Good Neighbor Handbook
A Guide for Landowners in the Methow Valley
Cover: Balsamroot and a view of the Sawtooths. Above: Twisp River. Dennis O’Callaghan

Facing page, left to right: rancher Craig Boesel; skiers on the Methow Community Trail; a ponderosa pine; naturalist Ken White; Taylor Woodruff. Photos and illustrations throughout are from the Methow Conservancy Collection unless otherwise credited.
Welcome to the Methow Valley

If you own a piece of property or are considering buying land in the Methow Valley, the Good Neighbor Handbook is for you.

In one way or another, every person who has ever lived here – from Native Americans to second homeowners to alfalfa farmers – has played a role in shaping the landscape. And nearly everyone in the Methow has also been inspired by the landscape in some way.

This handbook offers guidelines and ideas that come from many sources: resident scientists, amateur naturalists, experienced general contractors and most likely, your future neighbors.

While this collective input comes from people in many walks of life, it has a running theme: a deep appreciation of the Methow Valley. Our hope is that this information will help you enjoy and protect all that creates the unique beauty of the Methow.
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Once a dietary staple of Native Americans, bitterroot usually grows in barren, rocky soil. Dennis O’Callaghan

LOOKING FOR MORE INFORMATION?
Who do you call if you have a beaver in your irrigation ditch? Where can you find recycled material for a renovation or new home construction? A list of resources can be found on pp. 30-31.
A View of the Methow Valley

The Methow Valley is a 70-mile-long, 1.17-million-acre watershed that is flanked on three sides by the Cascade Mountains. Eighty-five percent of the land is federally owned, 10 percent is held by private landowners and five percent is owned by the state of Washington.

Three main rivers – the Methow, Chewuch and Twisp – and many smaller creeks flow through the valley and eventually spill into the Columbia River. As with most valleys in the western United States, the lower elevation areas with their deep soil and access to irrigation were homesteaded and claimed for private use.

The climate is diverse, with a temperature range that can span 120 degrees over the course of a year. Hot summer temperatures can bring afternoon work to a standstill, and in winter, heavy blankets of snow can collapse roofs. It is also a drier climate than that just west of the Cascades: The average precipitation is about 13 inches a year.

Though the valley has been through waves of logging, mining, ranching, hunting and other booms, the driving economic force today is tourism. Over a half million people flock to the valley every year, whether it’s to enjoy the cross country ski trails or to stop a while on their journey along the North Cascades Loop.

The resident population of Okanogan County is spread out over 5,281 square miles, for an average of seven people per square mile – far below the U.S. average of 80 people per square mile.
Living near Water

Water is the lifeblood of the Methow Valley. Not only does it support a community of farmers, residents and recreational users, its presence is critical to a vast array of wildlife. Biologists estimate that riparian (streamside or wetland) habitats make up only about one percent of the land in the Methow watershed, yet 80 percent of wildlife species depend on these habitats for their survival. Riparian areas provide habitat for wildlife and also serve as travel corridors for many species. Protecting and maintaining the health and connectivity of these habitats is critical for conserving the rich biodiversity of the watershed.

Species like salmon that depend on riparian areas are particularly sensitive to seasonal water variation and to the sediments and pollutants that are by-products of development. There are local, state and federal riparian policies that protect habitat for three species of threatened or endangered salmonid fish: bull trout, steelhead trout and spring chinook salmon.

Water Moves in Many Ways
While it may seem enticing to live close to a river, the reality is that rivers constantly change shape and location. The Methow River has flooded several times in the past century, and the main bridge south of downtown Winthrop was taken out by the flood of 1948. Annual spring high-water levels often fill basements and damage riverfront homes. You can avoid the expense and inconvenience of flooding by building or buying a home outside of a floodplain area. Floodplain information may be found through the County Planning Department or at the Methow Conservancy office.

PROTECTING WATERWAYS THOUGH CONSERVATION EASEMENTS
A conservation easement is a voluntary, written legal agreement between a landowner and a qualified conservation organization, like the Methow Conservancy. Easements permanently protect specific conservation values such as riverfronts, wildlife habitat, scenic views, open space, forests, working farms and ranches. To find out more about easement opportunities, contact the Methow Conservancy office or visit our website at www.methowconservancy.org.

Conservation easements help protect riparian areas in the Methow Valley.
What You Can Do
The most significant way to protect our waterways is to keep any new development out of riparian areas. Maintaining a healthy and undisturbed riparian area increases water absorption, which prevents rapid water runoff, erosion and stream sedimentation. Soils with air spaces and organic materials hold moisture and release it slowly, sustaining plants through dry summer months. Timely replanting of native vegetation after any development ensures that roots will hold soil in place.

If you’re mitigating potential fire hazard by thinning near rivers and wetlands, use extra caution. Extra shade from thick vegetation helps keep water and air temperature down for fish and amphibians. Leaving snags and debris in place maintains a rich habitat for nesting birds and other wildlife.

Keeping livestock out of riparian areas protects critical vegetation while reducing sedimentation and nitrogen-laden waste, which can decrease aquatic oxygen levels and suffocate stream invertebrates, amphibians and small fish. Also, there are many times of the year when unseen salmon eggs and redds (nests) are vulnerable to human and animal disturbances.

Finally, disposing of both liquid and solid wastes carefully – including drain water, septic waste, herbicides and household trash – reduces harmful contamination of riparian habitat. Fish, amphibians and aquatic insects are extremely vulnerable to chemicals and they can carry pollutants further into the food chain. Leave a buffer zone between sprayed areas and streams, and avoid applying fertilizers or pesticides during wet, rainy periods as they will quickly run off toward low-lying riparian areas.

BUILDING NEAR SHORELINE AREAS
The Okanogan County Planning Department regulates building near rivers and wetlands. The county’s Shoreline Ordinance defines the shoreline environment as any area 200 feet from the ordinary high-water line (OHW line), or to the edge of the 100-year floodplain, whichever is greater. In the Methow Review District, Rural Residential District and Low Density Residential District the standard setback in the shoreline environment is 50 feet from the OHW line, and residential development is prohibited in the floodplain. You can learn more about zoning districts and shoreline regulations on the county website at www.okanogancounty.org.
A Home in the Woods

The Methow Valley contains large stands of conifers (trees with needle-like leaves) and other trees, including black cottonwoods and quaking aspens. Conifers withstand the weight of heavy snow in winter and the drought-like conditions of summer.

For thousands of years, ponderosa pines have dominated the lower elevation forests of the Methow Valley. Ponderosas are distinguished by their long needles in bundles of three and their vanilla-scented orange bark. Douglas-fir is the second most common conifer. With their flat, short needles and distinctive, “hairy” cones, they are more shade tolerant and typically grow beneath larger ponderosa pines or on north-facing slopes.

When mature, both conifers have thick, fire-resistant bark. Some of the remaining old trees in the Methow show scars of numerous past fires, and forest historians estimate that low-intensity fires burned through Methow forests every five to 15 years. These ground fires were hot enough to kill understory vegetation, but they did not kill the large, widely spaced trees. Today the Forest Service sets low-intensity fires in Methow forests each spring and fall to mimic the frequent fires that historically burned in this watershed.

Wide spacing helps trees resist the spread of insects and disease and allows more rain and snow to reach the forest floor. Stable forest soils absorb moisture and gradually release it throughout the summer. This slow release of moisture helps recharge underground aquifers, maintains late-summer stream levels and sustains plants through dry months.

Fire Danger

Past fire suppression and the removal of many large, fire-resistant trees has left many forests in the Methow Valley primed for large fires. Where forests are dense (more than one tree every 10 feet) with small-diameter trees and no understory vegetation, fires can become very hot and move quickly. Frequent fires have always been a part of the natural cycle in the valley, and they will continue to be present here. Limiting burnable fuel close to your home is the best way to help prevent the loss of the things you have worked hard to create.

The July, 2001, 30-Mile Fire quickly spread from five to 2,500 acres in two-and-a-half hours. Dennis O’Callaghan