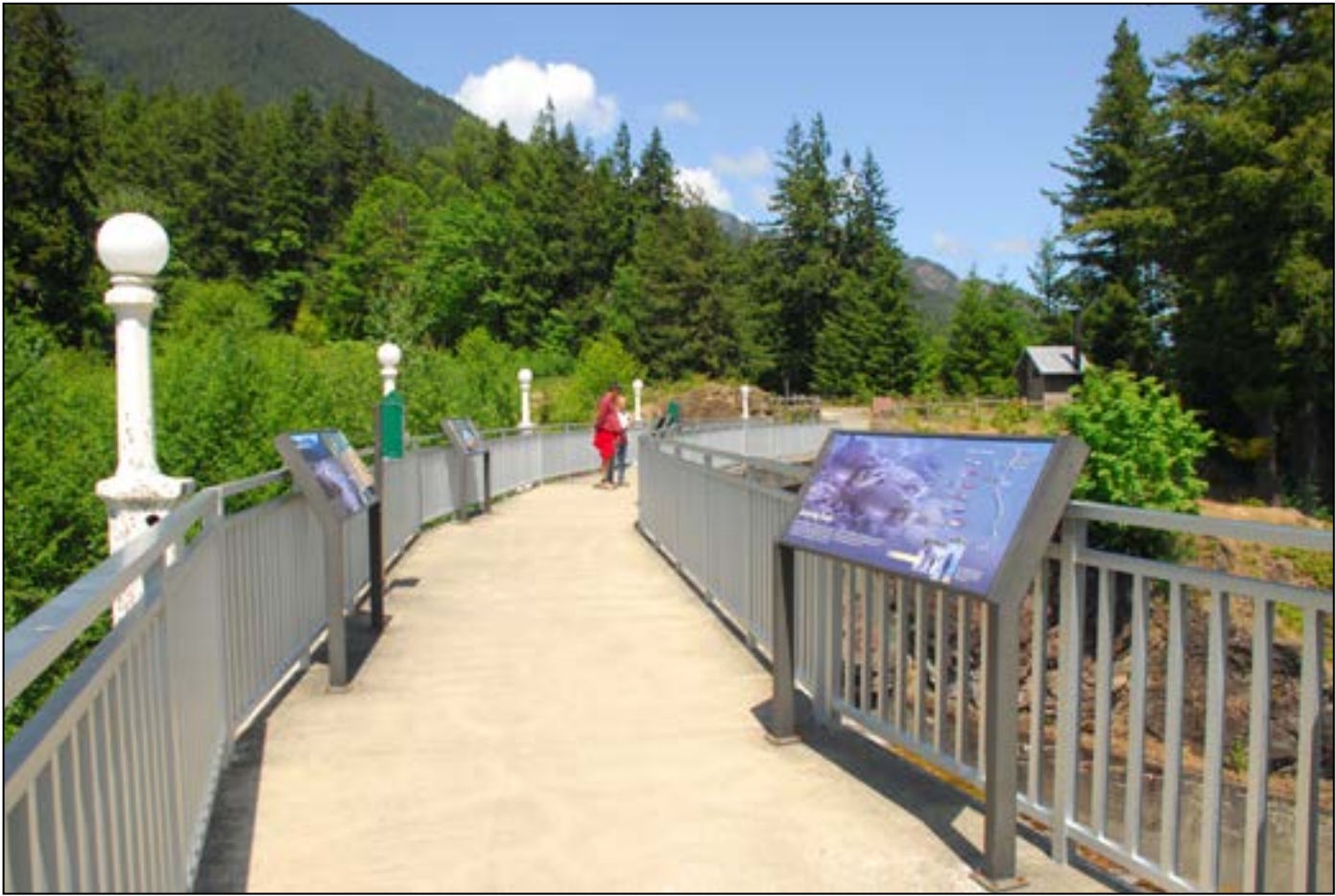


**Join the RMS Northwest Chapter  
Alberton Gorge on the Clark Fork River, Montana  
July 22, 2025**

**Contact Lelia Mellen [lrn.nps@gmail.com](mailto:lrn.nps@gmail.com)**

*The Alberton Gorge on the Clark Fork River just west of Missoula, Montana, offers floaters with a fun day trip through a beautiful canyon.*  
Photo: Cannon Colegrove





**Spillway to Interpretive Site:** The spillway for Glines Canyon Dam was left in place and now serves as an overlook and interpretive site where the public can learn about the dam removal and restoration of the Elwha River and witness the recovery of the former reservoir. Photo: Thomas O’Keefe

**Condit Dam (White Salmon River, WA)**

When Condit Dam was removed in 2012, FERC required a Recreation Facilities and Improvements Plan as a surrender condition, even though no recreation planning had been included in the earlier settlement agreement for dam removal. PacifiCorp implemented upgrades to the Northwestern Park boat launch, a reservoir access site that became a river access site following dam removal. The new river access was developed as a mitigation measure and condition of dam removal despite unresolved questions about long-term ownership and management. More than a decade later, with transfer of this recreation site to the U.S. Forest Service pending, the site remains open and well-used by river runners. This example demonstrates that recreation mitigation can be implemented successfully ahead of final project land transfer, maintaining continuity of public use during the transition to a free-flowing river.

**Dillsboro Dam (Tuckasegee River, NC)**

FERC’s 2007 surrender order for Dillsboro Dam, removed in 2010, required the licensee to construct a new boat launch and parking area upstream of the reservoir. Although the new facility was outside the project boundary and a future operator had not been identified, FERC concluded the one-time investment was necessary to maintain public river access. The resulting CJ Harris Access Area, which includes ADA-compliant features, is now operated by Jackson County Parks and Recreation. Dillsboro exemplifies how FERC can distinguish between ongoing recreation operations for which a licensee is responsible and one-time mitigation for decommissioning impacts, including at sites that will be outside its jurisdiction after license termination.

**Mill Pond Dam (Sullivan Creek, WA)**

Removed in 2017, Mill Pond Dam offers a comprehensive example of public recreation integrated with ecological restoration. Seattle City Light, working with the U.S. Forest Service, replaced informal use areas around the former reservoir with thoughtfully designed facilities that support both conservation and public enjoyment. The project delivered a new accessible picnic pavilion, a rebuilt campground, a footbridge across the restored stream channel, and a 1.7-mile interpretive loop trail. These features reflect a deliberate strategy to focus use on durable locations while protecting riparian resources. Though no long-term obligations were imposed in the surrender order, the Colville National Forest now actively manages the site and associated recreational amenities that were provided as part of its broader recreation portfolio.

**Klamath River Dams (CA/OR)**

The Klamath project was the largest dam removal effort in U.S. history, with four hydroelectric dams dismantled and 45 miles of river restored in 2025. The Klamath Hydroelectric Settlement Agreement and associated environmental documents identify recreation as a core project value and key benefit of dam removal. The settlement specified that, following dam removal, former project lands “shall thereafter be managed for public interest purposes such as fish and wildlife habitat restoration and enhancement, public education, and public recreational access.”

The Recreation Facilities Plan, submitted as part of the overall dam removal and decommissioning process, proposed removing recreational facilities along the reservoirs, with mitigation measures that include new infrastructure to support public access to the restored river corridor. The plan responded to FERC’s direction to develop funding for the construction and maintenance of river access sites including, at a minimum, access facilities in areas that would be affected by land disturbance during dam removal implementation.

This represents another example of FERC’s practice of requiring one-time improvements prior to license termination, even when long-term management structures are not yet finalized. Actions such as converting reservoir launches into river access sites and constructing low-impact amenities can be completed during the decommissioning window and remain functional long after. These measures will provide public access to the restored Klamath River, offer opportunities for education and recreation, and support the project’s broader goals of ecological and community restoration.

**Conclusion**

Across these four projects, a clear pattern emerges: recreation is not an ancillary consideration, but a foundational element of successful dam removal. One-time investments in access infrastructure support public engagement, enable long-term stewardship, and provide tangible community benefits. As decommissioning becomes a more frequent tool in river management, incorporating recreation into project planning — regardless of land ownership uncertainty — should be recognized as a best practice. The Condit, Dillsboro, Mill Pond, and Klamath projects show how it can be done with outcomes that benefit the community long after dam removal is completed. ❖

*Thomas O’Keefe is Pacific Northwest Stewardship Director for American Whitewater based out of Seattle, Washington.*



5' 0"

**Culturally-Aware Safety Signs:** Safety signage for the Klamath River is an important part of the overall effort to educate the public on the character of the river following dam removal. The signage includes traditional place names that were erased with colonization and construction of the hydropower project that inundated cultural sites that were important to Indigenous communities.

*Photo: Yann Crist-Evans*



# Cadets Clean the Clearwater River in BLM Partnership



by Michael Traver-Greene and Rebecca Urbanczyk

Just after the sun peeked over the walls of Idaho’s Clearwater Canyon on a blustery September morning, an armada of river patrol boats from the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Cottonwood Field Office was ready to embark on the day’s mission. Three rafts full of cadets from the Idaho Youth ChalleNGe Academy set out to clean up a five-mile stretch of the Clearwater River. This program, affiliated with the National Guard, provides structure, discipline, and education for youths seeking positive growth. BLM staff and volunteers captained two rafts and an inflatable kayak to help support the clean-up mission.

With the best turnout yet for the Clearwater River Clean-up, 24 cadets took a moment to synchronize their paddling before setting off downstream. But it was not long before they were elbow-deep in dirt and ash. The Gwen Fire, which burned approximately 30,000 acres earlier in the year (2024), had torn through the area, leaving most clean-up zones void of vegetation. Black soot soon covered the faces of cadets, resembling war paint, as they prepared to vanquish the trash and debris, some of which had been there for over 20 years.

The fire-scorched landscape allowed cadets and volunteers to see items that would have otherwise remained hidden. This led to a record amount of waste being collected during the 2024 Clearwater River Clean-up Day. Cadets removed over two truckloads of trash and debris from the river corridor.

*Cadets from Idaho Youth ChalleNGe Academy learn the basics of paddling (below), with the scorched canyon sides from the Gwen Fire in the background (above).  
Photos: Michael Traver-Greene / BLM*



Notable finds included: stove pipes, boat anchors, tents, tarps, tires — 15 of various sizes — and a crosscut saw with a patina that could only be achieved by sitting on a riverbank for years. The cadets completed all this challenging work with smiles on their faces and a contagious can-do attitude.

More was gained than just cleaning the river. Cadets had the opportunity to experience river recreation — many for the first time — and enjoy the thrill that comes with it. They got their toes wet on some Class II rapid sections — just splashy enough to put smiles on their faces.

Wildlife-viewing moments were abundant, as well, with sightings of a few snakes, a deer, and a river otter. Cadets witnessed both the devastation that a wildfire can have on a community, and the resilience and recovery of nature in response to disasters. The reward the cadets was the cookout at the end of the workday.

The Clearwater Management Council (CMC) hosted the cookout, providing everyone with plenty of burgers and sides at the BLM McKay’s Bend Recreation Site. Members from U.S. Senator Risch’s office, McKay’s Bend volunteer camp host, the Idaho County Commissioners, and Idaho County Search and Rescue took time out of their busy schedules to set up, cook, and serve cadets, volunteers, and staff. The CMC capped off the event by graciously donating \$400 to the Idaho Youth ChalleNGe Academy Foundation.

The event had a positive impact on the river, but the lasting impression to all involved was even more profound. The cadets, volunteers, and BLM staff developed a deeper passion for public lands and will remember this experience for a lifetime.

BLM Cottonwood Field Office Outdoor Recreation Planner Rebecca Urbanczyk, who founded and coordinates the annual Clearwater River Clean-up, has built a community that fosters stewardship of BLM-managed public lands, provides education and personal growth, all while having fun and cleaning up a cherished Idaho resource.

The BLM Cottonwood Field Office was excited to partner with the Idaho Youth ChalleNGe Academy, CMC, and volunteers for another fantastic National Public Lands Day event along the Clearwater River. ❖

*Contributors Michael Traver-Greene and Rebecca Urbanczyk work with BLM Cottonwood Field Office in Idaho.*



*The Clearwater River Clean-up crew. Photo: Nate Millet / USFS*



*A volunteer and cadet ensure no tire was left behind. Photo: Michael Traver-Greene / BLM*



*Cadets pose with the debris they retrieved from the river. Photo: Rebecca Urbanczyk / BLM*



# Rivers that Inspire Poetry



Rattlesnake Creek, Montana. Photo: Jessy Stevenson

by Lisa Ronald

American Rivers teamed up with Missoula Writing Collaborative to inspire placemaking through “ekphrastic poetry,” verse inspired by nature photography.

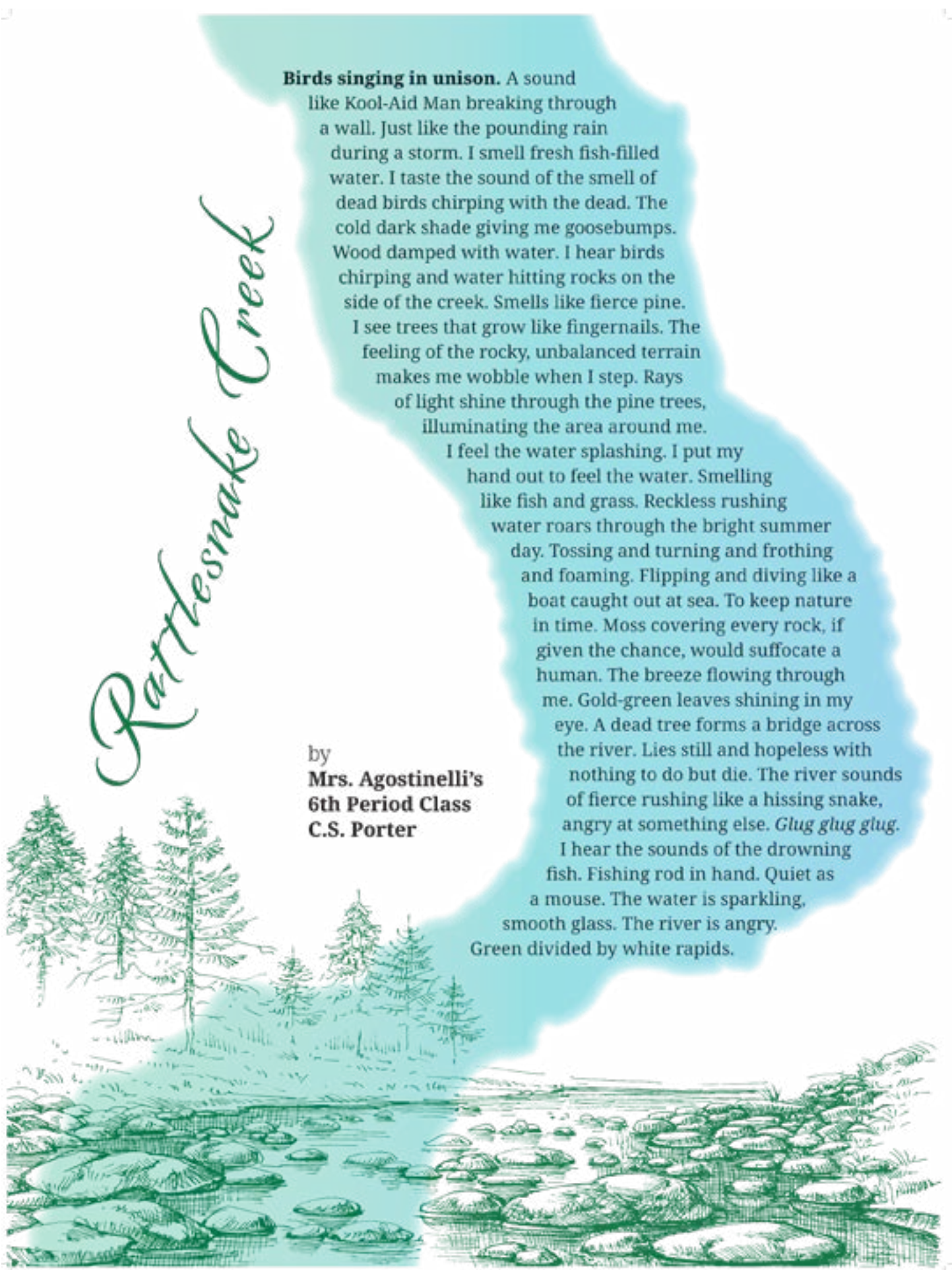
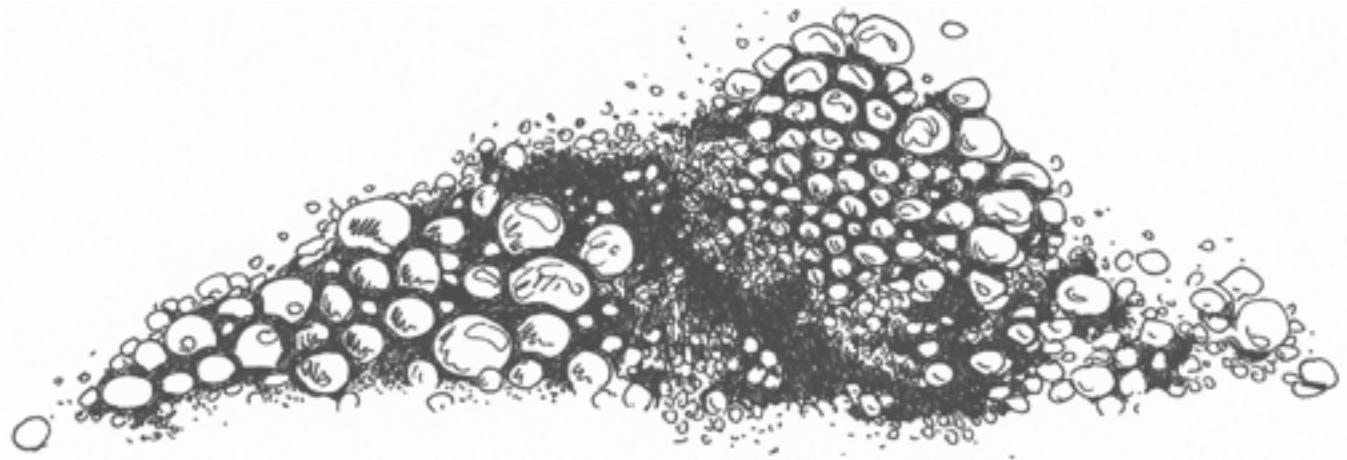
Missoula middle school students wrote individual poems inspired by pictures of potential Wild and Scenic eligible rivers in western Montana. The photographs depict rivers in their many forms — frothy, churning, boiling, and trickling.

Each students’ best lines were woven together to form a collaborative poem about Rattlesnake Creek, which flows through Missoula and is important to the city’s public water supply.

A river poetry [storymap](#) showcases select young poets’ awe-inspiring interpretations and renditions of their home rivers.

To move from individual poetry to collaborative work, each student chose a favorite line from their own poem. Woven together, these lines represent the words of each class — in total more than 175 students—and are a testament to the collective power of inspiration. ❖

*Lisa Ronald is the Northern Rockies Associate Conservation Director for American Rivers. To learn more, contact Lisa at [lronald@americanrivers.org](mailto:lronald@americanrivers.org).*



## Rattlesnake Creek

**Birds singing in unison.** A sound like Kool-Aid Man breaking through a wall. Just like the pounding rain during a storm. I smell fresh fish-filled water. I taste the sound of the smell of dead birds chirping with the dead. The cold dark shade giving me goosebumps. Wood damped with water. I hear birds chirping and water hitting rocks on the side of the creek. Smells like fierce pine. I see trees that grow like fingernails. The feeling of the rocky, unbalanced terrain makes me wobble when I step. Rays of light shine through the pine trees, illuminating the area around me. I feel the water splashing. I put my hand out to feel the water. Smelling like fish and grass. Reckless rushing water roars through the bright summer day. Tossing and turning and frothing and foaming. Flipping and diving like a boat caught out at sea. To keep nature in time. Moss covering every rock, if given the chance, would suffocate a human. The breeze flowing through me. Gold-green leaves shining in my eye. A dead tree forms a bridge across the river. Lies still and hopeless with nothing to do but die. The river sounds of fierce rushing like a hissing snake, angry at something else. *Glug glug glug.* I hear the sounds of the drowning fish. Fishing rod in hand. Quiet as a mouse. The water is sparkling, smooth glass. The river is angry. Green divided by white rapids.

by  
**Mrs. Agostinelli's  
6th Period Class  
C.S. Porter**





Flathead Waters Cleanup on the North Fork of Flathead River, Glacier Rim. Photo: Sheena Pate

by Sheena Pate

Early May, Flathead Rivers Alliance quietly marked its fifth year in official capacity as the non-profit organization dedicated to education, stewardship, and volunteer-fueled community initiatives to support and enhance health of over 219-miles of the Three Forks of the Flathead River ecosystem. The Flathead Rivers Alliance has established itself as the standard-bearer for conservation and stewardship and was recently recognized as an Outstanding National Wild and Scenic River Stewardship Award recipient from TEAM Rapids, an interagency group that advocates for rivers and planning interdisciplinary discussions. With recent shifts in the river system’s on-the-ground federal agency capacity, the non-profit organization’s mission work has become essential in mobilizing the community to ensure visitors interact respectfully and responsibly.

The Flathead River Basin comprises six million acres of forests, agricultural land, and small communities, in the heart of the 18-million-acre Crown of the Continent ecoregion. This ecoregion is one of the most ecologically diverse and intact landscapes remaining in North America, and is a globally significant climate refuge. Pulsing through the basin is the 219-mile Flathead Wild & Scenic River system, one of the last remaining wild rivers, a stronghold for the native Westslope Cutthroat Trout bolstered by the country’s largest conservation projects, and home to archaeological evidence of over 10,000 years of human existence. This transboundary river system is the inspiration behind the Wild & Scenic River Act of 1968. Regionally, three forks of the Flathead River are the source of 85% of the water that flows into Flathead Lake — the largest natural freshwater lake west of the Mississippi River — and form the largest tributary at the headwaters of the Columbia River.

River usage and visitation have dramatically increased, peaking at over 100,000 summer river users. At the same time, resource management agencies have faced growing challenges in their efforts and capacity to mitigate river-system threats: invasive aquatic species, climate impacts, water quality issues, and river safety. Through education, stewardship, and partnerships, Flathead Rivers Alliance collaborates with communities, businesses, tribes and First Nations, organizations, and agencies with collective vision to maintain the health of the Flathead River while ensuring current and future access and enjoyment for all.

Building off a successful 2024, that resulted in 80+ stream miles improved, 300+ volunteers, and 1,769+ volunteer hours the organization has its work cut out for it; with partner and community support, it looks to continue to boost programming and projects that include, but are not limited to:

- River Ambassador
- River Recreation Floating Citizen Scientists
- Water Quality Monitoring
- Youth Stream Ecology & Career Awareness
- Montana’s only permanent river loaner “life jacket” stations
- Removing Barriers for River ADA Accessibility
- Distribution of over 4,000 reusable cleanup bags annually
- Online Trip Planning Hub
- River Weed Pull Rodeo
- Flathead Waters Cleanups
- Spring River Safety Workshops

In 2026, Flathead Rivers Alliance will celebrate the 50th Anniversary of the Flathead Wild & Scenic River designation. To learn more, visit: [www.flatheadrivers.org](http://www.flatheadrivers.org). ❖

Sheena Pate is Executive Director of the Flathead Rivers Alliance.

# Balancing Timber Harvest and Fire Mitigation with Wild and Scenic River Protection

by Lisa Ronald

American Rivers is undertaking a new research project examining the history of forest management along the Flathead Wild and Scenic River. This project seeks to reveal the nuances of how river protection under the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act can be compatible with various forest management activities. Together, designated and potential Wild and Scenic Rivers number nearly 3,500 rivers nationwide; these rivers have been awarded the best-available protections to safeguard their free-flowing character, water quality, and unique values. Yet lingering negative attitudes toward forest management activities within protected river corridors, combined with inadequate policy and a recent 25% increase in commercial timber harvest on multiple-use public lands, are likely to reduce the extent and durability of river protection efforts over time.

American Rivers research posits that compatibility between forest management

activities and river protection can and has happened. Montana’s Flathead Wild and Scenic River, with its nearly 50-year history of management, provides the ideal geography to reveal best practices and flexibility in conducting forest management in protected river corridors.

Restoration and fire mitigation efforts often include various forest management activities to thin dense canopy, burn understory, masticate fuels, replant, treat weeds, and restore wetland meadows. When done sustainably, these activities can benefit rivers and their surrounding watersheds. American Rivers is reviewing 11 different projects on two different recreational stretches of the South and North Forks of the Flathead River.

Between designation of the Flathead River as Wild and Scenic in 1976 and today, these projects have encompassed nearly 2,500 individual activities — from pre-commercial thinning and salvage cutting to yarding and brush pile burning — which have been grouped

into four categories: cutting, burning, planting, and removing invasive species. The activities that took place within the Flathead Wild and Scenic River corridor are part of larger projects that encompass work within the broader watershed to reduce fuels, restore forest structure and vegetation composition, and increase timber productivity. Analysis will continue this year through review of National Environmental Policy Act documents for the 11 projects and associated activities. Discussions with river protection advocates, agency land managers, and timber professionals will provide a clearer understanding of how each of these groups defines criteria for “successful” projects. The forthcoming report will assess river protection and timber success metrics and provide case studies illustrating best practices for how and where forest management activities and river protections can coexist. ❖

Lisa Ronald is the Northern Rockies Associate Conservation Director for American Rivers. To learn more, contact Lisa at [lronald@americanrivers.org](mailto:lronald@americanrivers.org).



North Fork of Flathead Wild and Scenic River. Photo: Sheena Pate



# Bighorn Blueway: A Work in Progress

by Lelia Mellen



Over the past few years, a diverse array of federal, state, and local partners have been working together to create a Blueway on the Bighorn River. Partners include: the Bighorn National Recreation Area (NRA), the Wyoming Office of Outdoor Recreation, the Bureau of Land Management, businesses and residents of Greybull and Basin, and the National Park Service’s Rivers Trails and Conservation Assistance Program (RTCA).

“Growing up in the Bighorn Basin, youth are thought to stay away from canals and other waterways associated with the canal system. This mentality also affects the other water activities in the area. The Bighorn Blueway would be a way to introduce the area youth to fun, safe, and approved ways to recreate in the area waterways,” explains Brooks Jordan with the State of Wyoming.

### What is a Blueway?

Blueways, also known as water trails, blue trails, or paddling trails, are recreational routes on waterways with a network of public access points supported by broad-based community partnerships. Blueways provide both conservation and recreational opportunities.

These stretches of river, shoreline, lake, and ocean routes have been mapped out with the intent to create safe educational, scenic, and recreational experience for canoers and kayakers.

### History of the Bighorn Blueway

The mission of the Wyoming Office of Outdoor Recreation’s Bighorn Basin Outdoor Recreation Collaborative (BBORC) is to promote, enhance, and develop sustainable outdoor recreation that encourages responsible use, personal well-being, and economic benefit in the Bighorn Basin. As such, BBORC approached RTCA in 2021 with the idea of creating a Blueway along the Bighorn.

The proposed Bighorn Blueway is starting the project with recreational sections from Wedding of the Waters to Hot Springs State Park in the southern part of the Bighorn River and then from Greybull to Lovell in the northern Wyoming section of the river. When the Blueway idea was proposed, a series of public meetings were held along that stretch of the Bighorn River — in Thermopolis, Worland, Manderson, Basin, Greybull, and Lovell. While support and enthusiasm has been evident, concerns were also voiced: How will private lands be protected? What about safety around diversion dams? Are there enough safe access points? And will there be sufficient signage to help users stay safe and prepared? Given these concerns, the project decided to focus on the two ‘bookended’ sections mentioned above. The idea is to start where there is support and show incremental success.



**Promoting Blueways:** The Wyoming Office of Outdoor Recreation’s Bighorn Basin Outdoor Recreation Collaborative Promoting the Blueway Trail. Photo: Wyoming Office of Outdoor Recreation

### Progress

With partner support — the Bighorn NRA, BBORC, BLM, and RTCA, and local businesses, including Chambers of Commerce — the Blueway has achieved a number of milestones, including:

- Organizing three successful community floats in 2021, 2023 and 2024, and another planned for 2025.
- Developing a draft river guide map.
- Printing a detailed map, accurately showing the river with the access points with BLM’s expertise.
- Planning access improvements at three new BLM sites in the river section between Greybull to Lovell, including: Dry Creek Point, Red Rim Meadows South, and Kane East. BLM has completed their internal National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) review process for these sites and hopes to begin construction on the river access site at Red Rim Meadows South in the summer of 2025, contingent on funding.

Partners are continuing to assess river access points, develop a full river guide/Blueway trail map, identify signage needs, and consider Memorandums of Understanding with local communities to outline stewardship responsibilities. The Bighorn Blueway is demonstrating how positive efforts can be made when multiple groups come together. ❖

*Lelia Mellen has recently retired after over 30 years with the National Park Service Rivers and Trails Program.*

# Skills, Gear, and Gumption Thoughts About Pre-Season Preparation

by Doug Whittaker, Bo Shelby, and Dan Shelby

It’s late on the second day of the season’s first river trip, a week-long fly-in journey in Alaska. It is cold, gray, and spitting rain at the end of a forbidding Tolkien-esque canyon, and our four rafts have just been scattered by the last rapid like Skittles from a bag. *Yellow* is far ahead (we have labeled boats by color to protect the innocent); the solo rower smells the barn, heading for a predestined cobble beach two miles ahead.

*Red* and *Tangerine* were scrambled by the drop, which was more furious than the easy Class III promised by those who had been here before. *Purple*’s rower catches an eddy to take photos and run sweep, feeling some guilt about the misinformation — maybe that last rapid is Class IV at this flow? But everyone is right-side-up. Back in the current behind *Tangerine*, with nothing but easy boulder gardens until camp, the *Purple* passengers start yakking about where the avocados, salsa, and chips are stashed.

Looking up, they see *Tangerine*’s solo rower daydreaming while drinking from a water bottle, drifting into a mid-river Subaru-sized slab. They holler and he drops the bottle to ferry away from harm, but it’s too late. Despite a last-second high-side scramble, one tube rises while the other submerges, filling the cockpit. The boat’s wrapped!

More yelling and whistleblowing ensue, but with poor spacing and a stout current there’s no time to toss a line or swing in behind the stranded boat. The three boats are several hundred yards downstream on both sides of the river before they can catch eddies. The good news is that *Tangerine*’s rower is securely perched on the rock, transforming a dynamic situation into a static one. *Tangerine*’s rower is already testing whether pulling on the frame will help dislodge the boat.

It takes five minutes for the troops to stumble upstream through head-high thorny devil’s club, throw ropes and pin kits in hand. By this time, the stranded boater has worked the stuck boat toward one end of the rock, and our line-of-sight walkie-talkies allow us to discuss options over the roar of the river.

With a rescuer about to throw a line, a surge pushes the boat higher, nearly shoving our guy off the rock. He capitalizes on the change, lifting the boat and shedding enough water so it squirts into the current. With a moment of indecision as the boat floats away, our hero yells, “Gotta go!” leaping, then plunging into the bathtub of the cockpit. He comes up sputtering, regains control, and pulls in next to the other boats as if he planned it.

The garage sale accounting begins. Lost: a water bottle, map, and snack bag. Soaked: two dry bags and the kitchen box — the one with the snacks! Later in camp, looking sadly at the soggy chips, we debriefed in a free-wheeling conversation about what went right and wrong, and how training might improve our performance. Many thoughts emerged — some familiar adages, others prompted by our recent drama.

In this article, we share a few ideas to kick off the boating season. As an organizing framework, we like to think incident prevention and crisis resolution depend on three broad categories of variables — skill, gear, and gumption. The best trips happen when you’ve got all three wired. But Murphy’s Law and our own experience suggest that is not always the way things work — sometimes the river seems bigger than life, equipment falls short, or you lose your picnic spirit. It is possible to get by with one deficient category, but two can lead to a cascade of problems. They make documentaries about groups that screw up all three.

*What can we do to prepare for a safer season?* (continued, page 16)



**Boat Rescue Not from the Story:** A lower-than-optimal test flow on Oregon’s Klamath River — during whitewater boating studies leading up to the nation’s biggest dam-removal project — was tough on gear and potentially hazardous for passengers. The solo rower was perched on the boat after high siding, then got to shore safely. The expert group tried several angles before a combination of lifting and pulling worked the boat free; the entire recovery took about 15 minutes; a mechanical advantage Z-drag was not needed. Co-author Dan Shelby is pulling on the rope.

Photo: Thomas O’Keefe, American Whitewater



(Skills, Gear, and Gumption, continued from page 15)

Skill and Experience

An over-generalized popular discourse suggests it takes 10,000 hours to master a skill. But most of us do not have this kind of time, and being an expert is overrated. A more manageable goal is to become competent, which is often possible with a reasonable amount of river time (the fun part!). The key is deliberate, intentional practice on skills that matter. For that you need guidance and commitment (because practice does not make perfect, only perfect practice makes perfect).

Swiftwater rescue and boating skill courses have improved immeasurably over the years, and they are offered by local clubs, agencies, or training organizations. Participants generally work through scenarios that lead to problems, including complacency at the end of a long day, inattention in easier rapids, and carelessness at the shore’s edge. Courses also unwrap spatial and situational awareness within groups and quick-response self-rescue techniques, which are often more useful than elaborate 9:1 Z-drags. Good courses provide in-river opportunities to unwrap boats, retrieve swimmers or loose boats, and try maneuvers to avoid hazards at the end of a long day. But it is important to work on safety skills outside those courses. And every mile on the river is an opportunity to practice!

On river skills can be practiced any time you are on the river:

- Try staying exactly in the fastest part of the current; this requires continual observation and adjustment — picking the best spots and optimally positioning your boat. It is more challenging on flat stretches of bigger rivers, but in addition to improving your current-reading skills, you may also your increase downstream progress.
- Use mid-channel obstacles as occasions to maneuver. Deliberately choose a route ahead of time and then pay attention to how it works out.
- Pick an eddy to catch. Choose a target and then see how well you hit it. Learn the difference between catching an eddy high and tight versus a clumsy entry into swirlies farther downstream. Pay attention to the positioning of your boat’s edges and the placement of your oar or paddle blade relative to the currents. Can you stop or hang out in this eddy?
- Use leaving the eddy as another opportunity to observe how the eddy line and current differential changes closer versus farther from the rock.
- Every stop (e.g., lunch or camp) is another chance to pick a target, hit it, and use the eddy to arrive as gracefully as possible at your chosen landing.
- Practice turning your boat using forward strokes, backward strokes, and combinations. Do several and try different amounts of power and speed.
- Learn how much effort it takes to develop sufficient momentum to cross a fast current or change direction mid-rapid, which will be particular to a craft and load. Practice upstream and downstream ferries; you’ll need both in rapids that require maneuvering rather than just a setup position.
- If you see someone do an interesting stroke, try to figure it out. Examples include feathering or sculling where blades don’t leave the water, stand-up rowing, power strokes, or forward/reverse sweeps for turning. They may be willing to explain, try asking!

- Learn about scouting by watching, listening, and asking questions. Identify the people who are good at judgement, strategy, and explaining. Whenever possible, see how plans were executed and debrief results.
- Think about spacing and order between boats in different situations, and gauge how easy it is to change it. In more complex boulder gardens, more space might be appropriate to provide time for each boater to read the river, learn from others, or help if a boat gets stuck. On less challenging sections, it’s okay to spread out, but some rivers have spacing rules to reduce crowding or avoid mixing groups.
- Gauge your success relative to your fellow boaters. Impromptu competitions (e.g., mini races, follow the leader, sponge tag, and surfing sessions) can all provide amusement and sharpen skills.
- In all these endeavors, it’s important to have a clear target and then precisely assess if you hit it. Not just, “I wanted to catch that eddy, and I did (or didn’t),” but, “I planned to catch the eddy 10 feet downstream of the rock and instead went 20 feet downstream.” Similarly, “I planned to enter that riffle 5 feet left of the rock, but I wound up 5 feet to the right.” Targets and objective non-judgmental feedback enhance learning.

Rescue skills generally need more set-up.

- Practice using a throw rope practice from shore, at lunch, or camp. Always have a target and see how many feet left or right, short or long. Practice different styles of hand coils for speed and clean second throws.
- Conduct the same drill from a boat; it’s a great diversion for passengers wanting to warm up or find a more active role. Targets can range from a spot on a rock to another boat.
- Use a riffle at lunch or camp to practice swimming in whitewater (easier to sell in-water activities when the air and water are warm). Try mid-current maneuvers and practice catching eddies. Combine with throw rope practice and experience how it feels to bring a person to shore.
- Consider adventure swims up or down the river, swim both ways if possible, or hike along the shore. Try crossing the river using boulders and eddies. See what it’s like under a fast current by swimming like a fish — there are sometimes surprisingly mellow bottom eddies under a swift top-current.
- Practice fording/crossing techniques such as a solo, duo, tripod, or centipede; try a walking stick or paddle for stability.
- Unload a small boat and practice flipping and righting it using different methods like using in-water flip-lines or against the shore.
- As always, wear your PFD!

Fitness is a final consideration. Many of us stop boating in fall and won’t row or paddle until the next summer, so muscle atrophy is inevitable. There are several whitewater training suggestions available on the internet, but many conditioning programs are developed for daredevils in their prime — even though many of us are weekend warriors and require something more basic. The realistic goal is to work river-running muscles enough in the off-season so the first day is not such a shock; regular simple cardio workouts, core strength training, and flexibility exercises should help. A single day on the water before the first big trip can help rewire river reflexes and balance.

Gear

Reliable equipment is critical for safety on the river, but deferred maintenance can contribute to problems. Buying good gear is a starting point, but all equipment deteriorates and needs checking. You have all winter to make sure the stove is working and the sliders on tent zippers are still grabbing teeth. Are the dry box seals peeling off? Will those faded cam straps hold if the boat’s getting “maytagged”? On the trip described earlier, *Tangerine* had a slow leak that required twice-a-day top-offs. But that didn’t happen after lunch on Day 2. Would a tight boat have bounced off that rock?

Having the right gear is one thing; having it usefully distributed and accessible is another. Most teams have protocols that ensure important gear gets included with each boat: pump, throw ropes, slings and carabiners, and personal gear for each boat’s crew in case of boat separation. But don’t forget the small stuff like Gorilla Tape, a multi-tool, extra rigging, and Aquaseal. Our team congratulated itself because everyone showed up to the stranded raft with throw ropes and extraction tools, even though they were not needed in the end.

Let us not underestimate the value of the humble checklist, which has proven revolutionary in aviation and medical safety (Gawande, 2009). Even with all the advances in technology, what you really need in a crisis are simple bullet points to make sure you have what you need and know how to use it. Lists of gear and procedures for the most common problems are easy to generate, laminate, and stuff on the top of your rig bag. For the meticulous, boat maps are further improvements. You could probably put this all on a phone — there is surely an app for it — but there is nothing like a strategically placed (laminated) hard copy for quick reference.

Gumption (and judgment about when to use it)

Courage and determination can help manage the adversity of river carnage. One might assume gumption is an innate part of personality, but do not discount the importance of situational variables, many of which are controllable by training or experience. Gumption combines courage and determination with wisdom to make good decisions.

Eat and hydrate; the level of gumption and quality of decision-making improves with snacks and water throughout the day. This is even more important with environmental factors in play — heat, cold, upstream wind, rain, sun, bugs, and wildlife can suck the gumption from even the sturdiest. The time needed to take a snack break, set up a tarp to block sun or rain, or build a warming fire will pay off when spirits are low and the miles aren’t going away — not to mention if it prevents the next wrapped boat!

Gumption includes recognizing limitations. The competency fallacy (Dunning, 2011) suggests people tend to overestimate their skills, equipment, and gumption — and lack the knowledge to even understand their deficiencies. Another article is needed to explore this topic adequately, but we have all seen less-skilled boaters bumbling down a river, oblivious to possible crises, who mistakenly believe ricocheting through one Class IV rapid makes them a Class IV boater. Helping your team members have sufficient skills, equipment, and internal fortitude promotes safety, learning, and fun.

Finally, gumption is not just about fighting through adversity — it includes good judgment. Sometimes that means having the intelligence and courage to get the team to stop, review, consider options, and perhaps even rest or wait for better conditions. The phrase “brains over brawn” may be a cliché, but it holds true for good reason. Many accidents happen when a pre-arranged schedule meets overheated gumption, pushing past good judgment about limitations of the situation and the group. Effective communication is a major part of this, and the best teams encourage observations and suggestions, so team leaders can assess limitations and plan accordingly.

This includes communication during and after incidents. Even though it can be uncomfortable, thoughtful and non-judgmental debriefing can resolve problems, reduce risks, and help change things for the present or some future trip. Mistakes are inevitable; talking about and learning from them is not. ❖

- Safety Gear List – per raft**
- Spare paddle or oar
  - Throw bag - 25 m Poly is okay; Dyneema is better
  - Repair kit – Aquaseal, repair tape, multi tool, heavy needle, fishing line, knife, spare oarlock & rings, duct tape, frame tool, 6-in-1 screwdriver, patch material & glue
  - Walkie talkie
  - Small first aid kit – splint, wound kit, assorted band aids, tweezers, Benadryl, Ibuprofen
  - Small water filter
  - Pump
  - Small rig bag / pin kit – extra straps, paracord, 4-5 locking carabiners, 3-4 strap slings, 2 prusiks, 2 pulleys, 3:1 Z-drag cheat sheet, 50 m of static rope
  - Tarp with paracord and ridge line (or tent)
  - Personal gear for each occupant
  - Enough food for a day / number of people

- Safety gear – on person**
- PFD
  - Knife
  - Lighter
  - One locking carabiner
  - Pen and piece of waterproof paper
  - Fun size insect repellent and sunscreen (for places with those issues)

- Safety gear – per group**
- Large water filter
  - Stove and gas
  - Large pin kit (straps, paracord, 10 locking biners, 8 slings, 4 prusiks, 5 pulleys, 3:1 Z-drag cheat sheet, 100 m of static rope)
  - Spare PFD

**For further reading:**

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Gawande, A. (2009). *The checklist manifesto: How to get things right*. Penguin Books.

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# Catching *Currents* of Community in Pursuit of the River Studies and Leadership Certificate (RSLC)

by Mikayla Kutsher

I have spent countless hours on Northwest rivers. I grew up with the Deschutes River in my backyard and parents who believed that rafting trips were the best family vacation. Some of my greatest moments of personal growth happened with whitewater rushing around me and oars in my hands. The more time I spent exploring rivers around Oregon, Washington, and Idaho, the more I came to associate river trips with a sense of unfiltered joy, deep connections, and a place where I felt fully myself. By the time I went to college, it only felt natural to learn more about how to protect these places.

I did not know of the River Studies and Leadership Certificate (RSLC) until I took a riparian ecology course with Western Washington University’s (WWU) RSLC advisor, John McLaughlin. After completing the course, which culminated in a three-week river trip down the Grand Canyon, my mind was

set on pursuing the certificate and a career involving rivers. I was able to cater the last portion of my college career towards earning the certificate, alongside a degree in environmental science. But beyond the course requirements and encouragement from Professor McLaughlin, I did not have a clear idea of the real benefits of receiving the RSLC. There had been a lag time between advisor transfers and no current students or alumni were available to share their experience earning the certificate or how it impacted their career opportunities after college. My passion for river recreation and desire to work in the environmental field led me to pursue the certificate. I also gathered it would look good on a resume and help me find a job. But there was still one major uncertainty — what does it look like to work in this field?

Attending the 2025 River Management Society (RMS) Symposium helped me answer this question. Listening to talks from various river professionals, exploring the outreach booths in the hall, and even chatting in line for food, I learned about the

wide variety of career pathways that stem from rivers. From scientists, educators, managers, policy makers, and government agencies, it was fascinating to learn more about the role these careers play in conserving watersheds across the country. After learning about the different paths people took to get where they are today, I realized that the one thing that connected them all was following their passion for rivers.

What stood out to me most during the symposium was the importance of collaboration. The more I have learned about freshwater ecology and policy, the more I have realized that problems watersheds face are as complex as the water bodies themselves. A variety of tools and knowledge is needed to properly assess and solve these problems. This idea was highlighted by the recent Klamath dam removals. It was apparent that every person and organization that played a role in taking down the dams were crucial to its success. From tribal members, policymakers, ecologists, activists, and everything in between, everyone brought different skills to the table that were necessary in removing the dams and restoring the land. I could feel the palpable sense of accomplishment, pride, and celebration from all around the room during the opening plenary.

One way to foster collaboration is on river trips. Time spent out on the river is what brings everyone in this field together. I rafted the day section of the Rogue with symposium attendees on a field trip. While paddling, our differences melted away, replaced with a childlike joy. I could see it reflected on the faces of those in my boat and the boats around us. The acute stress, thrill, and relief of paddling through rapids has a way of quickly connecting people.

It is difficult not to feel a little pessimistic about the job hunt from looking at the media. But after talking to various river professionals, I came away from the Symposium with a sense of hope that there are still ways to enter this field if you look in the right places. As a recent college graduate, connections to river professionals are an invaluable resource for my future career path. I found that the people I spoke with were very willing to share advice and support my peers and me as we pursue careers in the professional river community. This welcoming environment made my peers and I feel like a part of a community, something that is hard to come by at scientific conferences. During a meeting with RSLC students, advisors, and professionals, we had the opportunity to ask questions directly to professionals about how to navigate finding a job in this field. This conversation was one of my most valuable takeaways from the symposium. The collaboration between students and professionals through RMS is something I would not have had the chance to be a part of without the RSLC. My WWU peer, Bruce Cudkowicz, summarizes my sentiments:

The environmental field can feel daunting as a student as there is a great divide between academic and professional settings. The RSLC program beautifully fills that gap by connecting students and river professionals in an impactful way.

Attending the RMS Symposium was an invaluable part of my experience pursuing the RSLC, and something I would recommend to any other RSLC student. As I transition from college to the professional world, the knowledge and connections gained through the certificate will become even more applicable. The Symposium provided an opportunity for face-to-face connection with the river community that I would not have been able to experience otherwise in my time as a student. I am grateful that my timeframe aligned with the biannual nature of the Symposium. I look forward to participating in future river trips and events with RMS and the Northwest Chapter.

The rivers of the Pacific Northwest will continue to be a place of learning and connection for me, as a raft guide this summer, and in future professional and educational pursuits down the road. ❖

*Mikayla Kutsher holds a B.S. in Environmental Science and a River Studies and Leadership Certificate from Western Washington University.*

## 2025 SYMPOSIUM TAKEAWAYS

### *RSLC Students from WWU*

“ I was surprised by how laid-back and welcoming the river professionals were. I had expected the Symposium to feel more formal and impersonal, but the atmosphere was approachable and genuine. River professionals care about student success!

— **Katrina Doerflinger**  
Environmental Science, Freshwater and Terrestrial Ecology emphasis  
Graduated December 2024

[T]here are still people fighting for the environment despite what you might hear in the media, and that if you look in the right places, there’s lots of positive change taking place.

— **Sage Hagopian**  
Environmental Studies, GIS emphasis  
Graduating June 2026

I was ... blown away by the power of Indigenous-led environmental initiatives. Many of the most powerful talks were given by Yurok and Karuk tribal members. Amy Bowers Cordalis’ opening speech stuck with me the most after the conference. She spoke of the Yurok Tribe’s involvement in the multi decade fight for a free-flowing Klamath River, highlighting the 2002 mass wasting of salmon that led to intensified protest of the Klamath dams. Cordalis also offered insight into how best to work with tribes in ... modern-day restoration. She implored all symposium goers to seek partnerships with their local tribes regardless of federal recognition status, as Indigenous peoples are right-holders and not merely stakeholders. [Her] ... message that ... ‘the way you use your life force matters,’ I found ... profoundly uplifting, motivating, and beautiful.”

— **Bruce Cudkowicz**  
Environmental Science  
Graduating June 2025

*Interviews: Mikayla Kutsher*



(l to r): Megan Proctor, Bruce Cudkowicz, Ren McScoggin, Paetra Cooke, Lily Howard, Mikayla Kutsher, Sage Hagopian and Katrina Doerflinger.  
Photo: Chris Elder



# 2025 RMS River Management Training Symposium

*In April, more than 220 river champions — from river managers and stewards to hydropower licensees, students, and scientists — convened in Ashland, Oregon, for our 17th national River Management Symposium, hosted against the powerful backdrop of the Klamath River restoration.*

Reprinted Linkedin Post by James Vonesh

Just returned from the River Management Society (RMS) Symposium in Ashland, Oregon, and I’m still processing what might be one of the most impactful professional gatherings I’ve ever attended.

The central theme — the story of the Klamath River restoration through the largest dam removal project in U.S. history — was incredibly powerful and unifying.

In a time where our community may feel like it’s swimming against a strong current, it would have been easy to focus on the negatives. Instead, the Symposium centered on this monumental achievement. We heard about the breathtaking scale of the project — the complex science, engineering, massive revegetation efforts (billions of native seeds!), and intricate collaborations required. It felt like a ‘moonshot’ accomplishment, proving what we can achieve together against daunting odds.

This incredible feat was beautifully juxtaposed with moving presentations from the Klamath Basin’s Tribal communities, highlighting their multigenerational struggle to free the river and the deep importance of this work not just for ecological restoration (salmon, water quality, free flow) but for healing relationships between people, and between people and the river itself.

These presentations provided an ideal foundation for cultivating gratitude, appreciation, and even joy as we rafted down a section of the newly restored Klamath River.

Witnessing the energy of the largest cohort of River Studies and Leadership Certificate students ever at an RMS meeting, seeing former students like Katie Schmidt — doing vital work at American Rivers, and connecting with folks from our NSF River Field Studies Network — further fueled this sense of optimism.

Huge thanks to the RMS staff Risa Shimoda, Bekah Price, James Major (among with many others), and all the speakers for crafting such a meaningful and uplifting program. It provided a much-needed reminder of our collective capacity for incredible, positive change.

Feeling hopeful and inspired! ❖

“... one of the most impactful professional gatherings I’ve ever attended.”



**Participants** from 32 states, 125 organizations, and 11 universities explored this year’s theme: *Restoring Rivers for a Resilient Future*. The program featured dynamic plenaries, immersive field sessions, and hands-on workshops.  
Photo: Cannon Colegrove

## “Simply an Inspiring Symposium”

*In our opening plenary, Amy Bowers Cordalis from Ridges to Riffles Indigenous Conservation Group shared a message of hope and determination — that we can do what seems impossible on our rivers because we have seen this historic transformation on the Klamath River.*  
Photo: Bekah Price

*During the closing plenary, Indigenous youth from Paddle Tribal Waters — a program of Rios to Rivers — shared their powerful journey of preparing for the first descent of the newly reconnected Klamath River. Their interview with Sam Carter was recorded live for The River Radius podcast.*  
Photo: James Vonesh



## Symposium Field Trips Bring Learning to Life

### Klamath Rafting



Photo: Jared Skaggs

“It was truly amazing to paddle the Klamath River, which flows from southern Oregon to north California, with so many other river advocates. The Klamath is culturally important to the Yurok, Karuk, and Shasta Tribes, and had been dammed for over a century. During our float, we saw an abandoned earthen log flume, once greased with bear fat to slide logs down the hillside. We passed dry lake beds that have been restored to free-flowing river, and witnessed areas where salmon are finally able to swim upstream once again. The field session provided in-person, hands-on education that simply can’t be replicated through videos or articles.”

— Jared Skaggs  
Grand River Dam Authority

### Klamath Driving



Participants in the Klamath River driving and rafting trips saw the river from an overlook since the land around the river will not be accessible until the Shasta Indian Nation completes a cultural assessment. Photo: James Vonesh

### Rogue River Access Design

This half-day field trip along the Rogue combined site analysis and cultural reflection. Starting at Gold Hill Sports Park, participants evaluated river access points using the River Access Planning Guide, discussing strategies to enhance access while preserving natural and cultural resources.



Photo: Ben Fowler / PARKS360

### Rogue Watershed Restoration

The field trip on Bear Creek Greenway explored stream restoration through a floodplain reconnection project that improves water quality and fish habitat in an area severely burned by the Alameda Fire in 2020. Attendees learned how restoration efforts enhance ecosystem resilience, protect infrastructure, and support healthier waterways.



Photo: Ethan Burroughs

*“I enjoyed seeing the progress towards restoration efforts on an important tributary that feeds into the Rogue River, which houses spawning habitat for key species like steelhead and Chinook salmon.”*  
— Ethan Burroughs

### Symposium-Goers Take to the Rapids on the Rogue

by Ben Fowler

On day two of the 2025 RMS Symposium in Ashland, Oregon, sunlight and blue sky danced across the churning waters of the Rogue River while over twenty River Management Society (RMS) members traded retro conference rooms for PFDs and paddles. The half-day whitewater trip, hosted by Rogue Rafting Company, offered thrilling rapids and a deeper connection to one of Oregon’s most iconic waterways along the 5.5-mile Nugget Falls run.

The Rogue Rafting Company, family-run and operated by Ben and Jade, transformed a scenic riverbank at Gold Hill Sports Park into an outdoor dining room for lunch. After lunch, guides showcased their experience and sarcasm to get the crew pumped and safe for the adventure to come with a great safety talk. Given the temperature of the water and elevated water levels that day, everyone donned fashionable wetsuits and booties.

This river section is known for its rapids at “Nugget Falls” (also known as Hayes Falls) and “Power House” (also known as Ti’lomihk Falls), which both hold class IV whitewater ratings. At the beginning, the river offered us a calm mellow current, but it gradually progressed in rapid size and excitement level. Our raft guides knew the section well; as we navigated the rapids they offered insights into the region’s Indigenous history, the gold rush era that brought settlers to these banks, and the ongoing conservation efforts along the Rogue.

The river ecosystem revealed itself with each bend. Osprey and bald eagles circled overhead, while deer and great blue heron occasionally appeared at the water’s edge. Majestic Ponderosa pine, Douglas fir, and incense cedar dominated the landscape. Closer to the water’s edge, riparian species like red and white alder, black cottonwood, Oregon ash, and various willow created a lush corridor of green. Bursts of color came from the distinctive madrone trees, with their reddish bark, and manzanita, known for its twisting branches.

Before we knew it, the rapids had been run and some even went for a swim (you know who you are ;)/heart emoji) as we approached the take-out. Conversations turned to applying our experience to management challenges in our own home watersheds. All-in-all, the half-day trip accomplished what conference rooms rarely can — spreading river experience, education, inspiration, and connection to us all. ❖

### Rogue Rafting



Fisher’s Ferry Boat Ramp on the Rogue River outside of Gold Hill, Oregon. Photo: Ben Fowler / PARKS360



## 2025 RMS River Management Training Symposium



Dave Muerer (RES) shares insights on the Klamath dam removals and restoration during the driving tour. Photo: Risa Shimoda



The Southeast Chapter was one of several to organize a meet-up at the Symposium. Photo: Bekah Price

Attendees received a commemorative gift at check-in in honor of the Klamath dam removal and ongoing restoration efforts. The muslin bag included native seeds being planted along the river, a piece of the Iron Gate Dam, and a clay coin imprinted with native seed stamps. River Management Society thanks Dave Muerer at RES for donating the seeds and Bill Kuntz for collecting — and thoughtfully breaking into travel-sized pieces— the rock from the dam.



Orion Hatch and Tamara Eddy brought big energy and playful banter to our live auction, rallying the crowd for this exciting fundraiser. Photo: Bekah Price

## Congratulations 2025 RMS Award Winners

by Helen Clough with input from nominations

The River Management Society (RMS) awards were presented at three events in March and April. Although only one awardee was physically present at the 2025 River Management Symposium in Ashland, Oregon, all recipients were recognized there, as well as at the separate events described.

### Outstanding Contribution to River Management Award — Joan Stemler

**Joan Stemler**, Chief of Water Control Operations at the St. Louis District of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE), is the 2025 award recipient in recognition of her outstanding contributions to the field of river management.

Joan oversees the day-to-day operations of the lower three locks and dams on the Upper Mississippi River. Since the 1930s, these operations had been focused exclusively on navigation. Joan is a strong advocate for stakeholder involvement and heard the concerns of other resource managers about habitat loss on the Upper Mississippi. She decided to do something almost unheard of in the federal government; she acted without conducting a long study or asking permission. She knew what was in her authority and what was legal even though it had never been done before, and she just did it.

Starting in 1994 Joan developed the implementation plan for Environmental Pool Management. The upper river is characterized by a series of locks and dams that had lost most of its original vegetation. In the past, vegetation projects were leveled off areas that were alternately pumped dry and flooded to provide habitat. Typically, these projects cost between 3,000 and 5,000 dollars per acre annually and are connected to the river through outlet structures. She developed the program that through manipulation of pool levels exposed thousands of acres of mudflats and turned them into lush vegetation at no additional expense and fully integrated into the river ecosystem.

What started as a one-year demonstration project is now standard operation procedure. Environmental Pool Management has changed and improved through adaptive management over the past 30 years. It has produced thousands of acres of vegetation each year and has restored some species of plants that many thought were lost in this section of the river. Environmental Pool Management uses the natural seed base of the area. The concept is to work with what nature provides and not against it. This habitat provides many benefits including food for waterfowl.

Joan has organized and led river management conferences for the sustainable river program so river professionals throughout the Greater Mississippi River Basin take a fresh look at what is possible. Serving as the long-term Water Control Champion



Joan Stemler was honored in a virtual ceremony with colleagues on March 31.

for the Mississippi Valley Division, she has organized and led meetings of river managers throughout the basin that has led to a more sustainable and systemic approach to river management. Joan has been a change agent in leading her peers to think environmental enhancement in everything they do.

Her work creating and refining Environmental Pool Management has had a large impact well beyond her district. Currently the USACE Navigation Environmental Sustainability Program is focusing on this type of river management across Upper Mississippi to address critical habitat needs.

Joan has been a true trailblazer — not only in the science of river management but also for women in the USACE. She was the first woman to hold several key positions and has broken the mold of what a Water Control Manager can achieve. Her groundbreaking contributions to river management have likely made her the most highly decorated Water Manager in USACE history. RMS was proud to honor Joan Stemler for her work and lasting impact.

## Thank You Dennis

All the award winners receive beautiful wooden commemorative plaques that have been provided by past RMS President Dennis Willis of Sustaining Landscapes in Price, Utah.

Dennis was once again present at the symposium for the in-person presentation and to showcase the plaques.

(continued, page 26)



# Congratulations 2025 RMS Award Winners

## Outstanding Contribution to the River Management Society Award — Lelia Mellen

The award recipient for 2025 Outstanding Contribution to the River Management Society (RMS) was **Lelia Mellen**, former National Park Service employee and Northwest Chapter Events Coordinator. Since joining RMS in 1993, Lelia has embodied “all things appreciated” as a member, volunteer, and partner. She defines true commitment through her warm hospitality, down-to-earth approach to life, and resolute pragmatism — all of which have greatly benefited RMS and its mission.

Every membership organization seeks for its members to feel welcome, at any time, to participate in events and dialogue with peers, whether they have weighed in the week before or have not been in touch for years. Whenever Lelia shows up, she is always aware of the organization’s current programs and recent accomplishments — the best an organization can expect.

She has gone well beyond this, however, volunteering for her local chapter — twice! Lelia offered to serve the Northeast Chapter as its Vice President for a term beginning in 2010. When her Chapter President stepped away unexpectedly the next year, Lelia assumed the presidency and continued as the chapter’s leader for another extended term, during which she led and/or helped organize river trips on the Great Egg Harbor (2013) and Connecticut (2014) Rivers, on the Missisquoi and Piscataqua (during the 2015 National Board meeting), the Bronx River (2016), and on the Anacostia and Potomac in 2017. She was also an eager participant of the Allagash Wilderness Waterway chapter trip in 2021.

Lelia turned a page in her own book by moving to Montana the very next year and, without skipping a beat, offered to serve as the Events Coordinator for the Northwest Chapter! Together with her fellow stellar officers, she organized or supported an ambitious, unprecedented suite of trips on the North Fork Flathead and Snake in 2023, Middle Fork Flathead, Nooksack, Rogue, and Main Payette in 2024!

Lelia was, without a doubt, the National Park Service’s (NPS) most committed advocate for the opportunities water trails offer — as portals for public awareness and appreciation of rivers, not only as safe and welcoming places for recreation, but also as platforms for learning and outdoor stewardship.

RMS received grants from the NPS Rivers, Trails, and Conservation Assistance Program in 2020 and 2021 to establish a state-based river managers’ working group, with Lelia serving as the partnership coach. As it turned out, there were not enough ‘state’ partners to amass a following for collaborating on water trails or other state-based systems.



*Lelia Mellen, 2025 award recipient for the Outstanding Contribution to the River Management Society*

Monthly meet-ups morphed into the River Management Roundtables, which have now become the organization’s means to address and encourage timely discussion about issues among river, watershed, and water trails leaders.

With the growth of state-based Offices of Outdoor Recreation and the designation of water trails as public amenities, Lelia has now joined the evolving RMS Water Trails Working Group to help nurture and advance the community of water trails leaders.

By encouraging, attending, and leading chapter events and supporting RMS’ effort to develop a sense of community among water trails leaders, Lelia Mellen stands tall.

*Opposite (l): Kevin Colburn with Kristina Rylands at the 2025 River Management Symposium in Ashland, Oregon.*

*Opposite (r): Liz Lacy*

## Frank Church Wild and Scenic Rivers Award — Kevin Colburn & Liz Lacy

**Kevin Colburn** of American Whitewater was recognized for his long-term commitment and contributions to the management, enhancement, and protection of designated Wild and Scenic Rivers (WSRs). Kevin has consistently supported the creation and maintenance of data and information for WSRs through contributions to and stewardship of American Whitewater’s National Whitewater Inventory and RMS’s National Rivers Project. Kevin has also helped create videos on river and paddling safety, dam removal, forest planning, all of which often relate to WSRs.

Kevin is an active member of the Wild and Scenic Rivers Coalition, and is helping lead efforts to designate new WSRs through the Montana Headwaters Legacy Act, Nantahala-Pisgah Forest Plan Revision, Nolichucky Wild and Scenic River campaign, and North Fork French Broad River Wild and Scenic River campaign, along with increasing and protecting access to the headwaters of the Chattooga Wild and Scenic River. All of these projects have involved working with many different organizations, businesses, agencies, and individuals.

Kevin frequently writes about and communicates techniques for managing large woody debris in WSRs. He has contributed technical expertise to dam removal projects and has worked to advance knowledge and practices in fisheries restoration, while also supporting river protection and recreational access efforts.

Kevin has led several meetings and trainings related to WSR campaigns, designations, stewardship, and recreation. These events have occurred locally with residents and community members, in virtual settings with coalitions and partners, as well as in-person with congressional staffers in Washington, D.C. Kevin has consistently participated in opportunities to provide comment on public land projects involving current or prospective WSRs. Kevin does a great job of distilling complex projects for the sake of widespread understanding and action. He is strategic and forward-thinking, with a keen understanding of where and how to recommend changes to agency processes, budgets, and more — giving projects and campaigns the best possible chance for success.



**Liz Lacy** of the National Park Service (NPS) was also recognized with this award. She has worked on the Partnership Wild and Scenic Rivers program for two decades. She is dedicated both to the rivers she supports and also to advancing the WSR System as a whole. She has worked on a number of federally- designated rivers and also supported the Westfield River in Massachusetts.

Along the rivers she has worked on — the Farmington, the Eightmile, and the Westfield — Liz is especially known for her collaboration with the many volunteers who make up the Partnership River Management Councils. Liz was instrumental in re-establishing a vibrant and successful River Council on the Westfield River as her first foray into the wild and scenic world many years ago. She helped develop the Farmington River Coordinating Committee into a model for the entire Partnership WSR Program. She empowers local volunteer appointees within their communities and together as effective Councils guiding the WSR designations.

Liz has piloted and led both Visual Resource Assessment and Visitor Use Management programs and contractual arrangements tailored to the non-federal Partnership WSR Model. Building off her Farmington and Westfield roots, Liz has helped expand the program in Connecticut and Massachusetts on rivers including the Eightmile, Lower Farmington, Nashua, Squannacook, and Nissitissit Rivers, serving as a mentor to both NPS staff and local partners navigating the WSR Study process.

Liz has always been willing to think beyond the regular stakeholders, bringing in experts and other resource people to do what was best for the rivers and the communities. She has tirelessly assisted communities, partners, and river councils to navigate the difficult waters of implementing WSR Act protections, including Section 7 of the Act, in the Partnership WSR environment.

Liz has also been willing to share her knowledge with other river professionals. She has presented many numbers of times to RMS Symposia and elsewhere to explain Section 7, restoration, and partnership issues, among others. Liz was presented with her award along with her nominator, Lelia Mellen. ❖





# Ode to Dan Thomas

## March 16, 1960 to October 19, 2024



“I first noticed Dan at an all-employee meeting in Ontario many years ago, but we didn’t interact much at the time, as he was not yet involved with the rivers and recreation program. His big beard and quiet demeanor suggested there might have been a lot more beneath the surface; as time went on, and I got to know him better, and that certainly proved to be the case.

On an early spring river patrol on the Grande Ronde, with almost freezing temperatures and constant rain, I was surprised to round a bend in the river and see a campsite with rafts ahead. I rowed ashore to talk to the group, bracing myself for the likelihood that at that time of year, and in those poor conditions, I would find problems with campfires and resource impacts. Many of the early season boaters at that time tended to leave their “Leave No Trace” ethics at home. I soon realized that these campers were not going to be part of the problem, which came as a welcome relief. A few moments later, through the pelting rain and overcast shadows, Dan appeared — beard and all — to talk awhile on the river’s edge. He seemed as surprised to see me there as I was to see him. We parted with a handshake and what seemed like a non-verbal recognition of meeting someone of like-mind.

Fast forward a few more years, and the need would arise for additional boat operators to help facilitate multi-day river trips on the Grande Ronde with the Nez Perce tribe, and some Forest Service and BLM leadership trips. Dan stepped up on all those occasions and helped us make those important river trips possible. It was during those floats that we began “talking shop” — comparing notes, discussing policies, and starting what would

become a lasting friendship. Although we had slightly different approaches and ideas about how to do things (no two rivers are the same, nor two river programs), we also shared a common ground. We both loved the rivers and the country through which they flowed. Dan used to say, “We manage for solitude.” We had fun teasing each other about how the Owyhee “stole” the river operations facility at Rome from the Grande Ronde (true story!). We also had a running “debate” on which raft maker was better: Maravia, or Sotar? (if you know, you know!)

On one particularly memorable trip, I needed an experienced raft operator to conduct a grueling float down the Grande Ronde during extremely low river flows, transporting a team of fire investigators. We needed at least four rafts to keep the weight as low as possible to achieve the trip objectives; we rowed, pushed, pulled, and waded 25 miles downstream to reach our first night’s destination — arriving exhausted but intact. Dan delivered once again, expertly reading the water and navigating his raft through the shallow, rocky waters without incident or complaint.

After helping me on the Grande Ronde several times over the years, the occasion finally came to help Dan on the Owyhee River, something I had always wanted to do. That Owyhee trip will stay with me forever, and I have no doubt that I will wish I had taken better notes. He was one of those rare individuals that can say a lot with very few words. I am honored to have shared some river time with him and only regret that we didn’t start decades earlier.

— Kevin Hoskins, Park Ranger Baker Field Office, Oregon

“I first met Dan in a BLM recreation permitting class I was teaching in New Mexico. He had that quiet presence of someone taking it all in, absorbing and thinking. We spoke a little during that week about Oregon rivers and his work on the Owyhee, but it wasn’t until years later that I was able to spend time with him on those rivers.

Fast forward five years, and there we were — meeting on the banks of the John Day with mutual friends and old co-workers — when Dan came up and reminded me of that class. In typical Dan form, he started out with a complement and then proceeded to ask my thoughts about a couple of different topics. He was always curious, always wondering what other views were out there. As our group made its way down the canyon, it was the afternoon of day three or four when the headwinds began in earnest. It was just Dan and his wife Christine in one boat and me in another. We put our heads down and pushed on the oars, zig-zagging back and forth across the river with the wind gusts, slowly making headway without saying a word for hours. In those silent hours I admired how effortlessly Dan kept the pace. I knew then I wanted to spend a lot more time on the water with him. And we did. But not enough.

Over the next four years, I had the privilege of spending over 50 days across five different rivers with Dan. I came to admire what a consummate river professional he was. Of course, there was his Dutch oven cooking — amazing! And the guitar — always customized entertainment! But there was also his approach to safety and looking after others in the group. And then stories. From meeting some of the pioneering river runners of our time to telling the funny stories of coming upon ill-prepared groups or dysfunctional dynamics, Dan had just about seen it all during both his private adventures and river ranger patrols.

And of course, his family — Dan was so proud of his kids and usually had several family trip stories for every river. And although the stories described river things like camps, rapids, boats, they were really snapshots in time of his wife and kids through the years — growing up together on rivers and learning about life.

The next time I scout a rapid I know that I’ll feel Dan there. And in my mind, I’ll hear the question, “Well, Dave, what do you think?” And I’ll answer. Dan always made me a better boater, and he made people around him feel just a little better about themselves every day.

And although I miss him, I keep thinking of what another of Dan’s friends, Brent, said:

He’s out ahead of us now,  
scouting a new river.

— Dave Ballenger, retired from BLM,  
and friend of Dan

“I had the pleasure of working with Dan who was on the environmental compliance team at the Burning Man event in 2024 and 2023. Dan was friendly when contacting event participants and sharing information about burn barrels, fuel containment, and grey and black water. He even found a camp that was offering Dutch oven-cooked food and visited with the camp to share his love of Dutch oven cooking. Dan told me stories of his family and his intense love of the activities they shared together.

I was fortunate to participate in a 25-day private rafting trip through the Grand Canyon with Dan. He was always looking out for others and earned the nickname “Harbor Master” during our boat wrangling sessions in the dark, between midnight and four in the morning. Dan was very comfortable and accomplished on the oars, a true outdoorsman. He was musically inclined and serenaded us in camp at night with custom lyrics to honor the personalities and characteristics of each trip member. ❖

— Jennifer Jones, Assistant Field Manager Moab Field Office, Utah

### OBITUARIES

**Daniel “Dan” Joseph Thomas**  
March 16, 1960 - Oct 19, 2024

Daniel “Dan” Thomas, 64, of Vale, Oregon, passed away peacefully on October 19, 2024. Dan was born on March 16, 1960, to Jim and Jeanette Thomas of Camarillo, CA. Dan was an avid outdoorsman who dedicated his life to exploring the beauty of nature.

Dan grew up in Camarillo, graduating from Camarillo High School in 1978. Dan took an interest in the outdoors at an early age starting with backpacking. He backpacked the Sespe, and the entire John Muir Trail with his father. Post high school, Dan obtained a welding certificate and began a lucrative career working on the offshore platforms, and establishing his own business.

Dan married Christina Mowrer in 1984 and they started their family, living in Sonoma, CA. In 1992, the Thomas family relocated to Vale, OR. Dan self taught himself many skills, including farming, cattle raising, and how to break and tame wild horses. Dan and Chris raised their three children in Vale, getting involved on the school board and supporting the kid’s interests. Dan was a contractor, and later an employee for the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Vale Office, where he was able to explore much of the Vale District open space by horseback and river raft. Dan served as the River Ranger on the Owyhee River for many years. Dan was knowledgeable on the recreation opportunities as well as the history of the area. He continued to work at the BLM until his passing.

Dan’s hobbies were many. He took



friends and family on pack-horse and hunting trips into the Oregon backcountry. He was a white-water rafting enthusiast tackling the Grand Canyon four times, the Gates of Lodore, the Middle Fork of the Salmon River, Payette and others. He loved rowing his drift-boat for friends and family chasing Steelhead on the Clearwater and Rogue Rivers. Dan was also a musician, playing harmonica, and multiple string instruments, competing, and winning the People’s Choice Award at Yellow Pine Harmonica Festival.

Dan is survived by his wife, Chris Thomas, and his children and grandchildren: Dani (Nick) Geyer (Ada and Lucia) of Loveland, CO; Milissa (Russ) Seals of Boise, ID (Mami and Dan’s first grandson due in November); Jake Thomas (Crystal) of Vale, OR; and foster son Caesar Perales of Ontario, OR. He is also survived by his brother Michael (Kristie) Thomas, his sisters, Annalise (Jim) Winfrey; Ellen (Bruce) Jochums; Margaret Baltzell; and many extended family members and friends. Dan is preceded in death by his parents, Jim and Jeanette Thomas.

A celebration of Dan’s life will be held in the spring at the Thomas home in Vale, OR. In lieu of flowers, consider making a donation to your favorite charity or to the Vale FFA in Dan’s memory.

Dan will be remembered for his zest for life, love for the outdoors, and the joy he brought to all who knew him. His spirit will forever live on in the hearts of his family and friends.



# In memorandum: Do cows affect solitude?

There's no better tribute than to quote the author himself. Inspired by a question raised during National Environmental Policy Analysis analysis — “Do cows affect solitude?” The simplicity of the story captures the core essence of what wilderness and Wild and Scenic Rivers might mean to those of us fortunate enough to be their stewards. Dan's viewpoints on simplicity encourages reflection and offers a sense of peace.

— Kari Points, Outdoor Recreation Planner, Malheur Field Office, Oregon

by Dan Thomas (written January 2023)

## The Long Day

In Homedale, Idaho, I pull into a dirt lot to pick up the other half of the Malheur Resource Area recreation staff. With Kari's horse, Sugar, loaded in the trailer alongside my horse, Haily, we head south on Highway 95. Three hours and 150 miles later, we turn left and slow from 55 mph to 10 mph as we hit the gravel washboard road. After two hours of bouncing down Star Valley Road, we turn right onto a primitive route. A half mile later, we arrive at our night's destination: Bell Springs. We go about the tasks of setting up camp: unloading the horses, unsaddling them, brushing them, walking them to water, and feeding them. The back of the flatbed truck turns into a countertop for prepping dinner. Cots are set up — all in silence. I wonder if we sense the quietness, and we don't want to disturb it. With one day behind us, we have only just reached the edge of the Upper West Little Owyhee River Wilderness Study Area.

The beams of two headlamps cut through the morning darkness as we make coffee, feed the horses, and saddle them. We only have six miles to ride to reach our destination, but those six miles across “the lavas.” Over the years, we have



Dan Thomas, Bureau of Land Management, pictured at Iron Point Canyon.

searched for better ways into the West Little Owyhee, but *the lavas* provide the best route. “Best” doesn't mean good; it just means better than any other option. We leave the truck behind with two quarts of water each. *The lavas* are a sea of sharp basalt — more rock than soil. We follow the trails of 100 years of livestock grazing, as the cows know the route through this maze of sharp rock. At times, we walk our horses — partly due to empathy for them and partly for self-preservation. A lame horse this far out would not be good. One and one-half days after leaving town, we reach our destination. We stand on the rim above the West Little Owyhee River.

**Solitude:** *the state of being alone or remote from others; isolation. A lonely or secluded place.*

We stand in the middle of solitude. What makes this place special isn't something it has, but what it doesn't have: the evidence

of man. We drop into the canyon and head downstream. The horses seem happy to have soil beneath their hooves instead of rock. We don't talk much, simply taking in the quiet. Despite the peace of this place, we know we need to leave and head back onto the rocks. We depart the West Little Owyhee River via the remnant of an old wagon trail. We follow the rock cairns and wonder who piled them. The sun drops below the horizon, and with no moonlight to take its place, it becomes pitch black. We are hours from the truck. We drop our reins to let our horses guide us. Horses have senses that we humans lost when we became civilized. In the distance, I see the silhouette of the horse trailer.

We unsaddle, brush, water, and feed the horses. As for us, sleep is more important than food. As I fall asleep, I hear a cow in the distance, bellowing for her calf. It is a peaceful sound, and I hope she finds her calf. ❖

# Buffalo River Rendezvous: A Confluence of Chapters, Universities, and Career Stages on America's First National River

by James Vonesh

The Buffalo National River, carving its way through the rugged, forested Ozark Mountains of northwest Arkansas, is more than just a beautiful waterway; it stands as a testament to the power of conservation, civic engagement, and public lands stewardship. Stretching more than 150 miles, known for its soaring bluffs, deep pools, and expansive gravel bars, the Buffalo holds the unique distinction of being America's first national river, designated on March 1, 1972. Its protection was a result of a passionate, years-long battle against proposals by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to construct dams for flood control and hydroelectric power.

Champions like Supreme Court Justice William Douglas and local leaders such as Dr. Neil Compton of the Ozark Society advocated fiercely for its preservation. Their efforts pushed back against dam proponents who viewed leaving the river in its natural state as folly and believed all rivers should be dammed. The decision to protect the Buffalo ensured it remained a free-flowing, native fish fishery, avoiding the fate of becoming a series of stagnant impoundments and the potential for widespread development like hotels and motels along its banks.

Photo: James Vonesh



Today, the Buffalo is a popular destination, attracting millions of visitors annually who come to camp, paddle, hike, and soak in its sparkling waters and pristine vistas. This recreational activity supports tourism and jobs in the region. Yet, despite its protected status, the river faces ongoing challenges related to water quality and the increasing impact of recreation demand. American Rivers named the Buffalo one of America's Most Endangered Rivers in 2019 due to this threat to the river's clean water from concentrated animal feeding operations, and concerns about potential pollution from millions of gallons of liquid waste impacting groundwater and the river itself. While specific actions, including state-funded closure of the hog farm, have addressed some immediate dangers, water quality challenges persist.

The Spring 2025 Buffalo River Rendezvous, a joint event by the River Management Society (RMS) Southeast (SE) and Midwest (MW) Chapters, took place to celebrate the Buffalo's natural and historical importance while also addressing current challenges. This event was designed as a unique and collaborative field course, bringing together river professionals with students and faculty from multiple universities, united by a shared passion for river stewardship.

While RMS has a tradition of rendezvous for shared learning among professionals, this particular event incorporated innovative elements that we hope that other RMS chapters will adopt in future River Rendezvous.

(continued, page 32)



*(Buffalo River Rendezvous, continued from page 31)*

**A Journey of Collaboration**

One novel element of this RMS River Rendezvous was its integration into a hybrid course — combining online and in-person learning — for credit at three collaborating universities. Students pursuing the RMS’s River Studies and Leadership Certificate Program met virtually for preparatory sessions, focusing on the human and natural history of the Buffalo River with guest experts. The institutions included: Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU, led by Dr. James Vonesh, SE Chapter President), the University of Tennessee Chattanooga (led by Dr. Elise Chapman, SE Chapter Officer), and Northeastern State University (led by Drs. Lizz Waring and Cheyanne Olson).

The faculty leadership from each of these schools reflects the fruits of the NSF-funded River Field Studies Network (RFSN) community of practice, which focused on building capacity for university educators to teach field courses in and around riverine environments. All four participating faculty are RFSN alumni. This community of practice has become an incubator for new RMS River Studies and Leadership Certificate (RSLC) programs and coordinators across the country. For faculty, this trip served as professional development and an opportunity to further hone their craft, inspiring them to implement similar experiential learning models at their home institutions. Dr. Lizz Waring was awarded the “DaVinci Institutes Creativity in Education Fellowship” for a proposal focused on the trip.

RMS professionals from both SE and MW Chapters offered their expertise to the students. Steve Chesterton, Wild and Scenic Rivers Program Manager, and Andrew Eddy, both from the U.S. Forest Service, taught students about the Wild and Scenic Rivers Program and scenic rivers in Arkansas. Darrell Bowman, Recreation and Access Coordinator for the Arkansas Fish and Game Commission, who proposed the idea for a chapter rendezvous on the Buffalo, spoke about the biological diversity of the region. David Peterson of the Ozark Society discussed some of the contemporary challenges facing the river.

In addition to learning about the region, students also planned a collaborative observational research project to explore variation in land cover across the Buffalo River and rivers in their home regions, as well as the relationship between land cover and water quality, as assessed using macroinvertebrates as bioindicators.

This preparation was framed to enhance our learning and appreciation of the joint Rendezvous, which took place over the shared spring breaks of the three universities in mid-March. The heart of the experience was the multi-day field expedition itself, where students and faculty converged on the Buffalo River for an immersive float trip and hiking excursion. The journey began long before reaching the riverbanks, involving lengthy drives from distant states, setting the stage for immersion and shared experience. Upon arrival in the upper Buffalo region, the learning became hands-on, starting with hikes that provided a foundational understanding of the river’s unique geological setting.



*Photo: James Vonesh*

Exploring places like the Goat Trail to Big Bluff, which overlooks the Upper Buffalo River in the Ponca Wilderness, offered breathtaking views of the river and its striking karst landscape. A walk to Lost Valley allowed hikers to engage closely with the topography, witnessing waterfalls, natural arches, disappearing rivers, underground streams, and a waterfall hidden within a cave amphitheater. These excursions connected the academic concepts learned in online sessions to the physical reality of the river’s unique karst features.

The narrative then shifted to the water and

additional participants joined. Notably, student and faculty outdoor professionals from the University of Arkansas University Recreation program, led by Dr. Mike Hoover, played a critical role as outfitters and group facilitators. In addition, career river professionals Jack Henderson (MountainTrue, French Broad Paddle Trail), Darrell Bowman (AFGC), Jared Skaggs (Grand River Dam Authority), Leif Kindberg (new SE RMS Chapter Vice President, Illinois River Watershed Project), and Ed Fite (MW RMS President, formerly Oklahoma Scenic Rivers Commission) joined, providing networking opportunities across chapters, universities, and career stages. Dodging early spring thunderstorms, our expedition numbering 29 strong put on at Kyle’s Landing for a paddle covering approximately 30 miles downstream to Carver Landing over two nights and three days.

The experience on the river was multifaceted. Paddling the Buffalo provided direct engagement, allowing participants to hear the sounds of the river and connect with its wildness. It involved navigating the river, which highlighted the practical, on-the-water learning curves involved. Evenings were spent camping on a large, rocky cobble bar, a quintessential Buffalo experience that allows for a deep connection with the environment. During the paddling portion, students actively collected observational data on aquatic insects found on the river’s cobblestones, integrating a course-embedded research project directly into the trip.

**Experiential Learning and Knowledge Transfer**

This expedition fostered invaluable experiential learning and knowledge transfer between generations and disciplines. Students had direct opportunities to collect data and engage with river professionals from various organizations, hearing their passions for rivers and gaining insights into real-world river management challenges and solutions.

One student reflected: “I was able to gain a new appreciation for freshwater which I really enjoyed. Part of that was because of the river professionals that spoke to us. I loved hearing how passionate they were about rivers ... It made me want to get involved.” Another found that seeing the river they had learned about beforehand significantly increased their motivation for conservation and science.

The interaction wasn’t just academic; it involved building community and understanding the human dimensions of stewardship. Hearing professionals talk about their fields “all seemed to come back to that concept of getting people involved and on the rivers will lead to better management.” Participants noted the value of connecting with like-minded people and learning about everyone’s stories, finding it “insightful and inspiring that not just environmental scientists are interested in protecting our rivers. It takes a village.” Many students felt the immersive experience “lit the spark,” fostering a deeper connection to rivers and igniting aspirations for careers in stewardship and conservation.

The collaborative research component, a Course-Embedded Undergraduate Research Experience, offered practical skills by having students analyze data collected

on the Buffalo and replicate data collection in their home rivers for comparison. The project culminated in collaborative poster presentations, allowing students to engage deeply with real-world river issues and contribute to scientific understanding.

Challenges along the trip included dealing with storms, navigating rapids, and pivoting our takeout, reflected inherent aspects of complex field logistics of river trips and represented crucial ‘real world’ learning opportunities in adaptability and risk management, vital skills for future river professionals. Overall trip feedback underscored the overwhelmingly positive impact on participants’ motivation and career paths.

**Lessons from the Current: Inspiring Future Stewards**

The Buffalo River Rendezvous, through its innovative blend of academic study, immersive field experience, and multi-generational collaboration, offers a powerful model for training the next generation of river managers and scientists. It demonstrates the effectiveness of connecting students directly with the environments they study and the professionals who dedicate their careers to these places.

By bringing together diverse stakeholders on the water, these initiatives not only celebrate the unique natural history of places like the Buffalo National River, with its rich heritage, stunning geology, and complex ecological challenges, but also equip

participants with the skills, knowledge, and, critically, the passion needed to address the enduring challenges facing our nation’s rivers. It also builds the community we need to steward our rivers well into a complex future. The opportunity for individuals to experience the Buffalo River firsthand – to hike its bluffs, camp on its gravel bars, and navigate its currents – makes its preservation deeply personal. The Buffalo River Rendezvous serves as a vivid reminder that protecting “America’s first National River” is not just about preserving a place but about cultivating the dedicated stewards who will ensure its free-flowing future for generations to come. ❖

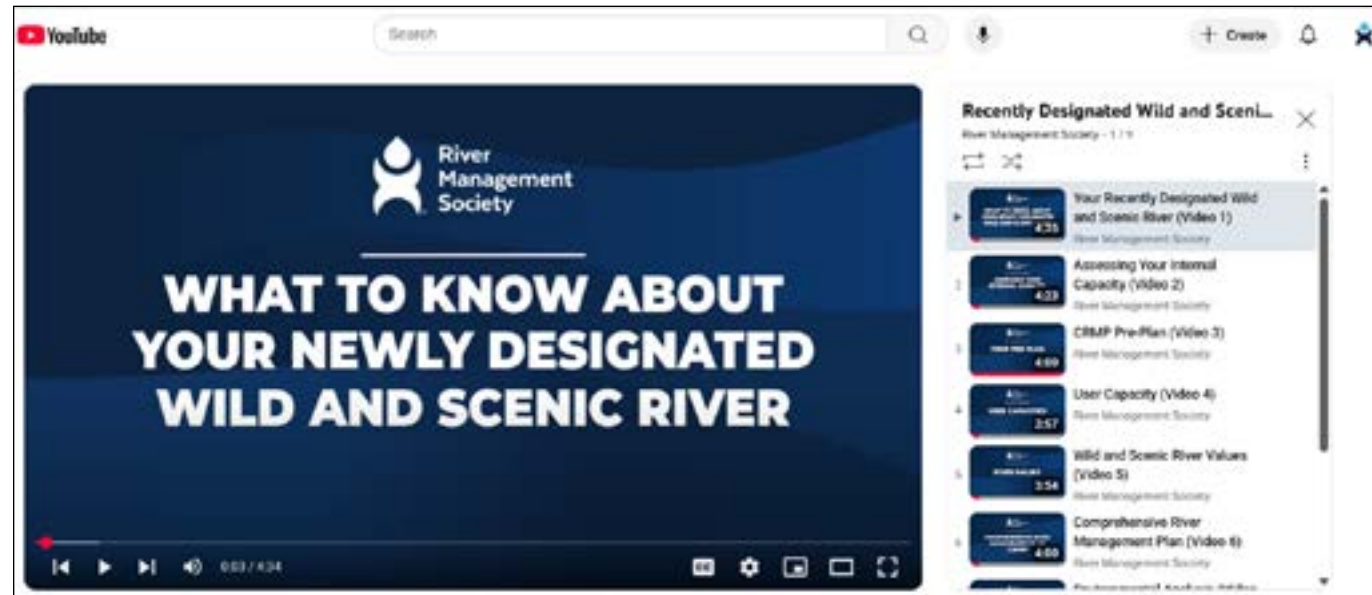


*Photo: James Vonesh*

*James Vonesh, PhD, is RMS Southeast Chapter President, River Studies and Leadership Certificate Coordinator and River Field Studies Network Lead at Virginia Commonwealth University.*



## Introducing a New Educational Video Series on Wild and Scenic River Management



*A collaborative effort by federal agency staff, this online series supports managers of newly designated wild and scenic rivers.*

by Bekah Price

Managing a newly designated Wild and Scenic River can be both an honor and a challenge — especially if you are navigating the process for the first time.

To make the learning curve a little less steep, the River Management Society (RMS), in partnership with the Interagency Wild and Scenic Rivers Coordinating Council, has released a new series of short videos called Recently Designated Wild and Scenic Rivers: A Training Series.

This collection of nine short videos — each just 2 to 5 minutes long — is designed to introduce river managers, planners, and partner organizations to the foundational elements of wild and scenic river management. Whether you are new to the work or just need a refresher, the series offers practical guidance in a quick, clear, and easy-to-absorb format.

“These videos were created specifically for federal agency staff who are new to wild and scenic river management — whether they’re overseeing a recently designated river or stepping into a new position,” said Risa Shimoda, RMS Executive Director and project collaborator.

“Each video is packed with essential information and links to additional resources for those ready to dive deeper.”

Videos in the series include:

1. Your Recently Designated Wild and Scenic River (4:35)
2. Assessing Your Internal Capacity (4:23)
3. CRMP Pre-Plan (4:00)
4. User Capacity (3:57)
5. Wild and Scenic River Values (3:54)
6. Comprehensive River Management Plan (4:00)
7. Environmental Analysis (3:27)
8. Wild and Scenic Rivers Act: Section 7 (3:36)
9. Climate Change and Wild and Scenic Rivers (2:49)

The series is freely available on the RMS website and YouTube channel. Videos break down complex topics into manageable parts, making them a great starting point or handy reference.

“Wild and Scenic designation is one of the strongest protections a river can have, but if you’re new to the process, it can feel a bit daunting,” says Nancy Taylor, a project collaborator. “These videos offer a clear overview to help you see the big picture and determine next steps for your river.”

The series was a collaborative effort involving input from Wild and Scenic River leads across the four federal river management agencies, as well as RMS. “We’re grateful for the many contributors who shared their expertise,” Taylor says. “This series will be a valuable training resource for years to come.” ❖

## Thank You Hannah Volk

For nearly three years, Hannah has worked with the National Park Service (NPS) Partnership Wild and Scenic Rivers Program in the Northeast, as well as the NPS Hydropower Assistance Program that serves a national team from her office in New Hampshire. Thank you, Hannah, for your contributions to these programs!



*Hannah Volk with Susan Rosebrough in the North Cascades*

“Hannah has been a pleasure to work with. Her communication background, graphic skills, and thoughtful approach has been an asset to our program. She is a considerate team member and has helped us advance a number of initiatives that we would not have been able to do without her support and leadership, including the accessibility toolkit and associated presentations, the website, and annual reporting.”

— Susan Rosebrough,  
*NPS Hydropower Assistance Program*

“Hannah brought her communications and community outreach expertise to her 11-month fellowship with the Partnership Wild and Scenic Rivers Program. Among many other things, she helped plan a multi-day River Access Planning Guide workshop on the Nashua River, developed a much-needed Partnership Wild and Scenic Rivers Primer document, and worked closely with the recently formed York River Stewardship Committee to get their branding and communications projects up and running. She lent her communications, graphic design, and photography skills to the program, designing outreach materials and taking wonderful photos. She has been an incredible asset to the team!”

— Emma Lord,  
*NPS Wild and Scenic Rivers Program*

## New SE Chapter Vice President

## Welcome Leif Kindberg

Executive Director  
Illinois River Watershed Partnership



Leif Kindberg is the Executive Director of the Illinois River Watershed Partnership (IRWP) where he works with a great team on integrated water resources management in partnership with landowners, businesses, municipalities, and others to promote and improve water quality of the Illinois River, economic development of the region, and quality of life in the watershed. Prior to joining IRWP, Leif worked with Tetra Tech Inc, most recently living in Tanzania managing a USAID water resources management program. Leif has a BA in Political Science from California State University Long Beach and MBA from the George Washington University. He grew up on a small farm on a tributary to the Buffalo National River, America’s first national river. He spends as much time as possible chasing water in the Ozark streams and rafting with his wife and two kids. ❖



# Launching a New Guide Helps Stakeholders Champion Accessible Recreation at Hydropower Sites

by Bekah Price

A new guide, *Enhancing Accessible Recreation at Hydropower Projects*, has been released as part of the Hydropower Licensing 101 Toolkit — a comprehensive resource developed through a partnership between the River Management Society, the National Park Service (NPS) Hydropower Assistance Program, and the Hydropower Reform Coalition. The addition helps stakeholders integrate accessibility into recreation planning and ensures that hydropower relicensing reflects the diverse needs of the communities affected.

The *Hydropower Licensing 101 Toolkit* outlines six core competencies for navigating the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission’s hydropower licensing process. It serves as both a primer for newcomers and a deeper resource for seasoned practitioners, offering foundational knowledge, practical guidance, and curated tools.

Building on that foundation, the accessibility guide encourages planners to adopt an “accessibility mindset” — one that prioritizes inclusive design and proactive engagement with all users. It highlights how stakeholders can use the licensing process to recommend infrastructure and amenities that support

equitable access to rivers and reservoirs. This can include boat ramps, portage trails, access points, signage, trails, and more.

The guide also recognizes that accessibility is not one-size-fits-all — it depends on both the user and the type of recreational experience, from shoreline observation to launching a canoe. By approaching accessibility as a holistic concept, the guide offers practical strategies and resources for incorporating equity into planning and design.

While referencing compliance frameworks like the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and the Architectural Barriers Act (ABA), the guide also addresses their limitations — especially around water-adjacent access. To bridge this gap, it highlights tools like *Prepare to Launch! Guidelines for Assessing, Designing & Building Access Sites for Carry-In Watercraft*, as well as case studies such as *Wheels to Water on the Saluda River*, which emphasize context-specific design based on user needs and site characteristics.

Accessible recreation can strengthen communities, build broader public support for hydropower projects, and ensure our rivers and reservoirs are truly open to all. ❖

*Accessible Launch in Brockport, New York. Photo: National Park Service.*



## Statement about the Spring Scam

by Risa Shimoda

In mid-March 2025, River Management Society (RMS) became the victim of a fraud in the form of a sophisticated telephone-based scam, resulting in the loss of close to half of the funds in the RMS bank account. When RMS realized a scam had occurred, we immediately filed a police report and a fraud claim. Roughly seven percent of the funds were able to be recovered, but unfortunately, the rest was lost. The fraud investigation was closed at the end of April.

The impact of this event on RMS’ operations is significant, resulting in our decision to pause the hiring of a River Training Center Coordinator. Other RMS staff are filing in to support those responsibilities, and we intend to restart the hiring of a coordinator as soon as practicable.

While this event has undermined our otherwise successful spring, we will continue to do our best to serve members and fulfill RMS’s mission.

RMS deeply appreciates all the support our membership has provided in the past and we look forward to your continued support in the future. ❖

## Board Response to Members

by RMS Executive Committee

Risa laid out our unfortunate situation with scammers that stole a significant portion of our funds. We want you to know that we stand behind Risa and understand that this could have happened to any of us. We also want you to know that we are updating some of our official policies and procedures to better ensure that this type of fraud (and/or other) never happens to RMS again.

As an Executive Committee, we have often placed the responsibility for financial management on the Executive Director without the level of support that we should have provided. We are addressing that. We are re-establishing the Finance Committee and will be implementing procedures to more carefully track our financial management. In these uncertain times, we are being extra careful with expenditures.

We hope our transparency shows our members that while we have had a major setback, we are not hiding anything and welcome questions or suggestions from members. We also hope you will continue to support RMS as you can. Again, thanks for your continued support to RMS. ❖

## Federal Cuts May Impact River Safety. Help RMS Tell the Story.

River managers across the country know that safety may be compromised as a consequence of new and projected levels of staffing and maintenance for those who work for the federal river-administering agencies. We’re hearing that some rivers — even those expecting hundreds of thousands of visitors this season — may have reduced or no patrols, dirty bathrooms, insufficient rescue operations, and reduced education and safety programming. Impacted rivers include Partnership Wild and Scenic Rivers, whose management is shared between the National Park Service and Councils!

To bring national attention to this issue, RMS is building an national impact map — and we need your voice.

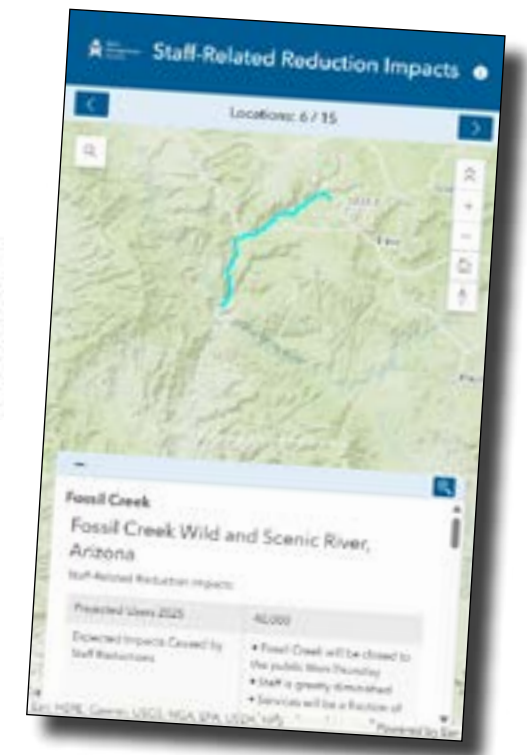
Summer visitation has begun, and we want to list as many rivers as possible. We will then ask for photo updates to visualize changes. Information will be shared anonymously.

Submit rivers using the form on the RMS website or scan the QR code. Send photos showing past or current visitor use and conditions to [james@river-management.org](mailto:james@river-management.org).

Your input will help us illustrate the real-world impacts of these reductions and support adequate staffing. As river managers and stewards, you see with a lens that other visitors do not. Help us tell this national story. ❖



Scan this





Welcome New RMS Members

Associate

Kimberly Balke, Program Director  
Conservation Resource Alliance  
Traverse City, MI

Jessie Pierson, Senior GIS Analyst/Cartographer  
Utah Division of Wildlife Resources  
Mill Creek, UT

Luke Wimmer, Aquatic Restoration Project Manager  
Applegate Partnership and Watershed Council  
Jacksonville, OR

Individual

Cheyenne Olson, Assistant Professor  
Northeastern State University  
Norman, OK

Jonathan O'Donnell, Ecologist  
National Park Service  
Anchorage, AK

Holly Henriksen  
Mississippi National River and Recreation Area  
National Park Service  
St. Paul, MN

Kristin Schaeffer, Project Manager  
Sacramento Municipal Utility District  
Pollock Pines, CA

Cecil Goodman, Faculty Adventure Education  
Prescott College  
Prescott, AZ

Leslie Pomaville, Sr. Recreation / Environmental Planner  
WSP  
Willow Springs, NC

Brian White  
Salmon, ID

Organization

**Save the American River**  
Brenda Gustin, Board Member  
Sacramento, CA

**Allagash Wilderness Waterway**  
Bangor, ME  
Mark Deroche, Superintendent  
Alissa Lutz, Ranger  
Trevor O'Leary, Ranger  
Jay Young, Ranger

**Metroparks Toledo**  
Maumee, OH  
Zurijanne Carter, Chief Natural Resources Officer

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Ava Money  
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Tahlequah, OK

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Annabel Humphrey  
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William McGahey  
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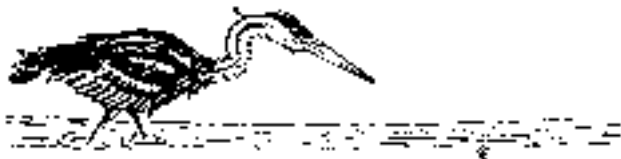
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**Canadian River Management Society**

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tel (613) 729-4004 / dowfink@gmail.com

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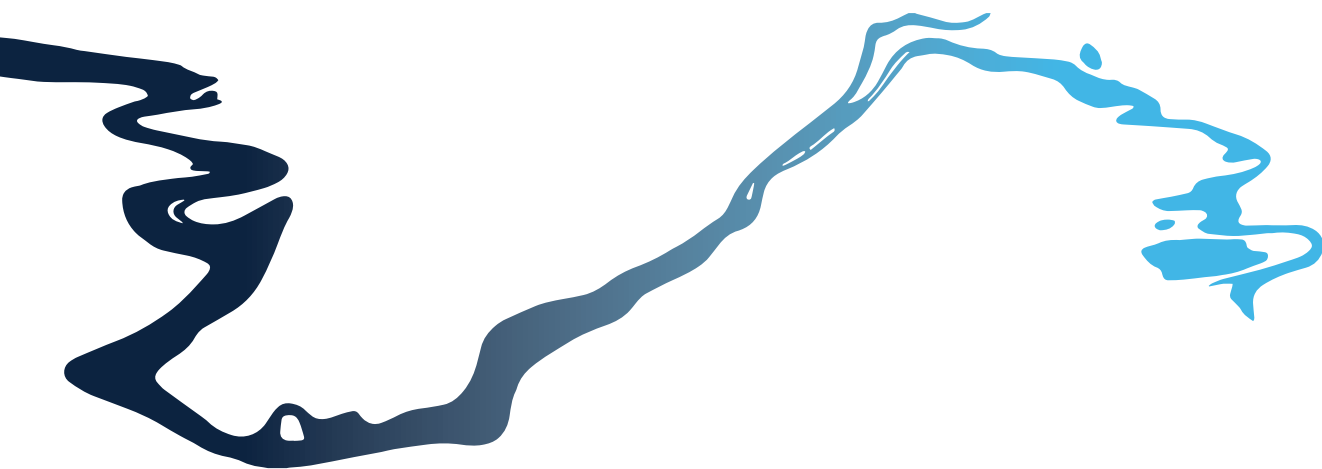


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| Fall 2025   | Vol. 38, No. 3 | Northeast | Aug |
| Winter 2025 | Vol. 38, No. 4 | Pacific   | Nov |
| Spring 2026 | Vol. 39, No. 1 | Alaska    | Feb |
| Summer 2026 | Vol. 39, No. 2 | Southeast | May |
| Fall 2026   | Vol. 39, No. 3 | Midwest   | Aug |
| Winter 2026 | Vol. 39, No. 4 | Southwest | Nov |

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