



# Montana NRCS Conservation Update

April 2010 Quarterly Newsletter [www.mt.nrcs.usda.gov](http://www.mt.nrcs.usda.gov)



## In This Issue

- ❑ Message from the State Conservationist
- ❑ 40 Earth Day Celebrations
- ❑ 75 Years of "Helping People Help the Land"
- ❑ The Joint Montana Agricultural Business Association
- ❑ Core Area Montana Counties Given Higher Priority for Initiative Sign-Ups
- ❑ Biogram No. 101 "Of Grass and Grouse"
- ❑ USDA and Department of Interior Establish New Wildlife and Hunting Heritage Conservation Council
- ❑ Agriculture Secretary Visits Montana
- ❑ Farm-to-Table
- ❑ Multiple Awards for the Bitterroot RC&D
- ❑ Jordan Ranchers, Belgrade Consultant Honored with Range Leader Awards
- ❑ Construction Work Well Underway on Both Montana ARRA Watershed Projects
- ❑ National Agriculture Week
- ❑ NRCS Tips for a Healthy Lawn
- ❑ Upcoming Events

## Message from the State Conservationist *Joyce Swartzendruber*

This is probably a good time to pull out that book, *The Worst Hard Time* by Timothy Egan, if you haven't read it yet, and get a gritty idea of what it was like to live in the dust bowl of the dirty thirties.



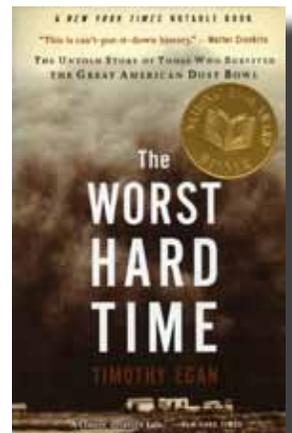
*Joyce Swartzendruber, State Conservationist*

There is another anniversary this April that holds a special place in my own personal history. I was reminded of it again when I visited my mother in an assisted living facility in my home town of Wellman, Iowa in March. Across the road from her new home is the Wellman City Park with a new recreation center that just opened up. It sits where Grandpa Swartzendruber's retirement farmstead, auction barn, and hayfields used to take up that corner of the world. I had my first "conservation memory" on that farm when I was only 3 or 4 years old. Grandpa took me out to his blue spruce windbreak one morning, lifted me up and showed me a robin's nest with several blue eggs nestled in the branches.

The windbreak is still partly there, the trees much taller, and now they provide some protection for the tennis courts. Down the hill, toward the northeast corner of Grandpa's farm, there is a grove of ash and maple trees, now standing 40 feet tall. After Grandpa died in 1964, the city bought that farm, and in 1970 my school class celebrated the first Earth Day by planting those trees across the home run fence of the Little League field.

In many ways I'm glad that that small "gentlemen's farm" has provided so much pleasure to so many people. It was bound to be swallowed up by the town, and now that it's a park, I can still appreciate the trees that were planted there by both my grandfather, and by me.

So I celebrate our conservation history with you this year. I hope you take time to share your own conservation memories. Remember, that our work creates many conservation benefits, but it creates conservation memories and stewardship as well.



# 40 Earth Day Celebrations 75 NRCS Conservation Years – They Are Real

Larry Cooper, NRCS Montana Public Affairs

Earth Day was first organized in 1970 by then Wisconsin Senator Gaylord Nelson. Much of the debate about the environmental future of our nation; meeting energy requirements, breathing healthy air, producing enough food, conserving available clean water supplies and meeting growing demands for energy has continued through all of those 40 years. Earth Day, April 22nd is now observed in 190 countries by more than one billion people.



First Earth Day - New York City

During each of those years the significance of public awareness about the complex yet repetitive debate increased, as did our population numbers.

As I personally give thought to these issues I must admit to a healthy dose of bewilderment, not just about the enormous scope and interaction of these

environmental concerns, but of the puzzling and pot-hole lined paths we seem to follow seeking management and resolution of the questions these concerns continue to raise.

In 1950, I was 8 years old. My early growth years were during the 1950s. During those years we didn't spend a lot of time discussing these concerns. We focused instead on the threat posed by the "A-Bomb" – should we be building a bomb shelter in our backyards?

We talked about that huge Mid-western snowstorm back in 1948. We talked about the dangers that new music (rock and roll) posed to the nation's morality. Looking back everything, including A-Bomb fears, seemed much simpler and easier to understand than the multitude of complicated issues we confront today. But then again there were fewer of us in 1950. Mass communication was very limited. The World had not started shrinking. Foreign news was indeed foreign to us other than what was happening in Korea or the endless stories related to World War Two. We didn't really grasp the concept that environmental issues impacted everyone who lives on this planet, not just this nation.

When I first learned to drive a car I didn't realize some day (which arrived sooner than I could have ever perceived) there would be more and more and more cars clogging the roadways.



The U.S. population is 304 million and expected to be 400 million by 2040.

Since 1950 the population of the United States has more than doubled and will double again over the next 70 years. In 1950, around 150 million people populated the U.S. Today the U.S. population has reached a record 304 million. In 30 years the population is expected to reach 400 million.

Think in terms of the explosion in the number of cars on our roadways – not just in Montana or the United States but around the world. How many cars now populate the planet Earth? Think of the energy demands – the growth of our urban areas and even the urbanization of rural America. Think of the amount of interdependent farmland, forestland, habitat and water resources already reduced by increased demand and decreased acreages. Today city sprawl and urbanization have eaten up huge chunks of productive and protective land.

Back in the 50s, when I first spent spring and summer school vacation time working on relative's

farms and ranches in Kansas, Nebraska and Colorado open land was abundant and today much of that wide open farmland is paved over. If World population projections are accurate where on Earth will we be in the next 50 years in terms of desperately needed resources? If the next 50 years arrives as quickly as my last 50 years has passed, we (all who inhabit this planet) need a unified plan.

On April 22, 1970 an estimated 20 million Americans gathered in parks, auditoriums and on the streets to draw attention to the need for action to assure a healthy sustainable physical environment for this country. Senator Nelson, by the way was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom for his role as Earth Day founder.



Photo: Wilderness Society

For 40 years now the gatherings continue every year on April 22nd and we remind ourselves the growth continues and solutions are not yet agreed upon. At least we are aware.

Earth Day awareness underscores the importance of the work being done every day by the agency for which I now work, the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) which this year celebrates its 75th anniversary. Spawned by the dramatic message Mother Nature delivered with the Dust Bowls of the 1930s, NRCS continues to work to conserve and protect our croplands, our private forestlands, our rivers and streams, watersheds, air, wildlife habitat, grazing lands and energy usage. When pondering the somewhat ethereal perception of the enormity of the problems that our burgeoning populations pose, the work of NRCS is hands-on, visible and practical. That work brings to the complex and often bewildering resource debate a true sense of reality.

To observe this year's Earth Day, Montana NRCS will be focusing on a multi-agency community level project that addresses, in its own way multiple resource concerns. This project is unique and perhaps reflects the spirit of the Earth Day observance. We need to address resource concerns, we need to develop partnerships and we need a plan.

The project, located at Livingston, Montana, involves a complete restoration of the Fleshman Creek that will pass from the Yellowstone River through the Voyich Farm, and on through the town of Livingston, providing a route for trout, improving water quality and completely re-vegetating the creek's banks.

The project serves as an outside classroom for Livingston high school students, who've been involved in each and every step of the restoration, Park County, the City of Livingston, applicable state agencies, Trout Unlimited and NRCS. As the project nears completion, NRCS and partners will, on April 16th, host a tour and highlight the project through the Montana News media and our Web site [www.mt.nrcs.usda.gov](http://www.mt.nrcs.usda.gov).

The message we would like to share is simple – protecting our environment today and tomorrow is a responsibility that each and every one of us shares at all levels – family, community, county, state and federal. Oh yes, especially all of us who inhabit Planet Earth.

### Fleshman Creek Restoration



Students plan project monitoring strategy.



# 75 Years of “Helping People Help the Land”

Larry Cooper, NRCS Montana Public Affairs



The Dust Bowl 1935

April 27, 2010 marks the 75th Anniversary of the creation of the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). As you are no doubt aware NRCS began as the Soil Conservation Service, created in the immediate aftermath of the Dust Bowl. “Dust Bowl” is, by the way a term first used by a reporter for the Washington D.C. Evening Star.

In the 1930s the total amount of cultivated land in the United States reached 530 million acres, an all time high. Wheat and cereal crops were most prevalent in the Great Plains. A popular practice at that time involved cultivating the land but planting only every other year. The theory was that moisture present in soil during the un-cropped period was stored in the soil and was used by the crop the following year. The soil was frequently clean-tilled to leave no residues on the surface. Farmers then believed that practice helped control weeds and preserved moisture from evaporation.

The early 30s, however, saw drought and high wind conditions during which silt and clay were removed from the top soil in fine particle form, leaving a coarse textured sandy soil with a lower water storage capacity. Wind eroded the land most severely from Texas to as far north as Wyoming, Montana and North Dakota.

Long time Dillon, Montana rancher and conservationist Art Christiansen was in his early teens when some of the dust clouds actually reached Montana. “We did get hit here too – as a teenager, I think I was just 14, I rode just for the fun of it in front of it, just to see what was going on. I rode from my place almost to the Ruby River and there wasn’t a soul left there – a black hole –they was gone – the wind –and the fences – the tumble weeds blew up on the fences and then the dirt blew up on top of that. And the bank owned everything – people just left the houses- there were empty houses everywhere.”

Although Montana dry-land farmers have had some very anxious years the extreme conditions seen in the 1930s have not been repeated. However, wind erosion continues to be a serious problem. The lessons learned taught us the true value of treating our land with care, and underscoring the work our agency has done over the past 75 years with the concern and the help of producers to “Help People Help the Land.”

## The Joint Montana Agricultural Business Association

Henry Burkwhat, District Conservationist

The Joint Montana Agricultural Business Association (MABA) and Montana Grain Elevator Association (MGEA) meeting, held in January in Great Falls was very informative. This convention, trade show, pesticide workshop, and recertification workshop provides a great opportunity to network with a cross section of Extension, agricultural business representatives, growers, specialists, researchers, and crop advisors. With a variety of breakout sessions, the 474 participants had the opportunity to stay informed on the latest ag advances. By way of example a couple of interesting things I learned:

- 1. If wheat stubble height is left at 1/3 of total height, in a no till system, the parasitoids, wasps that attack saw fly larvae, are preserved.*
- 2. Pesticide labels are being revised to include mandatory grass buffers between the spray area and a water source. Different pesticide products will require different buffer widths. NRCS planners will need to consider pesticide buffer width requirements in the near future.*

The conference provided a wealth of practical hands-on information.

# Core Area Montana Counties Given Higher Priority for Initiative Sign-Ups

Applications for participation in a national initiative to improve sage-grouse habitat and simultaneously promote the overall health of grazing land and the long-term sustainability of Montana ranching operations are being accepted through April 23rd, 2010. Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack has announced the new initiative to protect sage grouse habitat in 11 western states, using two popular Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) programs, Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and the Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program (WHIP).

State Conservationist Joyce Swartzendruber says Montana has already developed a long-term sage grouse habitat protection strategy that identifies key “core” areas for sage-grouse populations in Montana. Sage-grouse are found in parts of 37 Montana counties.

Sage-grouse populations tend to clump into comparably smaller identifiable core areas. These core areas contain a majority of the populations. Core areas are prioritized in Montana’s NRCS Strategic Plan in terms of distribution of the grouse populations. Higher priority will be given to applicants who have an NRCS approved grazing plan that addresses threats to sage-grouse and whose property is located in the core areas of the state. Information about those core areas can be found on the Montana NRCS Web page at [www.mt.nrcs.usda.gov](http://www.mt.nrcs.usda.gov).

Secretary Vilsack states, “Our targeted approach will seek out projects that offer the highest potential for boosting sage-grouse populations and enhanc-

ing habitat quality.” USDA will provide \$16 million this fiscal year for this national initiative. The exact amount of funding allocated for Montana is yet to be determined. USDA will also work with the Department of the Interior to ensure producers in the state who enroll in the NRCS programs are protected from increased regulation, should the bird be listed under the Endangered Species Act in the future. The initiative will help the 11 western states proactively respond to a recent Interior Department announcement that the greater sage-grouse warranted such protection, however will not be listed because of the need to focus on other high priority species.

NRCS Chief Dave White and Rowan Gould, Acting Director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, are working on a new partnership agreement to promote and preserve greater sage-grouse habitat and sagebrush ecosystems.

One of the most important parts of the agreement is to provide landowners who implement conservation practices certainty that they will be in compliance with the Endangered Species Act if the sage-grouse is listed in the future.

The primary goals for the agreement are to ensure conservation actions are beneficial and consistent for greater sage-grouse habitat conservation, and

to provide leadership and a collaboration framework for states and private landowners. The agreement applies to all 11 western states with greater sage-grouse and sagebrush ecosystems native to their land.

Besides Montana, sage-grouse are located in Wyoming, North Dakota, South Dakota, Colorado, Idaho, Utah, Washington, Oregon, Nevada and California. The sage-grouse has experienced a significant decline in population and habitat over several decades. In recent years the greater sage-grouse has lost 44 percent of its habitat for many reasons including agriculture; urban development; energy extraction, generation and transmission; invasive weeds, pinion-juniper tree encroachment, and wildfire.

Again, priority will be given to applicants in Montana who have an NRCS-approved grazing plan and are located in a sage-grouse core area of the state. Applications for the first year are being accepted through April 23, 2010. For additional information go to the NRCS Montana web page or contact your local NRCS field office.



# Biogram No. 101 "Of Grass and Grouse"

Pete Husby, Biologist

"Residual cover," or old grass carried over from the previous year, is one of the common buzzwords in wildlife biology because of its long-known importance to ground-nesting birds as diverse as pheasants, several dabbling duck species and sharp-tailed grouse. These birds initiate nesting early in spring before there is adequate current year's growth to hide a nest. Only fairly recently has the value of residual cover to sage grouse nest success been recognized as well. We now know that residual cover is as important as sagebrush to nesting sage grouse. However, the value of residual cover is far more basic to the prairie ecosystem than simply serving to hide bird nests.

Old grass and the associated litter cover it provides are essential for healthy, productive rangeland. Old grass traps snow to supplement spring rainfall, protects the soil from erosion, helps shade the ground to reduce surface temperatures and evaporation, enhances early green-up of current year's growth, and covers the soil surface with litter which makes more moisture available in the soil profile. Allowing for old growth carry-over allows for development of deep-rooted, high successional plants that are capable of maximizing conversion of solar energy into products that we living organisms need. Residual grass is also key for ranchers who need a drought reserve and for livestock who



Good residual grass cover

can't get a belly full of feed if they only have washy, new growth available in the spring.

The importance of residual grass and litter cover to rangeland health, ranchers and wildlife is yet another example of the compatibility of production agriculture and wildlife. The health of the land organism is the basis of sustainable human and wildlife interests. As Bob Ross, retired Soil Conservation Service (now NRCS) employee put it: "Take care of the range and it will take care of the stock." The same holds true for wildlife.

Bob Ross was our State Range Conservationist from 1965 to 1977. During that period, he wrote numerous articles - called "Range Tips" - which were published in the monthly Montana Stockgrower magazine. Montana State University (MSU) Cooperative Extension Service published many of these articles as Bulletin 1307: "Range Tips." Interestingly, at least 25% of the articles in Bulletin 1307 refer to the critical need for residual cover and surface litter on rangelands. In addition, Bob was not ever referring to the importance of old grass for wildlife cover. He was talking about how ranchers need it!

Here is a true win-win situation for all of us - ranchers, wildlifers, recreationists - concerned about Montana's grasslands and shrub-steppe. Help our rancher clientele plan for banking old grass and all of us will win. Remember our "Range Tips" - "It takes moisture and a good grass cover to grow grass."

## USDA and Department of Interior Establish New Wildlife and Hunting Heritage Conservation Council

USDA News



Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar and Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack were joined by Governor Brian Schweitzer to announce the creation of the Wildlife and Hunting Heritage Conservation Council (WH-HCC), an official advisory group under the Federal Advisory Committee Act (FACA). Secretary Vilsack, Secretary Salazar, and Governor Schweitzer made the announcement at a ceremony at the Theodore Roosevelt Memorial in Washington, DC in tribute to the great president, hunter and conservationist.

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# Agriculture Secretary Visits Montana

Larry Cooper, NRCS Public Affairs

U.S. Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack and Montana U.S. Senator Jon Tester worked a long weekend here in Montana during a March visit. They began with an early morning breakfast meeting in Helena, then went on to Deer Lodge and Bozeman. In Deer Lodge, the discussion focused on the Forest Jobs and Recreation Act. There



U.S. Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack

was a quick aerial tour of forests impacted by the Mountain Pine Beetles. The next stop was Bozeman where the discussion turned to the Child Nutrition Act and farm-to-school food programs.

The Secretary and his entourage, accompanied by Montana NRCS State Conservationist Joyce Swartzendruber visited the Bozeman Food Co-op and a Bozeman school.

The Secretary was very concerned about rural America due to the higher level of poverty, loss of population, and the aging population in our rural communities. In spite of this, rural America is responsible for 108 billion pounds of protein produced, one-twelfth of all jobs are connected



Left to Right – U.S. Senator Jon Tester; FSA Montana Director Bruce Nelson; NRCS State Conservationist Joyce Swartzendruber; USDA Montana Rural Development Director Matt Jones; U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack

to agriculture, 45% of the men and women in military service came from rural communities, and only 1/6 of the total population lives in rural communities.

The Secretary proposed a strategy for revitalizing the rural economy through regional efforts, to create ecosystem markets, renewable energy,

and to link local food production to local consumption. He talked about the difficulties that beginning farmers and ranchers face due to the capital required to get started in business. He mentioned that it is easier to become a doctor or even the president, but that resources to beginning farmers are “woefully inadequate”.



The marketing locally grown foods tour during the RC&D Association meeting included a visit to Montana Food Products packaging facility in Lolo.

## Multiple Awards for the Bitterroot RC&D



During the Recent Western Regional Conference in Missoula the Bitterroot Resource Conservation and Development Council was repeatedly singled out for awards. There were RC&D Councils from 10 States competing for the awards. The Outstanding Coordinator of the Year is Kit Sutherland, who is shown here receiving his award from 2nd Vice President of the Western Region Joe Leichtnam.

Outgoing Western President Jim H. Freeman was honored for twenty years of service. Other Award recipients included:

- *Byron Bonney, Outstanding Employee of the Year*
- *Bitterroot RC&D Council, Outstanding Council of the Year*
- *Nan Christianson, Outstanding Partner of the Year*

The Bitterroot RC&D includes Mineral, Missoula and Ravalli Counties. Additional information can be found at [www.bitterrootrcd.org](http://www.bitterrootrcd.org).



## Farm-to-Table

Ivy Allen, NRCS Public Affairs

A new concerted effort to make “Farm-to-Table” and “Farm-to-Institute” a broadened reality throughout the U.S. is taking place. Local food use, production, and marketing are challenges that many folks are talking about. USDA is part of a focused effort working to accomplish an improved food system through the “Know Your Farmer” initiative. The initiative is striving to raise awareness about our food supply, agriculture production practices, and increase the quality and nutritional value of food consumed.

When the Western RC&D Association hosted its annual meeting in Missoula, a hot topic during the conference was locally grown foods. Montana State University (MSU) held a breakout session on the nation’s food consumption and its link to childhood obesity. Attendees also discussed the link between our economy and a growing need for food donations. In the U.S., hunger is an income issue, not a supply issue. Quality food is harder for low-income families to access, and 21% of Montana families are facing or may face food challenges.

“Know Your Farmer” is a USDA-wide effort to create new economic opportunities by better connecting consumers with local producers. It is also the start of a national conversation about the importance of understanding where food comes from and how it gets to our plates. Today, there is too much distance between the average American and the farmer. A place for Montana farmers to market their product directly is Abundant Montana. Abundant Montana is an online directory to sustainably grown foods, available at [www.aeromt.org/abundant/](http://www.aeromt.org/abundant/).

Montana universities are making an effort to reduce the gap between producers and consumers. MSU hosted its annual “Food Fair” as a collaborative effort with the new “Sustainable Food and Bioenergy Systems” program. Food fairs help to create awareness within the community about local Montana products and producers. Joyce Swartzendruber, Montana NRCS State Conservationist, attended the event and sponsored a NRCS booth to support the USDA “Know Your Farmer” initiative.

# Jordan Ranchers, Belgrade Consultant Honored with Range Leader Awards

Heidi Olbert, Rangeland Resource Coordinator, MT DNRC

The Governor's Rangeland Resources Executive Committee (RREC) has announced that ranchers Bob and Debbie Gibbs of Jordan and private consultant Gene Surber of Belgrade have been chosen as recipients of the 2009 Range Leader of the Year awards.

"The Gibbsses and Gene Surber are genuine leaders in the field of range management," said Heidi Olbert, Rangeland Resources Program Specialist with the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation. "Their commitment to education and the principles of stewardship represents the best of Montana agriculture."

Olbert said the Gibbs family's two large pastures of native grassland

were continuously grazed. After noticing a decline in range conditions, the couple decided it was time to consider new ways of managing their land. "They installed cross fences and implemented a rest-rotation grazing plan," Olbert said. "As a result, they were able to give one pasture a full season of rest from grazing each year." The couple also made use of "chiseling," a low-impact form of plowing, on their rested pastures. Olbert said that technique helped break up heavy concentrations of club moss and improved soil conditions.

Their treated pastures now have more native species, including forbs, and are more productive. Within a year they started to notice more songbirds than in previous years."

In addition to the rangeland improvement, the Gibbsses also added water developments in upland sites. That has improved grazing distribution across their pastures, and also improved the health of riparian areas on the ranch.

"It's a great outcome for both the Gibbsses and the natural resources," said Olbert. "They are seeing heavier weaning weights for their calves, and the grasslands and riparian areas are doing great. The Gibbsses wanted to improve their native rangeland, they were open to trying some new and different ideas, and it paid off."

Gene Surber worked as the natural resource specialist in the Animal and Range Sciences Department of Montana State University from 1994 to 2006. Prior to that, he served for 22 years as a county agricultural extension agent in Gallatin and Park counties.

"Gene's leadership in agriculture is unsurpassed. He has educated so many Montanans in the areas of crop production, weed control, commodity marketing and water quality," said Olbert. "Gene coordinated the Ag Lenders School and the Western Integrated Ranch Education (WIRE) program, and has served as lead on the beef portion for the Environmental Management Systems, a national project that encouraged landowners to voluntarily address important environmental issues such as water quality. We're lucky to have Gene in Montana."

Bob and Debbie Gibbs and Gene Surber received their leadership awards in Havre during the 2010 Winter Grazing Seminar sponsored by Montana DNRC.



Left to Right: Gene Surber - 2009 Range Leader of the Year Professional Category, John Hollenback - Rangeland Resources Executive Committee (RREC) Vice-Chair, Steve Hedstrom - RREC Chairman, Debbie & Bob Gibbs - 2009 Range Leader of the Year Producer Category, Noel Keogh - RREC member.



Buffalo Rapids Watershed Project December 2009.



Lower Birch Creek Watershed Project December 2009.



## Construction Work Well Underway on Both Montana ARRA Watershed Projects

Larry Cooper, Public Affairs

Construction work is progressing on two major Montana watershed projects funded in part through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act.

The first construction element at the Buffalo Rapids Watershed Project involved installation of a center pivot irrigation system.

The project is located in the Buffalo Rapids Irrigation District which covers over 24-thousand acres in parts of Custer, Prairie and Dawson Counties. The Natural Resources Conservation Service cost share of the project is \$281,000, with an additional \$203,000 contributed by partners Custer, Prairie, and Dawson County Conservation Districts, Buffalo Rapids Irrigation District, and Bureau of Reclamation.

The project involves installation of new irrigation equipment and the burial of water-carrying pipelines. All water for the project is diverted from the Yellowstone River through five pumping plants and one re-lift plant. When completed the amount of energy required to pump irrigation water will be significantly reduced. The project will provide improved water quality and conserve water quantity associated with cropland irrigation.

Construction is completed on two of the three-stage Lower Birch Creek Watershed canal and waste-way improvement project located in Pondera County. The project will stabilize severe gully erosion by conveying excess irrigation flows back into the Lower Birch Creek, the original source of irrigation water. Water will be returned to stable outlets in the stream corridor through buried pipelines.

Federal funding through ARRA is \$527,000 with an additional \$366,000 paid by partners, Pondera County Canal and Reservoir Com-

pany and the Pondera County Soil and Water Conservation District. When completed 25,000 tons of sediment deposited annually into more than 18 miles of stream fisheries will be significantly reduced and water quality will be significantly improved. Irrigation run-off, which through the years has caused severe erosion, will be diverted back to its original source.

Both projects are part of the Obama Administration's plans to modernize the nation's infrastructure, jump-start the economy, and create jobs. Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack recently announced \$84.8 million is being allocated to state and local governments throughout the nation to improve water quality, increase water supply, decrease soil erosion and improve fish and wildlife habitat as part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act.



# National Agriculture Week

Rebecca Colnar, Montana Farm Bureau Federation

The Montana Farm Bureau celebrated National Agriculture Week March 14-20. This is a time to thank farmers and ranchers for a job well done. National Ag Day March 20, 2010 was the first day of spring.

*“Agriculture provides almost everything we eat, use and wear on a daily basis, but too few people truly understand this contribution,” notes MFBF President Bob Hanson, a cattle rancher from White Sulphur Springs. “This is particularly the case in our schools where students may only be exposed to agriculture if they enroll in related vocational training. We need to reach out to the young people and teach them about what we do on our farms and ranches and why we do it.”*

Hanson pointed out that each American farmer/rancher feeds more than 144 people, a dramatic increase from 25 people in the 1960s. They’ve introduced more efficient farming practices to reduce pesticide and herbicide use, along with implementing no-till farming to reduce erosion.

*“Keep in mind too, agriculturalists are the reason for a lot of our open space. Private land owners provide 75 percent of the habitat for wildlife,” notes Hanson. “If it weren’t*

*for our farms and ranches, a lot of that land would be converted to shopping centers and houses. Let’s face it, farmers and ranchers are providing food for our country. Home-grown food means more national security.”*

By building awareness, the Agriculture Council of America is encouraging young people to consider career opportunities in agriculture.

*“Many people think agriculture is simply producing the food, but there’s a lot more to it. More than 22 million people are involved in ag, whether they’re designing or selling tractors, working in a processing plant, stocking shelves in the a grocery store or marketing our products,” notes Hanson. “Of course, since the average age of a farmer is 55, we still need a lot of young people to get involved in actual food production. It’s a great way of life, and it is very rewarding to know you’re feeding and clothing not only Americans, but people all over the world.”*

The efficiency of U.S. farmers benefits the United States consumer in the pocketbook. Americans spend less on food than any other developed nation in the world. On average in 2004, Americans spent only 2 percent of their disposable income on meat and poultry, compared to 4.1 percent in 1970. In general, Americans spend less than 10 percent of their disposable income on food.



# Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) Tips for a Healthy Lawn

Larry Cooper, Public Affairs



Many Montana farmers and ranchers work with the NRCS to address soil erosion, water quantity and quality, air pollution and energy conservation issues. Homeowners in Montana can benefit from conservation practices as well. Small parcel owners can create and preserve green spaces, reduce flood impacts, landscape to minimize fire dangers and join in the growing effort to protect Montana soils, water, air, forestlands, energy usage and wildlife habitat.

If you think about the environment as you plan new landscaping or work to improve the landscaping on your property, you are practicing conservation:

- ❑ **Plant trees to reduce heating and cooling costs, help clean the air, add beauty and color, provide shelter from the wind and the sun and add value to your property.**
- ❑ **Reduce the amount of water use on your property by growing plants adapted to dry conditions (you can request publications from NRCS in Montana identifying those plants at [MT-nrcs-publications@one.usda.gov](mailto:MT-nrcs-publications@one.usda.gov)).**

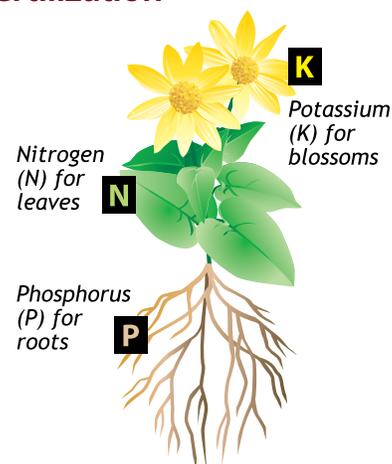
- ❑ **Plant shrubs and other plants that provide food and shelter for wildlife (including birds, pollinators, beneficial insects and small animals).**

Trees should be placed where they help cool the house in summer and block prevailing winds in the winter. Rainwater that falls on the roof of the house can be collected and used for irrigation, reducing surface run-off. Retention basins and pervious paving will trap sediment and reduce surface water run-off. Grading a portion of your yard can help control erosion and stabilize slopes.

Spring and summer in Montana is a good time to review your lawn and garden practices. One deep watering is much better than watering several times lightly. Lawns require about one inch of water each week. In hot weather the lawn will need one inch of water every three days. Watering to a depth of 4-6 inches encourages deeper, healthier root development and allows longer periods between watering. You can measure the water using an empty tuna can or cat food can placed on the lawn while watering. When the can is full stop watering.

Different soil types have different watering needs. Loosen the soil around plants so water and nutrients are quickly absorbed. Use a one to two inch layer of mulch on the soil surface above the root area. For clay soil, mix in organic material such as compost or peat moss. Because clay soil absorbs water more slowly, water only as fast as the soil absorbs the water. Add organic material to sandy soil to prevent the water running through so quickly it won't be absorbed. The best soil is loam soil, a combination of sand, silt and clay. It readily absorbs water and stores it for plants to use. Water during the early morning or night hours to reduce evaporation and don't water when it's windy, control where your water goes.

## Fertilization



The letters "N" "P" "K" should appear on the bag of fertilizer. That means the product includes Nitrogen (N) for healthy green growth, Phosphorus (P) for proper root and seed development and disease resistance. Potassium (K) is also important for root development and disease resistance.

Test your soil to find out what nutrients are needed. Contact your local NRCS office or MSU extension service to get information on soil testing. A soil test will help you understand what your plants require. Choose a fertilizer that

has at least one-fourth of the nitrogen in a slow release form, such as sulpher-coated urea.

It is best to apply fertilizer when the soil is moist and then water lightly. This helps the fertilizer move into the root zone where it is available to the plants, rather than remain on top of the soil where it can be blown or washed away. Avoid applying it immediately before a rain storm. Too much rain will take the nutrients away from the root zone. Apply the fertilizer in small frequent applications. An application of two pounds of fertilizer five times per year is more effective than five pounds of fertilizer applied twice a year. Calibrate your spreader so you know exactly how much material is being spread in a given space. Cover the ends of the lawn first, and then go back and forth across the rest of the lawn perpendicular to the first pattern.

## Composting

Compost is a dark, crumbly mixture of decomposed organic matter such as grass clippings, leaves, twigs and branches. Don't compost diseased plants, weeds with seed heads, invasive weeds, pet feces, dead animals, bread and grains, meat or fish parts, dairy products, grease, cooking oil, or oily foods.

Do compost grass clippings, leaves, plant stalks, hedge trimmings, old potting soil, twigs, and annual weeds without seed heads, vegetable scraps, coffee filters, and tea bags. It is best to chop, chip or shred materials to help them decompose faster. Turn or mix the materials occasionally to add air that will sustain warmer temperatures and control odor. This can be accomplished with a rake or a pitch fork. Compost contains nutrients, but is not a substitute for fertilizers.

Compost holds nutrients in the soil until plants can use them, loosens and aerates clay soils, and retains water in sandy soils.

As you maintain or develop your lawn look for opportunities to practice conservation. Gradually develop a plan to landscape for conservation. You can find additional information at [www.nrcs.usda.gov](http://www.nrcs.usda.gov).



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## 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>.

### Montana NRCS 75th Anniversary Events

- ❑ May 15, Bucking Horse Sale Parade – NRCS Work Truck Float, Miles City
- ❑ June 15, NRCS Tour – American Recovery and Reinvestment Act Project, Buffalo Rapids
- ❑ June 15-16, NRCS Truck Display – Montana Range Days, Miles City
- ❑ July 21 – 25, Gallatin County Fair NRCS Display, Bozeman
- ❑ July 24, NRCS Conservation Night at the Movies – Historical videos and presentation, Museum of the Rockies, Bozeman
- ❑ Aug 6, NRCS Tour of Lower Birch Creek American Recovery and Reinvestment Act Project, Valier and Conrad
- ❑ Aug 7, Conservation Day at the Montana State Fair, Great Falls
- ❑ Aug 13, NRCS Truck Display – Clark Fork Farmer's Market, Missoula
- ❑ Aug. 15 Display – Western Montana Fair, Missoula

### April 2010

- ❑ Montana Envirothon 19-20, Lewistown
- ❑ Earth Day, 22
- ❑ Montana Watercourse/DNRC Water Rights Training, 27, Missoula

### June 2010

- ❑ Livingston Round-up, 5, Livingston
- ❑ Range Days, 14-16, Miles City
- ❑ Montana Youth Range Camp, June 28-July 2, Elliston