



The effects of septic systems on surface water and groundwater quality in two subdivisions in the Gallatin County Local Water Quality District, Montana  
by Kerri Rae Fleming

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science in Earth Sciences  
Montana State University  
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**Abstract:**

The Gallatin Valley has experienced a tremendous increase in rural subdivision growth. Due to the number of individual septic systems, there is growing concern regarding groundwater and surface water contamination. To test whether degradation is occurring from subdivisions specifically, two mature subdivisions with shallow ground water and proximity to water-quality impaired streams were chosen for study.

The shallow ground water was sampled from shallow monitoring wells located up flow, mid flow, and down flow of the subdivision. Deeper ground water was sampled from domestic wells. Both shallow and deep wells were sampled during high water and low water periods. All samples were tested for pH, specific conductivity, temperature, dissolved oxygen, total coliform (if present, then also for *E. coli*), chloride, total ammonia as nitrogen, nitrate plus nitrite as nitrogen, and total phosphorus. The water-quality impaired streams in the selected subdivisions were also tested for these parameters up flow, mid flow, and down flow of the subdivision.

Nutrient values are well below maximum contaminant levels with no obvious increasing trends or patterns related to septic system flow lines in the surface water or the ground water. Nitrate plus nitrite as nitrogen averaged less than two milligrams per liter in both wells and surface water. Total coliform was present in some wells at both subdivisions, but no *E. coli* was found to be present, except in one shallow monitoring well. No discernable cumulative septic system influence was found in domestic wells or surface water. Some local areas with higher than average concentrations of nitrate (2.7mg/l) and chloride (18.1 mg/l) were found, which suggests that detailed, site-specific studies may be valuable, rather than regional studies.

Two nitrate models were tested for prediction accuracy, Bauman-Schafer and Hantszche. The Bauman-Schafer model accurately predicted the Middle Creek subdivision area nitrate results and predicted higher than observed nitrate values for the Gardner/Sourdough subdivision area. The Hantszche model attempts to predict an overall degradation and was higher than observed nitrate values for both subdivisions. A phosphorus breakthrough curve model was run which showed no areas of concern when predicting breakthrough times.

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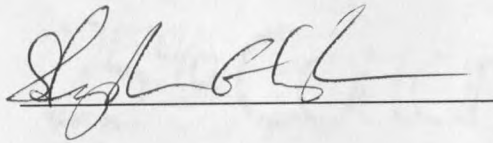
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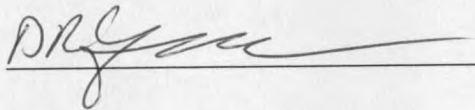
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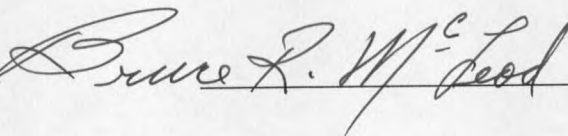
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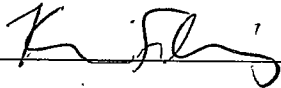
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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION.....	1
Purpose and Scope.....	6
Objectives of Study.....	8
Location of Study.....	9
Geohydrology of Study Area.....	14
2. METHODS.....	21
Surface Water Sampling.....	21
Groundwater Sampling.....	22
Domestic/Public Well Sampling.....	22
Monitoring Well Site Selection and Installation.....	27
Monitoring Well Sampling.....	29
Nitrogen Isotope Sampling.....	33
Laboratory Analysis Methods.....	34
Nitrate/Nitrite as Nitrogen Analysis.....	35
Total Kjeldahl Nitrogen (Ammonia) Analysis.....	36
Orthophosphate Analysis.....	37
Chloride Analysis.....	38
Total Coliform Analysis.....	38
Nitrogen Isotope Analysis.....	39
3. RESULTS.....	41
Surface Water Results.....	41
Middle Creek Study Area.....	41
Laboratory Results.....	42
Field Measurements.....	44
Summary.....	46
Gardner/Sourdough Study Area.....	46
Laboratory Results.....	48
Field Measurements.....	48
Summary.....	51
Groundwater Results.....	51
Middle Creek Study Area.....	51
Nitrate plus Nitrite as N.....	54
Chloride.....	54
Phosphorus.....	58
Ammonia.....	60
Coliform Bacteria.....	60

Field Measurements. ....	63
Summary. ....	63
Gardner/Sourdough Study Area. ....	68
Nitrate plus Nitrite as N. ....	73
Chloride. ....	73
Phosphorus. ....	73
Ammonia. ....	76
Coliform Bacteria. ....	76
Field Measurements. ....	80
Summary. ....	80
4. DISCUSSION. ....	86
Surface Water. ....	86
Discharge and Loading. ....	88
Middle Creek. ....	88
Gardner/Sourdough. ....	89
Ground Water. ....	90
Discharge and Loading. ....	90
Water Quality. ....	97
Model Discussion. ....	105
Bauman-Schafer Nitrate Model. ....	105
Hantzsche and Finnemore Nitrate Model. ....	112
Phosphorus Breakthrough Curve Model. ....	115
5. CONCLUSIONS. ....	121
REFERENCES CITED. ....	129
APPENDICES. ....	136
APPENDIX A: Candidate Subdivision Data. ....	137
APPENDIX B: Representative Well Logs. ....	139
APPENDIX C: QA/QC Data. ....	144
APPENDIX D: Monitoring Well Data. ....	147
APPENDIX E: Stream Discharge Data. ....	160
APPENDIX F: Domestic Well Data. ....	171
APPENDIX G: Survey Data. ....	180

## LIST OF TABLES

## Table

1. Rank of criteria for subdivision selection.....	9
2. Properties of the soil series found in the study areas.....	18
3. Historical high and low water level data for well M:95307 (MBMG, 1999).....	24
4. Nutrient and coliform results from before and after clearing three well-bore volumes from monitoring wells at the Middle Creek study area.....	33
5. Efficiency of laboratory nitrate + nitrite - N analysis based on concentration (modified from Diamond, 1998).....	36
6. Discharge values for the Middle Creek study area streams.....	42
7. Laboratory results for the Middle Creek study area surface water sampling sites. ....	43
8. Field measurements for the Middle Creek study area surface water sampling sites. ....	45
9. Discharge values for the Gardner/Sourdough study area streams.....	47
10. Laboratory results for the Gardner/Sourdough study area surface water sampling sites.....	49
11. Field measurements for the Gardner/Sourdough study area surface water sampling sites. ....	50
12. Middle Creek Domestic and Monitoring Well Sampling Results Summarized. ....	52
13. Filtration results for nitrate and phosphorus.....	58
14. Ammonia results (in mg/l) for the domestic wells in the Middle Creek study area.....	60
15. Total coliform bacteria results (in cfu/100 ml) for the domestic wells in the Middle Creek study area. ....	63



16. Gardner/Sourdough domestic and monitoring well sampling results summarized. ....	69
17. Ammonia results (in mg/l) for the domestic wells in the Gardner/Sourdough study area. ....	76
18. Total coliform bacteria results (in cfu/100 ml) for the domestic wells in the Gardner/Sourdough study area.....	80
19. Nitrogen isotope values and nitrogen concentrations.....	85
20. Surface water sampling times.....	87
21. Discharge and daily load values for the Middle Creek study area streams.....	89
22. Discharge and daily load values for the Gardner/Sourdough study area streams .....	90
23. Aquifer characteristics of the Middle Creek study area. ....	91
24. Discharge and daily load values for the Middle Creek study area aquifer.....	92
25. Aquifer characteristics of the Gardner/Sourdough study area.....	93
26. Discharge and daily load values for the Gardner/Sourdough study area aquifer.....	95
27. Seasonal differences shown by the Wilcoxon test.....	102
28. Candidate subdivision data. ....	138
29. Representative well logs from the Middle Creek study area (MBMG, 1998)...	140
30. Representative well logs for the Gardner/Sourdough study area (MBMG, 1998) .....	141
31. Duplicate QA/QC data for the domestic wells. ....	145
32. Duplicate QA/QC data from surface water sampling.....	146
33. Duplicate QA/QC data for the monitoring wells.....	146
34. Filter apparatus blank QA/QC data. ....	146
35. Discharge data for canal at high water by velocity-area method.....	161

36. Discharge data for Dry Creek at high water by velocity-area method. ....	162
37. Discharge data for Limestone Creek at low water by velocity-area method. ....	163
38. Discharge data for Sourdough Creek at low water by velocity-area method. ....	164
39. Discharge data for Sourdough Creek after the confluence with Limestone Creek at low water by velocity-area method. ....	165
40. Discharge data for the canal at low water by velocity-area method. ....	166
41. Discharge data for Dry Creek at low water by velocity-area method. ....	167
42. Discharge data for Limestone Creek at high water by velocity-area method. ....	168
43. Discharge data for Sourdough Creek at high water by velocity-area method. ....	169
44. Discharge data for Sourdough Creek after the confluence with Limestone Creek at high water by velocity-area method. ....	170
45. Domestic well field data for Middle Creek high water sampling. ....	172
46. Domestic laboratory data for Middle Creek high water sampling. ....	173
47. Domestic well field data for Gardner/Sourdough low water sampling. ....	174
48. Domestic laboratory data for Gardner/Sourdough low water sampling. ....	175
49. Domestic well field data for Middle Creek low water sampling. ....	176
50. Domestic laboratory data for Middle Creek low water sampling. ....	177
51. Domestic well field data for Gardner/Sourdough high water sampling. ....	178
52. Domestic laboratory data for Gardner/Sourdough high water sampling. ....	179
53. Eastern portion of Middle Creek study area survey data. ....	181
54. Western portion of Middle Creek study area survey data. ....	184
55. Survey data for the Gardner/Sourdough study area. ....	185

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure

1. The location of the Local Water Quality District (LWQD) in Gallatin County.....	2
2. Cross-sectional diagram illustrating relationship of wells and septic systems to the water table. ....	7
3. The locations of the two subdivision areas and streams of the study.....	13
4. Hydrostratigraphic units of the study areas (modified from Dixon, 2002). ....	15
5. Soil series in the Middle Creek Subdivision Area (modified from Custer et al., 2000 and NRCS, 1999).....	17
6. Soil series in the Gardner portion of the Gardner/Sourdough Subdivision Area (modified from Custer et al, 2000 and NRCS, 1999) .....	19
7. Use of multi-parameter probe to determine stabilization for sampling. ....	26
8. Locations of installed monitoring wells (orthophoto). ....	28
9. Installation of steel well points with hydraulic post pounder .....	30
10. Installation of pvc well points using a Geoprobe. ....	30
11. Diagram of how the two types of foot valves were constructed.....	32
12. Locations of streams and stream sampling sites in the Middle Creek subdivision area (CA indicates a canal sample, and DC indicates a Dry Creek sample).....	41
13. Locations of streams and stream sampling sites in the Gardner/Sourdough subdivision area (SD indicates a Sourdough Creek sample and LS indicates a Limestone Creek sample) .....	46
14. Domestic and monitoring well identification numbers for the Middle Creek study area. ....	53
15. Known well depths (meters) for the Middle Creek study area. ....	53
16. Relative water table elevations (in meters) for the Middle Creek study area.....	55

17. Nitrate+nitrite as nitrogen concentrations (mg/l) for the Middle Creek study area.....	56
18. Chloride concentrations (mg/l) for the Middle Creek study area.....	57
19. Phosphorus concentrations (mg/l) for the Middle Creek study area.....	59
20. Ammonia concentrations (mg/l) for the Middle Creek study area (<D means below detectable limit of 0.01). ....	61
21. Total coliform numbers (cfu/100ml) for the Middle Creek study area (<D means below detectable limit of 1 cfu/100ml). ....	62
22. Temperatures (degrees Celsius) for the Middle Creek study area.....	64
23. pH values for the Middle Creek study area.....	65
24. Specific conductivity values ( $\mu\text{s}/\text{cm}$ at 25° C) for the Middle Creek study area.....	66
25. Dissolved oxygen values (mg/l) for the Middle Creek study area.....	67
26. Domestic and monitoring well identification numbers for the Gardner/Sourdough study area.....	70
27. Known well depths (meters) for the Gardner/Sourdough study area (no number means that the well depth is not known for that well). ....	71
28. Relative water table elevations (in meters) for the Gardner/Sourdough study area.....	72
29. Nitrate+nitrite as nitrogen concentrations (mg/l) for the Gardner/Sourdough study area.....	74
30. Chloride concentrations (mg/l) for the Gardner/Sourdough study area.....	75
31. Phosphorus concentrations (mg/l) for the Gardner/Sourdough study area.....	77
32. Ammonia concentrations (mg/l) for the Gardner/Sourdough study area (<D means below detectable limit of 0.01 mg/l). ....	78
33. Total coliform numbers (cfu/100ml) for the Gardner/Sourdough study area (<D means below the detectable limit of 1 cfu/100ml). ....	79
34. Temperatures (degrees Celsius) for the Gardner/Sourdough study area.....	81

35. pH values for the Gardner/Sourdough study area.....	82
36. Specific conductivity values ( $\mu\text{s}/\text{cm}$ at $25^\circ\text{C}$ ) for the Gardner/Sourdough study area. ....	83
37. Dissolved oxygen values ( $\text{mg}/\text{l}$ ) for the Gardner/Sourdough study area.....	84
38. Box-whisker plots for the laboratory data from the domestic wells (+ indicates a near outlier and o indicates a far outlier). ....	98
39. Box-whisker plots for field parameters from the domestic wells (+ indicates a near outlier and o indicates a far outlier). ....	103
40. Bauman-Schafer model example input for the Middle Creek study area (Excel model, DEQ, 1997).....	107
41. Bauman-Schafer nitrate model results for the eastern portion of the Middle Creek study area (lines represent flow lines used, flow to northwest). ....	108
42. Bauman-Schafer nitrate model results for the western portion of the Middle Creek study area (lines represent flow lines used, flow to northwest). ....	108
43. Bauman-Schafer model example input for the Gardner portion of the study area (Excel model, DEQ, 1997).....	110
44. Bauman-Schafer nitrate model results for the Gardner portion of the study area (lines represent flow lines used, flow to northwest).....	111
45. Hantzsche and Finnemore nitrate model input and results for Middle Creek study area. ....	113
46. Hantzsche and Finnemore nitrate model input and results for Gardner portion of the study area. ....	114
47. Phosphorus breakthrough curve model example input for the new method (modified from MT DEQ worksheet).....	116
48. Phosphorus breakthrough curve model example input for the old method (modified from a MT DEQ worksheet). ....	117
49. Phosphorus breakthrough curve model results for the eastern portion of the Middle Creek study area (numbers represent years until P reaches surface water).....	118

50. Phosphorus breakthrough curve model results for the Gardner portion of the study area (numbers represent years until P reaches surface water). .....	120
51. Data for MW-1. ....	148
52. Data for MW-2. ....	149
53. Data for MW-3. ....	150
54. Data for MW-4. ....	151
55. Data for MW-5. ....	152
56. Data for MW-6. ....	153
57. Data for MW-7. ....	154
58. Data for MW-8. ....	155
59. Data for GW-1. ....	156
60. Data for GW-2. ....	157
61. Data for GW-3. ....	158
62. Data for GW-4. ....	159

## ABSTRACT

The Gallatin Valley has experienced a tremendous increase in rural subdivision growth. Due to the number of individual septic systems, there is growing concern regarding groundwater and surface water contamination. To test whether degradation is occurring from subdivisions specifically, two mature subdivisions with shallow ground water and proximity to water-quality impaired streams were chosen for study.

The shallow ground water was sampled from shallow monitoring wells located up flow, mid flow, and down flow of the subdivision. Deeper ground water was sampled from domestic wells. Both shallow and deep wells were sampled during high water and low water periods. All samples were tested for pH, specific conductivity, temperature, dissolved oxygen, total coliform (if present, then also for *E. coli*), chloride, total ammonia as nitrogen, nitrate plus nitrite as nitrogen, and total phosphorus. The water-quality impaired streams in the selected subdivisions were also tested for these parameters up flow, mid flow, and down flow of the subdivision.

Nutrient values are well below maximum contaminant levels with no obvious increasing trends or patterns related to septic system flow lines in the surface water or the ground water. Nitrate plus nitrite as nitrogen averaged less than two milligrams per liter in both wells and surface water. Total coliform was present in some wells at both subdivisions, but no *E. coli* was found to be present, except in one shallow monitoring well. No discernable cumulative septic system influence was found in domestic wells or surface water. Some local areas with higher than average concentrations of nitrate (2.7mg/l) and chloride (18.1 mg/l) were found, which suggests that detailed, site-specific studies may be valuable, rather than regional studies.

Two nitrate models were tested for prediction accuracy, Bauman-Schafer and Hantszche. The Bauman-Schafer model accurately predicted the Middle Creek subdivision area nitrate results and predicted higher than observed nitrate values for the Gardner/Sourdough subdivision area. The Hantszche model attempts to predict an overall degradation and was higher than observed nitrate values for both subdivisions. A phosphorus breakthrough curve model was run which showed no areas of concern when predicting breakthrough times.

## INTRODUCTION

The population of Gallatin County has increased by 34.4% to 69,442 from 1990 to 2000 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2002), and much of this new population is on individual well and septic systems. Over 7,000 septic systems are in use in the county (Custer et al., 2000). The cumulative effects of individual septic systems in subdivisions on surface and ground water quality have not been determined in the Gallatin valley. Concerns have been raised regarding water quality because of the increasing number of individual septic systems being installed in the Gallatin County Local Water Quality District (GCLWQD) (Fig. 1).

Septic systems, which are used for wastewater disposal in rural subdivisions, have been shown to affect surface water quality (Ingram, 1993; Weiskel et al., 1996; Grant, 1999) and ground water quality (Yates, 1985; Reneau et al., 1989; Robertson et al., 1991; Aravena et al., 1993; DeSimone and Howes, 1998; Tuthill et al., 1998). Nutrients and microbes that affect the quality of drinking water are the main contaminants of concern. Nitrate is a concern because nitrate can contribute to methemoglobinemia (blue-baby disease) (Cogger, 1988; Avery, 2000). Ammonia and ammonium, part of the nitrogen cycle, can have negative effects on human health when present in large amounts (ATSDR, 2002). Phosphorus causes eutrophication of surface waters, which can negatively affect ecosystems (Cogger, 1988; Zanini et al., 1998). Microbes from septic systems can cause disease, so any indication of septic system effluent in drinking water poses a serious health risk (Cogger, 1988; Ingram, 1993).



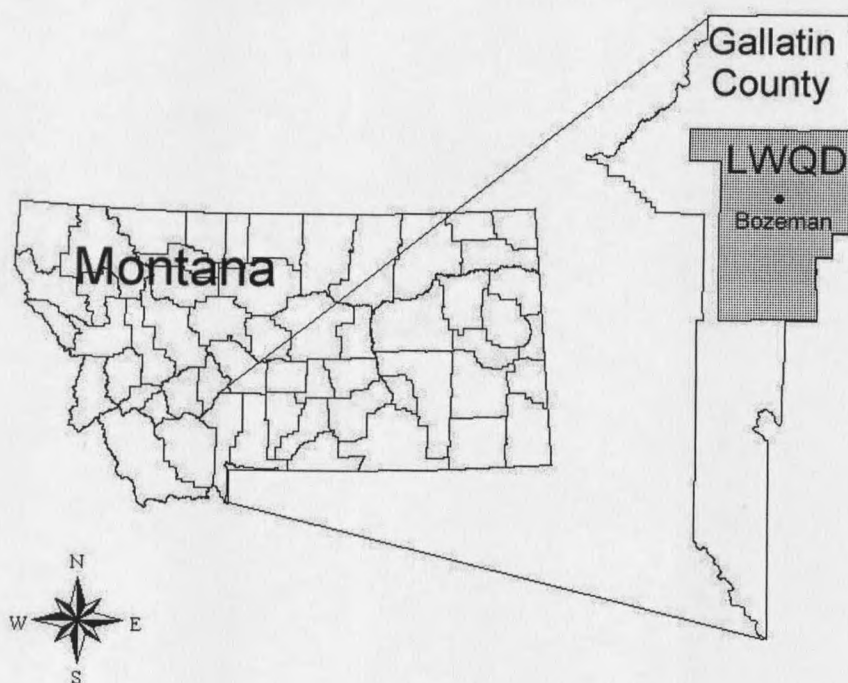


Figure 1. The location of the Local Water Quality District (LWQD) in Gallatin County.

Coliform bacteria are used as indicator microorganisms because they are the most populous bacteria in septic waste and are easy to detect. If *E. coli* is found, the possibility of other disease-causing microorganisms being present is high (NRC, 1977). Diseases caused by septic effluent include hepatitis A, typhoid, and gastroenteritis (Yates, 1985). Viruses can also be found in effluent (NRC, 1977). Viruses are smaller (0.06 microns) than bacteria (0.60 microns) and may sometimes move farther and faster depending upon the interaction between cell surface charge and sediment particle surface charge, although

this pattern is not always true (Bales et al., 1995; Sinton et al., 2000). Depending on interactions, viruses may not get filtered out of groundwater as soon as bacteria.

Therefore, coliform bacteria may not always be an appropriate indicator of microbial presence or absence (Pyle et al., 1979; Yates et al., 1985; Bales et al., 1995; DeBorde et al., 1998). Since absence of bacteria does not necessarily mean absence of contamination, testing for other indicators of septic influence, such as nutrients and chloride, is important.

Local historical data on nutrients and chloride can be found in published research. The hydrogeology of the Gallatin valley was first investigated by Hackett and others (1960). This report includes a small section on water quality. Only one well was found in the valley with excessively high chloride, and a shallow well near a barn had a very high nitrate concentration (110 mg/l nitrate), otherwise nitrate concentrations were low (Hackett et al., 1960).

No indications of septic problems were found in the next major study of the area done to revalidate the 1960 findings (Dunn, 1978). Only a small increase in total dissolved solids was found, which was thought to indicate increased leaching as more land became irrigated farmland (Dunn, 1978). One well, located in a farming area with no septic systems, had a large increase in nitrate concentration (4.2 mg/l to 14 mg/l) that was thought to be a locally severe case of leaching in the subsurface (Dunn, 1978).

The results from the Dunn (1978) study were mirrored in the next study of the Gallatin valley's water quality by Slagle (1995). Water quality was good overall, with nitrate concentrations ranging from 0.1-4.5 mg/l (Slagle, 1995). The higher nitrate concentrations (2.0-4.5 mg/l) were all from north-northwest of Bozeman, which is more

developed. Slagle (1995) proposed that the increased concentrations, though not detrimental, may be from septic systems or increased fertilization.

No indications of widespread water quality problems were found in the most recent study of the water quality in the Gallatin valley (Kendy, 2001). High nitrates (10 and 13 mg/l) were found in two of the ninety-six wells sampled. One well was affected by livestock waste or septic system effluent, based upon the nitrogen isotope data. The rest of the wells averaged less than three milligrams per liter (Kendy, 2001). One subdivision was sampled more intensely, and two wells were sampled from two subdivisions. Domestic septic-system effluent was determined not to be a major source of nitrate to ground water, rather fertilizers and soil organic nitrogen probably contribute most of the groundwater nitrate (Kendy, 2001).

Nitrate levels were measured in wells in Montana and combined with a geographic information system to identify correlations between average nitrate concentrations in each county, probability of greater than ten milligrams per liter of nitrate concentrations, geographic, climatic, geologic, and land-use practices (Bauder, Sinclair, and Lund, 1993). In Gallatin County, the groundwater nitrate concentration average was 1.7 mg/l (sample size 175) with two samples higher than ten milligrams per liter (Bauder, Sinclair, and Lund, 1993). Higher nitrate concentrations were correlated with soil and physiographic properties, climatic conditions, and land-use practices (Bauder, Sinclair, and Lund, 1993).

A study of two individual septic system drainfields in the Bozeman area found that nitrate was the only pollutant that migrates significant distances in the ground water, with a predicted increase of 2.4 mg/l per lot (Peavy, 1978). Chloride was also found to

be elevated in the ground water resulting from septic influence, but numbers were not high enough to cause concern (Peavy, 1978). Both of these constituents are negative ions that do not interact easily with soil particles.

Five subdivisions with individual well and septic systems in southwestern Montana were studied for effects on water quality (Peavy et al., 1980). No indications of septic system influence were found in the domestic well samples or in the installed shallow monitoring well samples, even though sites with porous materials over high ground water were picked. Groundwater dilution was listed as the main reason for seeing no contaminants. Low flow from many of the septic systems was another reason cited for lack of contamination. Most of the systems built for families were being used by retired couples, who generate less wastewater. Since the subdivisions chosen were fairly new and not completely developed, monitoring over time for changes was recommended (Peavy et al., 1980).

The Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) has suggested reexamination of subdivisions studied by Peavy et al. in 1980 to determine if ground-water quality has been degraded below and down flow of subdivisions and to determine whether the Bauman-Schafer and phosphorus breakthrough methods currently used for subdivision review and non-degradation assessment reasonably predict impacts of development on ground-water quality. While the DEQ's proposed reexamination is interesting, the original research wells are gone, homeowner cooperation is not assured, and the study areas would require significant travel. An alternative is to examine groundwater below 1970's-vintage subdivisions in the Gallatin County Local Water Quality District (GCLWQD) (Fig. 1) that are known to show elevated nutrients or coliform. Such a study

could be used to answer several important questions of interest both to the State of Montana and the GCLWQD.

### Purpose and Scope

Two subdivisions were selected, one with a coarse-grained substrate and one with a fine-grained substrate. Water quality was checked in these subdivisions for indicators of septic contamination, which fall into two categories, microbiological and nutrients plus chloride. Total coliform bacteria can indicate microbiological contamination. If total coliform bacteria are present, then *E. coli* is checked for in the same sample. Nutrients (nitrate, ammonia, and phosphate) and chloride are common byproducts of domestic septic systems and are good indicators of septic contamination (Cogger, 1988). Although chloride is not a nutrient, from this point on the word nutrients will be defined as nitrate, ammonia, phosphorus, and chloride for brevity.

We hypothesized that, in the fine-grained subdivision, higher nutrient concentrations would be found due to lower volumetric dilution, but that coliform bacteria would be lower due to enhanced filtration. On the other hand, the coarser-grained substrate would have more dilution of the nutrients and higher microbiological numbers due to the lack of filtration. The term substrate particle size will be used to encompass both the aquifer grain size and the unsaturated grain size.

Microbiological and nutrient data was collected from the domestic wells and installed shallow monitoring wells. Shallow ground water is closer to possible contamination sources, so a vertical concentration gradient may exist. Furthermore, deeper domestic wells may be isolated from septic contamination by hydrogeologic

barriers or be on different flow paths than shallow systems (Fig. 2). To test these possibilities, shallow wells were placed up flow, mid flow, and down flow in each subdivision for microbiological and nutrient sampling. The up flow wells provided a background nitrate concentration for the shallow ground water. The mid flow wells were placed directly down flow of a septic system, as close to the system as possible, to see if any septic influence could be found. The down flow wells were placed on flow lines with the most septic systems to see if cumulative impacts from septic systems could be found in the ground water leaving the subdivision.

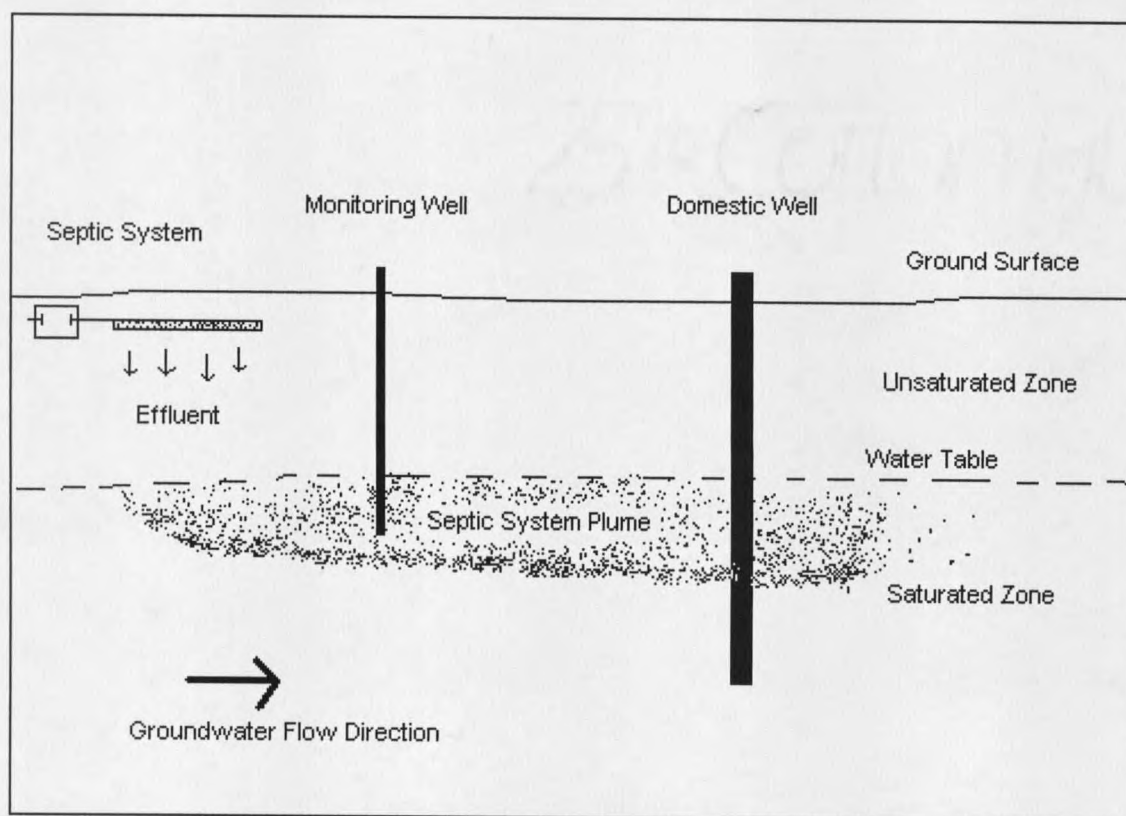


Figure 2. Cross-sectional diagram illustrating relationship of wells and septic systems to the water table.

The streams by each subdivision were also sampled up flow, mid flow, and down flow for microbes, nutrients, and chloride. If the ground water is being degraded by septic systems in subdivisions, then the streams may also be affected if this degraded ground water reaches the streams.

Once all the sampling data were collected, the numbers were compared to popular models used to estimate nitrate levels and phosphorus breakthrough curves. The predictions generated by these models were compared against the actual data collected in each subdivision.

#### Objectives of Study

The objective of this study is to assess the impact of septic systems on surface water and groundwater quality in mature subdivisions. The following questions will be addressed.

- 1) What nutrient and total coliform loads are carried by streams in the study area that have been identified as water-quality impaired?
- 2) What nutrient and total coliform loads enter and leave the subdivision area via the ground water?
- 3) Is the groundwater used for domestic water supply below subdivisions contaminated with nutrients and/or microbes?
- 4) Is the shallow ground water contaminated with nutrients and/or microbes?
- 5) If contaminated wells are found, are the wells on a flow line that contains one or more septic systems?
- 6) Is the source of microbial contamination discernible?

- 7) Is the contamination level and type (nitrate, chloride, phosphate, ammonia, and total coliform bacteria) dependent on the texture of the sediments below the subdivision?
- 8) Do nutrient and microbial levels below subdivisions differ seasonally?
- 9) Do the Bauman-Schafer nitrate model and the phosphorus breakthrough model accurately predict observed concentrations below mature subdivisions?

#### Location of Study

The criteria for subdivision selection (Table 1) were based on the hypotheses to be tested. First, the subdivisions had to be next to a stream designated as a water-quality impaired stream by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL) process (Montana DEQ, 1998). All of the water quality impaired streams in the GCLWQD were highlighted and then the subdivisions that fit the required

Table 1. Rank of criteria for subdivision selection.

#### **Rank Criteria**

- 1 Discharge of subdivision ground water to nearby water-quality impaired stream
- 2 Depth to ground water between two and fifteen meters
- 3 Mature subdivision (early 1970's to early 1980's)
- 4 No subdivisions on septic systems up flow
- 5 Public water supply present down flow
- 6 Different substrates between subdivisions for comparison (coarse-grained versus fine-grained)
- 7 Previous history of ground water contamination by nutrients or microbes
- 8 Permission from homeowners to conduct study



proximity standard for the study were identified on a map with all of the subdivisions listed. This requirement for surface water proximity allowed testing of the hypothesis that ground water from subdivisions might be affecting the water quality of the nearby streams.

High water table produces short filtration distances and so is more susceptible to contamination (Reneau et al., 1989). A deep water table is less likely to become contaminated because nutrients and microbes are more likely to be removed or adsorbed in the vadose zone. Furthermore, monitoring wells were to be installed by hand due to budget constraints, so shallow depth to water (less than ten meters) was used as the second criterion. Because deep groundwater depths have a longer flow path, nutrients and microbes may be diluted/removed. The shallow wells are expected to have a higher probability of showing contamination. Depth to ground water for each listed subdivision was estimated from published reports (Hackett et al., 1960; Slagle, 1995) and data from the Ground Water Information Center (GWIC) (Montana Bureau of Mines and Geology, 1998).

The third factor was based on the hypothesis that if septic system influence on water quality is to be found, success would be more likely in mature subdivisions that have had homes with septic systems for at least twenty years. Peavy et al. (1980) studied nine subdivisions less than two years old around the state for septic system influence on ground water, found no septic system effects, and recommended that mature subdivisions be studied in the future because problems would have more time to develop. Mature subdivisions also have a higher probability of septic system failure and groundwater quality degradation in response to poor septic system maintenance. Mature subdivisions

are more likely to represent the groundwater condition as developments mature in the valley. Septic system permit dates were used to identify the relative ages of subdivisions. The age was also assessed from preliminary data in a Department of Revenue database (Custer et al., 2000).

The fourth criterion is that no subdivisions on individual septic systems are located up flow of the candidate subdivisions. Ideally, water quality up flow of the candidate subdivisions would be at background levels. This criterion ensures that any changes in water quality down flow are due to the subdivision. The Gallatin County Planning subdivision map was again used to check this factor. Field reconnaissance was also used to ensure that no subdivisions were developed immediately up flow.

The fifth criterion is that the candidate subdivisions are up flow of a public groundwater supply. DEQ was interested to see if the study sites affected community water supplies.

The sixth criterion relates to substrate particle size. One of the hypotheses of the study is that a difference in contamination patterns might exist between different substrates. Two substrates were tested, one finer-grained and one coarser-grained. Both well logs (GWIC; GVLWQD) and soil data (NRCS) were used along with geologic maps (Hackett et al., 1960; Slagle, 1995) to determine the texture of the substrate. A study done using pump-test data from drillers' logs was also used to determine differences in aquifer substrate by statistically comparing transmissivity estimated from driller specific capacity from different geohydrologic units (Dixon, 2002). The candidate list was divided into two groups (one coarse-grained and one fine-grained). One subdivision was chosen from each group.

The seventh factor was evidence of historic nutrient or microbiological contamination at the candidate subdivision. Contamination could be evidence which supports septic system influence.

Finally, homeowner permission was a factor. This criterion couldn't really be researched prior to subdivision selection. In the end, the candidate subdivisions, in coarse-grained and fine-grained classes, were rank ordered so that if owner permissions were denied, another subdivision candidate was available.

Once all of the relevant data was collected for the candidate subdivisions, the list was split into two groups based on substrate grain size, and everything was presented at a selection meeting. Summary information was sent out with a letter to all the involved persons, and a meeting time and place was set up in Helena, Montana, so the subdivisions could be rank ordered. Selection was based on consensus of present personnel, including representatives from GCLWQD, DEQ, DPHHS, and MSU. The subdivision data for candidate subdivisions is in Appendix A.

Two subdivision areas were chosen for study in the Gallatin County LWQD. The Middle Creek study area represents the coarser-grained substrate, and the Gardner Park/Sourdough study area represents the finer-grained substrate (Fig. 3). The Middle Creek Subdivision is in the northeast and northwest quarters of the northwest quarter of section thirteen in range four east and township two south. The Gardner Park portion of the second subdivision area is in the northwest and southwest quarters of the northeast quarter of section thirty in range six east and township two south. The Sourdough portion of the second subdivision area is in the northwest and southwest quarters of the southeast quarter of section thirty in range six east and township two south.







































































































































































































































































































































































































