

Position on Protecting Missoula's Drinking Water

Adopted 1997

Summary

The Missoula League of Women Voters supports government and private actions to protect the Missoula aquifer, our only economically feasible source of drinking water for the Missoula community, from contamination.

Background

In the 1990s Missoulians became increasingly aware of the importance and fragility of their single-source aquifer. Scientific studies have revealed that the aquifer is a fast moving, readily replenished source of drinking water for the Missoula valley. But it is not immune to contamination. In 1990 bacterial contamination shut down Missoula's largest public supply well, requiring two-thirds of the valley's residence to boil drinking water for three days. In 1993 a broken water line spewed thousands of gallons of water contaminated with heavy metals into an abandoned sump and forced closure of a drinking water well. Ineffective seepage pits in the Linda Vista area have caused fecal coliform and nitrate contamination of public and private wells. In 1996 floods and ice jams at the Milltown Dam scoured the river bed and contaminated the river with arsenic and heavy metal waste from the Milltown Superfund site, killing fish in the Clark Fork River.

In response to threats to the aquifer, Missoula city and county governments created a Missoula Valley Water Quality District, and the city adopted an aquifer protection ordinance. These two pieces of legislation offer Missoulians excellent tools to protect their drinking water supply. After studying the effectiveness of the Missoula Water Quality District in 1995-1997, the Missoula League agreed that the Water Quality District alone can not protect Missoula's aquifer.

Position

The Missoula League of Women Voters supports:

1. A coalition of government, private industry, and environmental watch-dog groups to protect the Missoula aquifer from contamination. The Missoula County Health Department is the most effective agency for protecting local water quality. Other governmental units should support the Health Department or other local government units and give them the authority necessary to adequately protect drinking water.
2. Encouraging sewer hookup in existing neighborhoods through the use of government grants and other financial incentives and requiring any new subdivisions or developments to lay dry sewer lines. The waste water treatment plant(s) should be improved/expanded to accommodate the population of the entire valley and to remove nitrates from its effluent discharged into the Clark Fork River.
3. Encouraging continuous community-wide education of people of all ages about protecting the aquifer and how individual acts of negligence can impact water quality for the community.
4. Tough fines for violating pollution regulations and for threatening the quality of drinking water

anywhere within the recharge area of the aquifer.

5. Regular publication of testing results from water quality inspections of Missoula area public wells.