

Thompson Chain of Lakes Stewardship Coalition

Designation: 501 c3 nonprofit

Established: 8/28/2022

Membership: Grassroots Community Organization, approximately 100 members

Email: tcl.stewardshipcoalition@gmail.com

Organization Website: <https://www.thompsonchainoflakesstewardshipcoalition.com/>

Social media: <https://www.facebook.com/thompsonchainoflakes/>

Guiding Principles

- We are endeared to the words and values enshrined in the state of Montana's 1972 Constitution, which prioritized the close relationship that exists between the state's natural resources and a high quality of life.
- We believe preserving the land and water of the Thompson Chain of Lakes for **future generations** means responsible use AND conservation of natural resources to maintain a balance and ensure the well-being of present AND future generations.
- We work to prevent questionable development that could sacrifice the quality of life for many and the health of the entire Thompson Chain of Lakes watershed for economic commercial development benefiting only a select few.
- We stand by the land use designations of the Lincoln County Growth Policy and The Thompson Chain of Lakes Neighborhood Plan.
- We believe that the unique characteristics of the land and water in The Thompson Chain of Lakes set the limits of possible land use options.

Our Guiding Document

The Thompson Chain of Lakes Neighborhood Plan

Signed April 7th, 2010, by the Lincoln County Commissioners

The underlying premise of the Thompson Chain of Lakes Neighborhood Plan is to protect property rights and values by offering assurance that the types, locations, and density of future uses are consistent with the inherent quality and values of the Thompson Chain of Lakes. This plan is intended to guide Lincoln County land use decisions for the area and is a foundation for future land use regulations.

The Chain of Lakes Neighborhood Plan, the only one in Lincoln County, was incorporated into the Lincoln County Growth Policy and was signed by all 3 Lincoln County Commissioners in 2010. According to Montana State Law, a Neighborhood Plan is a land use plan that must be substantially considered as County Commissioners evaluate development proposals within its boundaries.

The boundary of the Thompson Chain of Lakes Neighborhood Plan is from Loon Lake to Lower Thompson Lake for a total of 65,570 acres. It presents a future vision on how the stakeholders below agreed that this area should grow and develop. It identifies prohibited and permitted uses using detailed maps and narrative descriptions.

- The Stakeholders listed below spent 3 years developing the Thompson Chain of Lakes Neighborhood Plan.
 - Chain of Lakes Homeowner's Association
 - Plum Creek Timber Company
 - Lincoln County Planning
 - FWP (Fish, Wildlife and Parks)
 - Fisher River Fire Department
 - DNRC
 - US Forest Service

Organization

The Thompson Chain of Lakes Stewardship Coalition is a nonpolitical neighborhood organization founded as a nonprofit in 2022. Our mission is to protect and conserve the land and clean water of The Thompson Chain of Lakes for current and future generations.

Many of our members were born and raised in this area and have cherished the clean abundant water of the 18 lakes in the Thompson Chain of Lakes and the primitive and pristine surrounding land for generations of families. Some are descendants of those who first logged the trees on this land, bulldozed the back roads, and built the first lake cabins on the lakes. Many still get their drinking water from the lakes. We are pleased to welcome the many new neighbors to the area who share our values of place and caring for this area for future generations. Our newest neighbors chose this special place to live, work, recreate and perhaps even retire because of the very values we are trying to preserve. Together, as neighbors, recreationists, property owners, nature lovers, fishers, and hunters we are determined to conserve and protect this area we all cherish.

We came together to contribute to the public debate on new development in the Thompson Chain of Lakes. We are concerned about the cumulative effects of over development. We are not opposed to all development. We believe in thoughtful, wise, and deliberate land use planning and want to contribute to that in a meaningful way. As we have seen from counties throughout Montana, land use conflicts get worse as population density grows. Montana has been discovered and if we are going to keep what we love about this area – without letting it get loved to death, we must plan now for the future.

Our Goals

- Protect water quality and quantity from over development.
- Protect important wildlife linkage zones lands.
- Advocate for updating local government policies—land use plans, growth policies, neighborhood plans, corridor plans, transportation plans— so that they:
 - More strongly support sound planning.
 - Respect and reflect the wishes of the whole community with robust public participation.
 - Serve to enhance the well-being of the community, the environment, for now and future generations.
- Advocate for policies that limit highway sprawl in the Thompson Chain of Lakes.
- Advocate for thoughtful lake management to balance the multiple uses of our lakes, ponds, and wetlands, while protecting their health.
- Advocate for collaboration with stakeholders in developing a comprehensive water resource monitoring framework needed to meet the stewardship objectives outlined by the TCL Management Plan and the 2010 TCL Neighborhood Plan.
- Promote education, communication and coordinated action between the many stakeholders who use the Thompson Chain of Lakes.
- Coordinate with planning boards, realtors, timber holding companies, scientific community, tourism, business and industry, Montana State Fish, Wildlife and Parks agency.
- Provide input related to lakes, ponds, and wetlands to State Legislators and County Officials in support of healthy watersheds.
- Hold elected officials accountable to uphold the Thompson Chain of Lakes Neighborhood Plan, the Lincoln County Growth Policy, all state laws, and county and state regulations and policies; and to provide adequate public space and public notice as required by law for meaningful public participation in all land management decisions within their authority.

Some History

Once, not too long ago, 48,000 acres of land in this area was owned by a large timber company. It was mostly undeveloped and not in active timber management. Recently, the timber company divested 28,000 of these acres to

private development – all in the Thompson Chain of Lakes watershed. With development comes rapid change and increased pressure on this sensitive watershed.

About the Thompson Chain of Lakes

The primitive and pristine area of the Thompson Chain of Lakes provides winter range for white-tailed deer and elk. Mule deer often use the valley in the spring. Moose use the area in both winter and summer and the forested landscape supports black bears. The region lies in an area that may be used by grizzly bears moving between the Cabinet and Northern Continental Divide ecosystems. Mountain lions are attracted primarily to white-tailed deer populations in the valley. The lakes and streams support beavers, mink river otters, and muskrats. Wolves from nearby packs also frequent the area.

This biodiverse watershed is made up of 18 lakes, several ponds, and wetlands. Many species of waterfowl and water birds migrate and nest on the lakes and wetlands, including Red-necked grebes, mallards, goldeneyes, and Canada geese. The area supports many Species of Concern such as Common Loons, American bittern, Black terns, Bald eagles, and Western toads. The lakes and wetlands are important for nesting osprey and several amphibians and reptiles.

The lake/land interface is perhaps the most sensitive area in terms of water quality. The proximity and intensity of uses in this interface will have a significant influence on water quality.

The hydrology of these lakes is threatened as is the entire watershed and the ecology of this primitive and pristine area of Montana. As additional development occurs in this area, our nonprofit is focused on ensuring that:

- Wetlands, unique fish and wildlife habitats, species of special concern, and other environmentally sensitive areas are protected.
- Wildlife corridors continue to function.
- Water quality and quantity is protected and conserved; and
- Habitat loss, degradation, and fragmentation are minimized.

Why We Are Concerned About the Health of the Lakes

Drawdown of the lake levels from surface and groundwater extraction for domestic water needs is an ongoing problem associated with the recent and rapid growth of subdivision development in the TCL area. Several water bodies in the TCL area are especially vulnerable to water withdrawal impacts. Many of these lakes are spring fed basins with no inlet or outlet streams. Lake replenishment is dependent on groundwater inflows and direct precipitation on the lake surface and adjacent shoreline riparian zones. Long term Lake residents have observed significant declines in seasonal lake level for several years corresponding with extended drought, impacts of climate change, wildfires and the increased domestic water use associated with expanding lakeshore and near lakeshore developments.

The spring fed lakes are sinks for sediment as well as contaminants contained in surface runoff and groundwaters. Significant water quality concerns associated with Nitrogen and Phosphorus contamination from septic system was highlighted 29 years ago in the Thompson Chain of Lakes Management Plan and Environmental Analysis (1993). Surface and groundwater quality degradation associated with stormwater runoff, septic system effluent, and pesticide and fertilizer application are ongoing concerns in the TCL area. The cumulative effects of large-scale development on the TCL water resources need to be seriously evaluated when making land use decisions.