



USDA-CSREES 2006 National Water Quality Conference

[Extension Education and its Evolving Role in Watershed Based Organization: A Study of the Montana Powder River Basin](#)

The potential for water quality and quantity changes within the Powder River Basin and its smaller watersheds in eastern Montana have generated an increased awareness of stakeholder roles in water conservation and management. Decreased precipitation patterns in an already arid climate, changes in water quality from downstream sources, and the potential of groundwater loss due to aquifer draw-down are all contributors to increasing concerns for loss of soil and water resource integrity throughout the basin. In the past, individuals or a small consortium of local landowners have come together to try and deal with watershed related issues in the Powder River Basin. These approaches have been costly and somewhat controversial, turning viable concerns into sounding boards for individual agendas.

Recently, agricultural producers and landowners are becoming increasingly aware of the proactive power in unifying through the development of watershed groups. Funding agencies at national, state, and local levels recognize these groups as legitimate applicants for assistance in watershed monitoring plans. Dealing with protection and preservation of water resources at the watershed level has helped organize and unify stakeholders into more effective tools in watershed conservation and management.

Professionals at Montana State University's Extension Water Quality Program have historically been consultants and technical service provider who bring expertise and guidance in monitoring techniques, data gathering, and data analysis. Extension's role is evolving and educators are now learning to provide more facilitation along with technical expertise to help empower watershed groups and give them an understanding of the effectiveness organization, teamwork, and community-wide efforts have in influencing major watershed based decisions. The combination of technical service expertise and education has been instrumental in facilitating stronger, more effective watershed management throughout the Powder River Basin.

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