



Flathead Lake, Montana

Spring, 2005

# Irreplaceable North Shore Wetlands at Risk

By Robin Steinkraus, Flathead Lakers Executive Director

The wetlands that line much of the north shore of Flathead Lake are at risk. Two years ago Roger Sortino/ Flathead Properties, LLC, submitted a proposal to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to fill 2.8 acres of wetlands adjacent to Flathead Lake and 1.5 acres within the ordinary high water mark of the lake for a nine-lot subdivision.

The Corps has yet to make a determination on whether or not to issue a permit for the proposal, which has since been slightly modified. But recent activities have focused new attention on the proposal. The Corps requested more information about the potential impacts of the project from several agencies, with a deadline of last March. Jean Ramer, Project Manager for the Corps' Hel-



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Unprotected north shore with Flathead Lake at full pool. Wave erosion during a powerful storm on June 6<sup>th</sup> caused this shoreline to retreat an average of four feet.

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ena office, recently said that a decision is not imminent. But with the deadline for agencies to submit information now passed, it appears likely that the Corps' evaluation is nearing completion.

The wetlands on the north shore of Flathead Lake are a unique resource. They help protect Flathead Lake by filtering and storing nutrients, sediments and pollutants before they reach the lake. They provide important habitat

for birds and wildlife. They offer scenic vistas and recreational opportunities, such as bird watching and waterfowl hunting.

Some of the wetlands on the north shore are protected by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Waterfowl Production Area. However, allowing the wetlands to be filled on one parcel of private property could initiate a domino effect in which

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## DIRECTORY

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## Flathead Lake Monitor

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**Robin Steinkraus, Editor**

## President's Column

The Flathead's characteristically splendid summer season got underway early this year. As I write, we are enjoying the warmest and sunniest Memorial Day weekend in memory. More boats than usual for May are out on the lake, and the lake is up, filling nicely after all.

The reality, however, is that the delightful circumstances of late May also elevate concerns about sustaining the lake at full pool through the recreation season. They raise the possibility that pleas to the Bureau of Reclamation for tactical water releases from Hungry Horse Reservoir may be needed. But there are no assurances that such pleas will yield results.

The Environmental Impact Statement for a Drought Management Plan will command our attention soon, when the draft is offered for public scrutiny and comment by the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Operation of Kerr Dam in 2004 and thus far in 2005 per the interim PPL Montana drought plan, has been quite successful in attaining the seasonal lake level goals and meeting downstream minimum flows, despite the low snowpack. The Lakers will be seeking to assure consideration of the full range of environmental and economic impacts of drought management options in the EIS. It is essential to protect the positive impact of the lake on our local economy and quality of life.

We continue to urge the Province of British Columbia to be a good neighbor. Efforts from Montana to persuade our neighbors to develop baseline data on environmental conditions and to share that data before launching coal and coalbed methane extraction ventures have been rebuffed so far. Calls are being made from various sources, including our governor, for the federal governments of our two countries to invoke the services of the International Joint Commission to undertake the needed data collection and impacts assessment.

Then there is the ongoing subject of water quality protection right here, as the valley experiences dynamic growth and development. Septic system proliferation, clearing of streamside vegetation, and inadequate management of stormwater runoff from streets and parking lots all have the potential to compromise water quality in Flathead Lake. We are seeking to foster best practices and good science on the part of all who are involved in the growth trend, particularly county planners and commissioners. The Lakers are working to ensure that measures to protect water quality are included in the new growth policy for Flathead County, which must be completed by October, 2006. Our effort will include emphasizing the need for special consideration for shallow aquifers in order to protect our water quality.

There is a continuing spate of development proposals with potential impacts on water quality, including subdivisions, gravel mines and requests for variances from lakeshore regulations. The summer will not be a time when the Lakers can relax.

— continued next page, column 1

# Flathead Lakers

## 2005

# Annual Membership Meeting

*Keynote Address by*  
**Senator Max Baucus**

*State of the Lake Report*  
**Dr. Jack Stanford**  
Director, Flathead Lake Biological Station

Wednesday, August 10<sup>th</sup>  
Flathead Lake Lodge, Bigfork

Social time with hors d'oeuvres and no-host bar beginning at 6:15 p.m.  
Program: 7:00 to 9:00 p.m.

In closing, I want to salute our legislature for providing modestly increased funding for water quality monitoring by the Flathead Lake Biological Station over the next biennium. For a while, it appeared that continuance of this essential program was in jeopardy. The combined efforts of Senators Barkus, Keenan and Wineberg, and other local legislators, not only gained funding of \$200,000, but lined up more assured future support of this essential program. Thank you, Legislators.

— *Paul Williams.*

P.S Please plan to attend our annual meeting on August 10<sup>th</sup>. It will be an enjoyable evening in a delightful setting, with important commentary on current lake issues.

### **Special Message to Members:**

The Flathead Lakers' board of directors recently considered raising our basic membership dues amount. The board decided to maintain the basic dues at \$25.

But the reality is that we need additional resources to sustain the important work we do to protect Flathead Lake and clean water. The number and complexity of issues that affect Flathead Lake and water quality continue to grow. The need for resources to effectively address those issues is growing as well.

We decided to work on increasing membership and asking you, the members, to consider voluntarily increasing your contribution. Please help us build our membership by recruiting a friend or neighbor. If you prefer, just provide the Lakers office with a name and address and we will send out an invitation to join. In addition to sustaining our work, the size of our membership really counts when we urge public officials to take action.

And when you receive your renewal notice, please consider moving up to a higher dues category. Together, we can do more to ensure a Flathead legacy of clean water and outstanding quality of life. ♪

## News From Around the Watershed

### Flathead Coalition Sets Annual Meeting for July 6<sup>th</sup>

Dr. Jack Stanford will present a synopsis of a transboundary scientists workshop held earlier this spring at the Flathead Coalition's annual meeting.

The meeting will be held July 6<sup>th</sup> at 7:00 p.m. in the theater of the KM Building at 50 East Second Street in Kalispell. The public, including all Flathead Lakers members, is invited to attend.

The Coalition is made up of people and organizations from both sides of the U.S. and Canadian border who are concerned about resource development that may adversely impact the Flathead River ecosystem.

Scientists from the U.S. and Canada who are experts in a variety of disciplines met in early April at the Crown of the Continent Scientific Workshop. Stanford and Dr. David Schindler of the University of Alberta were co-chairs of the workshop. Its purpose was to determine where there are gaps in the baseline data for water quality and other environmental parameters. This information will be essential to evaluate potential impacts of coal and coalbed methane development in this transboundary watershed.

Governor Brian Schweitzer has been invited to speak at the meeting also. Schweitzer recently sent a letter to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice requesting that the International Joint Commission undertake an assessment of the condition of the North Fork Flathead watershed. *Rose Schwennesen.* ♪

### Legislature Passes Resolution on B.C. Coal Field Development

The House and Senate passed a joint resolution during the 2005 Legislature expressing concern over the potential for coal and coalbed methane development in the headwaters of the North Fork of the Flathead in British Columbia. The

resolution supports a transboundary environmental assessment of the North Fork watershed prior to coal field development in B.C.

"The resolution supports taking common sense precautions to ensure protection of the Flathead's priceless waters," said Rose Schwennesen, a board member of both the Flathead Coalition and the Flathead Lakers.

The resolution urges the International Joint Commission to conduct a comprehensive environmental assessment of coal field development impacts on North Fork transboundary resources and waters. The IJC is a bi-national organization established by the Boundary Waters Treaty of 1909 to help prevent and resolve disputes relating to waters along the international boundary between Canada and the United States.

The state legislature joins Senators Max Baucus and Conrad Burns, Representative Dennis Rehberg, Governor Brian Schweitzer, the Fernie, B.C. City Council and the Flathead Basin Commission in calling for a transboundary assessment. *Robin Steinkraus.* ♪

### Legislature Approves Funding for Water Quality Monitoring

Montana legislators came together late in the 2005 legislative session to fund water quality monitoring in the Flathead Basin. The \$200,000 appropriated will fund the monitoring program conducted by the Flathead Lake Biological Station at Yellow Bay for the next two years.

The Flathead Lakers provided legislators with information about the monitoring program and asked them to support its funding.

"Flathead Lake is the pride of northwestern Montana and an enormous economic asset for the entire state," said Paul Williams, president of the Lakers.

"With growing concern about clean water on both sides of the U.S. and Canadian border, it is imperative that we continue to monitor Flathead Lake and its tributaries. We are grateful to our local legislators for securing this funding."

For the first time, monitoring funding was included in the state's base budget, which should provide some security for program funding in the future. *Robin Steinkraus.* ♪

### New Lake Best Management Practices Video Available

The Flathead Basin Commission's new video production, Healthy Lakes through Living Shores, provides basic information on landowner Best Management Practices for those living on lakes or next to streams and wetlands. These concepts are designed to enhance water quality while protecting property values.

Available in DVD format, the 17-minute program includes local examples of BMPs and testimonials of area residents who have incorporated such techniques into their land management plans.

Copies are available on request, at no charge, from the FBC office. A preview of the video is also available at the FBC website, and e-mail requests for the DVD can be placed through the site ([www.flatheadbasincommission.org](http://www.flatheadbasincommission.org)).

FBC staff have met with small groups of property owners in an informal workshop setting to view the video and discuss the concepts. Anyone interested in hosting such a gathering for their neighbors is invited to contact the FBC to make arrangements. *Mark Holston, FBC Public Information Officer.* ♪

### Secchi, His Disk, & the Pope

The disk for measuring water clarity is named for Peitro Angelo Secchi, the 19<sup>th</sup> century Jesuit astronomer and science advisor to the Pope. ♪

## Flathead Basin Commission Needs Volunteer Monitors

The Flathead Basin Commission is recruiting adult volunteers for both its lake and stream volunteer monitoring programs.

Area residents began to monitor sites on about three dozen lakes in 1992 after receiving training from the FBC and the Flathead Lake Biological Station. Stream monitoring began in 1997. Much of the data collected by volunteers is on water

bodies that receive little or no monitoring by agency or other programs.

The lake monitoring program is in constant need of new volunteers. Monitors are needed for several sites on Flathead Lake, Jette Lake near Polson, Loon Lake near Bigfork and a number of other lakes in the upper basin. Training is done on a one-on-one basis. Those interested should contact the FBC office.

The FBC and The Montana Watercourse will conduct an evening training session for volunteer stream monitors in Kalispell on Thursday, June 23, from 6:00 to 9:00 p.m. at the Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks headquarters at 490 North Meridian in Kalispell. Those interested should contact the FBC office at 752-0081 to preregister for the course. Weather allowing, a portion of the program will be conducted at a nearby stream. A follow-up session will be scheduled for hands-on work on an area stream.

Volunteers may monitor a stream in their neighborhood or elsewhere in the basin. Monitoring activities are scheduled three times a year. Specific monitoring techniques include checking the stream for dissolved oxygen, pH, temperature, discharge and other parameters. The data collected becomes part of the FBC's extensive storehouse of water quality information on area lakes and streams.

Data collected by volunteer monitors may be requested by anyone interested in water quality data on a particular lake. The FBC routinely shares such information with agencies and educational institutions. For information on any of the FBC programs, contact the office in Kalispell at 752-0081. *Mark Holston, FBC Public Information Officer.* ☺



A volunteer water quality monitor conducts field tests on a sample from a nearby stream. Volunteer monitors collect many useful data. Mark Holston photo.

### *North Shore Wetlands at Risk, continued from page 1 —*

other property owners line up with their own fill and development proposals. Filling the wetlands on the private property would compromise the integrity of the entire wetlands complex, "one of the largest river-lake delta/wetland complexes in the United States," says Research Assistant Professor Dr. Mark Lorang of the Flathead Lake Biological Station.

In his comment letter to the Corps, Lorang states that filling the wetlands also will have "immediate and far reaching impacts to the way in which neighboring shorelines respond. The biggest impact will be accelerated erosion to neighboring properties which ultimately will result in accelerated loss of additional

wetland and wildlife habitat in this critical area...Hence, not only will there be a loss of wetlands, due to fill on site, but also an accelerated loss of wetland habitat beyond the project properties that would not otherwise occur."

The Corps' controlling regulations indicate that the decision whether or not to issue a permit must be based on an evaluation of the probable impacts, including cumulative impacts, of the proposed activity on the public interest. In addition, the applicant bears a significant burden in terms of establishing that the public interest will indeed be served by granting the requested permit. Corps documents state, "Fundamental to these

Guidelines is the precept that dredged or fill material should not be discharged into the aquatic ecosystem, unless it can be demonstrated that such a discharge will not have an unacceptable adverse impact either individually or in combination with known and/or probable impacts of other activities affecting the ecosystems of concern."

Is filling this wetland for a subdivision in the public interest? The Flathead Lakers don't think so. The Lakers submitted comments to both the Corps

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# Heavy June Rains Fill Lake, Raise Flood Scare

By James Conner, *Lakers Webmaster*

Following a winter and spring of unusually low snowpack, early spring runoff, and continuing drought, Flathead residents unexpectedly found themselves worrying about flooding in early June.

Significant sustained rainfall flooded small streams in the Mission and Swan Mountains, closing Highway 35 along the east shore of Flathead Lake for three days due to flooding and highway damage. The rapid filling of Hungry Horse Reservoir raised concerns about flooding along the Flathead River. Managers at both Hungry Horse and Kerr Dams increased outflows, drastically at Kerr (from 12,800 cubic feet per second on May 31<sup>st</sup> to 48,000 cfs on June 7<sup>th</sup>), to prevent overflowing the reservoir and lake.

Flathead Lake's level reached 2892.90 feet on June 6<sup>th</sup>, just one tenth of an inch below the legal full pool mark of 2893 and slightly above the June 15<sup>th</sup> to September 15<sup>th</sup> average of 2892.72 for the last 50 years. Because the lake is kept a few inches below 2893 in order to absorb heavy rainfall without violating Kerr Dam's operating license, 2892.72, should be considered operational full pool.

Heavy rains in May and June helped, but the most important factor in reaching operational full pool in early June was PPL MT's decision, following predictions of well below average runoff, to begin the refill when the lake reached 2888.86 instead of drawing down the lake to 2883, the minimum allowed by the license. These decisions were consistent with the interim drought management plan for Kerr Dam, and the management strategy for Hungry Horse Dam known as VAR-Q.

Starting the refill with the lake almost six feet higher than low pool had the effect of increasing the supply of water by over 700,000 acre-feet, and ensured that the refill targets for Memorial Day

(2890) and June 15<sup>th</sup> (2893) could be met while meeting the project license's Article 56 minimum streamflow requirement. In addition, the earlier fills and resulting larger discharges meant that the hydrographs for the Flathead River at both Columbia Falls and below Kerr Dam more closely resembled the unregulated (natural) hydrographs for those reaches, a biologically desirable outcome.

Spring rains notwithstanding, PPL MT still could have difficulty keeping the lake within half a foot of full pool later in the summer depending on the Bureau of Reclamation's operation of Hungry Horse Dam, .

Flows in the Flathead Basin's three major unregulated rivers – the North and Middle Forks of the Flathead, and the Swan River (the Bigfork dam is small and has little storage) – peaked just after mid-May, a sure indicator of a thin snowpack. Once the snowpack is gone and the rainy season passes, the inflow to the lake will diminish rapidly and might not keep pace with outflows from Kerr Dam.

The unknown factor in this equation, besides how much more rain will fall, is how much water will be released from Hungry Horse Dam during July, August, and the first half of September, and how much of that water can be held in Flathead Lake.

Hungry Horse Dam, a major storage dam that impounds approximately 3 million acre-feet of water, is operated for flood control, production of electrical power, and increasingly to augment flows for salmon in the lower Columbia River. Fulfilling these operational objectives sometimes causes friction with the operation of Kerr Dam.

Power, of course, can be, and is, generated any time of the year. Hungry Horse Dam's four generators can produce 428 megawatts of peaking power, but only approximately 115 megawatts of average power.

Flood control requires drawing down

the reservoir at winter's end, then reducing releases during the spring runoff season to hold the mainstem Flathead River below flood stage. The water stored during this period is released later in the year. Customarily, discharges from the dam are chopped when the river at Columbia Falls reaches two feet below flood stage.

Fish flows, as the augmentation flows are known, occur during spring and summer, and are intended to speed the journey of Columbia River salmon smolt to the sea, reducing mortality in that endangered species.

During years of average runoff and spring precipitation, how Hungry Horse Dam meets its multiple objectives matters little. There is enough water for everyone. But in dry years it matters a great deal.

Here's why. Ask this question: if Hungry Horse Dam did not exist, if the flows in the Flathead's south fork were as natural as the flows in the Flathead's north and middle forks, in how many years since Kerr Dam began operating in 1938 could the lake have been filled to 2893 by June 15<sup>th</sup> while meeting the minimum flows required by Article 56? The answer: all except 1941, 1944, and possibly 1977. Take away the South Fork's natural flows, however, and there is not enough water in some dry years to both reach full pool and meet minimum flows.

There were, of course, dry years combined with reduced spring releases from Hungry Horse Dam, and the lake was kept at operational full pool by throttling back outflows from Kerr Dam, sometimes to a trickle. That played havoc with the river's fisheries, prompting one biologist to describe the reach below the dam as a "biological desert," and led to the restrictions in Article 56 when the project's 50-year license was renewed.

How critical the South Fork's flows are to filling Flathead Lake, and to keeping it filled, was underscored by the

events of 2001, one of the two driest years since Hungry Horse Dam began operations in 1951. At the end of April, the Bureau of Reclamation cut releases from Hungry Horse Dam to 500 cubic feet per second, less than ten percent of the pre-dam mean, and held the outflow at or under 1,000 cfs until the end of July. Not enough water was left in the river to fill the lake while maintaining minimum flows below Kerr Dam.

PPL MT, frustrated by the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission's glacial response to PPL MT's request for a variance from Article 56, unilaterally reduced releases from Kerr Dam in

early May, thereby allowing the lake to fill to 2892.67 by June 21<sup>st</sup> — at which point an irritated federal government ordered the Article 56 minimum streamflow restored. The lake began dropping, and continued to drop for the rest of the summer. More information on the events of 2001 is available in the lake levels section of our website.

As June, 2005 began, Hungry Horse Reservoir had filled to within two feet of its full pool elevation of 3560 feet above mean sea level. There appears to be enough water behind Hungry Horse Dam to help keep Flathead Lake at operational full pool during the summer rec-

reation season as well as meet obligations for power generation and fish flows, but how that water will be allocated remains to be seen.

The study in contrasts for streamflows this spring highlights the difficulty in planning for all possible contingencies. The Environmental Impact Statement for the Drought Management Plan required by Kerr Dam's license, which is currently underway, should provide additional insight about how to best manage Kerr Dam in the face of nature's variability and unpredictability. *Robin Steinkraus contributed to this story.* ♪

## North Shore Wetlands at Risk, continued from page 5 —

and the state DEQ (which has authority under the Clean Water Act to ensure that federal actions meet state standards) regarding the proposal and informed our Congressional delegation about the proposal.



An important factor in the north shore debacle is the continuing problem with shoreline erosion. A proposal to build a retaining wall on the subject property and neighboring properties to protect the shoreline was submitted to the Corps in March, but it was subsequently withdrawn. Lorang predicts that a retaining wall, as previously proposed, would further increase the pace of erosion on adjacent properties.

Lorang offers an alternative to building a retaining wall to stabilize the shore-

Left, north shore beach after the June 6<sup>th</sup> storm. This beach held because anti-erosion measures were in place. Photo by Mark Lorang, © 2005..

line. He recommends the establishment of a "dynamic equilibrium beach" using existing logs and strategically placed gravel and boulders. Gravel beaches, Lorang said, force waves to first break off shore away from the beach, "thereby dissipating the majority of energy that would otherwise be available to cause erosion." One of the nearby land owners, Bob Keenan, has begun a test project on his property for this type of shoreline erosion control with Lorang's assistance.

The Flathead Lakers have encouraged the Corps to deny the permit to fill north shore wetlands. Degrading these wetlands would truly be a major loss for Flathead Lake and the qualities that make it special. ♪

## YES! I want to be a member of the Flathead Lakers!



Name \_\_\_\_\_

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Telephone \_\_\_\_\_ E-mail \_\_\_\_\_

Summer Address (if applicable) \_\_\_\_\_

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*Friends and neighbors  
 working for clean water, a  
 healthy ecosystem, and  
 lasting quality of life in the  
 Flathead Lake watershed.*

## Living by Water Workshop and Tour

Do you live near a river, stream or lake? Are you planning to build a home near the water? Do your river banks need restoration? Then this workshop is for you.

The Flathead Lakers are sponsoring a *Living by Water* workshop on Saturday, June 25, from 10:30 a.m. to 2:00 p.m. at the Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks Conference Room in Kalispell. Lunch will be provided.

Participants will learn about the importance of lands near water, called riparian areas, in maintaining the quality of streams, rivers and lakes. They will learn to recognize healthy and unhealthy riparian areas, about land use impacts that degrade these critical areas, about land use management decisions that minimize impacts, and how to restore riparian areas.

The workshop includes a tour of a restoration project on Truman Creek west of Kalispell that demonstrates various land use management and stream restoration techniques.

The workshop is cosponsored by the Flathead County Extension Program, the Flathead Basin Commission and the Flathead County Conservation District. Hydrologist and consultant Steve Buckley, of Watershed Consulting, will guide the tour.

The number of participants is limited. For more information or to register, please contact Constanza von der Pahlen, Critical Lands Project Leader at 406-883-1341 or [criticallands@flatheadlakers.org](mailto:criticallands@flatheadlakers.org). ↴

### Reminder to Boaters

When motor boating on Flathead Lake (and other lakes) this summer, please remember to abide by the 200 feet from shore no-wake zone, and be aware of the effect of your wake on canoes, kayaks and other small boats. The no-wake zone helps prevent shoreline erosion and increases safety for all lake users as well as reducing the noise level for recreators on shore.

If you transport a boat from other states, please drain all water and wash the boat and trailer with hot water before using it here to prevent the spread of harmful exotic species such as the zebra mussel and Eurasian watermilfoil.

Have a safe and fun summer on the lake. ↴