



Montana NRCS Conservation Update

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Look Ahead to the New Year

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Happy New Year to all. Every new year brings change - new challenges and new opportunities. While we didn't begin 2013 with a fall off the fiscal cliff, some things at NRCS will be different this year. Here is a short run-down of what has changed and what hasn't.

The 2008 Farm Bill was extended until the end of September. That means we can continue to run our programs that are of great importance to farmers and ranchers in Montana. The Environmental Quality Incentives Program will stay on schedule, and our field offices are currently in the ranking, planning, and obligating process. We finalized our cost-list in mid-January and it has taken a much more regional and national skew than ever before. All of our practice scenarios are developed in conjunction with Idaho and Wyoming, and our cost list reflects the restrictions placed on it by national policies.

The easement programs are still intact, but we don't have funding yet for the Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP). NRCS has requested an apportionment for WRP from the Office of Management and Budget, so we could still get some new easements and restoration agreements this fiscal year. In the meantime, our easement staff has virtually eliminated the backlog of past year's WRP work, and all the closures remaining are from 2012.

Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) contracts are all still viable and will be paid, but there isn't enough funding this year to hold a signup for more CSP contracts.

So what is the prospect for a new Farm Bill? No crystal ball here, and with the debt ceiling issue and sequestration unresolved, it's hard to say when Congress will pick up Farm Bill work again.

The proposed sequestration of discretionary funds could force a bigger hit to our budget. Two discretionary programs that are subject to larger cuts are Plant Materials and Snow Survey. The Snow Survey leaders in Montana eliminated a lengthy list of manually measured snow courses this winter to meet their budget constraints. All of the telemetry sites are still in operation, and some manual courses will still be measured by snow survey staff and contractors. There is also a proposal to close some Plant Materials Centers across the nation, but we don't have the names of those on the chopping block.

On the brighter side, we have dedicated conservationists on the ground, planning for sage-grouse habitat, soil health workshops and field days, and many other activities coming up. We are undergoing a limited hiring freeze, but are moving forward on an all-employee safety conference in May. We continue to train the best and brightest for careers in conservation.

Dahl Fire Acres Aerially Seeded

On December 14, the Roundup NRCS field office worked with Central Air Service, Inc., to seed 1,384 acres that burned in the Dahl fire last summer. More than 15,500 pounds of seed was applied to critically burned areas south of Roundup. The burned areas were primarily timber with little herbaceous vegetation where the fire burned at a high intensity.



Soil Health Featured in 2013 Calendar

Brand new 2013 NRCS calendars feature NRCS's "Unlock the Secrets in the Soil" effort. The calendar covers the importance of healthy soil, what practices make soil healthy, and how you can learn more. If you would like to request copies of the calendar for you or your office, please email your request with your shipping address to MT-nrcs-publications@one.usda.gov.



NRCS Chief Dave White Retired on Dec. 3, 2012

Below is Chief White's
farewell message:



"Since January, 2009, it has been my greatest honor to have been able to serve as NRCS Chief. I will admit to being a bit biased, but NRCS is, without question, the best Federal agency there is.

We have a commitment to America's natural resources that is unmatched anywhere. We are known today as the premier "can do" natural resource agency in the Federal government and are held in high esteem across the country.

I am so proud of our accomplishments. From focusing our programs through initiatives to deliver natural resource results...to providing regulatory certainty for our producers...to the vast array of agency improvements, NRCS is simply the gold standard for Federal agencies."

Jason Weller, NRCS chief of staff, was named acting chief. Weller has been involved in every major NRCS policy decision since 2009 when he was appointed NRCS chief of staff. Dedicated to advancing the cause of voluntary, incentive-based private lands conservation, Weller has focused on coordinating and streamlining NRCS's programs, structure, and operations to improve conservation assistance to the Nation's farmers, ranchers, and forest landowners.

Prior to joining NRCS, Weller worked as a staff member for the Senate Agriculture Committee; the House Budget Committee, and the U.S. House Appropriations Subcommittee on Agriculture. He worked for five years with the White House Office of Management and Budget where he assisted with the development and implementation of the USDA conservation programs budget.

Weller is a native of northern California and earned a bachelor of arts from Carleton College in Northfield, Minn., and a graduate degree in public policy from the University of Michigan. Prior to Washington, D.C., Jason worked for several years with the California state legislature where he provided fiscal and policy recommendations on a variety of natural resource conservation and environmental protection issues.

NRCS Receives Funding for 2013 Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program

The USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service received \$3.4 million for the Farm and Ranchlands Protection Program (FRPP) for 2013 and has set an application deadline for this funding cycle of Feb. 22, 2013. NRCS accepts FRPP applications year round.

FRPP is a voluntary easement program that assists farmers and ranchers preserve their agricultural lands. The program provides matching funds to state, tribal, and local governments, and nongovernmental organizations (NGO) with existing agricultural land protection programs to purchase conservation easements.

FRPP conservation easements only limit subdivision and development rights on the property. Landowners continue farming and ranching as prior to the easement. Also, the federal match does not require any public access.

More program information and application forms are available at <http://www.mt.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/frpp/index.html>. You can also contact Dennis Dellwo, FRPP program manager, at 406-587-6748 or dennis.dellwo@mt.usda.gov.

Wetlands Reserve Program Marks 20 Years of Wetlands Conservation

In its two decades of existence, NRCS's Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP) has restored more than 2.6 million acres of wetlands habitat across the United States, creating prime wildlife habitat and helping the environment by holding and cleaning water. This includes 23,850 acres in Montana.

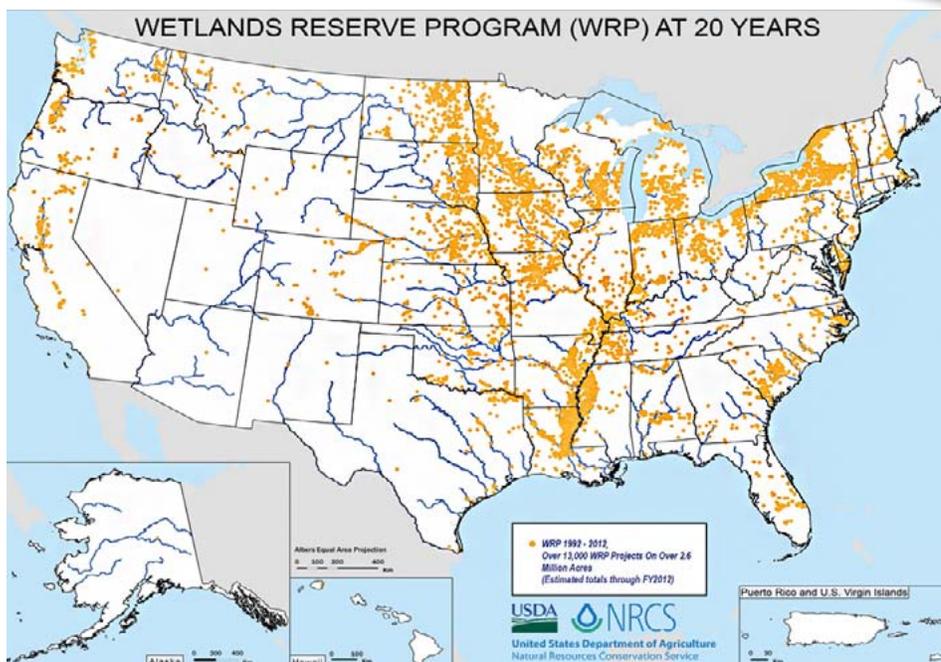
Through the program, NRCS provides technical and financial assistance to help landowners voluntarily restore and protect wetland ecosystems. Landowners may select either a permanent or 30-year easement, retaining ownership of the land once the easement is in place. Seventy-five percent of wetlands in the United States are located on private lands.

In the 20-year history of the program, more than 11,000 landowners across the country have participated in this voluntary program. Landowners can receive financial assistance to restore wetlands on the saturated and flooded portions of their property that are dif-

ficult to farm, focusing their agricultural efforts on more productive soils.

"The farmers, ranchers, and landowners in Montana are not our only citizens who have benefited from the Wetlands Reserve Program," said Joyce Swartzendruber, NRCS state conservationist for Montana. "The program has led to cleaner water, beautiful open spaces, and abundant habitat for wildlife. Montana will continue to benefit from WRP as more land is set aside for wetland areas."

NRCS attributes WRP's milestone achievements to landowner interest, strong partnerships, and effective science-based technical assistance. NRCS technical specialists work cooperatively with landowners, federal and state wildlife agencies, conservation districts, and non-governmental organizations to develop and implement effective hydrologic and vegetative restoration and management techniques.



Plant Materials Today

Pollinator habitat enhancement and conservation practices are

important activities influencing agriculture and conservation in many ways. Establishing pollinator plantings can be tricky business and success poor if plantings are not properly designed and installed. Read this issue of Plant Materials Today to learn what the NRCS Bridger Plant Materials Center is doing to improve your success with pollinator plantings.

http://www.mt.nrcs.usda.gov/technical/ecs/plants/pmpubs/pmtoday_dec12.html



January 1 Montana Mountain Snowpack Primed for Normal Water Year

December 2012 treated Montana generously, providing above average snowfall across the entire state, according to snow survey data from NRCS. The majority of the accumulation came during the beginning of the month, while drier conditions prevailed during the latter half of the month.

SNOTEL (SNOWTElemetry) data indicated Dec. 1 snowpack was near 80 percent of average, but due to an active weather pattern statewide, snowpack ended December just below average. "This is typically the turning point in the snow accumulation season with nearly half of a normal year's accumulation behind us," said Brian Domonkos, NRCS water supply specialist. "Snowpack is currently

positioned well for the remainder of the year provided near normal snowfall for the remaining season."

Since the beginning of the water year on Oct. 1, the mountains of Montana have received nearly 110 percent of average precipitation. The Flathead in Montana has seen nearly 120 percent of average precipitation. The National Weather Service Climate Prediction Center is forecasting above average precipitation for western and central Montana through March.

For detailed and summarized snowpack information, go to: www.mt.nrcs.usda.gov/snow/.

Most streamflow volume forecasts are also predicted to be near nor-

mal come April 1. Some exceptions do exist most notably in the river basins of the Lower Yellowstone and in some Missouri Headwaters basins.

For detailed basin streamflow forecast information, go to: ftp://ftp.wcc.nrcs.usda.gov/support/water/provisional_forecasts/montana/mt.txt.



Montana Farmers and Ranchers Help Conservation Program Reach 50 Million-Acre Mark

In just four years, America's top conservationists have enrolled 50 million acres in NRCS' Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), a program that helps farmers, ranchers and forest landowners take conservation to the next level.

CSP is aimed at producers who are already established conservation stewards, helping them to deliver multiple conservation benefits on working lands, including improved water and soil quality and enhanced wildlife habitat.

The land enrolled in CSP is more than 78,000 square miles, an area larger than Pennsylvania and South Carolina combined, making it one of the top federal programs for private lands offered by NRCS. This year, nearly 12.2 million acres across the country were added to the program's rolls.

From improving soil health to sending cleaner water downstream, this program is improving the environment, including the landscape here in Montana. Landowners in Montana have enrolled 3.4 million acres into CSP.

"The Conservation Stewardship Program allows our conservation-minded farmers, ranchers and forest landown-

ers to go that extra mile in conserving natural resources," said Joyce Swartzendruber, NRCS State Conservationist for Montana. "This program leads to cleaner air and water, enhanced wildlife habitat and healthier soil, among many other benefits. Montana producers using this program are innovators in conservation, and they're making great contributions to our rural communities."

Eligible landowners and operators in all states and territories can enroll in CSP. NRCS local offices accept CSP

applications year round and evaluate applications during announced ranking periods.

A CSP self-screening checklist is available to help producers determine if CSP is suitable for their operation. The checklist highlights basic information about CSP eligibility requirements, stewardship threshold requirements and payment types. It is available from local NRCS offices and on the CSP website: <http://go.usa.gov/g9dx>.



Montana Pollinator Education Project

NRCS partnered with the Montana Department of Agriculture and the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation to create an education packet for Montana teachers called the Montana Pollinator Project. Together, they developed a packet complete with lesson plans, which are integrated and aligned to Montana educational standards. Each packet contains educational cards, posters, and informational flyers on several different native and non-native pollinators, including information on their habitats and functions, and plants which are pollinator friendly. Pollinator friendly seed starter packets for each participating school are also in the packet. Lesson plans, available on CD in the packet and online, meet the needs of students while they learn about pollinators and their role in food and fiber production, the cost of pollinators for agriculture in dollars, and the future of the food system as it relates to reliance on pollinators.

The lesson plans and other materials included in the packet can be downloaded from the Montana Department of Agriculture Web site: <http://agr.mt.gov/agr/Programs/AgClassroom/LessonPlans/SchoolProjects/>.

Human Resources Report

Promotions

- Cedar Magone, Soil Conservation Technician, White Sulphur Springs
- Dawn Wickum, District Conservationist, Chester
- Max Blodgett, Soil Conservationist, Great Falls
- Mickey Van Der Hagen, Soil Conservation Technician to Engineering Technician, Big Timber
- David Doughty, Civil Engineer, Conrad, to Civil Engineer (Area), Miles City

New Permanent Employees

- Lance Lindbloom, Soil Conservationist, Rocky Boy
- Jared Worthington, Soil Conservationist, Scobey
- Christina Klima, Human Resources Specialist, Bozeman

Reassignments

- Brian Ressel, Soil Conservationist, from Kalispell to Eureka
- Jessica Heptner, Soil Conservationist, from Chester to Kalispell

Resignations

- Nicole Kerstetter, Soil Conservation Technician, Circle

Retirements

- John Monahan, Soil Conservationist, Jordan
- Beth Woodson, Soil Conservationist, Billings
- Joe Fidel, Resource Conservationist, Bozeman
- Rick Bandy, Soil Scientist, Great Falls

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>.

February 2013

- ❑ Society for Range Management Annual Meeting, February 2-8, 2013, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma
- ❑ Pasture Renovation Workshop, February 5, 2013, Corvallis
- ❑ Range Workshop, February 21, 2013, Baker

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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.

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