



Montana NRCS Conservation Update

April 2013 Quarterly Newsletter www.mt.nrcs.usda.gov



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Think Spring

Joyce Swartzendruber, State Conservationist

Greetings from the NRCS State Office. I know many of you are watching the news and wondering how NRCS will fare over the fiscal cliffs, slides, and bumps the nation is experiencing.

I am happy to report that conservation programs, employment and activities are all still alive and kicking at NRCS despite the fiscal woes we hear about daily. Through March 27, we operated on a Continuing Resolution for fiscal year (FY) 2013. Sequestration could trim a percentage of our technical and financial assistance funding, and we await an act of Congress to determine our course as we plan ahead for future activities. The next hurdle, after these are resolved, will be to get back on track with a FY2014 budget and a new Farm Bill, both needed by September 30, 2013.

It's more gratifying to focus on the conservation work that IS being done around Montana, and I know you will find some great stories about that in this issue of Conservation Update. Our field staff is busy finalizing contracts and scheduling their planning workload for the spring and summer. We are slightly behind the nation in our practice implementation rate, and that affects our funding. So getting those practices designed and constructed or implemented is high on our list of priorities. The snow survey staff has been busy with measurements and analysis, and we are finalizing our technical training session schedule for approval by the national office.

The federal budget situation has tightened our operation in many ways. We have cut travel expenses by about 20 percent in the past two years. We scrutinize every purchase and are audited across all programs and activities. We cut out 39 manually-measured snow survey courses this year. But we are well positioned for the future with many new employees who are getting the best training we can afford. We are working with our partners to assist them with holding Montana Range Days in Havre this June, the Montana Envirothon in Lewistown in April, and the North American Envirothon in Bozeman in August.

We also welcome Jerry Shows to our State Leadership Team. Jerry came to us from NRCS in Louisiana and is our new assistant state conservationist for operations. He's been getting around the state and meeting our employees and partners, and I hope you get a chance to meet him soon. Jerry and our own Kris Berg are recent graduates of the NRCS Emerging Leaders Development Program through George Washington University in Washington, DC. I'm quite proud of their accomplishments and know they have great futures in conservation.



Jerry Shows

NRCS Signs Montana's First Tribal Wetlands Reserve Program Contract with Fort Belknap



On March 7, 2013, NRCS and the Fort Belknap Indian Community entered into the first 30-year Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP)

contract in the Montana. NRCS anticipates signing another WRP contract later this spring on the Fort Belknap Reservation with members of the Gray Family, a property adjacent to the tribal WRP. This project will protect and restore the natural heritage of the Gros Ventre and Assiniboine lands.

These combined projects will protect roughly 520 acres of wetland and grassland habitat in Montana's Prairie Pothole Region. This region contains crucial breeding habitat for wetland and grassland birds. These projects are a significant step in NRCS and its partner's efforts to protect these highly productive wetland-grassland complexes. NRCS has worked with the Fort Belknap Indian Community and the Gray family to develop conservation plans to ensure that the diverse wetland and grassland ecological systems are restored and will provide quality habitat for waterfowl and other wildlife habitat.



Back row left to right: Scott Morton, NRCS district conservationist Fort Belknap; Brett Dorak, Ducks Unlimited; Clifford Hall, Bureau of Indian Affairs superintendent; Josh Schrecengost, NRCS biologist Great Falls. Front row left to right: Joyce Swartzendruber, NRCS state conservationist; Kristi Doney, notary; Tracy King, president of Fort Belknap Community of the Fort Belknap Reservation.

NRCS Offers Targeted Conservation Initiatives

NRCS is accepting applications for three targeted conservation initiatives: National Water Quality, America's Great Outdoors, and Sage-Grouse Working Lands for Wildlife. All three initiatives offer technical and financial assistance through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program.

Applications must be received by April 19, 2013, to be considered for funding in 2013. NRCS will rank all eligible applications in May 2013 and will notify applicants of ranking results and begin developing contracts with selected applicants.

National Water Quality Initiative

NRCS helps agricultural producers and nonindustrial private forest landowners install conservation practices that benefit water quality. Financial assistance is available this year in the Pipestone watershed in Jefferson County.

America's Great Outdoors

The Crown of the Continent was identified as a demonstration landscape located in the northern Rocky Mountains. In collaboration with locally led conservation efforts, NRCS will help producers improve forest and riparian health, install fuel breaks, control noxious weeds, and reduce human/wildlife conflict in the Blackfoot Watershed in northern Powell County, the North Fork area of the Flathead River, and the foothills of the Swan Mountain Range in Flathead County.

Sage-Grouse Working Lands for Wildlife

NRCS helps producers keep expired or expiring Conservation Reserve Program lands in permanent grass cover for grazing by installing fences and water sources. NRCS also works with landowners on grazing management practices. Assistance is targeted to sage-grouse core areas in Blaine, Phillips, Fergus, and Petroleum counties.

For more information or to apply, visit your local NRCS office.



New 2013 Report Reveals Why Sage-Grouse Conservation Works

"Sage-Grouse Initiative: Tracking Success," a highly visual 44-page report, reveals the six secret ingredients for bringing back sage-grouse without the need for listing under the Endangered Species Act.

The first ingredient has everything to do with the hundreds of Sage-Grouse Initiative partners – shared vision. They agree that what's good for rangelands is good for grouse, and that's why an alliance of groups is teaming up with western ranchers. The results, from 2010 to date, are impressive:

- *700+ ranchers enrolled; investments of \$145 million generate \$70 million in matching contributions*
- *Conservation easements reduce sodbusting and subdivision threat on 240,000+ acres*
- *New grazing systems increase hiding cover for nesting birds on 2+ million acres*
- *Removal of invading conifers restores historic sagebrush on 200,000 acres*
- *Marking or removing 500+ miles of high-risk fences prevent bird collisions*

The five remaining secret ingredients round out a model for conservation: Strategic, Accountability, Leverage, Certainty, and Trust and Credibility. The report also highlights success stories from each of the 11 states with sage-grouse habitat, and ends with a vision for the future.

To view the report, visit the Sage-Grouse Initiative website at www.sagegrouseinitiative.com.



Conservation Volunteers Honored During National Week

USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service is celebrating National Volunteer Week April 21 to 27 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 2012, more than 19,000 people donated 305,564 hours of service to NRCS worth approximately \$6.7 million.

NRCS State Conservationist Joyce Swartzendruber said Earth Team volunteers are making an environmental impact in Montana. Last year 76 volunteers donated 2,644 hours. "That's worth \$57,613 of benefit to our customers and the taxpayers," said Swartzendruber. "These are impressive numbers, and we are grateful for the help, but we also recognize much more conservation work needs to be done."

Earth Team is a program that partners volunteers with NRCS employees. It was created in 1985 and offers many opportunities to individuals older than 14 who are interested in volunteering to improve the nation's natural resources. Earth Team 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 the use of community projects.

"The NRCS theme for this year 'Celebrate Volunteers' puts it best," said Swartzendruber. Earth Team Volunteers allow us to stretch available resources and help us put additional conservation practices on the ground. Their volunteer efforts

help us improve our land and wildlife habitat, clean our water and air, and they help us improve the environment for everyone."

Swartzendruber said she hopes National Volunteer Week will motivate others to volunteer to help NRCS with its conservation mission.

"Earth Team volunteers work closely with our staff and they play an important role in our state's conservation work. They take on a variety of conservation assignments and many Earth Team Volunteers tell us they find their volunteer work enjoyable and personally very rewarding," said Swartzendruber.

Learn more about the Earth Team Volunteer Program online at: <http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/national/people/volunteers> or by calling (toll-free) 888-526-3227. For more information on NRCS visit www.nrcs.usda.gov.



Third Annual Ladies Ag Night Held in Hardin



Keshia Croft, county executive director for the Big Horn County Farm Service Agency, gave an update on the Farm Bill at the Ladies Ag Night in Hardin.

The Hardin NRCS, Big Horn County Farm Service Agency, and Montana State University Extension hosted a Ladies Ag Night in January at the Big Horn County Fairgrounds in Hardin. More than 60 local women braved the cold, windy weather to attend the meeting.

Keshia Croft, county executive director for the Big Horn County Farm Service Agency, gave an update on the Farm Bill. Seanna Sparks, district conservationist for the Natural Resources Conservation Service in Hardin, gave a presentation about pollinators and pollinator habitat management. Marsha

Goetting, family economics specialist with Montana State University Extension, discussed the importance of financial and estate planning.



Marsha Goetting, family economics specialist with Montana State University Extension.

What is This?

Can you identify what this photo is all about? Look for the answer later in this newsletter.



Ecology and Management Brochures Available

Five new ecology and management of noxious weed publications are now available from NRCS for common tansy, diffuse knapweed, hoary alyssum, oxeye daisy, and purple loosestrife. In addition to the new publications, brochures are also available for the following noxious weeds: Canada thistle, common St. Johnswort, Dalmatian toadflax, Dyer's woad, field bindweed, hawkweeds, houndstongue, leafy

spurge, pepperweed, Russian knapweed, saltcedar, spotted knapweed, sulfur cinquefoil, whitetop, and yellow toadflax. Request copies of these publications by emailing MT-nrcs-publications@one.usda.gov.



Ag Agenda Draws Crowd of Ranchers to Broadus



In January, approximately 30 landowners and agency employees attended a workshop at the Broadus Community Center to hear five presentations on a broad array of topics ranging from animal health and diseases to the characteristics and benefits of healthy soil. The workshop was sponsored by the Miles City Sage-Grouse Local Working Group, Powder River Conservation District, Bureau of Land Management, and the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS).

The first presentation was delivered by Rick Danvir, wildlife biologist for Deseret Land and Livestock (DLL). Danvir showed how ranchland in northeastern Utah has been managed to maximize livestock production and improve wildlife habitat at the same time. In an era (1985 to present) that led to near doubling of DLL's cattle/sheep numbers, ranch management reintroduced pronghorn (approx. 600 now), and has witnessed huge growth in other species of wildlife, including moose, elk and sage-grouse.

learn exactly where grouse travel throughout the course of a year, they cannot accurately assess opportunities for habitat enhancement nor eminent threats to their survival. The Carter County project, funded largely by the Bureau of Land Management, was conducted in 2011 and 2012 and is now complete. Foster also shared statistics from tracking sage-grouse hens at breeding grounds to assess nest success and re-nesting behavior following loss of nest.

Pete Husby, NRCS biologist in Bozeman, shared information about NRCS's Sage-Grouse Initiative (SGI), which is placing special emphasis on managing remaining, suitable habitats for the benefit of both sage-grouse and livestock. He also highlighted a process whereby threats, such as fence wires near breeding grounds, power transmission lines, or stock tanks that drown grouse and other wildlife are identified and plans are developed for remediation. Also, NRCS sometimes uses conservation easements to protect critical native habitats that might be fragmented or otherwise diminished by development.

Melissa Foster, Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife, and Parks, provided spatial information about local sage-grouse populations gleaned from radio-collared individuals in Carter County. Until conservationists and biologists

Tahnee Szymanski, veterinarian with the Montana Department of Livestock, shared her insights into managing three significant diseases that have become problematic in Montana. Trichomoniasis, a now-common venereal disease of cattle, can have a devastating financial effect on cow-calf enterprises. When "trich" outbreaks occur, 15-20 percent reductions of calf crop are common. The key to controlling this is to use virgin bulls or test all experienced bulls before breeding. Szymanski also shared tips for recognizing rabies, recent local rabies case numbers, and stats about recent eastern Montana cases of West Nile virus.

Mark Henning, NRCS agronomist in eastern Montana, gave a short presentation about the qualities of healthy soils and principles/practices that promote soil health. The single most important characteristic of a healthy soil, whether in a cropland setting or on native grasslands, is a high proportion of organic matter. This is because of the appetite of a thriving community of microorganisms that feed upon organic matter in healthy soil. Healthy soils experience reduced temperature extremes, hold more plant-available water, suffer less erosion (and less runoff) and have more plant-available nutrients than soils that are degraded.

The Powder River Conservation District's new no-till drill was brought to the workshop location for all to inspect. It is available to Powder River and surrounding area producers for rent.



Five attendees of the Fort Belknap technical workshop include (left to right) Bud Walsh, Curt Adams, Joey Kill Eagle, Ivan Wing, Sr., and Hannah Has Eagle

NRCS Participates in Fort Belknap Mid-Winter Fair

The Fort Belknap Indian Community held the 45th Annual Mid-Winter Fair. This community event is held every February and gives the community an opportunity to engage in many activities.

The Fort Belknap's NRCS field office teamed together with Indian Nation Conservation Alliance (INCA) to offer a wealth of information to the community. Scott Morton, NRCS district conservationist, and Mena Limpy-Goings, INCA tribal outreach coordinator and part-time NRCS volunteer, displayed information about conservation planning, working with NRCS, NRCS's student intern program, and many other topics related to conservation.

Both Morton and Limpy-Goings agree that outreach is important on the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation. NRCS and INCA also held a technical workshop in January at the Fort Belknap Agency. Presenters from NRCS and the Farm Service Agency,

as well as a ranch owner, made presentations to 16 community members. Topics of discussion were conservation planning, training cows to eat certain weeds, range management, livestock and financial recordkeeping, and rural youth loans.

Life After CRP Publication Available

A new publication, "Life after CRP: Maintaining Ring-Necked Pheasants in a Changing Landscape," was developed cooperatively between NRCS; Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks; Farm Service Agency; Pheasants Forever; and Ducks Unlimited. It is designed to provide private landowners/operators with guidance on ways to manage expired CRP acres for profitability, while maintaining some benefits for pheasants and other wildlife. The publication is posted on the Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks website and copies of the publication can be requested by emailing MT-nrcs-publications@one.usda.gov.

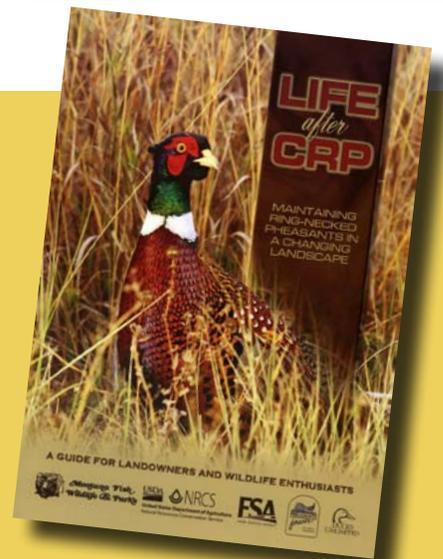
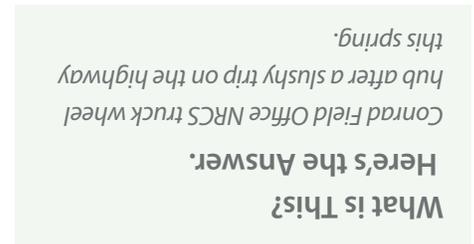
Montana Farmers Featured for Soil Health Efforts

Two Montana producers, Dirk O'Connor from Plevna and Darryl Crowley from Poplar, are featured on the national NRCS website for their soil health efforts.



Read their stories to find out more about what they are doing and how they are farming.

<http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detailfull/national/soils/health/?cid=stelprdb1048860>.



Human Resources Report

New Permanent Employees

- Carolyn Edenbo, Soil Conservationist, Harlowton
- Holly Taylor, Soil Conservation Technician, Cut Bank
- Michael Lucas, Soil Conservationist, Malta

Promotions

- Gerald Shows, District Conservationist, Louisiana, to Assistant State Conservations (Operations) Bozeman
- Stacy Pease, Soil Conservationist, Hamilton
- Dan Ostrem, Civil Engineer, Great Falls
- Eric Watson, Soil Conservationist, Shelby
- Patrick Rohling, Soil Conservationist, Glendive
- Justin Meissner, District Conservationist, Townsend

Reassignments

- Travis Lemke, Soil Conservation Technician, Lewistown, to Soil Conservationist, Missoula
- Garrett Larson, Soil Conservationist, Fessenden, ND to Joliet
- Erik Suffridge, District Conservationist, Bozeman, to Soil Conservationist, State Office

Losses

- Joan Johnson, Cartographer, Bozeman effective
- Gwen Davies, Soil Conservation Technician, Shelby effective
- Will Locatelli, Civil Engineering Technician, Fort Benton



Upcoming Events

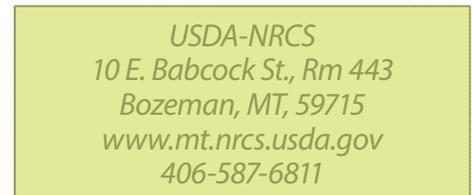
For up-to-date conservation and agriculture-related events and activities in Montana, visit <http://www.mt.nrcs.usda.gov/news/events.html>.

April 2013

- ☒ Volunteer Week, April 21-27, 2013
- ☒ Earth Day, April 22, 2013
- ☒ Montana Envirothon, April 22-23, Lewistown

June 2013

- ☒ Montana Range Days, June 24-26, 2013, Havre



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To File an Employment Complaint:

If you wish to file an employment complaint, you must contact your agency's EEO Counselor within 45 days of the date of the alleged discriminatory act, event, or in the case of a personnel action. Additional information can be found online at http://www.ascr.usda.gov/complaint_filing_file.html.

To File a Program Complaint:

If you wish to file a Civil Rights program complaint of discrimination, complete the USDA Program Discrimination Complaint Form, found online at http://www.ascr.usda.gov/complaint_filing_cust.html, or at any USDA office, or call (866) 632-9992 to request the form. You may also write a letter containing all of the information requested in the form. Send your completed complaint form or letter to us by mail at U.S. Department of Agriculture, Director, Office of Adjudication, 1400 Independence Avenue, S.W., Washington, D.C. 20250-9419, by fax at (202) 690-7442, or email at program.intake@usda.gov.

Persons with Disabilities:

Individuals who are deaf, hard of hearing or have speech disabilities and you wish to file either an EEO or program complaint please contact USDA through the Federal Relay Service at (800) 877-8339 or (800) 845-6136 (in Spanish).

Persons with disabilities, who wish to file a program complaint, please see information above on how to contact us by mail or by email. If you require alternative means of communication for program information (e.g., Braille, large print, audiotape, etc.), please contact USDA's TARGET Center at (202) 720-2600 (voice and TDD).

Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program:

For any other information dealing with Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) issues, persons should either contact the USDA SNAP Hotline Number at (800) 221-5689, which is also in Spanish, or call the State Information/Hotline Numbers.

All Other Inquiries:

For any other information not pertaining to civil rights, please refer to the listing of the USDA Agencies and Offices.