

# Conservation

## Coeur d'Alene Basin Restoration Plan

By Michael Hamilton

In the case of the Coeur d'Alene Basin Restoration Plan, the familiar advertising slogan “Good things come to those who wait,” once used to defend the correct way to slow-pour Guinness stout from the tap, is especially apt. After a multiyear process that included thousands of hours of private and public meetings hosted by the Restoration Partnership Trustee Council, which includes representatives from the Idaho Department of Fish and Game (IDFG) and Idaho Department of Environmental Quality, the Coeur d'Alene Tribe, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, The Bureau of Land Management, and the U.S. Forest Service, a comprehensive plan and an environmental impact statement were finalized in 2018.

The plan lays out a strategic framework for restoring natural resources, such as rivers and streams, riparian zones, and wetlands that were decimated

by the release of millions of tons of ore containing silver, lead, and zinc during more than a century of mining in the Coeur d'Alene Basin. Each of the partnership trustees received a pot of money through previous litigated settlements that totaled approximately \$140 million.

Once the plan was finalized, the trustees solicited project proposals through an open public process focused primarily on ecological restoration of habitats in the lower Coeur d'Alene Basin near the confluence of the South Fork and North Fork of the Coeur d'Alene River, and below the small burg of Pinehurst, off Interstate 90. In the upper basin, near the towns of Kellogg and Wallace, known as the “Silver Valley,” the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has led decades of remediation.

“We are trying to be judicious and pick projects out of the gate that were vetted and selected after public solicitation and, more importantly, can show success,” explains partnership trustee Chip Corsi, regional supervisor for the IDFG's Panhandle Region. Corsi says that particular attention is focused on restorations of wetlands where, each spring, tundra swans migrating

to Alaska are sickened and die after feeding on aquatic vegetation growing in contaminated marshy soil.

The long-term goals of the plan are to restore the resources that were injured by decades of mining-waste contamination, not an easy task given the size of the area and the level of toxic pollution. “With the settlement funds and our comprehensive plan in play, we now have the resources to do work to help restore keystone species and impact wildlife affected by pollution. We need to ensure that the public can reconnect with what has been lost,” explains Caj Matheson, natural resources program director for the Coeur d'Alene Tribe.

Not lost on any of the partnership trustees is the fact that in order for restoration projects to take place, remediation often must happen first. And, since the EPA controls the purse strings for leading remediation of contaminated resources in the Coeur d'Alene Basin, cooperation and oversight are key. “Our cleanup work in north Idaho, now well into its third decade of reducing contamination, is helping the basin heal from over a century of mining and smelting. Our focus there has been intentionally synchronized with restoration efforts from the beginning,” explains Mark MacIntyre, EPA's senior public information officer for Region 10.

In other words, according to Phillip Cernera, director of the Lake Management Department of the Coeur d'Alene Tribe, restoration work is separate from but complementary to cleanup activities in the Coeur d'Alene Basin led by the EPA. “The restoration plan was written by committee. With so many partnership trustees involved, it was challenging to reach consensus and select projects for restoration that would also include remediation efforts by the EPA.”

The bottom line, says Cernera, is simple: “It took over 100 years to poison our wetlands, lakes, and streams, and it may take another 100 to clean them up. We are committed to move ahead.”

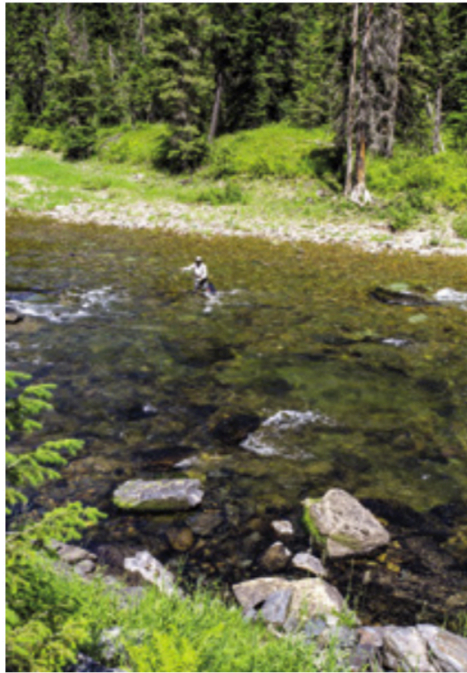


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