

Belle Fourche River Watershed Partnership: Working toward better water quality
Written By Kindra Gordon Published in Range and Pasture Journal March 2009

Belle Fourche, which is French for Beautiful Fork, was named by French explorers for the confluence of what is today known as the Belle Fourche and Redwater Rivers and Hay Creek.

But stream entrenchment and bank failure were causing excess sediment to enter the Belle Fourche River, making it less than “beautiful” and prompting South Dakota to add a 17-mile stretch of the river to its 1998 and 2002 Clean Water Act section 303(d) lists of impaired waters for elevated total suspended solids (TSS).

As a result of these water quality issues, the Belle Fourche River Watershed Partnership (BFRWP) was formed in the mid-90s, and has since progressed to ongoing implementation projects focused on improving the river’s water quality and reducing the concentrations of TSS. The mission statement for the partnership is:

“Coordinate available resources to address concerns associated with the Belle Fourche River Watershed and the riparian areas within.”

Longtime Belle Fourche rancher Tim Reich serves as chairman of the BFRWP board and he explains, “We are a volunteer group of local people and organizations dedicated to the enhancement of the Belle Fourche River Watershed. The Partnerships’ goal is to provide a voluntary management approach to the BFRWP to conserve its natural resources, foster the long term economic stability of its communities, maintain the social and cultural values of those communities, and ensure the sustainability of the primary aquifer basin’s safe yield.”

Throughout the past decade the BFRWP has continually sought new and innovative ways to improve conservation in the watershed while promoting economic sustainability and growth. Much of the effort has been working with landowners on implementing Best Management Practices. To date, over \$9.1 million has been secured for rehabilitation of the watershed. Of that total, approximately \$2.5 million was granted from EPA 319 Funds through the SD DENR, \$3.7 million came from local participants and \$2.9 million was secured from other federal sources. They have:

1. Supported conservation outreach programs for producers, students, civic and government leaders and others, including pasture walks, riparian workshops and range camp.
2. Held bimonthly meetings which are open to the public to encourage community involvement. Watershed tours have also been held to demonstrate/educate local, state and federal governing groups on partnership activities.
3. Built relationships with state and federal agencies and local agriculture producers to promote conservation on the ground.

Reich explains, “Conservation planning includes proper grazing, which improves surface water quality and overall range health. Healthy rangelands are profitable and sustainable.”

4. Secured funding for improved conservation practices, including improving irrigation delivery and application efficiency, automation, lining and piping projects in the Belle Fourche Irrigation District, and funding support for improved irrigation application with center pivots.

Since 2007, the BFRWP has assisted with cost share from 319 grant money on 17 center pivots in the irrigation districts as well as over 10,000 feet of producer pipeline converting open ditches to gated pipe.

Also to date, cost share with 319 funds has gone toward range/riparian improvement practices affecting over 200,000 acres. Projects include: developing livestock watering system (pipeline and tanks), cross fencing for better distribution of livestock, and stream bank stabilization. These projects have taken place in 2007, 2008 and 2009.

Success has been the reward of these efforts, as water quality improved and South Dakota removed the 17-mile segment of the Belle Fourche River from the 2008 303(d) list for TSS.

Reich attributes the success of the BFRWP to the willingness of the partners to share ideas and follow through with those ideas by collaborating efforts (or funding) to get conservation practices on the ground.

Efforts will continue to keep watershed best management practices on the land. Thus far the Partnership has only worked in the South Dakota portion of the watershed, which encompasses 2.2 million acres. The watershed in its entirety drains northeast Wyoming and a small portion of southeast Montana. For more information visit the project's website at www.bellefourchewatershed.org.

Many local, state and federal individuals and organizations have been involved in the BFRWP. Among these include the Butte County, Lawrence County and Elk Creek Conservation Districts – each of which have voting members on the BFRW board; the Belle Fourche Irrigation District, which also has a voting member; the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS); SDSU, SD Conservation Commission, SD Department of Ag, SD Department of Environment and Natural Resources, the SD Game Fish and Parks, the SD Grassland Coalition and many others.