



United States Department of Agriculture

NRCS Assistance to Forestland Owners and Managers



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The USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) is a federal agency that emphasizes voluntary, science-based assistance to help private forest landowners and managers improve their forest resource. NRCS conservationists work with private forest landowners and managers to plan and install forestry practices that can improve growth, reduce risk of catastrophic wildfire, and improve forest health, wildlife habitat and forested grazing. In addition, many forestry conservation practices can be cost-shared through Farm Bill programs administered by NRCS.

Conservation Planning

NRCS works with forestland owners and managers to develop conservation plans customized to meet the owners' objectives for their land. The conservation plan addresses resource concerns and proposes improvements that can be voluntarily implemented on the landscape. Conservation planning provides direction to achieve the land manager's goals and improve natural resources.

Healthy Forests

Forest health is a very broad term. Many forests are both healthy and productive. However, a number of different concerns have been identified as major forestry problems in the West. These include fire and fuels, invasion of nonnative and native pests, loss of biodiversity, air pollution, water quality and quantity, and degraded riparian forests.

Many forest stands have too many trees per acre (overstocked) or contain a disproportionate amount of shrubs in the understory. This competition for light, nutrients, and water leaves forests extremely susceptible to disease and insect damage, increases the risk of catastrophic fire, reduces productivity, and provides poor quality wildlife habitat, as well as limited recreational opportunities. Other forests, for a number of reasons, have too few trees.

Fuel Hazard Reduction

Forests make up about 25 percent of Montana's land base and about a quarter of that portion, or 6 million acres, is in private ownership. Many of these acres are overstocked and at risk of wildfire damage. Without effective management, opportunistic understory plants compete with trees for water, nutrients and light. These adverse conditions have fueled severe wildfires.

Fire, a natural phenomenon, is a key to maintaining natural processes of most Montana ecosystems. Fire suppression policies that prevailed in the 1900s have prevented fire from doing its job of removing low-growing underbrush, cleaning the forest floor of debris, opening it up to sunlight, and nourishing the soil. In many areas in the West, human development is intermingled with undeveloped wild land, making the use of fire as a management tool more difficult. It also creates safety concerns when wildfires do occur. Reducing fuels won't completely restore a fire dependent ecology but can bring it back to a more appropriate fire intensity and help the forest be more resilient in the face of wildfire impacts. Properly designed forest harvests can achieve similar results.

Assistance

NRCS conservationists provide technical expertise and conservation planning for forest landowners and managers who want to implement conservation practices to improve forest health and reduce the impacts of catastrophic wildfires.

NRCS has assembled a body of technical standards to help landowners and managers address a large number of natural resource concerns. Forest conservation activities, such as those found on the back of this sheet, exemplify the type of practices for which NRCS provides technical and financial assistance.

Financial Assistance

The Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) is a voluntary conservation program that promotes production and environmental stewardship as compatible goals. EQIP shares conservation costs with landowners to implement conservation practices on the landscape. This program has been used throughout Montana to help fund forest conservation activities such as those listed on this fact sheet under Conservation Forestry Practices.

In addition, the Conservation Stewardship Program, a separate conservation program, can help forest landowners obtain even higher levels of environmental enhancements.

How to Apply

Persons interested in participating in Farm Bill programs should contact their local NRCS field office. Applications may be submitted at any time during the year. Eligible projects will be evaluated, prioritized and selected for funding as budget allocations permit. Submitting an application does not obligate the landowner or the NRCS to the enrollment of property or any future expenditure of funds.

Conservation Forestry Practices



Site Preparation

Treating areas to improve the site conditions for the successful establishment of trees.



Tree Planting

Establishing trees by planting seedlings or cuttings, direct seeding, or natural regeneration.



Fuel Break

Creating an area where the vegetation and debris have been reduced and/or modified to control or reduce the risk of the spread of fire.



Sediment Reduction from Roads and Trails

Treating legacy erosion problems with long-term erosion control features to reduce soil loss and sediment into creeks and other water bodies.



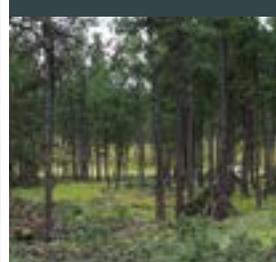
Forest Stand Improvement

Treating areas to improve the composition, structure, condition, health, and growth of even- or uneven-aged stands. Smaller trees in an immature stand may be removed to provide adequate growing space for other trees, accelerate diameter growth, and improve the form of the remaining trees.



Slash Disposal

Treating residual woody material that is created due to management activities or natural disturbances to reduce hazardous fuels and reduce the risk of harmful insects and disease. This also improves access to forage for grazing and browsing animals, and improves soil organic matter.



Controlling Competing Vegetation

Reducing the numbers of shrubs in the understory to an acceptable level to reduce the competition between trees and shrubs. Removing or controlling herbaceous weeds including invasive, noxious and prohibited plants.



Pruning

Removing all or parts of selected branches, leaders, or roots from trees and shrubs to reduce ladder fuels. Lower branches are not pruned more than 50% of the total height of the tree.



Prescribed Burning

Applying controlled fire to control undesirable vegetation; prepare site for planting or seeding; control plant disease; remove slash and debris; and reduce wildfire hazards.

