

BITTERROOT NATIONAL FOREST - DAMS AND RESERVOIRS

An Historical Overview

Adopted from a presentation by Roylene Gaul, 1999

The Bitterroot was one of the first early forest preserves. The Proclamation which created it was signed by President Cleveland on March 22, 1897. Most of the original forest was in Idaho. It included all of the Selway area, and much of the Salmon River country. The Montana portion of the early preserve consisted of the area south of the Sula Basin and the higher west side of the Bitterroot Range – approximately 6 to 10 miles above the valley floor. It was not until 1905 when the forest preserves became National Forests that the Bitterroot Forest absorbed much of what was the old Hellgate Forest Preserve, and our present boundaries to the north and east end of the valley came into existence.

St. Mary's Mission was established at near present day Stevensville in 1841. Here in the Bitterroot Valley; water was first used for irrigation in Montana. Father Anthony Ravalli, first taught the Indians how to irrigate their crops and then utilizing the water from Burnt Fork Creek built one of the first grist mills in the state. In 1852 Major John Owens acquired the very first water right in Montana when he diverted water from Burnt Fork Creek for his own agricultural use.

The following 10 years were busy years in the Bitterroot Valley. Settlers who followed in the steps of the trappers, missionaries, and miners acquired their water rights by appropriating water from many tributary streams that flow into the Bitterroot River. Many of these water rights date back to the 1860's.

History and case files have recorded that when the Forest was proclaimed many of the west side canyons already contained small dams. "The Bitterroot Forest Reserve" by John Leiberg dated 1897 states, "*Small dams have been constructed on as many as 75 small streams on the west side of the Bitterroot Range.....Dams which hold back a portion of the surplus water have been construct in Mill and Big Creeks which I have visited.*"

Currently on the Bitterroot National Forest there are 26 dams, 19 Dams are in the Wilderness (3 Forest Service owned and operated and 16 privately owned and operated). All of the privately owned facilities are used for irrigation water, with the exception of Burnt Fork Lake which lies at the head of the Stevensville Municipal Watershed and provides not only for agricultural uses, but also for the municipal uses of the City of Stevensville, Montana.

Currently the Bitterroot Valley is in the midst of the State of Montana Water Right Adjudication process. The Bitterroot National Forest plays an important role in the adjudication process. Each water right claimed is verified for accuracy. The Forest Service as custodian of the land is charged with protecting the resources. This includes the issuance of permits for rights-of-way and the inspections of the irrigation diversions to assure that they all conform to the rules of safety, practicability, and good land use.