

Friends of the Teton River Report on their Activities and Research Results

At a February 23 public forum at the High School the Friends of the Teton River (FTR) reported on the results of four years of water-related research and restoration work conducted across Teton Valley on the upper Teton River and its tributaries. Executive Director Lyn Benjamin presented a fascinating slide show to a crowd of about 55 on a diverse range of projects. “We have a number of serious concerns with respect to water in our watershed, including declining health in aquatic ecosystems, declining native trout populations, issues with the quality of both groundwater and surface water, alteration of natural hydrologic patterns, and, until recently, a lack of expertise and quality scientific data to support natural resource planning and decision making” said Benjamin. FTR has been working to solve that latter problem. “We’ve been very busy”, Lyn said, “and have learned a lot about our watershed.”

Key projects presented included the preliminary results of a unique groundwater recharge project conducted last year in the Fox Creek area. An upcoming public forum focused on that project, which is of particular interest to many in the agricultural community, will be held at 7:00 pm on March 16 at the High School. Lyn also described the results of a recently completed juvenile trout study completed with the assistance of researchers from Utah State University. This study shows that while our native Yellowstone Cutthroat trout are successfully spawning, despite very low numbers, the fry are not successfully surviving their first year of life and “recruiting” into the adult population. Another very interesting project with potentially huge implications regarding water management involves a hydrologic analysis of the Upper Teton River watershed completed with the assistance of Dr. Rob Van Kirk of Idaho State University. A prime conclusion of that study was that hydrologic alteration of stream flows, particularly the valley sections (between the foot of the Teton Mountains and the highway) of the larger tributaries to the river, is a major contributing factor in the decline of our native Yellowstone Cutthroat Trout. “Flow alteration clearly favors non-native trout species such as Rainbows and Eastern Brook Trout”, explained Benjamin. Lyn also explained that, because of the sharp declines across its range, there is a possibility that the Yellowstone Cutthroat will be listed under the Endangered Species Act. If this were to happen it would have widespread implications in Teton Valley. Other projects include an extensive water quality monitoring program. “We are closely watching trends in things like nitrate and E. Coli bacteria”, said Lyn. FTR has conducted extensive studies of aquatic habitat conditions on both the Teton River and key tributaries. This work, in particular, has helped FTR to target their restoration work, which has included diverse projects involving stream bank stabilization and plantings of important wetland vegetation, willows, etc., in an effort to reduce sedimentation and create critical fish habitat. FTR is also active in watershed education efforts in the local community, and has one staff dedicated to this important effort.

At the conclusion of the presentation, Lyn presented a range of projects planned for 2005, and said “now we want to hear from you”. “What are on your concerns and opinions as to what our priorities should be as FTR moves forward”. Nearly everyone stayed around for this second half of the program to ask questions and participate in the open

discussion. Chairs were rearranged into a large circle and a lively discussion ensued. Participants ranged from long-time residents and ranchers to newcomers and everyone in between. Clearly many are passionate about protection of our precious water resources, and how that might best be accomplished. While there is still much to do to protect what we have, the kind of open discussion and collaboration displayed at last weeks meeting amongst diverse members of our community will be key to achieving that goal moving forward.