

ABSTRACT
**THE IMPORTANCE OF PERFECTING YOUR WATER RESERVATION – NOW IS THE
PERFECT TIME**

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Thirty-three municipal, forty conservation district, and ten State and Federal water reservations have been granted in Montana. The Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC) recently completed a 10-year review of existing state water reservations as directed by the 2015 Montana Legislature. Each water reservation holder submitted a report which provided information on how the objectives of the reservation are being met. This information was used by DNRC to evaluate the continuing need for each reservation.

Most water reservations in Montana are associated with three Final Orders issued by DNRC: 1) Yellowstone, 2) Upper Missouri, and 3) Lower Missouri Final Orders. Water reservation uses created through these Final Orders include maintaining instream flow for fisheries, municipal, irrigation, and multi-purpose uses (chiefly large storage reservoirs). Municipal, irrigation, and multi-purpose reservations were all required to submit a response to the DNRC request for information. In most cases, DNRC found that the actual volume used to date has been considerably less than expected.

Only the Upper Missouri municipal reservations have a perfection date attached to the reservation, which is December 31, 2025. In the Upper Missouri, several municipalities have moved ahead with developing water reservations, either with scoping, planning, and designing, or with actual use of the water. The City of Helena has drilled two test holes and installed one production well to evaluate the availability of water in the deep alluvial aquifer within the reservation boundary. In addition, the City continues to tap into the water reservation with applications to change the points of diversion within the place of use for selected irrigation projects. The City of Great Falls has perfected most of its surface water reservation through change applications for parkland irrigation and industrial use.

The City of Shelby submitted applications to change the place of use and point of diversion for each of the City's municipal water rights and reservation. The City requested the water right changes to meet current municipal demands from portions of the City that have grown outside of its historic boundaries. Additionally, the City has obtained multiple water use agreements to distribute water to outlying communities. The water right and water reservation changes are part of an interim solution to provide reliable potable water to local communities prior to completion of the North Central Montana Regional Water Authority pipeline project.

Innovative and progressive policies by some municipalities show that numerous opportunities to develop and perfect water reservations are available. End users will greatly benefit from access to reliable and sufficient water supplies. Moving forward with planning, design, and actual use of the water is critical to ensuring the reservation is not withdrawn for lack of use in the future. But, the 2025 deadline means that some water reservation holders must initiate actions quickly.