



Montana NRCS Conservation Update

April 2012 Quarterly Newsletter www.mt.nrcs.usda.gov



In This Issue

- ❑ NRCS Montana Responds to 2011 Floods
- ❑ Pollinator Conservation Planning Short Courses
- ❑ "Montana Native Plants for Pollinator-Friendly Plantings"
- ❑ Sage-Grouse Initiative Launches New Web Site
- ❑ NRCS Hosts Delegation of Mongolians
- ❑ Chief White Testifies Before Senate Ag Committee
- ❑ Montana NRCS Photos Now Online
- ❑ Wibaux Workshop Highlights Soil Health
- ❑ Wetlands Education Activity Book
- ❑ Know Your Farmer Know Your Food
- ❑ Conservation Reserve Program Training for Conservation Professionals
- ❑ April 1 Montana Snowpack Above Average
- ❑ Montana Weed Control Association Fight 5 Campaign
- ❑ Human Resources Report
- ❑ Upcoming Events

The Secret's in the Soil

Joyce Swartzendruber, State Conservationist

A new land management practice is expanding across the crop fields of Montana. Soil Health is a new focus for many farmers who are concerned about rising costs of fertilizer and diesel fuel. They discovered that combining cover crops and no-tillage farming increases their net income, controls erosion, and creates a better underground environment for their crops.

Cover crop "cocktails" are seed mixes that can include legumes, root crops, and oil seeds that support beneficial soil microbes which cycle nutrients in the soil. Planting a cover crop instead of fallowing the land creates more nutrient rich organic matter and increases the soil's capacity to hold water. Richer soil retains water in times of drought, and also holds water longer in times of heavy rains. The cover crop can be grazed or hayed before the next crop is planted. Soil tests reveal that less commercial fertilizer needs to be purchased following cover crop plantings.

More than 1,500 Montana farmers and ranchers attended workshops this winter where they learned the basic concepts of soil microbiology. Conservation districts, Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation, and USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service are bringing this expertise to farmers and ranchers across the state.

Personally, this renewed focus on soil is very gratifying to me. Good soil health is a solution to many environmental concerns. Healthy soil doesn't erode as fast as over-tilled and undernourished soil. Healthy soil sequesters more carbon from the atmosphere, helping lower greenhouse gases in the atmosphere. Healthy soil soaks up rain and snowmelt more effectively, which holds more water for future crop use, and reduces runoff that can cause flooding. The nutrient cycling from the millions of living organisms in healthy soil can significantly reduce costs for commercial fertilizer.

Soil health has become a nationwide focus, and Montana NRCS and our partners are ahead of the curve in bringing this expertise to our customers.



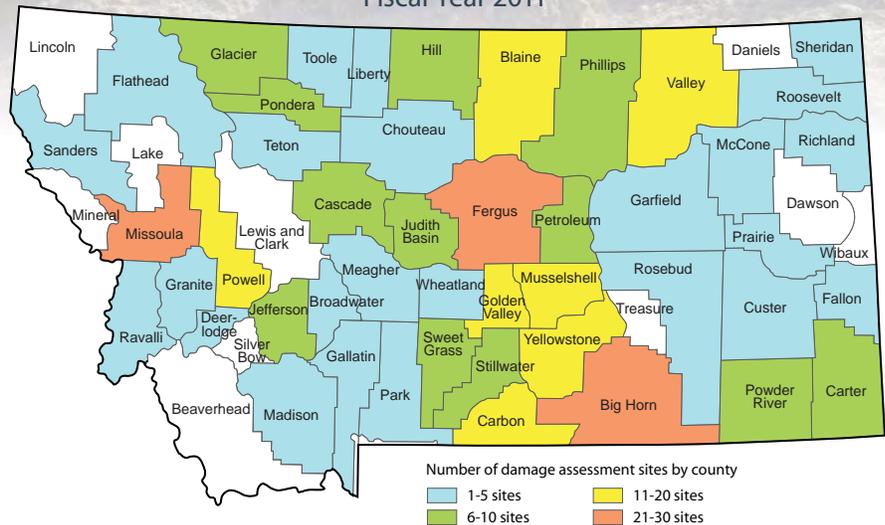
NRCS Montana Responds to 2011 Floods



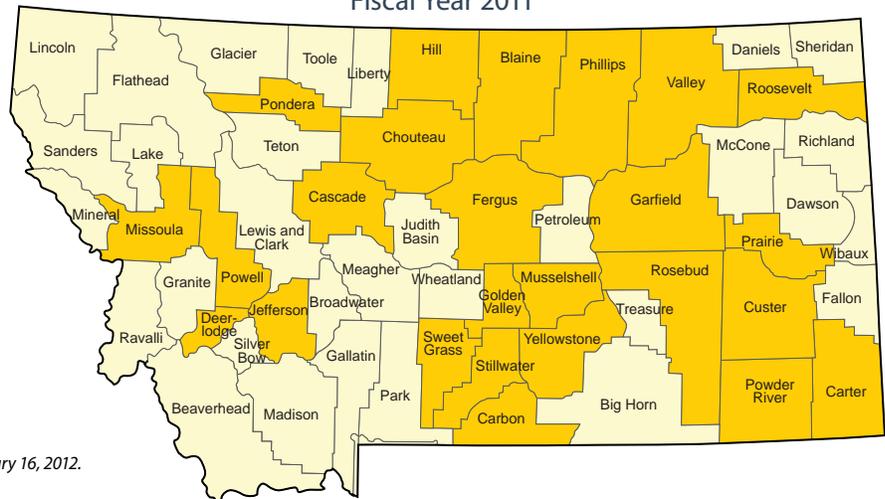
NRCS provided \$5.1 million to assist Montana sponsors with flood recovery projects through its Emergency Watershed Protection (EWP) program in 2011. NRCS assessed 340 requests for assistance in 46 counties; 62 projects were deemed program-eligible and received funding.

Projects include stream bank protection for roads, bridge abutments, and houses; repairs to irrigation diversions and canals; clearing fallen trees and removing sediment to restore the hydraulic capacity in channels and road crossings; and relocation of a house, rural water pipeline, municipal sewage lagoon, and four livestock feedlots. You can see more project photos and stories on the NRCS Montana Web site: <http://www.mt.nrcs.usda.gov>

Emergency Watershed Protection (EWP) Damage Assessments Fiscal Year 2011



Counties with Emergency Watershed Protection (EWP) Projects Funded Fiscal Year 2011



Source: Montana NRCS SharePoint EWP spreadsheet. February 16, 2012.

Two Pollinator Conservation Planning Short Courses Offered in Montana



The Xerces Society is offering Pollinator Conservation Planning Short Courses across the country in 2012 and 2013. Two will be offered in Montana this summer:

Bridger June 12
Great Falls June 14

Introductory topics include the principles of pollinator biology, the economics of insect pollination, basic bee field identification, and evaluating pollinator habitat. Advanced modules will cover land management practices for pollinator protection, pollinator habitat restoration, incorporating pollinator conservation into federal conservation programs, selection of plants for pollinator enhancement sites, management of natural landscapes, and financial and technical resources to support these efforts. Registrants will receive the Xerces Society's Pollinator Conservation Toolkit, which includes Xerces' latest book, *Attracting Native Pollinators*. *Protecting North America's Bees and Butterflies*, as well as habitat management guidelines and relevant NRCS and Extension publications.

To find additional information or register for either workshop, visit the Xerces Society Web site: <http://www.xerces.org/events/>.

Popular Booklet Revised and Reprinted

"Montana Native Plants for Pollinator-Friendly Plantings" is available again from Montana NRCS. Request the publication by e-mail from MT-nrcs-publications@one.usda.gov. Be sure to include the title of the publication and your mailing address with your request.



Sage-Grouse Initiative Launches New Web Site

Check out the Sage-Grouse Initiative's new Web site.



Highlights include:

- Video collection. Videos feature an overview of the initiative, private landowners developing grazing systems, establishing conservation easements and tackling conifer encroachment—all to benefit both sage-grouse and sustainable ranching.
- Local success stories. Check out the conservation practices being implemented under the Sage-Grouse Initiative success tracker.
- Local sage-grouse events and news stories. A link to a Nature Conservancy article about efforts to conserve sage-grouse across the West can be found here.
- Sage-Grouse Initiative partners.
- Sage-Grouse Initiative photos. A free photo library is available to help promote the Initiative. Just right-click on your favorite library photo and download it for free.
- Want to have something posted? Send an e-mail to Info@sagegrouseinitiative.com to have something posted on the Sage-Grouse Initiative Web site.

NRCS Hosts Delegation of Mongolians



Above: Mongolian scientists meet with NRCS Montana staff at the state office in Bozeman to discuss voluntary conservation and other related topics.

Left: Chuck Gordon, Montana state soil scientist; Joyce Swartzendruber, Montana state conservationist; and Tammy DeCock, rangeland management specialist, Miles City; met with Mongolian scientists.

NRCS Montana was co-host to a delegation of seven scientists and diplomats from Mongolia in February 2012. They spent six days traveling from western Montana to eastern Montana looking at and discussing ecological sites, soil types, and soil/site correlation procedures. Along the way, they met with various NRCS field office and area office staff, as well as local producers to discuss ecological site descriptions and conservation planning. They also met with Joyce Swartzendruber, Montana NRCS state conservationist, and Chuck Gordon, state soil scientist, to discuss the role of government in voluntary conservation planning, the Farm Bill, inventories, Plant Materials Centers, and soil survey.

NRCS Chief Testifies Before Senate Ag Committee

NRCS Chief Dave White testified before the Senate Agriculture Committee in March, Strengthening Conservation through the 2012 Farm Bill. You can watch the presentation and download the written testimony and slide show on the Senate Ag Committee's Web site: <http://www.ag.senate.gov/>. The Chief illustrates the accomplishments achieved through the conservation title of the Farm Bill by helping farmers maintain soil health, keep water clean and available, produce abundant and safe food, and provide wildlife habitat.



NRCS Chief Dave White testifies before Senate Ag Committee.

Gallery Categories



Montana Photos

82 galleries with 2398 photos
Updated: Mar 07, 2012 7:51am MST

Montana NRCS Photos Now Online

Montana NRCS photos are now on the internet and can be downloaded for free. Nearly 2,400 conservation images reside there. While the photos on the Web are not copyrighted and are within the public domain, NRCS requests users outside the agency use one of the following credit lines:

Photo courtesy of USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service.

Photo courtesy of USDA NRCS.

The photo gallery web address is <http://nrcs-photogallery-mt.smugmug.com/> and is linked to the Montana NRCS Web site under the News section.

Another source for online photos is USDA's Flickr Web site: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/usdago>. The Web site has more than 40 collections documenting the daily operations of the Department. Also, the national NRCS photo gallery at <http://photogallery.nrcs.usda.gov/> has several natural resource and conservation related photos from across the country.

Wibaux Workshop Highlights Soil Health

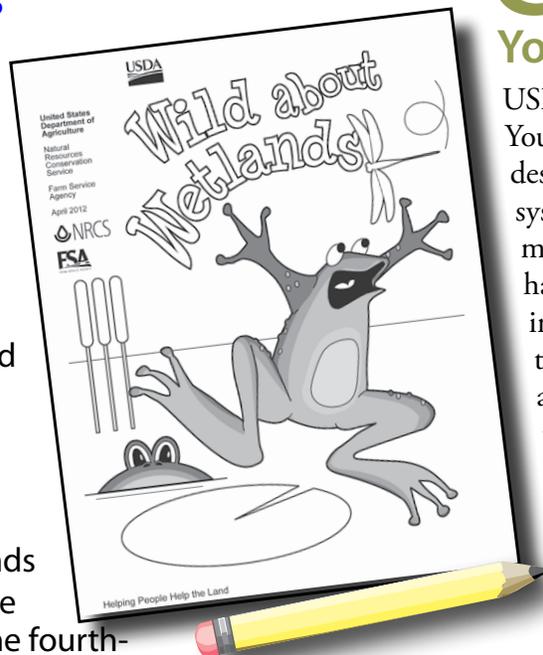


Since last October, more than 1,500 farmers and ranchers have attended soil health workshops held across Montana. The workshop in Wibaux in February was well attended also. NRCS presented information on the Spill Prevention Containment and Countermeasure program, soil health and sustainability, and the “micro-herd.” Through a producer panel, individuals shared their experiences as they travel the road to soil health.

Photo: Participants at a Wibaux soil health workshop were very interested and asked several questions.

New Wetlands Education Activity Book for Kids

Montana NRCS just completed and posted to its Web site an educational activity booklet for 2012, “Wild About Wetlands.” This activity book contains coloring pages, puzzles, and word games that can help children discover the unique plants and animals found in wetlands and to learn how wetlands benefit us all. Most of the activities are at about the fourth-grade level.



Download a copy at <http://www.mt.nrcs.usda.gov/about/education.html> or e-mail MT-nrcs-publications@one.usda.gov.

Compass Report Shows Know Your Farmer Know Your Food Achievements

USDA has prepared a national report on “Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food,” an initiative designed to strengthen local and regional food systems. This electronic compass report communicates the achievements USDA agencies have made in assisting customers. The report includes information about NRCS’ high tunnel initiative and videos and case studies about other agricultural achievements across the country. The Web-based report has a geospatial element with a map of the nation and county-level data on Know Your Farmer Know Your Food activities. The Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food Web site (<http://www.usda.gov/wps/portal/usda/knownyourfarmer?navid=KNOWYOURFARMER>) features the compass report and social media tools to help focus the public conversation on farming and food, while linking producers to customers.

New Program Offers Conservation Reserve Program Training for Conservation Professionals

NRCS is sponsoring a program to train conservation professionals to provide planning, implementation, and management services for Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) contracts.

A team led by NRCS, the Farm Service Agency, Montana State University, and representatives from NRCS partner agencies and organizations has collaborated to develop the trainings and make them accessible, convenient, and consistent. The new initiative is called the Conservation Reserve Program Readiness Initiative.

Participants in the CRP Readiness Initiative will be trained to create, implement and maintain all or parts of CRP plans based on a detailed knowledge of national and state conservation practices.

Participants in the CRP Readiness Initiative will have the opportunity to attend a free two-day training workshop, work directly with a project mentor, participate in online forums and webinars, and sign up for supplemental training courses as needed.

A training workshop was held in Great Falls in early April, but another one will be held in Dickinson, N.D., May 16 and 17, 2012.

Interested conservation professionals can visit the Conservation Professional Training Web site at <http://conservation-training.uwex.edu/crpworkshops> for more information on the program and to sign up for a training workshop.

What is This?

Can you identify what this photo is all about? Look for the answer on the next page of this newsletter.



April 1 Montana Snowpack Rises Above Average

March was a variable, yet snowy month around the state of Montana, increasing the statewide snowpack for the third month in a row, according to NRCS snow survey data.

“Storm patterns over the last month have favored the western and northern parts of the state with the Kootenai, Lower Clark Fork and Flathead River basins seeing substantial increases in snow water,” said Brian Domonkos, NRCS water supply specialist. Most of Montana saw slightly above average snowfall for the month, helping the basins around the state to stay at or slightly above average and allowed southwest Montana to continue recovering from the dry weather and below average snowfall experienced through Jan. 1.

However, some basins in Montana continue to be below average. The Milk River Basin continued to be considerably below average through the month of March, with little improvement from the storms that hit the rest of the state. The Wind, Big Horn, Powder, Tongue and Lower Yellowstone River basins in Wyoming have made the transition to a spring snowpack with the unseasonably warm temperatures, dropping significantly from the high percentages of average on March 1.

Streamflow prospects across the state have increased in all basins except the Yellowstone and Milk River basins since last month. Significant changes in the Yellowstone River basin snowpack decreased forecasts to below average levels. Above average precipitation during future months would likely increase runoff amounts.

More detailed snowpack data and streamflow forecasts can be found on the NRCS Montana Web site: <http://www.mt.nrcs.usda.gov>.



Spotted knapweed invades native range in Lake County, Montana.

Leafy spurge dominates a field near Bozeman, Montana.

The Montana Weed Control Association's Fight 5 Campaign

Have you heard about the Montana Weed Control Association's "Fight 5" education and awareness campaign? The purpose of the campaign is to raise awareness of noxious weeds and gain commitment to control weeds through simple and effective messaging.

"Fight 5" has the potential to reach more than a half million Montanans using a wide spectrum of outreach tools: print, radio, and television spots; Internet, Web sites, and social media; lesson plans for school-aged children; PowerPoint presentations for adult education; and training workshops.

For more information about the "Fight 5" Campaign, take a look at

the Montana Weed Control Association's YouTube channel: <http://www.youtube.com/user/MTWeedControlAssoc/feed>.



2011 Farm Bill Program Funding – Montana

NRCS's Resource Economics, Analysis and Policy Division has released official numbers for NRCS Farm Bill funding for fiscal year 2011. The table below outlines the number of contracts and funds for each Farm Bill program in Montana.

NRCS Program	Number of Contracts	Financial Assistance to Producers
Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP)	270	\$9.2 million
Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)	562	\$19.4 million
Agricultural Water Enhancement Program (AWEP)	5	\$412,000
Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program (FRPP)	11	\$6.4 million
Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP)	7	\$1.8 million
Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP)	9	\$203,000

Financial Assistance (FA) is provided directly to producers. Conservation Technical Assistance (CTA) funding is used by NRCS for professional planning and expertise to help carry out conservation activities. Data source: Foundation Financial Information System Status of Funds Report October 2011.

Here's the Answer. What is This?

This is surface hoar. During a clear sky, the snow in the shade or at night radiates a tremendous amount of heat away from the snow surface which becomes very cold. The vapor from the warmer air above the snow will condense onto the surface of the snow forming crystal shapes. Surface hoar is the winter equivalent of dew!

Once surface hoar becomes buried in the snowpack, it is a particularly thin, fragile and persistent weak layer in the snowpack, which is a contributing factor for avalanches. Surface hoar is pretty but can be deadly!

Human Resources Report

New Permanent Employees

- Travis Caudle, Soil Conservationist, Lewistown Field Office
- Kelli Coleman, Soil Conservation Technician, Conrad Field Office
- John Collins, Soil Conservation Technician, Culbertson Field Office
- Gwen Davies, Soil Conservation Technician, Shelby Field Office
- William Locatelli, Civil Engineering Technician, Fort Benton Field Office
- Laurie Massar, Soil Conservationist, Havre Field Office
- Jake Monson, Office Assistant, Bozeman State Office
- Joel Parker, Hydrologic Technician, Bozeman State Office
- Trudy Pink, MLRA Soil Survey Leader, Miles City Soil Survey Office
- Shalaine Watson, Soil Conservationist, Chester Field Office

New Term Employees

- Joan Johnson, Cartographer, Bozeman State Office
- Cathy Williams-Rash, Rangeland Management Specialist, Sheridan Field Office

Promotions

- Mark Johnson, Resource Conservationist, Bozeman Area Office
- Scott Morton, District Conservationist, Fort Belknap Field Office
- Patti Renevier, Contracting Officer, Bozeman State Office
- Josh Schrecengost, Biologist, Great Falls Area Office

Reassignments

- Stacey Barta, Soil Conservationist, Joliet, Field Office
- Amy Kaiser, Soil Conservationist, Havre Field Office
- Chris Mahony, Soil Conservationist, Bozeman Field Office
- Sheena Moore, Soil Conservationist, Glasgow Field Office
- Pat O'Connell, Soil Scientist, Missoula Soil Survey Office

Losses

- Hayes Buxton, Hydrologic Technician, Bozeman State Office
- Chelsea Hansen, Soil Scientist, Dillon Soil Survey Office
- Mariah McCormick, Soil Conservation Aid, Cut Bank Field Office



Josh Schrecengost, NRCS biologist, photographed this snowy owl in Phillips County, where the big white birds seemed to be everywhere this winter. Snowy owls winter in the northern US and Canada with harsh conditions typically pushing them further south.



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To file a complaint of discrimination, write to USDA, Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights, 1400 Independence Avenue, S.W., Stop 9410, Washington, DC 20250-9410, or call toll-free at (866) 632-9992 (English) or (800) 877-8339 (TDD) or (866) 377-8642 (English Federal-relay) or (800) 845-6136 (Spanish Federal-relay). USDA is an equal opportunity provider and employer.

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 2012

- ❑ Montana Envirothon, April 23 - 24, 2012, Lewistown
- ❑ Montana Farm and Ranch Show, April 27 - 29, Bozeman

June 2012

- ❑ Montana Stockgrowers Association Mid-Year Meeting, June 8 - 9, Great Falls
- ❑ Montana Audubon, Wings Across the Big Sky Bird Festival, June 8 - 10, Kalispell
- ❑ Pollinator Conservation Planning Short Course, June 12, Bridger
- ❑ Pollinator Conservation Planning Short Course, June 14, Great Falls

September 2012

- ❑ Women Stepping Forward for Ag Symposium, September 25 - 27, Great Falls
- ❑ Fifth National Conference on Grazing Lands, December 9 - 12, Orlando, Florida

USDA-NRCS

10 E. Babcock St., Rm 443

Bozeman, MT, 59715

www.mt.nrcs.usda.gov

406-587-6971