

Whitefish Pilot

113th year / issue 26

Wednesday, June 27, 2018

\$1.00

Commission puts focus on septic contamination

By HEIDI DESCH
Whitefish Pilot

The group tasked with monitoring and protecting water quality in the Flathead Basin, decided last week to focus on an issue that has been a decades-long concern for Whitefish Lake.

The Flathead Basin Commission voted unanimously to bring legislation to the state Water Policy Interim Committee dealing with the issue of septic leachate. The Septic Leachate Study Bill calls for an investigation of methods to address septic waste systems impact to Flathead Basin lakes, specifically Whitefish, Flathead and Echo lakes.

The bill asks for a study to be conducted by the Legislative Services Division and reported to the Water Policy Interim Committee, which is a joint bipartisan committee of the state Legislature and has oversight of agencies involved in water quality.

The request, approved by the commission, says results from the study could help inform solutions to address the issue for other Flathead Basin lakes, and "delay in addressing this issue will further stress the water quality and ecology of these lakes with potential impacts to our local and state economies."

It's an issue that two of the FBC committee members have spent years working on in regards to Whitefish Lake. Mike

See Septic, A3

Septic

from A1

Koopal, executive director of the Whitefish Lake Institute, and Ed Lieser, retired U.S. Forest Service silviculturist and former state legislator, hold two of the three spots on the commission's executive committee. They brought the issue to the full commission last week seeking support for the Study Bill.

Koopal said that efforts by the institute and the city of Whitefish to address the issue for Whitefish Lake have met challenges, but the issues surrounding septic leachate also have broader impacts to the Flathead Basin.

"This is an issue where the commission could occupy a niche," Koopal said. "This is an issue that we've been unsuccessful at addressing at the local level."

Septic leachate is the liquid waste that remains after the wastewater drains through septic solids. Functioning septic systems are designed to collect waste and neutralize contamination before it enters ground or surface water systems. However, if a septic system fails elevated concentrations of bacteria from human waste, detergents and other household materials can be transported by groundwater through sediments eventually ending up in lakes.

Koopal said septic leachate, which is a non-point source of pollution, can be an abstract concept for homeowner to grasp but he frequently hears stories from homeowners seeing changes in the lake as the result of failing septic tanks. The idea behind the bill would be to inform the broader basin by providing in-depth data on the issue and get around funding and jurisdictional issues that have plagued efforts in the past.

"It's timely to address this as a social issue and it's an area where the Flathead Basin Commission can be a leader," he said.

While serving in the state Legislature, Lieser in 2013 attempted to bring

forward legislation that would have provided a mechanism for inspections for septic tanks upon the sale of a property, but the effort never gained traction.

"This is not a new issue," he said. "There have been numerous efforts in an effort to try to create regulatory framework around this. In Helena sometimes it takes baby steps, but you have to be persistent — this needs a fix."

During the meeting, Tom Bansak, assistant director of the Flathead Lake Biological Station, said he supports a study bill on septic leachate. He noted that aging septic systems on Flathead Lake are a concern pointing out that most of the septic systems in Woods Bay are 50-years-old and likely not functioning properly.

"We feel this is a very important issue," he said. "We know that there are some people who don't have \$20,000 [to fix a failing septic tank] and I wish we could tell them to go here for assistance."

The commission's administrator Kate Wilson, of the state Department of Natural Resources and Conservation, said

the request for a septic leachate study bill could appear on the Water Policy Interim Committee's July agenda.

Failing septic systems around Whitefish Lake have been a concern for contamination for some time. The Whitefish Lake Institute in 2012 confirmed previous data and said that the issue is a growing concern for human health and water quality of the lake.

The Flathead Basin Commission was created in 1983 by the Montana Legislature to monitor and protect water quality and the natural resources in the watershed.

The commission for the last several months has been in the midst of restructuring. Their meeting last week in Kalispell focused largely on the future direction of the commission after budget cuts drastically reduced the group's funding and it lost its executive director in May.

The commission decided last week, in addition to septic leachate, to tackle issues that are not being handled by other agencies.