



Montana NRCS Conservation Update

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Greetings from Bozeman

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We are wrapping up the fiscal year in a frenzy of obligations and payments to farmers. Achievements are entered into the performance and results system, and we are accounting for our activities and accomplishments in reports to our bosses. This year was a roller-coaster of funding, with no real allocation to Montana NRCS until April. By then we were dealing with floods, and it didn't take long before we were inundated with Emergency Watershed Protection requests and enough funding to bring some solutions to many devastated landowners around the state. We were extremely grateful that so many conservation districts stepped up to the plate and became sponsors for this program. Their commitment to their communities was apparent by taking on this responsibility.

As we look forward to what we can do better and bigger in 2012, we have some unique opportunities we haven't had in the past. For the first time, each state was instructed to prepare our own budget and estimate of accomplishments for the coming year. We used the Local Working Groups' input to determine what their critical resource concerns were, and prepared a plan and budget request based on what we think we can actually get done. Now, we wait for Congress to determine our budget cuts for the new year, and we plan how we can accomplish all that is needed in light of predicted belt tightening across government.

NRCS is also moving rapidly toward a regionalized payment schedule for our financial assistance programs. Montana, Wyoming, and Idaho have been joined at the hips. We are developing payment scenarios and schedules we will use in 2012 for 15 widely used conservation practices. By 2013, we are projected to be using these regionalized payment schedules for all of our practices. This is a new concept for many of us, but National Headquarters has determined that we have to begin thinking about the payments differently than when they were cost-shared at a certain percentage. A flat payment rate is a method that streamlines our field office workload. It allows us to concentrate on our technical designs and conservation plans, and the payment becomes a simple "payment for conservation" rather than a 50 percent cost-share. We have to think of this as buying conservation rather than buying a pump or a pipeline.

One additional change is the turnover in our NRCS district conservationists. We've had a lot of moving and retiring this year and have placed about 14 new DCs in the past 12 to 14 months. This new generation of DCs will need our training and support, and I hope you take some time to welcome them and provide them whatever guidance and direction you can afford as a mentor. We may see more changeover, as NRCS is requesting an early-retirement and buy-out option from the Department of Agriculture for later this year.

We are extremely blessed in Montana with the best of staff in all aspects of our jobs, and I'm proud to share their accomplishments with you.



Cottonwood Regeneration Will Protect Montana's River and Stream Corridors during Next Flood

The floods of 2011 created devastation for many people across the state of Montana. Reconstruction and repair will continue, perhaps for several years, as we try to bring some semblance of normality back to our precious river and stream corridors. Homeowners and farmers are putting their lives back together and restoring homes and farm infrastructure. Government workers and others are designing fixes to irrigation systems, bridges, riverbanks, and roads.

But there is an intriguing natural repair that is appearing on river and stream bottoms everywhere there was high water. It appears that nature has offered a means to protect those riverbanks the next time nature herself unleashes another year like 2011.

Cottonwood tree seedlings have jumped out of the new sediment deposits and bared-off hay and crop

fields to carpet large acreages along the Musselshell, Yellowstone, Missouri, and other river floodplains. This year's dramatic response to a large-scale flood event, combined with the fact that Montana's cottonwood forests are largely the same age, indicates that cottonwood regeneration on many rivers over the years has probably been "episodic." It doesn't happen at a significant scale very often. Large floods along our rivers and their tributaries make it happen.

Fish and wildlife don't have a monopoly on the benefits provided by cottonwoods. Many livestock producers rely on cottonwood forests for protective cover during severe weather. "Banking" a good share of this year's flood-induced cottonwood crop will provide future generations of ranchers some storm cover for their herds. Since many of our existing cottonwood forests in Montana are

dominated by old and dying trees, we need to act now to regenerate these riparian forests for our children and grandchildren.

As landowners prepare now to disk down or spray these little cottonwoods, I hope they think twice about the tree's potential to buffer the damage from future large floods and give the watershed resilience: the ability to recover rapidly after a big disturbance. The USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, conservation districts, and other watershed groups can provide technical assistance, helping people plan for cottonwood regrowth and riparian area management. There is financial assistance available to farmers through NRCS and the Farm Service Agency to offset the costs of installing conservation practices, and in some cases, pay for the buffer you've provided for the public good for years to come. For conservation planning assistance, please contact your local NRCS or conservation district office.

NRCS and ARS Study Techniques for Establishing Native Cottonwood Galleries



Numerous cottonwood seedlings grow in new sediment deposited along the Mussellshell River by spring and early summer flooding in 2011. These photos were taken in mid-August of the same year.



Cottonwood seedlings grow very thickly in the rich sediment deposits.

Why should we protect and manage this new crop of cottonwoods as a buffer along the waterways? Because cottonwoods and other riparian trees and shrubs are critical components of healthy stream systems. Here are a few of the things cottonwoods and other woody plants do for us and other creatures:

- protect streambanks from erosion with their dense root systems
- slow down and soak up flood waters across the floodplain, resulting in less water rushing downstream
- capture and store sediment and nutrients – enriching our floodplain soils and protecting water quality
- provide diverse wildlife habitat for bald eagles, herons, migratory birds and cavity-nesters, such as woodpeckers, owls, and some song birds
- provide cool, shaded water for fish and other aquatic organisms
- add large woody debris to the waterway – providing cover for fish
- add terrestrial insects, which feeds fish
- add organic matter fueling the food chain in smaller streams

On July 13-15, staff from the NRCS Bridger Plant Materials Center, NRCS Miles City Area Office, NRCS field offices, and the Agricultural Research Service station at Ft. Keogh planted 90 plains cottonwood trees in a replicated study designed to test the effect of rooting depth on plant survival and growth. Seedlings cultured in 36-inch, 24-inch, and conventional 10-inch containers were compared. The theory is that deeper roots will access subsurface soil moisture and, therefore, survive and grow better than shallow plantings as the soil surface dries over the growing season. The goal is to develop more effective techniques for establishing native cottonwood galleries after Russian olive removal. This experiment is part of a large collaborative effort between NRCS and the Agricultural Research Service station at Ft. Keogh.



Project beginning with fence corners being installed and trees getting planted.



Project progress with trees being planted.



Nearly completed project.

Cover Crops Rebuild Soil After Floods

Not only did this spring's Musselshell River flooding wipe out irrigation canals, fences and farm acreage on Ty Checketts' farm outside Melstone, but it also scoured some of his remaining hay fields of all their organic matter.

"We've lost so much with the flood," he says. "But we're figuring it out."

He's able to pump irrigation water out of the river due to a Governor-declared emergency and he'll fix the fences over time. And he just might get a hay crop this year on those scoured fields with the use of cover crops.

Kate Norvell, agronomist with the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) in Bozeman, put together a diverse cover crop mix of legumes and grasses for Checketts. The mix, which Checketts planted on 110 acres in late June, will help stabilize the soil and add organic matter on the scoured fields.

A special initiative through the NRCS Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) covered approximately 50 percent of the seeding costs. NRCS offered financial assistance to plant cover crops in areas where wet conditions prevented landowners from planting spring crops. The initiative was designed to reduce the probability of erosion, increase soil health, provide cover and food for many wildlife species, and provide forage for livestock.

"I really like the idea of using crops to put nutrients back in the soil," Checketts says. "I've been hearing about the benefits of these cocktail mixes that need less tillage, pesticides, fertilizers and water, and I thought I'd give them a try."



Brad Kinsey, left, landowner near Roundup, digs up a radish on a 35-acre area he seeded to cover crops after floods scoured his land this past spring. Kate Norvell, right, NRCS agronomist, recommended a mix of sorghum-sudan grass hybrid, millet, field peas, safflower, chickpeas, soybeans, and radishes to plant as a cover crop.

Norvell included sorghum-sudan grass hybrid, millet, field pea, safflower, flax, soybean, turnip, and radish in Checketts' mix. She says the species diversity of warm and cool grasses, legumes and broadleaves will increase soil moisture, tilth and fertility, improving conditions for next year's wheat or hay crop. Plus, the cover crop can be grazed or when the situation demands it, such as the severe flooding that occurred this past spring, it can be hayed.

Still, Checketts is worried about the bare spots in the field, where the cover crop hasn't come up yet. On the west side of Roundup, Brad Kinsey had the same experience on his flood-scoured acreage and then, in short time, his cover crop filled in and is now past his knees.



"I'm surprised," Kinsey says, who runs Hay Fox Ranch. "Three weeks ago, this field didn't look so good. Now, it definitely looks like a success to me."

Kinsey planted 35 acres with a mix of sorghum-sudan grass hybrid, millet, field peas, safflower, chickpea, soybean, and radish in mid-June, started irrigation on Aug. 8 and plans to hay the field this fall. Before the floods, he'd prepared the field for planting alfalfa, and all his work and fertilizer was washed away. The cover crop, he says, is providing a way to bring the soil health back and the diverse planting mix seems to offer more advantages than chemical fallowing.

"This has kept the weeds down and the soil moisture is good," he says. "I'm considering trying it on another field next year."

NRCS provides technical and financial assistance to agricultural producers interested in cover crops. For more information, visit your local NRCS service center or www.mt.nrcs.usda.gov.



High rainfall and flooding severely eroded the Vandalia irrigation canal in Valley County. The right embankment breach was repaired; final grading and finishing is still needed. Work is 90 percent complete.

NRCS Provides Funds to Repair Glasgow Irrigation District Canals

NRCS provided nearly \$80,000 to the Glasgow Irrigation District through its Emergency Watershed Protection (EWP) program to restore Vandalia irrigation canals damaged by 2011 flood water.

Flooding in Valley County caused severe erosion, which damaged the Glasgow Irrigation District canals and structures. Repair work restored the watershed function and protected downstream structures by rebuilding the main canal and lateral canals where they eroded and filling an eroded embankment threatening the only access road to Vandalia Dam.

As of September 16, Montana NRCS received \$5,137,200 in EWP funds to help individuals (and their local project sponsors) recover from the severe storms and floods of 2011. NRCS pays 75 percent of the construction cost and the landowner is responsible for 25 percent.



To repair flood damage, an excavator scoops out water to mix into fill material to raise the moisture content.



Placing and compacting equipment was used to repair of the canal breach caused by flooding. Fill material is in the center of photo.

NRCS received 335 requests for assistance in 46 counties. Eighty projects have been found eligible for EWP. Construction costs have ranged from \$20,000 to \$600,000 with an average cost of about \$70,000 per project. Projects include stream bank protection for roads, bridge abutments, and houses; repairs to irrigation diversions and canals to bring irrigation water back online for the 2012 growing season; clearing, snagging, and sediment removal to restore the hydraulic capacity in channels and road crossings; relocation of a house, a rural water pipeline, an embankment on a municipal sewage lagoon, and four feedlots.

NRCS Offers Flood Recovery Assistance

NRCS is offering three flood recovery options for Montana farmers and ranchers to consider in helping them find solutions to the devastation caused by the 2011 floods.

Through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), NRCS will be offering both technical and financial assistance for a number of conservation practices that will allow the floodplain to recover from the damages caused by severe flooding. Montana farmers and ranchers have from Sept. 15 to Nov. 1, 2011 to sign-up with NRCS for the current EQIP program.

Some areas might be well suited for enrollment in the FSA-administered Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) continuous sign-up. Through CRP, a landowner can receive annual rental payments and cost-share assistance to establish long-term, resource conserving covers on eligible farmland, such as field margins and riparian buffers (the vegetated area next to a river or stream). Certain eligibility requirements still apply, but offers are not subject to competitive bidding. Interested producers can sign-up with their FSA county office anytime for the continuous CRP program.

Landowners interested in permanent easements may be able to enroll wetland acres into the Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP). NRCS is looking for sites on agricultural land where former wetlands have been drained, altered, or manipulated. Once under an easement or a contract, the land can no longer be cropped, but haying and grazing may be permissible through a wetland management plan to maintain riparian functions. The first cutoff date for producers to sign-up for WRP at NRCS is Nov. 11, 2011, and the second cutoff date will be June 1, 2012.

Scenes from the Musselshell



Top: Musselshell River channel after flood. Bottom: Bank erosion caused by flood that washed away point of diversion for irrigation water. Powerpole in channel marks location of original pump site. Inset: Remaining part of irrigation main line protrudes from flood-scoured bank.

Interactive Tool Offers Variety of Conservation Information

A new online tool provides information about USDA conservation efforts across the Nation. The USDA Soil and Water Resources Conservation Act (RCA) Data Viewer is an interactive Web site that allows anyone with a web connection to view and download a variety of conservation-related information. The RCA Data Viewer can be found on the Web at soils.usda.gov/survey/rca/viewer/.



With just a few clicks of the mouse, the RCA Data Viewer provides information on how natural resource conservation program dollars have been obligated, data on applied conservation by program and by resource concern, National Resources Inventory and Conservation Effects Assessment Project reports, and state-level Census of Agriculture data summaries. Users can tailor the information available on the RCA Data Viewer to their own needs and interests -- data are available at the state, regional (farm production region, or Conservation Effects Assessment Project region), and national levels.

The Blackfoot Challenge Receives Conservation Innovation Grant

NRCS awarded the Blackfoot Challenge, Inc., a \$53,475 Conservation Innovation Grant to deliver knowledge and share successful approaches of the Blackfoot irrigation efficiency project to partners in western Montana and to increase use of energy and water efficiency incentives by agricultural producers.

Through Conservation Innovation Grants, NRCS is investing nearly \$22.5 million nationally in innovative conservation technologies and approaches that address a broad array of existing and emerging natural resource issues.

The Blackfoot Challenge, Inc. is a coordinated effort to conserve and enhance the natural resources and rural way of life throughout the Blackfoot Watershed in western Montana.

Besides advancing innovations that address erosion prevention and other

perennial natural resource issues, the 2011 CIG award winners will demonstrate the effectiveness of new ways to reduce odors from poultry and livestock operations, reclaim mining lands, develop ecosystem markets and expand solar energy use on farms. Grant winners pay 50 percent of project costs.

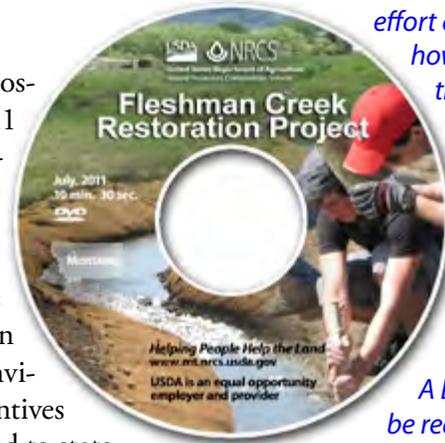
A summary of all proposals selected for a 2011 Conservation Innovation Grant is available at www.nrcs.usda.gov.

The NRCS administers Conservation Innovation Grants as part of the Environmental Quality Incentives Program. Grants are awarded to state and local governments, federally recognized Indian tribes, non-governmental organizations and individuals.

New DVD on Fleshman Creek Restoration Project

NRCS; Livingston Public Schools; Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks; the Joe Brooks Chapter of Trout Unlimited; Oasis Environmental; Park County; and Dr. Dan Voyich all worked together to restore this reach of Fleshman Creek on the Voyich Ranch near Livingston.

See how this partnership effort came about, how each of the partners contributed, and how the area looked before, during, and after restoration.



A DVD can be requested by e-mail from MT-nrcs-publications@one.usda.gov. Be sure to include the title of the DVD and your mailing address with your request.

View online at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C40Pom8y9nk>

MONTFARM Feedlot Evaluation Model

NRCS is putting the final touches on the "MONTFARM" Feedlot Evaluation Model which will be used to rate and prioritize the pollution potential of animal feedlots in Montana for program eligibility. MONTFARM is an objective, science-based tool to consistently and effectively evaluate the pollution potential of feedlots. This tool can formulate avenues



of technical and financial assistance, improving the economic condition of existing feedlots while bringing those feedlots into compliance with environmental regulations. Producers can use this tool to independently evaluate their facilities.

What's This?



If you've been involved with stream restoration projects, it's probably already familiar to you.



Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack (l) and Deputy Secretary Kathleen Merrigan (r), presents the Ensuring Our National Forests and Private Working Lands Are Conserved, Restored, and Made More Resilient To Climate Change, While Enhancing Our Water Resources Award to Sage Grouse Initiative Team, Natural Resources Conservation Service, Washington, DC. Timothy V. Griffiths and David E. Naugle, Group Leaders. For exemplary leadership in developing and implementing NRCS's new and exciting Sage-Grouse Initiative, a spatially targeted, landscape scale approach to achieving world-class wildlife conservation through sustainable ranching. On Wednesday, September 14, 2011 in the Jefferson Auditorium at the US Department of Agriculture in Washington, DC. USDA Photo by Lance Cheung.

Montana NRCS Employees Receive the 2011 Secretary of Agriculture's Honor Award

On Sept. 14, three employees of the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) in Montana received the Secretary of Agriculture's Honor Award. Tim Griffiths, NRCS National Sage-Grouse Initiative coordinator; Joyce Swartzendruber, NRCS state conservationist; and Charles Gordon, NRCS state soil scientist; received an Honor Award, the most prestigious award given by the U.S. Secretary of Agriculture.

Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack formally recognized NRCS' Sage-Grouse Initiative Team with a USDA Honor Award for exemplary leadership in developing and implementing NRCS' new and exciting Sage-Grouse Initiative, a spatially targeted, landscape scale approach to achieving world-class wildlife conservation through sustainable ranching. Griffiths and David Naugle, Universi-

ty of Montana wildlife biology professor, were honored as team leaders, along with 33 other team members, including Swartzendruber, from USDA and cooperating state and federal agencies.

Also recognized was the NRCS Soil Survey Restructuring Team, of which Gordon was a member, for leading the soil survey restructuring effort at the national level. The award was presented under the category of Management Excellence – A Modern Workplace with a Modern Workforce.

Sage-Grouse Initiative

NRCS' National Sage-Grouse Initiative (SGI) helps farmers and ranchers protect sage-grouse populations and habitat in 11 western states, including Montana. By partnering with Montana NRCS, MACD added three field positions in Malta, Forsyth and Winnett. All three positions are range management specialists dedicated to assisting ranchers develop sustainable grazing management plans that directly benefit sage-grouse in Montana. This adds to the current partner positions located in Sheridan and Dillon as well as dedicated NRCS range management specialists in Roundup, Winnett, and Forsyth. In 2011, NRCS developed grazing management plans with 10 individuals on 117,000 acres for \$1.91 million.





NRCS Seeking Students for Trainee Positions

NRCS is currently seeking interested students for student trainee positions in Montana. These positions will be filled under the Student Career Experience Program (SCEP), which allows students to gain real work experience while pursuing a degree in a natural resources field. Upon graduation, students are eligible for permanent full-time federal employment. Applications are due November 30, 2011.

Student trainees could work as soil conservationists, rangeland management specialists, soil scientists, agronomists, foresters, or civil/agriculture engineers.

To qualify, students must be enrolled in high school or an accredited college or university pursuing a course of study related to natural resources, agriculture or engineering.

Placements will begin as early as spring of 2012 with subsequent full-time employment each summer as long as the student continues to meet program eligibility. Students may be eligible for a \$1,500 stipend to help with housing costs.

More information and the application can be found on the Montana NRCS Web site at www.mt.nrcs.usda.gov/MT/about/scep.

Listen to What Montana NRCS Student Trainees Have to Say

This summer, Byrhonda Lyons, Montana NRCS SCEP intern with Public Affairs, worked with fellow interns and other employees to produce a DVD that looks at the NRCS student internship program from the perspective of students working in Montana.

View online at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7HNzt0wG5SU>.

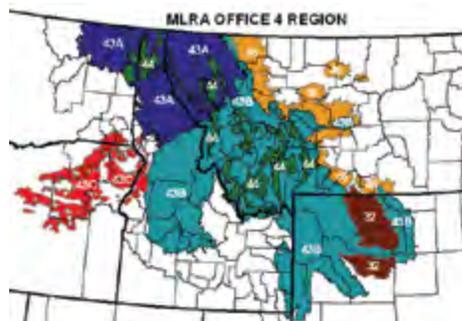
Or request a DVD by e-mail from MT-nrcs-publications@one.usda.gov. Be sure to include the title of the DVD and your mailing address with your request.



Student orientation and training, 2011. Front Row (L-R) Desiree Varela, Brittany Mayo, Jacob Swaney, Carolyn Edenbo, Shalaine Watson, Kayla Wickey, Ashley Kiehl. Back Row (L-R) Travis Caudle, Daniel Pratt, Logan Hodgskiss, Michelle Du, Dezerae Lorash, Joyce Swartzendruber, D'Jeane Peters, Ryder Simeniuk, Alix Wittmayer, Byrhonda Lyons, James Speed.

Soil Survey Update

With the completion of soil survey on private lands, Montana and the United States, are moving to a system of updates of soil survey data by Major Land Resource Areas



(MLRA). MLRA Soil Survey offices have been established in Dillon, Havre, Miles City, and Missoula and will be staffed with soil scientists and vegetative specialists to begin this process. Part of the responsibilities of these offices is the development of ecological site descriptions and the correlation of these with soil types.

Approximately 3.4 million acres of Federal land remains to be soil surveyed. Plans are in place to complete the Lewis and Clark National Forest, Glacier National Park, and the Bob Marshall, Scapegoat, and Mission Mountains Wilderness Areas.

Human Resources Report

New Employees

- Michelle Du, Student Trainee Soil Conservationist, Plains Field Office
- Chelsea Hansen, Soil Scientist, Dillon MLRA Office
- Eric Wyatt, Rangeland Management Specialist, Townsend Field Office
- Jordan Kudrna, Soil Conservationist, Chinook Field Office
- Jeff Matzke, Soil Conservation Technician, Culbertson Field Office
- Aaron Black, Soil Conservation Technician, Conrad Field Office
- Patrick Rohling, Soil Conservationist, Glendive Field Office
- Philip Reierson, Soil Conservationist, Malta Field Office
- Monica McMackin, Soil Conservation Technician, Chinook Field Office
- Michael Shipman, Soil Conservation Technician, Cut Bank Field Office
- James Williams, Soil Conservation Technician, Helena Field Office

Promotions

- Keri Bilbo, Assistant State Conservationist (FO), Bozeman Area Office
- Kristi Nile, Office Assistant, Miles City Area Office
- Jim Massick, Soil Conservation Technician, Billings Field Office
- Jerry Schaefer, State Resource Conservationist, Bozeman State Office
- Daniel Ostrem, Civil Engineer, Great Falls Area Office
- Heather Higgs, Office Assistant, Bozeman Area Office
- Beth Rowley, Soil Scientist, Missoula MLRA Office

Retirements

- Ron Nadwornick, Bozeman State Office
- Sue Sutherland, Northwest Regional RC&D Office Libby
- Dan Van Voast, Fort Benton Field Office
- Snooks Schmidt, Bozeman Area Office
- Tony Prince, Great Falls Field Office
- Terry Buck, Fort Belknap Field Office
- Carla Lawrence, Bitterroot RC&D Office Joliet
- Tim Solberg, Plentywood Field Office
- Rich Nordquist, Dillon Field Office
- Greg Evertz, Joliet Field Office
- Deana Grabofsky, Havre Field Office
- Stacey Thompson, Bozeman State Office
- Debbie Kaiser, Bozeman State Office
- Barb Gibbons, Dillon Field Office
- Dennis DeVries, North Central Montana RC&D Office Shelby



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Upcoming Events

For up-to-date conservation and agricultural-related events and activities in Montana, visit <http://www.mt.nrcs.usda.gov/news/events.html>.

October 2011

- ❑ 8th Annual Young Ag Leadership Conference, October 7 - 9, 2011, Lewistown
- ❑ Alternative Energy Resources Organization Energy Tour, October 8, 2011, Great Falls
- ❑ Women Stepping Forward for Agriculture Symposium, October 11 - 13, 2011, Red Lodge
- ❑ Montana Farmers Union State Convention, October 14 - 15, 2011, Great Falls
- ❑ Alternative Energy Resources Organization Annual Meeting, October 28 - 30, 2011, Flathead Lake

November 2011

- ❑ Montana Farm Bureau Federation Annual Meeting, November 6 - 9, 2011, Missoula
- ❑ Montana Association of Conservation Districts Annual Meeting, November 16 - 18, 2011, Helena
- ❑ Montana Grain Growers Association Convention, November 16 - 18, 2011, Great Falls

December 2011

- ❑ Montana Organic Association Conference, December 9 - 10, 2011, Billings
- ❑ Montana Stockgrowers Association and Montana Cattlewomen Convention, December 15 - 17, 2011, Billings

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