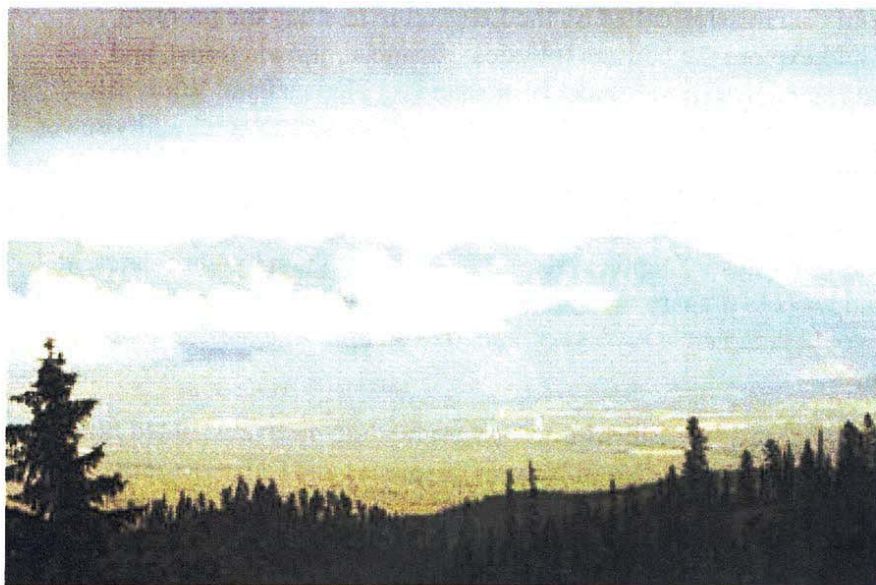


Leaking septic systems are a known problem for Montana lakes; solutions remain elusive

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Mar 14, 2019



The view from Whitefish Mountain looks out toward Glacier National Park, as well as Flathead and Whitefish lakes. BRETT FRENCH/Gazette Staff

WHITEFISH — For years, scientists have found signs of human waste trickling into Montana’s lakes. Now, an effort to study this problem is working its way through the Legislature.

A lunch panel at this week’s Montana Lakes Conference focused on septic leachate, the liquid that leaks from improperly maintained septic systems into groundwater. Underground aquifers help feed Northwest Montana’s lakes and streams, all of which can be harmed by leachate’s E. Coli bacteria, phosphorus and other ingredients.

Scientists have been finding this pollutant in Flathead and Whitefish Lakes for years. But getting lakeshore residents to adopt one of two remedies — fixing leaky septic systems, or replacing them altogether with sewer lines — has proven difficult.

“I think a lot of people, quite frankly, are struggling with the cost of non-point source pollution,” said panelist Ed Lieser. A retired forester and former state representative who lives in the Lion Mountain neighborhood near Whitefish, Lieser knows this problem firsthand.

In 2012, a Whitefish Lake Institute study confirmed the presence of septic leachate in Whitefish Lake. Four years later, an engineering report recommended connecting Lion Mountain to Whitefish’s sewer system. But residents balked at the costs of paying for installation and operation costs — and the prospect

of additional property taxes if sewer line extension eventually led to annexation by the city — and the Lion Mountain Homeowners' Association voted it down.

Flathead County Registered Sanitarian Kate Cassidy told the audience that currently, there are 79 permitted septic systems along the shore of Whitefish Lake. She said that 22 of those date back to the 1970s, when permits were first required, and many are serving cabins that have been expanded beyond their original size.

With the area's main method of handling sewage under strain, Leiser and others are still looking for solutions.

Over the summer, The Flathead Basin Commission called on the Legislature to study the problem, requesting an investigation that “would explore the barriers (physical, financial, jurisdictional, and community) that result in reluctance among nearshore residents surrounding Flathead and Whitefish Lakes ... to abandon their use of aging and failing septic waste systems and connect to community sewer systems, or other engineered alternatives.”

The bill in its current form, sponsored by Rep. Fred Thomas, R-Stevensville, instructs the Legislature to instead evaluate state and local permitting rules for septic systems and compare them to other states, and look at alternative septic systems and ways to prepare them. If passed, the not-yet-determined interim committee that conducts the study would complete it by September 2020 and provide recommendations on the issue to the 2021 Legislature.

Meanwhile, the Legislature is moving forward with other infrastructure funding measures, noted Mark Bostrom, an administrator with the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation.

One of these is H.B. 6, which passed the House Appropriations Committee Wednesday and provides nearly \$4 million worth of grants for local governments' water and sewer infrastructure projects over the next biennium. Its top-priority grants include \$125,000 awards to Whitefish, Bigfork, Seeley Lake, Bigfork and Thompson Falls, and a \$122,850 grant to Columbia Falls, for wastewater improvements.