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Montana businesses should be thankful for clean water

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By MARNE HAYES | 0 comments

Among the things Montana business people should be thankful for during this season is our clean water.

For more than 40 years, the state of Montana has led the way in placing conservation as a priority for its citizens, going as far as placing the importance of a clean environment into its state constitution. When this position was challenged in the 1999 case MEIC v. Montana DEQ, the Montana Supreme Court ruled unanimously that Montana had a constitutional right to a clean and healthy environment, one intended to be preventative in nature. We cannot have a clean and healthy environment without access to, and protection of, clean water.

Big Sky, where I call home, is a significant gateway to southwest Montana and the busiest gateway into Yellowstone National Park. Our community economy and our community culture depend on the Gallatin River that runs through where we live, work and play. Its tributaries and the forks of its waterway provide not only recreation but also livelihoods. It creates jobs. Period.

So when people wonder if they should support or not support the Environmental Protection Agency's Waters of the U.S. rule, the answer is simple. Blocking protections for clean water will crush existing and potential jobs in Montana and will be damaging to the future of our communities and businesses.

Water is vital to our local economy — for what it provides to the landscapes as much as for what it provides to those who live, work, play and visit. Tourism is a big part of the state's economy, contributing \$3.6 billion in spending and \$236 million in tax revenue in 2013 alone. Some of the best Blue Ribbon streams in the country are right out my back door.

But it's more than tourism. Nearby Bozeman has received consistent accolades for being one of the greatest places to work and live in the nation, and it continues to attract new business and create jobs. And it's only one of the contributors to what makes Gallatin County one of the fastest growing counties in the state.

This isn't chance. This is what happens when people and communities take care of the resources that serve their economy. It means that we can rely on clean water for consumption, recreation, and business.

Protecting our water isn't just good for Montana. The decisions we make about our water here affect all of our downstream neighbors, and if the Yellowstone River is polluted, that spreads to the Missouri River, and so on. We need to be aware that what happens in Montana may not stay here.

Do not underestimate the impact water has on the American economy. Small businesses nationwide certainly don't. According to a poll from the American Sustainable Business Council, 80 percent of small business owners across the country support the EPA's proposal, including 78 percent of Republican small-business owners. In addition, 71 percent of small-business owners agreed with the statement that clean water protections are necessary to ensure economic growth. Only six percent disagreed.

The challenge in protecting our waters is striking the right balance. The Waters of the U.S. rule does that, clarifying what the Clean Water Act allows the government to do, while not giving the government any powers it didn't already have. This isn't a power-grab or end-around Congress. It's an attempt to clarify what the government can and can't do to protect this resource.

All businesses in Montana should welcome these protections. Our community, and many like ours, cannot do without clean water that provides natural habitats for indigenous species, a source of income for local businesses and a sense of wonder for our visitors. In Big Sky, water is more than just aesthetically soothing or recreationally important. It is economically significant and a vital component to the working pieces of our community.

Once we understand the value of our natural resources, it is only natural to be thankful for them and to want to protect them. For Montana's business community, clean water is indeed a resource to be thankful for.

Marne Hayes is director of Business For Montana's Outdoors, online at www.businessformontanasoutdoors.com.

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