United States Department of Agriculture
Natural Resources Conservation Service

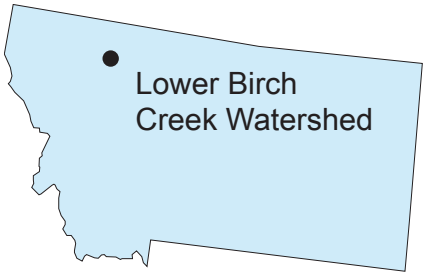
Watershed Operations

October 2009

Lower Birch Creek Watershed, Montana

Introduction

The Lower Birch Creek Watershed Project was started in 1982 to increase the availability of irrigation water, and improve the quality of water in streams and rivers.



The Lower Birch Creek Watershed is located in Pondera County, Montana.

Project Description

- **Location:** Pondera County, 1st Congressional District
- **Federal Funding:** $527,000
- **Sponsor Funding:** $366,000

This phase of the project will stabilize severe gully erosion by conveying excess irrigation flows back into Lower Birch Creek, the original source of irrigation water. Water will be conveyed to stable outlets in the stream corridor through buried plastic pipelines.

Partners

- USDA, Natural Resources Conservation Service
- Pondera County Canal and Reservoir Company
- Pondera County Soil and Water Conservation District

Funded through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) of 2009, this project is part of the Obama Administration's plans to modernize the nation's infrastructure, jump-start the economy, and create jobs. NRCS is using Recovery Act dollars to update aging flood control structures, protect and maintain water supplies, improve water quality, reduce soil erosion, enhance fish and wildlife habitat, and restore wetlands. NRCS acquires easements and restores floodplains to safeguard lives and property in areas along streams and rivers that have experienced flooding.

The severe gully erosion resulting from excess irrigation flows dropped into the Lower Birch Creek valley.

Lower Birch Creek Watershed, Montana

Benefits

The Lower Birch Creek Watershed Project will improve water quality by significantly reducing 25,000 tons of sediment deposited annually into 18.3 miles of stream fisheries, prime habitat for Westslope Cutthroat trout and grizzly bears. Irrigation water management made possible by this project will reduce the need for additional water diversion from Lower Birch Creek, and the amount of water released at the end of canal branches. Excess water returned to the stream is often higher in temperature and dissolved solids.

Wasteway exit into Birch Creek. Water is clear upstream of the exit point.

L9-2 Wasteway showing severe active erosion.

Economic Opportunities

This watershed has greater potential for agricultural production which is often limited by the availability of irrigation water. Improved water management will make efficient use of diverted stream flows, improve the consistency of irrigation volumes, and improve the quality of water returned to Birch Creek and the Marias River to support fish and other aquatic life.

Statewide Perspective

Birch Creek ultimately flows into the Marias River and the Missouri River. Downstream communities that tap the river for water supply will benefit from the decrease of sediment and associated saline levels.

Tourism is important to Montana's economy. The continued presence of species such as the grizzly bear and Westslope Cutthroat trout contribute to the recreational opportunities in this watershed.

Lewis and Clark traveled through areas of the Lower Birch Creek Watershed. Views unmarred by erosion and rivers clear of sediment will enhance this historic landscape experience for visitors and residents and alike.

For More Information

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Landslide on the side of the wasteway just below A-4 Canal. Soil erodes and washes into Birch Creek causing severe sedimentation.

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