

United States Department of Agriculture



Natural Resources Conservation Service Montana Conservation Update

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In This Issue

- Greetings from the STC
- ¤ 2014 Farm Bill
- Statewide
 Improvements Make for
 Excellent Water Supply
 Outlook
- Montana Releases
 2010 National
 Resources Inventory
 Results
- NRCS and Forest
 Service Partner to
 Resolve, Improve Forest
 Health
- Activity Booklet for Kids Features Soil Health
- Broadcast Recording Available from National Cover Crops Conference
- Conservation
 Volunteers Honored
 During National
 Volunteer Week
- War USDA Under Secretary Visits Boyer Ranch
- Muman Resources Report
- **¤** Upcoming Events

reetings from the State Conservationist

Joyce Swartzendruber, State Conservationist

Thanks for taking the time to check in with us via this newsletter to keep up on what is going on with NRCS in Montana. Things aren't ever boring around here, and I'd like to give you a brief look at some of the things that are monopolizing our time lately.

The 2012/2013/2014 Farm Bill finally got passed and signed by the President on February 7, 2014. Coming mid-year created some challenges, but nothing that we haven't done before. While the program rules are changing, our field employees are still engaged with producers writing conservation plans that will help them improve their operations and also qualify for financial assistance. The contracting software programs have to be changed to incorporate new stipulations in the programs, but we hope to be writing EQIP and CSP contracts by May.

The farm bill conservation programs were consolidated from 23 programs to 13, but the opportunities are still there for producers to do almost anything they need to do to implement their conservation plans. The old Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program was wrapped into EQIP, and part of the Grassland Reserve program is going into CRP and part into the new NRCS Agricultural Conservation Easement program. Veterans will get some increased access to our programs, and we have a new partnership program called Regional Conservation Partnership Program.

Overall, the program improvements will be great for our producers, and although the 10-year funding drops \$6 billion, it is still a strong conservation commitment from Congress, and we will do our best to get it implemented and out the door as efficiently as possible.

On another front, our Administrative services staff is facing some huge changes in the near future. NRCS Chief Jason Weller announced changes to national delivery teams in November, and we are nearing the implementation of this new plan. We will maintain a core administrative staff in each state, and those teams will be a merger of the State Administrative Officer and the Assistant State Conservationist for Operations shops. The key points of this new organization will be the ability to meet the stipulations of recent audits, nobody will be forced to move, and everybody will get to keep their pay. Six months after this was announced, we are starting to see some position descriptions of these new positions, and are very hopeful that this can be an employee-friendly transition.

Even with all of the changes in the air, the conservation future has never looked brighter. I look forward to working with partners in identifying conservation priorities and finding conservation solutions.



The 2014 Farm Bill is streamlining key conservation programs while investing about \$18.7 billion in conservation programs offered by NRCS over the next five years. The bill provides about \$3.4 billion for fiscal 2014 for NRCS-administered programs.

"The new Farm Bill continues to equip farmers, ranchers and forest landowners with the tools they need to address resource concerns while helping the environment," Montana NRCS State Conservationist Joyce Swartzendruber said. "NRCS is moving swiftly to get the consolidated and expanded programs implemented."

A comparison of programs included in the 2008 and 2014 bills is available on the NRCS website at http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/national/programs/farm-bill/. Current contracts enrolled in Farm Bill programs are not affected.

Key program changes include:



Financial assistance programs

The Environmental Quality Incentives Program, or EQIP, will absorb the Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program and make similar practices available. The Conservation Stewardship Program and Agricultural Management Assistance will be continued.



Easement programs

The agency's key easement programs will be merged into a new program called the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program, or ACEP. ACEP includes the former Wetlands Reserve Program, Grasslands Reserve Program and Farm and Ranchlands Protection Program. Funding for wetland and grassland protection expired Sept. 30, 2013, and the 2014 Farm Bill reinstates funding for these critical efforts under ACEP.



Partnership programs

The agency's regional conservation efforts have a home in a new program – the Regional Conservation Partnership Program, or RCPP. Critical conservation areas for this new program will be designated by Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack. NRCS will also select project areas at the state and national level.



Statewide Improvements Make for Excellent Water Supply Outlook

According to NRCS Snow Telemetry data and snow course observation sites, snowpack in Montana increased 20 percent in February. Precipitation saw nearly the same increase. Both precipitation and snowpack currently in place are the two major drivers of streamflow forecasts. Despite a few subbasins showing deficient water supply forecasts, nearly all forecast points showed improvement since January projections.

On March 1, 2014, the Kootenai Mainstem was the only sub-basin that remained below median at 92 percent. The mountainous areas between Toston, Mont., and Great Falls, Mont.,—known as Missouri Mainstem basin—received the greatest boost in the state. With a 38 percent increase, the Missouri Mainstem basin had record snowpack levels of 163 percent of median.

Reservoir storage is in excellent standing across the state, according to NRCS. Daily SNOTEL data is showing that more than half of the watersheds have already reached normal snowpack peak levels, which are typically achieved between mid-April and mid-May. Currently, snowpack is better than 2011 levels in 8 of 14 basins.

Due to the snowpack received this February, nearly all streamflow predictions for the spring and summer improved since February 1. Although most areas of the state made game-changing improvements in snowpack, the Red Rocks and Ruby (above the reservoir) rivers still maintain below average snowpacks. Located in the upper Jefferson, the current snowpacks in these areas will likely lead to below normal streamflow prospects without above average snow accumulation in the coming months.

For the latest snow survey information, visit the NRCS snow survey program website at http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/mt/snow/.

Montana Releases 2010 National Resources Inventory Results

NRCS recently released results from the 2010 National Resources Inventory, a statistical survey of land use and natural resource conditions and trends on U.S. non-federal lands. The inventory samples data from over 800,000 locations across the country.

Among the 1982 to 2010 national highlights: land dedicated for fruits, nuts, and flowers increased from 124.8 million in 2007 to 273.8 million in 2010 and cropland acreage increased by about 2 million acres from 2007 to 2010 after a steady decline over the previous 25 years.

In Montana, cropland acres and erosion were relatively constant between 2007 and 2010. "Despite an 11 percent decrease in the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) acres in Montana, total cropland acres did not significantly increase," said Julie Tesky, Montana

NRCS's state resources inventory coordinator.

The expired CRP acres remained in hay or pasture, rather than going back into cultivated cropland. "We are excited

that many ranchers and farmers are voluntarily keeping expired CRP acres in hay or pasture," said Tesky. "This has helped erosion rates remain stable and continued the conservation benefits of CRP."

Data for the NRI report is collected annually. According to Tesky, it is one of the most comprehensive tools to understanding what's actually happening on the country's landscape.

Download the report: http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/mt/technical/dma/nri/.



NRCS and Forest Service Partner to Resolve, Improve Forest Health

A multi-year partnership between NRCS and the U.S. Forest Service will improve the health and resiliency of forest ecosystems where public and private lands meet across the nation.

The project, called the Chiefs' Joint Landscape Restoration Partnership, will invest \$30 million in 13 projects across the country this year to help mitigate wildfire threats to communities and landowners, protect water quality and supply, and improve wildlife habitat for at-risk species

The 13 priority projects, including the Tenmile watershed near Helena, will build on existing projects with local partnerships already in place. Both agencies will leverage technical and financial resources and coordinate conservation activities on adjacent public and private lands.

"Wildfires and water concerns don't stop at boundaries between public and private lands," NRCS Chief Jason Weller said. "By working together, we can provide focused and effective assistance to help public and private landowners and managers put conservation solutions on the ground. This approach will provide greater benefits to surrounding communities and habitats, such as mitigating wildfire threats in drought-stricken California and protecting communities' water supply in Montana and New Hampshire."





Thinning trees in the forest creates a fuel break and also disrupts the movement of pine bark beetles. Trees that have not been thinned are brown in color, dying from pine bark beetle infestations.

The Montana project: Red Mountain Flume/Chessman Reservoir Project/Tenmile Watershed

Eighty percent of the water supply for the city of Helena comes from Tenmile Watershed. Critical water delivery infrastructure components, including a reservoir and 4.5 mile water conveyance constructed of earthen berm, wooden trestle and metal lining (the flume), are also located within the watershed.

The city of Helena has treated approximately 100 acres of private land adjacent to the flume to date. NRCS has treated 675 acres of private land in the area surrounding Red Mountain and Chessman Reservoir in the headwaters of the Ten-

mile Watershed. The Helena National Forest has an environmental assessment in the final stages to treat an additional 490 acres along the flume and around a storage reservoir. Additional land treatment on public and private land is needed to protect the flume and reduce the risk of catastrophic fire in this watershed.

Other projects:

- Arkansas Western ArkansasWoodland Restoration
- California San Bernardino and Riverside County Fuels Reduction Project
- California Mid-Klamath River Communities Project
- ¤ Kentucky Triplett Creek
- Minnesota Upper Mississippi Headwaters Restoration
- Mississippi Upper Black Creek Watershed
- New Hampshire New HampshireDrinking Water Improvement
- New Mexico Isleta Project
- New York Susquehanna Watershed Riparian Buffer Enhancements
- Dregon East Face of the Elk Horn Mountains
- West Virginia West Virginia Restoration Venture
- Wisconsin Lake Superior Landscape Restoration Partnership



NRCS Helps Preserve Forestland with Crown of the Continent Initiative

Lois Rose worked with NRCS to implement a forest management plan to add tree diversity to her property. Adjacent to Glacier National Park, Rose recognized her land needed some attention and teamed with NRCS through the America's Great Outdoors Initiative to make her forest land healthier.

It's a rare partnership: a private landowner, a private company and the government. But in Kalispell, Mont., it's a relationship that is working.

"It was a learning curve, but it went better than we expected," said Lois Rose, a private landowner who walked into the Natural Resources Conservation Service's (NRCS) Kalispell Field Office a little over a year ago looking for help.

Adjacent to Glacier National Park, Lois's 506-acre property was in need. She inherited land from her in-laws, Clarence and Isabel Rose, in 1999. It had been left to over grow for years. "Grandma Rose didn't want to cut a tree, ever," said Karla Levengood, Lois's daughter and Isabel's granddaughter. "It looked like Lincoln Logs."

With dead lodgepole pine trees throughout, Lois and Levengood knew a fire would be disastrous. "The lodgepole was at the end of its days," said Levengood. "And we've had fires on all sides of us. We were afraid that lodgepole was going to burn next, so we wanted to get it cleaned up before that happened."

Lois asked one of her neighbors, who is a logger, to help her clean up the ranch. In turn, he "introduced" her to EQIP (Environmental Quality Incentives Program) a voluntary NRCS program that provides technical

and financial assistance to plan and implement conservation practices that address natural resources concerns on agricultural land and non-industrial private forestland.

Once Lois learned about EQIP,

she began working with Angel Rosario, NRCS's district conservationist in the Kalispell Field Office. After speaking with Lois, Rosario and his staff inventoried the property and determined that the program could help pay for non-commercial tree thinning and tree planting.

(continued on page 6)

NRCS Helps Preserve Forestland with Crown of the Continent Initiative

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Citing its size and proximity to the national park, Rosario said this was a "worthwhile" project to undertake and fit into the goals of the Crown of the Continent initiative. "By thinning and planting trees, we are better managing the land—preserving open space and healthy forest for wildlife."

When Lois and Rosario got the ball rolling, she informed Rosario that she had already worked with F.H. Stoltze Land and Lumber Company, the oldest family-owned lumber company in Montana, on other projects.

Mark Boardman, certified forester with Stoltze, is the forester in charge of Lois's project. He was attending a Best Management Practices compliance audit on Lois's property when he noticed the last logger left some pretty valuable material lying around. "I contacted Lois to let her know," he said. Lois was very interested, so they took it a step further. "She asked me to plant some trees."

Soon after, Boardman and Rosario were working with each other directly.

Boardman researched and wrote a certified tree farm management plan, making the property part of the American Tree Farm System, meeting nine standards of sustainability and managing for water, wildlife,

timber and recreation. Rosario used parts of Boardman's research for the EQIP conservation plan.

NRCS provided the funding. Stoltze hired contractors.

The contractors logged the old lodgepole pine trees and thinned the new regeneration. Stoltze also contracted with the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC) to grow seedlings for species diversity and for areas that do not naturally regenerate.

"She wanted to do something about the land, but she needed funding and help from professionals to tell what she needed and

how to go about it," said Rosario. "That's where NRCS and Stoltze stepped in. I've learned that for these types of partnerships, you have to be creative and open to different avenues to do the business we do," said Rosario.

Although the project is ongoing, Boardman says for his first time working with NRCS, it's been a smooth road. He just had to learn the "ins and outs."

"I knew about EQIP, but I didn't know details," he said. "And honestly, I shied away from it. This forced me to do it, and that's good. EQIP is beneficial because we can do great things on the ground for the private landowner. It's hard getting extra money to pay for planting, thinning, and maybe some weed control on the land."

Lois and Levengood, are just happy to see it all coming together. "We got with the right people," said Lois. "Maybe this is a prelude to something down the road for other people."

And that's exactly what Rosario is looking forward to doing.

"We should always be open to new opportunities and new challenges because it's for the good of the land at the end," said Rosario. "And if we can get it done, everybody is a winner."



The north fork of the Flathead River, a designated wild and scenic river, runs between Lois Rose's property and Glacier National Park. Her forest management work will improve tree diversity, wildlife habitat, and water quality.

New Activity Booklet for Kids Features Soil Health

We just completed an educational activity booklet for 2014, "Hand-in-Hand for Soil Health." This activity book contains puzzles and word games that can help students learn more about soil health. Most of the activities are at about the fourth-grade level.

All of our activity booklets are posted to our website on the teachers and students page (http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/mt/people/teachers/). To request copies of any of the activity booklets, send an e-mail to MT-nrcs-publications@one.usda.gov.



Broadcast Recording Available from National Cover Crops Conference

To meet some of today's biggest challenges in agriculture, including rising food demand, a shrinking land base and climate change, farmers should be encouraged to adopt a holistic approach to enriching their most valuable resource - the soil - according to a panel of experts who helped open the National Conference on Cover Crops and Soil Health in February.

"Cover crops to me are just the next natural step in trying to have a broader system, and I think the single biggest issue we have as farmers in this country is we don't farm with a system in mind," said panelist Howard G. Buffett, a philanthropist and Illinois farmer.

To learn more, watch a recording of opening sessions from the National Conference on Cover Crops and Soil Health, held Feb. 17 - 19 in Omaha, Neb. Joining the 300 farmers, scientists, and industry and government representatives who met in Omaha,



approximately 6,000 others participated by gathering at more than 200 local soil health forums nationwide, where this recording was broadcasted live.

Also available online are presentations from breakout sessions and 10 short videos of innovative farmers describing their use of cover crops.

The conference recording features a discussion of how cover crops can improve soil health and the major barriers to their increased adoption, and was led by Buffett and fellow panelists Jason Weller, NRCS chief, and Ray Gaesser, Iowa

farmer and American Soybean Association president. Following them is a panel of farmers who are pioneers in the use of cover crops, no-till and other soil management practices.

Conference speakers addressed a wide range of ongoing challenges to cover crop adoption, including the need for more specialized seeding equipment, more advocacy by farmer leaders, more research on their economic benefits, and changes to insurance and conservation programs that better encourage their use.

Conference recordings, presentations and related videos

Recording of Opening Sessions:

http://www.sare.org/Events/National-Conference-on-Cover-Crops-and-Soil-Health/Broadcast-of-Opening-Sessions

Presentations from Breakout Sessions:

http://www.sare.org/Events/National-Conference-on-Cover-Crops-and-Soil-Health/Presentations-from-General-and-Breakout-Sessions

Farmer Videos:

http://www.sare.org/Events/National-Conference-on-Cover-Crops-and-Soil-Health/Cover-Crop-Innovators-Video-Series



Big Horn County ag agencies host Fourth Annual Ladies Ag Night.

Fourth Annual Ladies Ag Night

The Hardin NRCS office, Big Horn County Farm Service Agency, and Montana State University Extension hosted a Ladies Ag Night on January 15, 2014, at the Big Horn County Fairgrounds in Hardin, MT. Seventy local women attended the informational workshop.

Keshia Croft, FSA county executive director for Big Horn County, gave a programs update and also announced the FSA office days in Crow Agency. Seanna Sparks, NRCS district conservationist in Hardin, gave an update on NRCS programs. Laurie Lautt, Montana State University (MSU) Extension, discussed the cabin fever winter sewing projects.

Reba Ahlgren, NRCS soil conservation technician in Roundup, gave a presentation about no-till gardening. Over the past three years, Ahlgren has experimented with no-till and soil health techniques on her personal garden. Due to salt and mineral issues with her well water, she has set up a rainwater collection system that she uses to water her garden, and discussed its setup. She also highlighted a "no-till potatoes" technique the

Burleigh County Soil Conservation District (SCD) in North Dakota has used to raise garden potatoes.

Rachel Endecott, MSU beef specialist, talked to the women about interpreting and evaluating expected progeny differences (EPDs) in beef cattle. Endecott discussed the purpose of using EPDs for various breeds of cattle, the how's and why's of each EPD trait, and how careful evaluation of these numbers can lead to success in improving beef cattle herd genetics.

Conservation Volunteers Honored During National Volunteer Week

NRCS is celebrating National Volunteer Week, April 6-13, by thanking and honoring its Earth Team volunteers for their service to conservation. Earth Team is the agency's volunteer workforce, and nationally, in fiscal year 2013, more than 22,000 people donated 330,084 hours of service to NRCS, worth approximately \$7.3 million.

This year, Erik Warrington, a fulltime student at the University of Montana, was Montana's Earth Team Volunteer of the Year. Warrington assisted the Missoula Field Office with forest inventory data collection and analysis, certifying practices and drafting forest stewardship plans.

"The resource data Erik helped collect will be used to generate grazing plans and forest management plans for a number of farmers and ranchers throughout the area," said Travis Lemke, Missoula's soil conservationist

Earth Team was created in 1985 and offers many opportunities to individuals 14 and older who are interested in volunteering to improve the nation's natural resources. Volunteers help NRCS conservationists provide private landowners and others a range of services from conservation technical assistance to teaching and generating awareness about conservation through community projects.

The Earth Team offers outstanding and exciting opportunities for people who need professional work experience, academic credit or the satisfaction of becoming a caretaker of natural resources in their community. Visit the NRCS website at http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detailfull/mt/home/?cid=NRCS144P2_057808 to learn more about the NRCS Earth Team Volunteer Program.



Erik Warrington, left, Montana's Earth Team Volunteer of the Year, was recognized by Travis Lemke, center, NRCS soil conservationist, Missoula, and Jerry Shows, NRCS assistant state conservationist.

SDA Under Secretary Visits Boyer Ranch

USDA Under Secretary Robert Bonnie visited the Boyer family ranch near Frenchtown, Montana, in February 2014. Bonnie was in Montana visiting both private and public land conservation projects.

The Boyer Ranch is under two different conservation easements. With assistance from the NRCS Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program (FRPP), the Missoula County Open Space Bond, the local chapter of the Audubon Society, and members of Five Valleys Land Trust, 752 acres of the Boyer Ranch were conserved in 2009 in an easement. In 2012, the Five Valleys Land Trust received additional FRPP funds, adding another 160 acres to the final phase of the easement.

At more than 1,200 acres, the Boyer Ranch is one of the largest agricultural operations remaining in the Missoula Valley, according to Pelah Hoyt, Five Valleys Land Trust lands director. "Located four miles west of Frenchtown, which is near Missoula, much of the ranch is highly developable and extraordinarily valuable," she said.

NRCS's Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program provides matching funds to help purchase development rights to keep productive farm and ranchland in agricultural uses.

The Boyer family began farming and ranching near Frenchtown more than 100 years ago and passed the ranch on through several generations of land stewards. The ranch's current steward is Joe Boyer.

When asked why a conservation easement, Boyer answered this

way—"One day I thought to myself, if something happens to me, what is going to happen to this land?" He said that is why an easement made sense.

"I thought if I can get the land into an easement, whoever gets it is going to have to be a farmer or rancher," he said.

Ninety-nine percent of the Boyer Ranch is used for agricultural production. The relative proportions of cropland, pasture and hay land may vary from year to year as the family assesses conditions to determine the best use of the ranch's farm and rangeland that year.

In addition, a majority of the soils are designated "locally important" and "prime if irrigated" by NRCS. These soil categories are central to the purpose of FRPP, to preserve the agricultural values for future food production.

In 2012, the Boyer donated an additional easement of 167 acres of low-land agricultural property simultaneously with the FRPP conservation easement.

The ranch's high-quality agricultural values are complemented by important wildlife habitat, Hoyt said.

The Boyer Ranch is situated within a Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks Tier 1 Focus Area, considered the greatest need of conservation in the state. The property's agricultural land, woody draws and grasslands are valuable for birds. Grassland habitats, like those on the Boyer Ranch, are the most threatened habitat type in the nation and their value has been recognized by the state of Montana. Surveys conducted by the local chapter of the Audubon Society have recorded more than 45 different bird species on the Boyer Ranch—including the golden eagle, peregrine falcon, nesting pairs of Calliope Hummingbird and Lazuli Bunting, and Swainson's Hawk.

Boyer said the easements have helped him invest back into the ranch. He installed a high-efficiency irrigation system to use less water and stockwater tanks to facilitate better grazing.

Caring for the land is something Boyer takes seriously. "My family settled here in the late 1870s because of the soil, and they relied on it for their existence. They were farmers, ranchers, loggers, and miners. Without the soil, they would not have made it. Taking care of the land is something I owe my ancestors and my heirs."



Joe Boyer, left, rancher near Frenchtown, Montana, shows USDA Under Secretary Robert Bonnie land he has placed in a Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program easement.

Human Resources Report

New Permanent Employees

- Annette Soria, Program Assistant, Miles City
- Laurie Jakober, Program Assistant, Great Falls

Promotions

- Rebecca Wolenetz, District Conservationist, Ekalaka
- Heather Higgs, Office Assistant to Secretary, Bozeman
- Jennifer Paddock, Rangeland Management Specialist, Roundup, to District Conservationist, White Sulphur Springs
- Carolyn Edenbo, Soil Conservationist, Harlowton
- Dave Molebash, Soil Conservation Technician, Livingston
- Erik Suffridge, Resource
 Conservationist to Assistant State
 Conservationist (Programs),
 Bozeman
- Kayla Nickles, Civil Engineer, Dillon
- Stuart Veith, Soil Scientist to Soil Survey Project Leader, Havre
- Travis Lemke, Soil Conservationist, Missoula

Reassignments

 Teresa Morales, Civil Engineer from Portland, Oregon, to Great Falls

Losses

- Jaime Gordon, Student Trainee Soil Conservationist, Ronan
- Jake Monson, Office Assistant, Bozeman

Losses to Other States

- Mike Lucas, Soil Conservationist, Malta, to NRCS in Colorado
- Heather Richter, Rangeland Management Specialist, Winnett, to NRCS in South Dakota
- Ryan Witt, Soil Conservationist, Fort Benton, to NRCS in Mississippi
- Abe Clark, Rangeland Management Specialist, Dillon, to NRCS in Oregon

Upcoming Events

For up-to-date conservation and agriculture-related events and activities in Montana, visit

http://www.mt.nrcs.usda.gov.

April 2014

Montana Envirothon, April 28-29,2014, Lewistown

May 2014

Soil and Water Conservation
 Society, Northern Plains Chapter
 Technical Conference, May 28-29,
 2014, Billings

June 2014

- Montana Association of Conservation Districts Spring Board Meeting, June 3-4, 2014, Helena
- Montana Farm Bureau Federation
 Summer Conference, June 10-12,
 2014, Kalispell
- Montana Stockgrowers Association Mid-Year Meeting, June 13-14, 2014, Miles City
- Montana Range Days, June 23-25, 2014, Havre

July 2014

- Montana Youth Range Camp, July7-11, 2014, Dupuyer
- Montana Natural Resources
 Youth Camp, July 13-18, 2014,
 Greenough



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