

Little Bitterroot Lake Association Newsletter No. 2 April/May 2023



Septic System Management at Little Bitterroot Lake

Notice - Mark Your Calendar: Annual Meeting August 2nd 6 pm at the Fire Hall

“NEW” LBLA Septic Education and Awareness Program (SEAP)

**We have a “New” Septic Education and Awareness (SEAP) Program!
“Managed by Kate Thomas” We will go door to door and help you fully
understand: your septic, your lake responsibilities and explain what
we can do to help you protect our LAKE from failed septic systems!**

**This program is the “best” in the state of Montana. We have a full
database of all septic systems with their age and type of construction
and a fully interactive program with all lake owners!**

**Little Bitterroot Lake will have the best defense against lake
contamination because of all our efforts and our NEW SEAP Program.**

What’s going on down below?

As we sit back and enjoy the serene and priceless views of our lake, we should also take a moment and think about why the lake is so pristine and what we can do to preserve this treasure. Most people don’t like when conversations ‘go into the sewer (or septic)’ ... now is the time for all of us to have ***that*** conversation. This is a serious topic and we must take responsibility before it is too late.

For all of us who have septic systems on Little Bitterroot Lake, we have the responsibility to keep them running in good order. We have many options to choose from, from professional

inspections (and maintenance) to annual 'do it yourself' checkups. If the homeowner finds that their system is malfunctioning or suspect it, it will be necessary for them to contact a licensed professional with the necessary skills and equipment to repair the system. Septic system repairs in most cases, require a permit from the local health jurisdiction and must conform with state and local public health codes that regulate septic system repair. If you choose to inspect or maintain your septic system, you do so at your own risk and are personally responsible for your own safety. You may be exposed to health hazards including, but not limited to, infectious diseases, hazardous gases, and electrical shock. Sewage carries harmful bacteria, viruses, and parasites that can cause infection and illness, especially in people with weakened immune systems, pregnant women, children, and the elderly. Now, think for a moment if this applies to any of us swimming, fishing or drinking water exposed to a malfunctioning septic system!!!

We in the Little Bitterroot Lake Association are taking this seriously. Over the next few months SEAP communications about the health/wellness of our lake, surrounding area, and steps we all can take to keep this area one of the most pristine locations in the country will be delivered. We must all be stewards of our lake. If for some reason the lake displays signs of severe septic leachate right off someone's shore, we will all see it and it will become an eyesore and mean major repairs are in order.

Thank you for your consideration and participation in our
"New" Septic Education and Awareness (SEAP) Program. READ ON!

NEWS ALERT: Because of your support and contributions we are now able to sample in the Spring, Summer and Fall. This will give us a much better understanding of how our lake is being influenced by septic leachate and coincide with our Septic Education and Awareness Program (SEAP)!

**Little Bitterroot Lake Association (LBLA)
Septic Education and Awareness Program (SEAP)**

For all of us who have septic systems on Little Bitterroot Lake, we have the responsibility to keep them running in good order. A failing septic system can spread leachate (treated water that still contains polluted water) into groundwater, contaminating the lake as well as drinking water sources.

Not only does this cause algal blooms in the lake that cause fish kill, but it can also cause illnesses in humans and pets, especially in people with weakened immune systems, pregnant women, children, and the elderly.

The LBLA Septic Education and Awareness Program (SEAP) is here to guide and provide you with access to financial and educational resources to properly maintain your septic system.

A representative of the Little Bitterroot Lake Association, Kate Thomas, will be going door-to-door with a survey to determine the level of awareness on septic maintenance around the lake. She will also be providing homeowners with educational materials and information on how to request financial resources to help mitigate maintenance costs.

ATTENTION: Little Bitterroot Lake Residents PLEASE take care of your SEPTIC SYSTEMS!

Septic systems older than 15 years are at increased risk of failure and leachate! Septic leachate occurs when treated water still contains pollutants like nutrients or pathogens. This polluted water can contaminate groundwater and compromise drinking wells, as well as contaminate surface water bodies such as Little Bitterroot Lake.

This can cause illness in humans and pets as well as harmful algal blooms in the lake that cause fish kill and diseases in recreators.

The Little Bitterroot Lake Association is here to guide and provide you with access to financial and educational resources to properly maintain your septic system!



Maintaining Your System

Septic systems should be inspected at least every 3 years and pumped every 3-5 years. Systems should be pumped more frequently with increases in people using the system, amount of wastewater generated, and volume of solids in the system (such as a garbage disposal). Having a smaller septic tank also increases the frequency of pumping.

Drainfields should be inspected for cracked pipes and failure due to rust, frost, heavy loading, excess water from runoff or irrigation, and roots. Improperly treated wastewater can be toxic for children and pets.

Adding large solid waste items (diapers, cigarettes, grease, etc.) can clog the system. Adding large amounts of household chemicals, gasoline, pesticides, paint, and detergents can kill the microbes in the system that treat the wastewater.

Michigan State University's Michigan Septic System Education has stated that overloading the system drastically increases the chance of failure. This is caused by running multiple appliances at once and having more people using the system than what it is rated for. **A 1-3-bedroom house is intended to accommodate 1000 gallons for 4-5 residents. Housing more people or throwing a party floods the septic system and overwhelms the capacity of the tank and drainfield.** Microbes cannot break down waste products while the system is being flooded, causing sewage backups and untreated effluence into the drainfield.

Symptoms of a Failing Septic System

- Backups in toilets and sinks when flushing or doing laundry
- Bright green grass over drainfield
- New vegetation downstream of drainfield
- Foul odors
- Pooling of water or muddy soil around system, in the crawlspace, or basement

If you are throwing a large gathering or housing more than 4-5 people in your home or on your property, consider these steps to minimize septic failure:

- Rent a portable restroom
- Inspect and pump the tank and drainfield prior to the gathering
- Do food prep and other water extensive cooking ahead of time
- Reduce extra water inputs from laundry and dishwashers a few days before the party
- Ensure external water inputs such as rain gutters and irrigation lines are directed away from the drainfield

According to Flathead County Health Department adding an RV hookup is considered a second dwelling and must be permitted by the county to determine if an additional septic system should be installed.

Constructing two or more RV sites requires DEQ approval. More information about RV sites using septic systems can be found at <https://www.flatheadhealth.org/environmental-health/sewage-and-septic/faq/>

Tips for System Protection

- Think Before You Flush: Don't flush pharmaceuticals, sanitary products, chemicals, or paint.
- Watch the area around your tank and drainfield for failure symptoms.
- Don't empty your hot tub or swimming pool into the system as it can clog and fail the drainfield. Empty contents onto landscaped areas away from the drainfield.
- Limit use of the garbage disposal.
- Keep rainwater drainage systems away from the drainfield.
- For more tips please visit <https://www.epa.gov/septic/how-care-your-septic-system>

Systems That Need More Care

The lifespan of a septic system depends on construction material, amount of use, drainfield design, and soil acidity. When properly maintained and cared for, it can last a long time!

Steel tanks will rust and must be carefully inspected regularly after 10 years. Steel tanks are lucky to last to 15 years! Concrete tanks are more durable and can last up to 30 or 40 years but should still be inspected for cracks every few years.

The drainfield within your system can last a long time if properly taken care of. **Using steel or cast-iron pipes leads to the same rust issue and should be properly inspected once a year.** Parking vehicles or watercrafts over the drainfield can damage the area and cause early failure. Drainfields near trees should be inspected more frequently for root blockages.

As a homeowner and lake recreator you have a duty to protect Little Bitterroot Lake. Properly maintaining your septic system will prevent pollution from entering the lake and drinking sources, as well as save money!

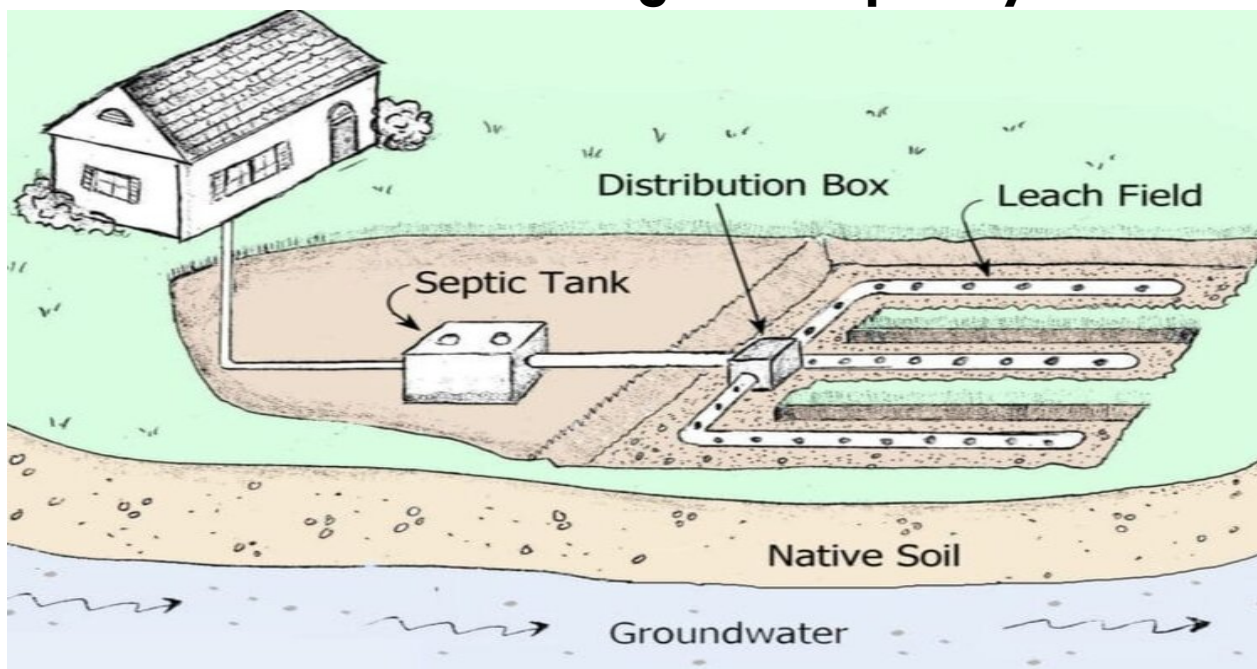
Remember it is much more expensive to replace an entire failed system than it is to repair small issues discovered during routine inspections. Maintenance service typically costs around \$250-\$500.

You may be eligible for a 50% reimbursement (up to \$200) for pumping and inspection of your system through the Flathead Basin Septic Maintenance Reimbursement Program, funded through a Department of Environmental Quality federal grant.

<https://lakecountyconservationdistrict.org/septic-maint-reimbursement/>

For more information on septic systems and their maintenance, please visit the websites listed below or contact Kate Thomas at (k.thomas@littlebitterlakeassoc.org):
<https://www.flatheadhealth.org/environmental-health/sewage-and-septic/>
<https://mtlakebook.org/understanding-septic-system/>

SEAP - Understanding Your Septic System



Maintain your Septic System

Septic systems are designed to hold, treat, and dispose of household wastewater. Household wastewater contains bacteria, viruses, household chemicals, and nutrients, all of which can cause health problems and pollute groundwater or surface water. Therefore, treatment is needed to prevent water contamination.

Pumping and inspecting your septic system every couple years can help your system run longer, save money, and protect water quality in the Flathead watershed. Ageing septic systems are a huge threat to future water quality in our watershed.

Throw a pumping party! Many companies offer discounts if pumping multiple residences in a neighborhood.

How Your Septic System Works

Most septic systems have two major parts, a septic tank and a drainfield. Wastewater from sinks, toilets, showers and other drains flows to an underground septic tank. In the tank, solids settle to the bottom and a layer

of scum or grease floats to the surface on an intermediate liquid layer. As raw sewage is added to the tank, an equal amount of liquid flows out into the drainfield.

The drainfield is where most treatment occurs. It consists of gravel-filled trenches containing plastic chambers or perforated plastic pipe. Effluent moves through the pipes and seeps into the surrounding soil. Soil particles filter out small, suspended solids and organic matter, while soil bacteria break down harmful microorganisms and other organic components. Viruses adhere to clay particles in the soil and eventually die. The treated effluent continues its downward flow through the soil layers.

Maintain Your System to Keep it Functioning Properly

Regular maintenance will keep your system functioning properly and extend its life.

Do not use additives in your system. They provide no benefit and may harm the system. Additives can result in sludge being flushed into the drainfield, plugging the soil pores.

Pump the tank regularly. Depending on your water use, pump the tank every two to five years.

Discharge all wastewater from the septic tank. Don't run wastewater from laundry or a sauna directly into the drainfield as the detergent scum will quickly clog soil pores and cause failure.

Avoid compacting soil over the drainfield. Compacted soil cannot treat wastewater and once compacted, it can't be restored.

Best Management Practices to Keep Your System Working

Conserve water. Excessive water use is the most common cause of septic failure, so reduce water used for bathing, laundry, and flushing the toilet.

Repair water leaks. Repair leaking pipes, sticking float valves in toilets, and dripping faucets to reduce wastewater. A dripping faucet can waste 15-20 gallons per day.

Take shorter showers and choose showers over baths. A full bath uses 50-60 gallons of water, while a shower uses only about 5 gallons per minute.

Install low-volume toilets and low-flow shower heads. Typical toilets use 5-6 gallons per flush, providing nearly half of the wastewater from a house. Toilets using only 1.5 gallons of water are available.

Do not use the toilet as a waste basket. Don't flush facial tissue, diapers, tampons or any kind of plastic down the drain.

Do not use garbage disposals. Ground up garbage does not decompose easily, causes rapid build up of solids in the tank, and may move solids into the drainfield, clogging pipes and soil pores.

Never put coffee grounds down the drain.

Dispose of household hazardous waste properly – not down the drain. Contact your county sanitarian to learn about proper hazardous waste disposal.

Do not flush or pour unused, unwanted or expired medications down the drain. Medications are being found in groundwater and the consequences for human and environmental health are not fully understood. Take your

medications to a “take-back” collection event. If that is not possible, add water and then ashes, dirt, kitty litter or coffee grounds and place in an outer container, such as a plastic tub (to prevent discovery) and dispose with household trash.

Wash only full loads in the dishwasher. Wash only full loads of laundry. To avoid overloading your system, spread washing out over the week instead of washing several loads in one day. A single load takes about 40 gallons of water. Minimize use of household chemicals and cleaners. Normal amounts of detergents, bleach, drain cleaners and other cleaners won't harm bacterial action in the system.

Signs of a Problem With Your System

Sewage backup in your drains or toilets. This may be black liquid with a bad odor.

Slow toilet flushing.

Wet areas or water seeping near the drainfield. It may or may not have an odor.

Excessive growth of aquatic weeds or algae in the lake near your home. Incomplete treatment of nutrient-rich wastewater seeping from your system promotes this growth.

Bacteria or nitrates found in your well water. This indicates a serious contamination problem that may come from your own or a neighbor's failing system.

What to Do if Your System Fails

Have your tank pumped. This may solve the problem. If the drainfield or household piping is clogged or if high water levels are a problem, this won't help.

Fence off the area to minimize human, pet or wildlife contact with wastewater.

Don't use additives – they may harm your system.

You may need to upgrade or replace the system or drainfield. A permit from the county health department is required for all new construction and replacement.

Summary of important tips to remember for maintaining your septic system:

Pump and Inspect Regularly. Systems should be pumped every 3-5 years and inspected every 3 years. If you are experiencing symptoms of failure (backups in toilets and sinks, bright green grass over drainfield, foul odors, or pooling of water around the system or under the home), contact a local inspection company as soon as possible.

Do not overload the system. Running multiple appliances at once or having more people using the system than what it is intended for can flood the system and cause sewage backups and push untreated effluence into the drainfield. A 1-3 bedroom house is intended to accommodate 2-6 residents. **If you will be having a gathering of more people than your septic is built for, consider renting a portable restroom to minimize septic failure.**

Do not let excess water empty into the drainfield. Rainwater drainage systems should direct water away from the drainfield. Do not empty hot tub or swimming pool contents into the system as it can clog and fail the drainfield. Empty contents onto landscaped areas away from the drainfield.

Think before you flush: Do not flush pharmaceuticals, sanitary products, chemicals, or paint.

Current EVENTS and NEW STUFF

- 1) Annual Meeting August 2nd 6 pm at the Fire Hall
- 2) Head Regional Warden coming to our Annual Meeting
- 3) Oct 18 – Oct 20 Montana Lakes Conference in Whitefish – See Capt Dan
- 4) We need a Loon Monitor for our Lake – Please Volunteer
- 5) SEAP Program begins this Spring – We will be knocking on your door!
- 6) Please Volunteer to work at the boat launches and teach the LBLA Active Boater Program



ALL HANDS ON DECK  CONTRIBUTION FORM

**PLEASE DETACH AND MAIL BACK TO: LBLA PO BOX 1003 MARION, MT.
59925**

NAME _____

CONTRIBUTION AMOUNT _____

MAILING ADDRESS _____

EMAIL ADDRESS _____

PHONE NUMBER _____ CELL _____

COMENTS IDEAS _____



KEEP THE “P” OUT OF LITTLE BITTERROOT LAKE

Lake Education and Awareness Program (LEAP)

****Notice - Mark Your Calendar: Annual Meeting August 2nd 6 pm at the Fire Hall****

TRY TO AVOID USING ANY FERTILIZER NEAR OUR LAKE

Please, if you must – “ONLY” use PHOSPHORUS FREE FERTILIZER

LAWN AND PLANT FERTILIZERS CONTAINING PHOSPHORUS IN THEIR CHEMISTRY ARE HARMFUL TO LITTLE BITTERROOT LAKE. PHOSPHORUS IN FERTILIZERS WASHES OFF FERTILIZED LAWNS AND PLANTS OF LAKE PROPERTY OWNERS AND IS LEACHED INTO THE LAKE.

HARMFUL EFFECTS OF PHOSPHORUS OVERLOADING OUR LAKE FROM FERTILIZERS

1. Aquatic plants absorb dissolved nutrient Phosphorus like it is sugar laced dessert. 1 pound of Phosphorus can produce 500 pounds of blue green algae, and result in unwanted algal blooms.
2. A sharp decline in water clarity results.
3. Algal blooms and accelerated growth of other aquatic plants in the lake dramatically decreases oxygen levels in the lake which is harmful to fish and other animals which inhabit the lake.
4. Unwanted fish and bacteria thrive in Phosphorus polluted low oxygenated lake water.
5. The lake becomes less desirable for recreational purposes such as swimming, boating, and fishing.

PROACTIVE MEASURES PROPERTY OWNERS CAN TAKE TO KEEP PHOSPHORUS OUT OF LITTLE BITTERROOT LAKE

1. If you must...Use Phosphorus free (w/Slow-Release Nitrogen) fertilizer.
2. Use fertilizer as directed in small amounts being sure to not over fertilize.
3. Do not fertilize directly by the lakeshore.
4. Limit the number of times you fertilize to once/year or not at all.
5. Best time to fertilize is in spring around Easter or fall; a couple of weeks after Labor Day.
6. Plant bushes and shrubs close to the lake to decrease and slow the flow of water runoff.
7. Remove grass clippings and other decomposing organic material close to the lake.
8. Encourage like friends and neighbors to buy Phosphorus Free (w/Slow-Release Nitrogen) fertilizer.
9. Encourage local stores with fertilizer to stock Phosphorus Free (w/Slow-Release Nitrogen) fertilizer.

FERTILIZER NUMBERING-A ZERO in the middle means phosphorus free!



BUY “ONLY” PHOSPHORUS FREE with Slow-Release NITROGEN! KEEP READING PLEASE...REALLY GOOD INFORMATION

The “P” stands for phosphorus. It is one of the most polluting substances in lakes across the United States and is a serious potential threat to Little Bitterroot Lake. Presently, phosphorus levels in Little Bitterroot Lake are stable, but with leaking septic systems, new development of property surrounding the lake, large tracts of “disturbed bare land”, excessive invasive noxious weeds, and overuse of phosphorus in fertilizers on grasses and other plants, the threat to Little Bitterroot Lake becomes very real. If we educate ourselves, and care about keeping Little Bitterroot Lake clean and pristine, and act proactively we can contain the potential hazards of phosphorus pollution in our lake. *This short essay will give the reader a basic, easy to understand approach about fertilizers and their dangers to the lake in what is actually a very complicated complex bio-chemical subject.*

Most property owners try to eradicate and control invasive noxious weeds and replace them with grasses and other plants. These plants need nutrients for their survival. There are many nutrients found in the natural ecosystem, but the most important ones for healthy plants are in the form of Nitrogen (nitrates, nitrites, ammonia), Phosphorus (phosphates), and Potassium (apatite, potash). *Nitrogen (N)* is used by plants in a process called photosynthesis to produce chlorophyll, which aids in plant growth and greens up lawns, and for aquatic plants nitrogen makes the water look green. *Phosphorus (P)* is important in the development of healthy roots and is also important during seeding. *Potassium (K)* aids in the general health of plants, the formation of chlorophyll, and in disease immunity. In small quantities these nutrients are good for the overall health of the Little Bitterroot Lake ecosystem. Environmental problems in the lake begin when fertilizers containing excessive amounts of these nutrients end up in the lake.

Nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium are the most important ingredients in any fertilizer. If the proper fertilizer is selected and used in small amounts, they may have a low impact on the lake, but over fertilization of grasses and plants can have devastating environmental effects on any lake, including Little Bitterroot Lake. The pollution problems created by fertilizer used by unknowing property owners around Little Bitterroot Lake could be catastrophic to the environmental integrity of the lake.

The following is a worst-case scenario for a future Little Bitterroot Lake

Dissolved nitrogen and phosphorus in fertilizers are leached from fertilized grass and plants from rain and snow melt into the lake. Soluble phosphates containing phosphorus is also released into the soil from the decomposition of grasses and other plants, then leached into the lake by rain and melt water from snow. Aquatic plants which include blue green algae and invasive noxious Eurasian watermilfoil absorb these nutrients into their cells providing growth and other important plant functions. The environmental problems involving phosphorus, begins when the lake becomes over-

loaded with intolerable levels of dissolved phosphorus (phosphate, PO₄). Aquatic plants absorb dissolved phosphorus like sharks in a food frenzy. The result of this pollution produces blue green algal blooms and a proliferation of all aquatic plants in the lake. It is estimated that one pound of phosphorus can produce about 500 pounds of blue green algae! The lake becomes eutrophic, that is the lake is over saturated with nutrients, especially phosphorus. When a lake is in the eutrophic state, aquatic plants deplete dissolved oxygen to very low levels resulting in negative unwanted shifts to the natural aquatic plants and animals which inhabit the lake. If the phosphorus pollution is extreme natural desired species rapidly decline or disappear from the lake while undesirable species thrive. Water clarity would greatly decrease taking on an unhealthy green appearance along the shoreline. Fish would often be seen belly-up in the water, dead or fighting for oxygen. In addition, once a lake is heavily polluted with phosphorus it is extremely difficult to get phosphorous levels back to normal, often showing phosphorus pollution retention periods greater than fifteen years!

Is this what we want for Little Bitterroot Lake? The answer is an obvious - NO. Can Little Bitterroot Lake realistically change like the lake depicted above? This is a scary - YES. Water quality monitoring of Little Bitterroot Lake by Water & Environmental Technologies since 2004 shows that although phosphorus levels in Little Bitterroot Lake are presently low and stable, nitrogen levels have “significantly risen” since 2012. Nitrogen levels in the lake are presently high enough for rapid algae growth in the lake, but by itself probably will not produce algal blooms, even with more additions of nitrogen. There is also a relationship between nitrogen and phosphorus concentrations. Increased nitrogen levels in Little Bitterroot Lake have not yet produced large algal blooms and by itself probably will not, but if phosphorus levels increase as nitrogen levels continue to increase, a tipping point will soon be reached limiting any further addition of phosphorus to the lake. The lake becomes what is termed a “phosphorus limited lake”. Little Bitterroot Lake is presently phosphorus limited. Increased concentrations of nitrogen in the water decreases the amount of phosphorus the lake can hold to reach its tipping point limit and any increase in phosphorus could directly cause algal blooms in the water to explode. Oxygen levels in the lake would also decrease (eutrophication) having negative effects on the lake. **Little Bitterroot Lake is approaching that limit.**

What can individual property owners proactively do to decrease or at least help stabilize increased phosphorus in Little Bitterroot Lake? One very important thing we all could do to help in this serious developing problem would be to choose the correct fertilizer to use when fertilizing property. Choose a 0 % phosphorus free fertilizer. The way you can tell if the fertilizer is phosphorus free is by the 3 numbers on the label on the fertilizer bag. For example: 20 – 0 - 5. These numbers indicate the % by weight of the nitrogen (N), phosphorus (P), and potassium (K) in the bag of fertilizer. In this example, a 100-pound bag of fertilizer would have 20 pounds of N, 0 pounds of P free, and 5 pounds of K in the fertilizer. The middle number needs to be zero. REMEMBER: USE PHOSPHORUS FREE FERTILIZER. The remaining 75 pounds would be inert filler ingredients.

What else can we do to protect Little Bitterroot Lake? Use fertilizer in small amounts as instructed. Fertilize less by the lake – better yet **DO NOT fertilize by the lake!** Limit the number of times per year in which you fertilize to once per year or in some years not at all. The best time of year to fertilize is around Easter (spring) or shortly after Labor Day to October (fall). Avoid fertilizing in summer. Try to purchase organic insoluble nitrogen fertilizer that is phosphorous free because they decompose into soluble plant nutrients much slower than soluble chemical nitrogen fertilizers. Plant bushes and

shrubs close to the lake to decrease and slow the flow of water runoff. Remove grass clippings and other decomposing organic plant material because it decomposes into soluble phosphorus phosphate harmful to the lake. Encourage your lake friends and neighbors to buy phosphorus free fertilizer. Encourage agricultural/country stores or other stores which sell fertilizer to stock phosphorus free fertilizer to help protect and save our area lakes from the dangers that phosphorus pollution creates.

In summary, there are many environmental issues attacking Little Bitterroot Lake. Phosphorus in fertilizers is a serious problem that we as individual property owners can eliminate and control if we proactively select and properly use phosphorus free fertilizer when using fertilizer on our property. Knowledge and awareness of these environmental issues is important if we expect to make a cohesive proactive plan to protect Little Bitterroot Lake. Why should we wait for Little Bitterroot Lake to suffer the same environmental problems that so many lakes in the Midwest and Eastern United States have been affected by? **Avoid fertilizing. If you must fertilize make the right choice: use phosphorus free fertilizer (with slow-release nitrogen).**

SOURCES OF INFORMATION FOR GREATER DETAIL

Little Bitterroot Lake Water Quality Monitoring Program 2020 Annual Report, Water and Environmental Technologies, Butte, Montana

The Montana Lake Book, 3rd Edition, 2017, Whitefish Lake Institute

Ted Peters, Director, Geneva Lake Environmental Agency (GLEA), Phosphorus Free Fertilizer, 2009

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PHONE NUMBER _____

CELL _____

COMMENTS and IDEAS
