



TONGUE RIVER WATERSHED MANAGEMENT PLAN

TONGUE RIVER WATERSHED STEERING COMMITTEE

**Original document approved September 2000
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SIGNATURE PAGE

In July 2005, the Tongue River Watershed Steering Committee (TRWSC) decided to revise the Tongue River Watershed Plan, originally approved in September 2000. All meetings of the TRWSC are open to the public and anyone in attendance had an equal opportunity to contribute to the revision. Following a 45 day public comment period that included an open house, the TRWSC approved the Revised Tongue River Watershed Plan on May 24, 2007.

Don Dobrenz, Chairman

Carrie Rogaczewski, SCCD

The Sheridan County Conservation District Board of Supervisors approved submission of the Revised Tongue River Watershed Plan to the Wyoming Department of Environmental Quality (WDEQ) on June 12, 2007.

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The Tongue River Watershed Plan has been approved by WDEQ.

John Wagner, Administrator
Water Quality Division
Wyoming Department of Environmental Quality

Date

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Sheridan County Clerk

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In September 2000, the Sheridan County Conservation District (SCCD) in cooperation with the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and the Tongue River Watershed Steering Committee (TRWSC) worked with local landowners to publish a local watershed plan for the Upper Tongue River Watershed. The effort began with the recognition of the importance of applying and measuring conservation treatments on a watershed scale, with water quality being considered a key indicator of overall environmental health. The Tongue River Watershed Management Plan was developed after 3+ years of monitoring on the Tongue River watershed from the Town of Ranchester upstream to the Bighorn National Forest boundary. Monitoring on the Tongue River and 5 tributaries indicated levels of bacteria that exceeded Wyoming water quality standards. This was a concern not only from a regulatory standpoint, but also as a potential human health issue related to recreational use. During the initial planning process, landowners identified concerns and developed a list of objectives and action items for each of the concerns. After 5 years, all of the action items in the plan were either completed or otherwise addressed by the TRWSC; however interim monitoring continued to identify unacceptable bacteria levels. As a result, the TRWSC decided to update the plan and began that process in July 2005.

The TRWSC recognizes bacteria levels as a major concern from a regulatory standpoint. The Tongue River Watershed Management Plan identifies wildlife, livestock and other domestic animals, and humans as the causes and sources of bacteria that need to be controlled. As a result, many of the action items that address bacteria concerns focus on reducing the potential contributions from domestic animals and livestock and faulty septic systems. The ability to address wildlife contributions is limited to information and education activities.

This watershed plan addresses all of the identified concerns on the watershed and is not limited to those issues that relate to water quality standards. Though not considered a numeric water quality standard, excess sediment is a concern for watershed residents. The relationship between sediment and bacteria is not completely understood, though some research suggests a connection. In Sheridan County, eroding streambanks are a significant contributor of excess sediment in waterways. The plan addresses sediment contributions from unstable channels and annual channel modifications for irrigation diversions and/or inefficient and erosive irrigation conveyances. These issues are being addressed through increased emphasis on stream restoration projects that not only stabilize stream channels, but also include improvements to aesthetics and provisions for fish passage.

The TRWSC, SCCD, and NRCS are committed to local watershed planning and improvement efforts. The voluntary nature of the program makes it difficult to determine specifically what types of improvement projects and/or assistance will be requested by landowners. The technical and financial assistance required to make improvements will depend on the types of projects that are requested. The TRWSC recognizes the success of the watershed improvement effort depends upon effective information and education strategies and their ability to encourage participation in the local improvement programs.

The watershed plan is a dynamic document, intended to represent changing conditions and attitudes. At a minimum, the TRWSC will update the plan every five years. If for some reason, an update/revision is necessary prior to that time, the TRWSC, in consultation with the landowners, can make necessary changes or open another revision process. In addition, the TRWSC, through the SCCD, will continue to monitor long-term trends in water quality through a 3 year monitoring rotation. Short term progress of the watershed effort will be documented through a progress register (Appendix A).

INTRODUCTION

The Tongue River Watershed Project is under the direction of the Tongue River Watershed Steering Committee (TRWSC) and the Sheridan County Conservation District (SCCD) in partnership with USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). In 2000, local landowners authorized the TRWSC and the SCCD/NRCS to draft a watershed plan for their review. Landowner participation was invited and encouraged throughout the planning process. The Tongue River Watershed Management Plan was approved in September 2000. In 2005, the TRWSC decided to update the document.

Mission Statement

The goal of the Tongue River Watershed Project is to maintain and improve existing water quality, natural resource health, economic stability, and the quality of life on the Tongue River Watershed through voluntary financial, technical, and educational resources; thereby preventing the need for government regulatory agency enforcement actions.

Resource Description

The Tongue River originates in the Big Horn Mountains with the confluence of the North Tongue and South Tongue Rivers. While the North Tongue and South Tongue Rivers are both Class 1 waterbodies, the Tongue River is a Class 2 at the confluence (WDEQ, 1998). The original project area included the upper Tongue River watershed from the Bighorn National Forest boundary near the mouth of Tongue River Canyon downstream to the Town of Ranchester (Appendix A). This watershed area consists of approximately 80,000 acres, with 92 percent of these lands being privately owned. The remaining 8 percent are State lands and include the Amsden Creek Big Game Winter Range administered by the Wyoming Game and Fish Department. Land uses within the watershed are many and include: irrigated hay and crop lands, dry land pasture, livestock grazing, wildlife habitat, various types of recreation, rural residential development, and the urban areas of Dayton and Ranchester. The Bighorn National Forest is located directly upstream from the project area, and also supports wildlife habitat, livestock grazing, logging, recreation, and other uses. A detailed description of the project area is included with the Tongue River Watershed Assessment Final Report (SCCD, 2000).

In 2006, the TRWSC and SCCD/NRCS proposed expanding the watershed boundary to the confluence with Goose Creek, for the purposes of planning and monitoring. There were several reasons for expanding this boundary. Data collected by other sources indicated concerns with temperature downstream of the original assessment. Improvement projects have been installed in the lower portion of the watershed. Projects include improvements to livestock operations and septic systems, as well as stream channel restoration projects. The expansion eliminates the gap between the Town of Ranchester and the confluence with Goose Creek, a drainage that has a separate active watershed effort (SCCD, 2003 and SCCD, 2004). Finally, the expansion of the watershed boundary will allow for a larger pool of potential steering committee members and expertise. The SCCD on behalf of the TRWSC requested input from landowners in the expanded watershed in April 2006. This was done through letters sent to landowners identified in parcels information provided by the Sheridan County Assessor's office. The letters included information on the initial assessment and planning effort, improvement efforts, and the proposed expansion. Residents had another opportunity to voice concerns or provide additional input on the expansion or other items in the plan during the public comment period.

The expanded area consists of approximately 50,000 additional acres between the Towns of Ranchester and Acme (Appendix A). Goose Creek, a perennial Class 2 stream enters the Tongue River just below the expanded boundary. There are no perennial tributaries within the expanded boundary, however intermittent draws may contribute stormwater/run-off during precipitation or snowmelt events. The largest of these draws include Six-mile Creek, Earley Creek, North Dry Creek, Slater Creek, South Dry Creek and Hidden

Water Creek. The expanded watershed transitions to a dryer precipitation zone with a different plant community. In addition, the Tongue River transitions from a cold water fishery to a warm water fishery in this area. Primary land uses in the area include: irrigated and non-irrigated hay meadows, cropland, and pastures, livestock grazing, wildlife habitat, and rural residences. In addition, a small meat packing plant, rock quarry, and mud bogging track are present and provide economic and recreational opportunities. The historic coal mining community of Monarch has been almost entirely removed, with some remnant homesites, a church, and a water tower remaining. A railroad, local highway, and the interstate run parallel to the Tongue River throughout most of the expanded area. With the change in precipitation zones and differing land uses, the expanded area possesses its own unique resource concerns, including habitat for sensitive species such as warm water game and non-game fish, and sage grouse. Parts of the expanded area also contain heavy prairie dog populations.

Planning Authority

Under Wyoming Statute 11-16-103 Legislative declarations and policy, the SCCD is required to “provide for the conservation of the soil, and soil and water resources of this state, and for the control and prevention of soil erosion and for flood prevention or the conservation, development, utilization, and disposal of water, and thereby to stabilize ranching and farming operations, to preserve natural resources, protect the tax base, control floods, prevent impairment of dams and reservoirs, preserve wildlife, protect public lands, and protect and promote the health, safety and general welfare of the people of this state.”

Wyoming Statute 11-16-122 (b) grants Conservation Districts the ability to “conduct surveys, investigations and research and disseminate information relating to . . . the conservation, development, utilization and disposal of water. . . in cooperation with the government of this state or its agencies . . . (v),” to “develop comprehensive plans for . . . conservation of soil and water resources . . . [that] specify in detail the acts, procedures, performances, and avoidances necessary or desirable to carry out the plans (xvi),” and to “make public the plans and information and bring them to the attention of owners and occupiers of land within the district (xvii).”

In 1996, the Wyoming Association of Conservation Districts, the NRCS, and the Wyoming Department of Agriculture saw an increasing need for Conservation Districts to represent local interests and take the lead in watershed planning efforts. As a result they developed the Watershed Strategic Plan, which was updated in 2000, to guide watershed planning efforts across the state (WACD et al., 1996 and 2000). This document insists that “any watershed effort led by a conservation district should be landowner driven . . . [and] any participation on behalf of any landowner is strictly voluntary.” By taking an active role in the planning process, the TRWSC, SCCD, and NRCS have adhered to this principle. The landowners followed the steps for watershed planning as outlined in the Watershed Strategic Plan. They identified and prioritized concerns, set goals and objectives, and developed a watershed plan. Included in the Tongue River Watershed Management Plan are elements to solicit funds, implement the plan, and provide for periodic plan evaluation.

In addition, the Tongue River Watershed Management Plan meets the top priorities of the Wyoming Non-Point Source Management Plan Update (WDEQ, 2000) by conducting an assessment of the condition of surface water, implementing information and education programs which “encourage participation in voluntary efforts to prevent, reduce, and eliminate pollution of the state’s water resources,” and, through the involvement of the TRWSC and local landowners “developing and implementing watershed management plans.”

In the initial planning effort, landowners participated in a series of meetings to review drafts of the plan as it was developed. In these meetings landowners described what they wanted the watershed to look like and what it would take to achieve that vision. They identified, categorized, and prioritized their concerns. The

group then outlined objectives and developed a series of action items to address the concerns. Because of the relationships among the concerns, there was some degree of overlap, and some action items were repeated. Finally, the group assigned approximate completion dates for the action items in a milestone table. Because the plan was developed in a public forum and was an action plan for the landowners of the Tongue River Watershed, not a plan for creating official policy, the TRWSC did not open a formal 45-day public comment period or file the document with the Sheridan County Clerk's office. The final draft was approved and submitted to WDEQ in September 2000.

In July 2005, the TRWSC decided to update/revise the Tongue River Watershed Management Plan for the following reasons:

- the original plan had a five year timeframe for completion and that deadline was approaching;
- all of the action items in the plan were either completed or were otherwise addressed; and
- despite implementation of the plan, bacteria and other concerns continued to be present.

In order to increase public awareness, encourage more participation in watershed improvement projects, and meet current WDEQ and Administrative Procedures Act (W.S. 16-3-101) requirements, the TRWSC agreed that the revised plan would be subject to a 45-day formal comment period that will include an open-house and the final plan will be filed with the Sheridan County Clerk's Office.

WATERSHED ASSESSMENT AND CONDITIONS

In 1996 and 1998, the SCCD obtained Clean Water Act Section 205j grants for non-point source, surface water quality assessments and planning on the Tongue River watershed. The objectives of the project were to determine the types of non-point source impairments occurring within the target watershed, categorize and prioritize the areas of greatest need that could be addressed by future SCCD programs, and develop a watershed plan to address identified impairments (if any) within the watershed. Sampling was conducted at 12 monitoring stations from August 1996 through October 1999. Monitoring stations were located on Tongue River, Wolf Creek, Five Mile Creek, Columbus Creek, Smith Creek, and Little Tongue River. The project area included the Tongue River watershed from Ranchester upstream to the Bighorn National Forest Boundary.

The Tongue River Watershed Assessment Final Report was completed during September 2000 (SCCD, 2000). This initial assessment found that overall water quality was good; pH, conductivity, macroinvertebrates, and dissolved oxygen were generally within acceptable ranges. Nutrient, pesticide, and herbicide levels were very low or not detectable, generally suggesting good nutrient and pesticide/herbicide management by local landowners. However, all lower tributary stations as well as the Tongue River at Ranchester exceeded the Wyoming water quality standard for fecal coliform bacteria relative to primary contact recreation.

A follow up monitoring effort was conducted during 2003 by utilizing many of the same monitoring sites, water quality parameters, and sampling periods as used in the initial 1996 – 1999 assessment. However, during 2003, the upper tributary sites were not monitored because no water quality impairments were found at these stations during the initial assessment. In addition, SCCD did not collect nutrient, pesticide, or herbicide data in 2003 because these parameters were found at low or non-detectable levels during the initial assessment. The 2003 monitoring effort was performed to evaluate any changes in water quality within the Project Area since the 1996 – 1999 assessment. No significant deviations in water quality were observed when comparing the two assessments other than changes occurring during isolated, but significant hydrologic events. For example, a precipitation event during May 2003 produced much higher than normal bacteria and turbidity results in water quality samples. Other samples collected during “normal” hydrologic conditions in 2003 produced results similar to the initial assessment.

In 2004, a section of the North Tongue River Watershed in the Bighorn National Forest was determined impaired for bacteria by the Wyoming Department of Environmental Quality. This determination was based on samples collected between July 2003 and October 2003 in response to a complaint about livestock use on the grazing allotments. In response, the Bighorn National Forest has initiated its own monitoring program and formed a steering committee with the intention of developing a watershed management plan. The TRWSC stands ready to assist in any way possible to help resolve resource issues while sustaining beneficial land uses. However, the TRWSC recognizes that the proposed watershed plan for the North Tongue River is being drafted under the existing authorities of the Bighorn National Forest for the management of these lands. As such, it represents a fundamentally different process from that used to develop and implement this Tongue River Watershed Management Plan.

**WATERSHED IMPROVEMENT ACTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS
AND
ACTION REGISTER/MILESTONE TABLES**

WATERSHED PLAN IMPLEMENTATION AND MONITORING

Issue: There is a need on the Tongue River watershed to sustain a dynamic watershed planning and implementation effort.

Objective 1. Maintain an on-going, active Steering Committee to provide leadership and project oversight.

Action Item	Responsible Parties	Inclusive Dates
Elect chairperson, determine general operating procedures, including meeting frequency, basis for decision making, etc.	TRWSC	3/2007
Invite interested individuals on the watershed, including the area from the Bighorn National Forest to the Goose Creek confluence, to participate as steering committee members	TRWSC	3/2007-6/2012
Review/Revise plan every five years or more often, if needed	TRWSC	6/2012
Include topics of interest or special presentations, in addition to regular business, at committee meetings to encourage more participation	TRWSC SCCD NRCS	3/2007-6/2012

Objective 2. Continue long-term monitoring to further define watershed condition and evaluate project effectiveness.

Action Item	Responsible Parties	Inclusive Dates
Continue follow-up monitoring for bacteria, turbidity, temperature, and other parameters, on a three year rotation to observe long-term trends	SCCD	4-10/2006 4-10/2009 4-10/2012
Expand monitoring boundary to include the area downstream of Ranchester to the confluence with Goose Creek	TRWSC	4/1/06
Maintain progress register to document progress in the short-term	SCCD NRCS	3/2007-6/2012
Relate monitoring results/trends to improvement activities where possible and appropriate	SCCD NRCS	3/2007-6/2012

GENERAL INFORMATION AND EDUCATION

Issue: There is an on-going need for education and understanding on the interaction among all land uses and watershed condition, and on the importance of water quality as a measure of natural resource health.

Objective 1. Improve understanding on the interaction among all land uses and watershed condition, and the importance of water quality as a measure of natural resource health.

Action Item	Responsible Parties	Inclusive Dates
Publicize completed projects, including pictures, in a highly visible way through the SCCD newsletter, SCCD website, articles in the Sheridan Press, and other means	SCCD TRWSC NRCS	3/2007- 6/2012
Distribute annual watershed newsletter, in color, to watershed residents to provide general information, highlights of improvement projects, and monitoring results to watershed residents	SCCD	6/2007 6/2008 6/2009 6/2010 6/2011 6/2012
Provide progress updates to Towns of Dayton and Ranchester, and Sheridan County Commissioners	TRWSC SCCD NRCS	3/2007- 6/2012
Recognize “outstanding efforts” by producers without minimizing or nullifying the improvement efforts by other producers	TRWSC SCCD NRCS	3/2007- 6/2012
Identify creative ways to use events such as Dayton Days, the Rodeo or the Sheridan County Fair to publicize projects, funding sources, and improvement efforts	TRWSC SCCD NRCS	10/2007

FINANCIAL CONDITIONS

Issue: Difficult economic conditions in agriculture and other industries, the cost of treatments, and lack of knowledge on available funding resources prevent the installation of improvements.

Objective 1. Minimize the financial burden for installing BMPs.

Action Item	Responsible Parties	Inclusive Dates
Provide technical and financial assistance for water resource improvement projects, including improvements to animal feeding operations and septic systems, stream restoration projects, and others, through federal and state grants, USDA program funds (EQIP, CRP, WRP, WHIP) and other funding sources as available	SCCD NRCS	3/2007- 6/2012
Publicize funding sources with a summary of available and potential funding opportunities in a watershed newsletter, SCCD newsletter, SCCD website, and/or the Sheridan Press	SCCD NRCS	6/2007
Promote/encourage participation in programs to watershed residents through direct, personal communications	TRWSC	3/2007- 6/2012

WATER QUALITY/QUANTITY

Issue: Water quality/quantity of the Tongue River and its tributaries may not be meeting natural resource health or quality of life expectations.

Objective 1. Reduce water quality impacts from domestic animals, including bacteria, nutrient, organic matter, and other inputs.

Action Item	Responsible Parties	Inclusive Dates
Provide technical and financial assistance for improvements to livestock operations	SCCD NRCS	3/2007- 6/2012
Provide information and education on the proper management of domestic animal waste (including livestock, pets, and other domestic animals)	SCCD	3/2007- 6/2012
Provide information on the potential impacts of winter feeding grounds	SCCD	3/2007- 6/2012
Provide information on grazing management to large and small acreage landowners as well as rural residential landowners	SCCD	3/2007- 6/2012
Identify ways to improve delivery of assistance programs to high priority areas	TRWSC SCCD NRCS	10/2007

Objective 2. Reduce water quality impacts from septic systems, including bacteria, nutrients, and other inputs.

Action Item	Responsible Parties	Inclusive Dates
Provide technical and financial assistance for improvements to septic systems	SCCD NRCS	3/2007- 6/2012
Provide information on the potential impacts of septic systems, proper function and maintenance, and alternative technologies	SCCD	3/2007- 6/2012
Invite representatives from the Towns of Dayton and Ranchester to provide an overview of sanitary conditions and treatment facilities	TRWSC SCCD NRCS	3/2008

Objective 3. Reduce water quality impacts from irrigation practices

Action Item	Responsible Parties	Inclusive Dates
Provide technical and financial assistance on irrigation upgrades, irrigation water management, and other practices	NRCS SCCD	3/2007- 6/2012
Provide technical and financial assistance on irrigation diversion improvements to eliminate the need for annual entry into and disturbance of a waterbody and to include fish friendly diversion structures	NRCS SCCD	3/2007- 6/2012
Provide information on efficient water use practices and irrigation water management	SCCD NRCS	3/2007- 6/2012

Objective 4. Reduce water quality impacts from unstable stream channels/banks

Action Item	Responsible Parties	Inclusive Dates
Provide technical and financial assistance for stream restoration projects	NRCS SCCD	3/2007- 6/2012
Provide information on riparian management and the benefit of stable channels, importance of maintaining natural channels, and the negative effects and regulatory impacts of improper manipulation	SCCD NRCS	3/2007- 6/2012
Provide information from the Tongue River Regional Curves assessment and evaluate its use within the watershed	NRCS SCCD	3/2007- 6/2012

Objective 5. Reduce water quality impacts from poorly managed riparian areas (or increase awareness about proper riparian zone function/management).

Action Item	Responsible Parties	Inclusive Dates
Provide technical and financial assistance on riparian improvement projects	NRCS SCCD	3/2007- 6/2012
Provide information on proper riparian management, function, etc.	SCCD	3/2007- 6/2012

Objective 6. Increase awareness about water quality impacts from other activities including urban and rural residential areas, urban stormwater, roads, wildlife and others.

Action Item	Responsible Parties	Inclusive Dates
Provide information on proper pesticide/fertilizer use and other Hazardous Household Wastes, impacts of improper use and disposal, including information on and participation in HHW Collection Days	SCCD	3/2007-6/2012
Provide free rural oil recycling using the tank in the Town of Dayton	SCCD	3/2007-6/2012
Provide information about urban run-off and the impacts of dumping in storm drains	SCCD	3/2007-6/2012
Provide information about feeding and concentrating wildlife near waterways	SCCD	3/2007-6/2012
Submit a letter, with pictures and resource concerns, to Sheridan County Commissioners on the Smith Creek/Columbus Creek road crossing that alerts them to water quality concerns and ask it to be considered a maintenance priority	TRWSC	6/2007

MONITORING AND EVALUATION

The existing, on-going monitoring network for the Tongue River Watershed will continue to be utilized to observe bacteria levels within the watershed, though not on a continual basis. At the present time, a 3 year frequency is used to monitor trends or observe long-term changes in water quality. The SCCD has an approved Quality Assurance Project Plan, updated in 2007 (SCCD, 2007) to guide the water quality monitoring program, which includes the development of project specific Sampling Analysis Plans for any monitoring activities.

A progress register (Appendix A) developed in 2000 and maintained on a regular basis, serves as a tool to document improvements made on the watershed and to encourage additional projects in the short-term. The most successful component of the Tongue River Watershed Project may be increased public awareness and the ability of individual projects and education activities to encourage more widespread and continuous improvement efforts.

The SCCD will attempt to provide information on bacteria load reduction estimates based on the type of improvement project or practice being installed or implemented. However, because of the complexity of non-point source pollution, it is understood that these are only theoretical estimates of what actually occurs on the watershed in the short term. Rather than attempting to use these estimates to make conclusions as to the overall impact on the watershed, the SCCD will use the existing monitoring network to look for long-term monitoring trends.

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APPENDIX A

**TONGUE RIVER WATERSHED MAP
WITH PROGRESS REGISTER**

APPENDIX B

PUBLIC COMMENTS RECEIVED

The open-house, held within the 45-day public comment period, was attended by approximately 10 people. Individuals visited with SCCD and NRCS personnel about various items including:

- the watershed assessment, planning, and improvement effort and interest in steering committee,
- individual septic system improvement opportunities,
- run-off conditions,
- bacteria and sediment issues with the Town of Ranchester water supply,
- possible point sources of pollution within the watershed in comparison to accelerated run-off conditions (warm temperatures, frozen ground, and drought effects), and
- bank erosion on the Tongue River in the park in the Town of Ranchester.

No comments specific to items within the DRAFT Tongue River Watershed Management Plan were received. Individuals in attendance generally felt the Plan addressed their concerns/issues on the watershed.

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