



# Natural Resources Conservation Service Montana Conservation Update

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## Thoughts on the Federal Furlough

Joyce Swartzendruber, State Conservationist

The transition from federal fiscal year 2013 to 2014 didn't go off without a hitch. I sent our 300 employees home on October 1. We powered down our computers, locked up our equipment, filed the loose papers on our desks, and headed home for what turned out to be 16 days of furlough.

For hundreds of thousands of federal workers, their security of a job and a paycheck and other benefits was in jeopardy, and their pain was felt in every corner of this country. The pain spread from them to our close partners: the conservation districts and tribes who we serve directly and on a daily basis. Contractors, farmers, and ranchers called our employees' personal cell phones for help, and our pain grew from a dull ache to guilt and frustration. "No, I can't come out and help you until we have a budget bill." Staying home from work and not helping our customers isn't a comfortable feeling for most NRCS employees. If we aren't there to help people help the land, who will?

Upon our return to work, NRCS Chief Jason Weller expressed his sincere gratitude to our workforce, and said that there is more focus than ever on what we do for natural resources on the state, regional, and national levels. We still have authority for \$4.2 billion to put conservation on the ground through technical and financial assistance. With the recent push to get a Farm Bill passed this fall, we hope the good conservation work can continue and our employees can have assurance that there is a future in what they are trained to do.

We learned some lessons about a shutdown that we will incorporate into future shutdown plans, although we hope it doesn't come to that again. We need to figure out a better way to report that we are closed down; we need to ensure that leadership has personal contact information throughout the agency; we need to provide the web site information that the districts and public uses without our help; we need to be prepared for emergency work somehow, such as the carcass disposal that was so tragically needed after the freak snow storm in the Dakotas, and flood repair in Colorado. We don't know how to sit on our hands when people really need us.

My advice? Don't schedule anything important for January 16, 2014, the day after our current Continuing Resolution runs out. And hope for a good farm bill this fall that will help us continue doing good conservation work with the good people in agriculture.

Thanks for all your concern and conservation efforts.



Dan Buerkle, right, farmer near Plevna, talks to Alex Smyth, left, about what he hopes to accomplish with his cover crop.

## Australian Visitor to Fallon County

Alex Milner-Smyth is the executive officer of SANTEFA (South Australian No-Till Farming Association) and winner of the Rural Youth Bursary, which is a \$5,000 grant for young rural people in all types of employment to learn more about their chosen career. She came to the United States to study conservation farming practices and keep a blog of her travels and findings.

Her goal was to observe how farmers have implemented summer and cover crops as part of their rotation. Her project will assist in communicating practical applications and benefits of crop diversity in broad-acre farming systems in Australia.

Smyth arrived in Bismarck, ND, on Thursday, Aug. 29. After spending a day with Jay Fuhrer at the Menoken

Farm, then Gabe Brown on his farm, she traveled to southeastern Montana to spend a day in Fallon County. She was interested in learning how growers in an area of lower rainfall (similar to areas where she works in Australia) incorporated continuous cropping, rotation, and cover crops.

She spent the day visiting with five producers in the Fallon County, who practice zero-till with diverse rotations, have planted cover crops and are committed to improving their soil health. Smyth came away with some new knowledge and ideas with the distinct impression that these farmers were serious believers that their practices were improving soil health and making their systems more resilient and sustainable.

If you are interested in what Smyth has been learning on her trip to the United States, visit her [blog](#).



## Public TV Series Highlights Conservation Work in Ogallala Aquifer Region

The conservation TV series “This American Land” will release three NRCS-centric segments during its third season. The first segment, on NRCS work in the Ogallala Aquifer region, was released Oct. 14 and is available [online](#). The second, on Working Lands for Wildlife, will be released Oct. 28, and the third, on wetlands restoration and other conservation programs in California, will be released Nov. 19. The [NRCS website](#) has additional information.

Because this is a public TV show, the air dates differ among stations. PBS has a [station finder](#) that’ll help you find out your station and exactly when it’s running in your area.



## Discover the Cover: Farmers Realize Benefits, Challenges of Soil-Improving Cover Crops



A growing number of farmers throughout the nation have “discovered the cover”—and for some very good reasons. They’re increasingly recognizing that by using cover crops and diverse rotations, it’s possible to actually improve the health and function of their soil.

According to David Lamm, an NRCS soil health expert in Greensboro, N.C., farmers are also reaping the benefits healthy soils bring to their operations in the form of better nutrient cycling, improved water infiltration and more consistent yields over time.

“The principles of building healthy soils are the same everywhere—you have to stop tilling the soil and switch from a monoculture crop rotation to one with a diversity of crops that should include cover crops,” Lamm said. “But the path to soil health is different on each farm.”

Lamm said that keeping the soil covered and growing with living roots is a critical component in improving the health and function of the soil. “That means understanding how to manage cover crops in a soil health management system. And that can be one of the biggest challenges farmers face.”

According to Lamm, cover crop and cash crop selections and rotation sequences should be chosen to fit the farmer’s resource concerns and priorities, and the resources available at that farm.

For more information on how to “Unlock the Secrets in Your Soil,” call or visit your local USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service office or visit the [NRCS website](#).

# Report Highlights Successes of Protecting Bird Habitat on Private Lands

“The State of the Birds 2013 Report on Private Lands” shows how private land conservation incentives positively impact bird habitat.

One program highlighted in the report is the Sage-Grouse Initiative offered by NRCS and its partners.

“The Sage-Grouse Initiative has increased voluntary conservation measures for sage-grouse in Montana,” said Joyce Swartzendruber, NRCS state conservationist for Montana. “The program goes well beyond our state, extending to 11 western states with sage-grouse populations.”

The Sage-Grouse Initiative started in 2010 and targets lands where habitats are still intact and sage-grouse numbers are highest. In Montana, the funds help ranchers employ targeted conservation practices to improve sage-grouse habitat and rangelands.

NRCS in Montana has obligated more than \$13.6 million through its Environmental Quality Incentives Program for ranchers to develop and implement grazing plans for pasture management on 560,000 acres, including deferred grazing in sage-grouse sensitive areas. Montana ranchers have also marked 148 miles of fence to reduce bird-fence collisions. They are also removing juniper to reduce the competition for native plants used by sage-grouse and other wildlife and installing wildlife escape ramps in stockwater tanks. Montana NRCS has also enrolled 47,000 acres of critical sage-grouse habitat in conservation easements.

The report is a collaborative effort as part of the U.S. North American Bird Conservation Initiative, involving federal and state wildlife agencies and scientific and conservation organizations.

The full “State of the Birds 2013 Report on Private Lands” is available at [www.stateofthebirds.org](http://www.stateofthebirds.org). For more information about the Sage Grouse Initiative visit <http://www.sagegrouseinitiative.com/>.

## “Out on the Land” Episodes to Feature Montana Landowners

Three episodes of “Out of the Land,” a show on RFD TV, recently featured Montana landowners. The episodes can be viewed on the [“Out on the Land” website](#).

### Season 2, Episode 23

Dennis Mercer, rancher near Lavina, discusses his participation in the Sage-Grouse Initiative (SGI) with NRCS, facilitating practices, and grazing management to improve sage-grouse habitat.



Dennis Mercer

### Season 2, Episode 24

Marc Vogel, farmer near Ballantine, breaks with local traditional farming methods to improve soil health, discusses crop residue management, cover crops, and other practices on dryland and irrigated croplands.



Marcus Vogel



Bob Lehfeltd



Ben Lehfeltd

### Season 2, Episode 25

Bob Lehfeltd and his son, Ben, are sheep ranchers near Lavina and participate in the NRCS Sage-Grouse Initiative (SGI). They show how they have adapted fence for sage-grouse safety; developed water for their sheep, and changed their grazing management to benefit sage-grouse.

# High Stock Density Grazing, It Works Here, It Will Probably Work There, It Might Even Work Everywhere

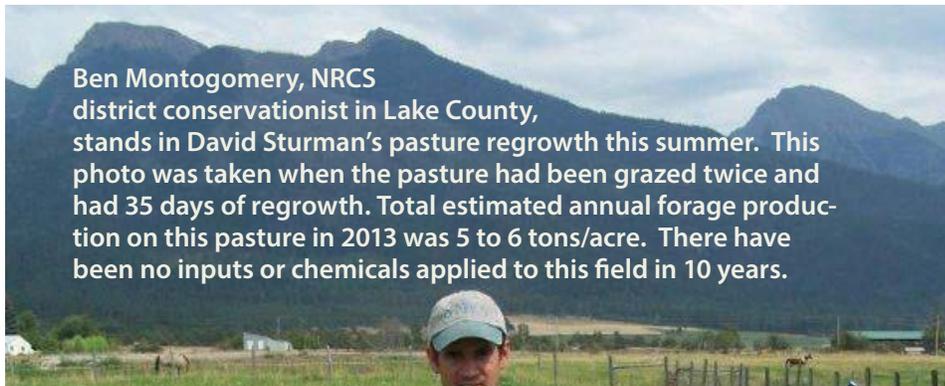
Ben Montgomery,  
District Conservationist, Ronan

**“Sure it works in Timbuktu, but it won’t work here, because....”**

This is a common phrase many of us in the conservation field hear when visiting with producers and other resource professionals about new and novel approaches. Often people get comfortable in their ways and don’t realize that there may be better methods to do things.

Such is the case with our pasture management within Lake County. However, over the past 18 months, our pasture team has worked hard to change that mindset and our efforts are paying off in a big way.

Take David Sturman, for example. Sturman operates a hair-sheep operation in Lake County. When he purchased the property a decade ago, the pastures were in poor condition, production was low, hay costs were high and making ends meet was a daily struggle. Four years ago, Sturman began to realize there must be a better way. He began experimenting with improved grazing strategies and for two years had some limited successes. Then, two years ago, with help from the NRCS and our pasture team, Sturman began implementing a Holistic High Stock Density (HSD) grazing system. Under the HSD system, Sturman rotates his sheep daily through small, temporary paddocks. Has he had good results? The smile on Sturman’s face says it all. Forage production has gone through the roof. Pastures that previously produced 1.5 – 2 tons of forage



Ben Montgomery, NRCS district conservationist in Lake County, stands in David Sturman’s pasture regrowth this summer. This photo was taken when the pasture had been grazed twice and had 35 days of regrowth. Total estimated annual forage production on this pasture in 2013 was 5 to 6 tons/acre. There have been no inputs or chemicals applied to this field in 10 years.



David Sturman



David Sturman’s horse pasture five years ago, before he started using a high stock density grazing system. “Before” pictures provide us with a baseline contrast.

per acre are now producing between 5 and 6 tons per acre (and upwards)! Species diversity is high, inputs costs are low, pollinators are buzzing, and sheep are happy. Happy sheep make Sturman happy as well. Would you believe that Sturman’s forage production tripled without a single ounce

of fertilizer? Would you believe that Sturman’s total financial expenditure to complete this transformation was approximately \$1,000 in temporary fencing materials? If you don’t believe it, let David tell you himself and the other producers in Lake County who have seen similar results.



A rainfall simulator was used to demonstrate runoff that would occur from no-till, conventional tillage, Russian wildrye-alfalfa hayland, crested wheatgrass pasture, and native range.

## Wibaux Hosts Three Soil Health Field Days

The Wibaux NRCS Field Office, along with the Wibaux Conservation District, hosted three soil health field days in Wibaux County.

The first field day was held at the David and Barb Maus Farm. NRCS employees used the rainfall simulator to demonstrate the different runoff that would occur from no-till, conventional tillage, Russian wildrye-alfalfa hayland, crested wheatgrass pasture, and native range. The group talked about the importance of hayland management, grazing management, sustainability, and reducing input costs.

Another tour took participants to the Houck Ranch to look at a rotational grazing system, focusing on grazing density and monitoring.

A third field day took a look at cover crops and an adjacent saline seep occurring in a chemical-fallow field.

### What Is It?

Robert Kilian, NRCS range management specialist in Miles City, provided this photo. Can you guess what this is? Find the answer on page 7.



## Check Out the New and Improved Web Soil Survey

The Web Soil Survey (WSS) site has been updated to version 3.0 and can be accessed at: <http://websoilsurvey.nrcs.usda.gov>. This website is available to the public and provides free soils information as well as soil maps, properties, and interpretations.

Some of the updates to the WSS version 3.0 include improved imagery and maps and increased ability to select an Area of Interest, as well as soils data available that can be downloaded directly from the Web Soil Survey site. The WSS website also has a wealth of available soils reports to download that can assist with management decisions on an ag operation. Some of these reports include: ecological site descriptions, farmland classifications, forage suitability groups, hydric soil ratings, in addition to many other soils reports.

So, the next time you have a free moment, hop on your computer and check out the new and improved Web Soil Survey site. You might be surprised about the information available at your fingertips.



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(WSS)  
The Web Soil Survey (WSS) provides soil data produced by the National Soil Survey. It is operated by the National Resources Conservation Service and provides access to the soil data information world. NRCS has soil maps available online for more than 95 states and territories.

I Want To...

- Start Web Soil Survey (WSS)
- Know the requirements for running Web Soil Survey — will Web Soil Survey work in my web browser?
- Know the Web Soil Survey hours of operation
- Find what areas of the U.S. have soil data
- Know how to hyperlink from other documents to Web Soil Survey

# Human Resources Report

## New Permanent Employees

- *Dezerae Lorash, Soil Conservationist, Lewistown*

## Promotions

- *Meredith Albers, Soil Scientist, Fergus Falls, Minnesota, to Soil Scientist, Great Falls*
- *Kailee Bickford, Soil Conservationist, Deer Lodge, to Soil Conservationist, Havre*
- *Kim Burr, District Conservationist, Cut Bank*
- *Scott Christiaens, Civil Engineer, Bozeman*
- *Kelli Coleman, Soil Conservation Technician, Conrad*
- *Shanna Huckins, District Conservationist, White Sulphur Springs, to District Conservationist, Joliet*
- *Brooke Johns, Soil Conservationist, Plentywood, to Soil Conservationist, Ekalaka*
- *Amy Kaiser, Soil Conservationist, Chinook*
- *Joel Laliberty, District Conservationist, Whitehall, to Area Resource Conservationist, Bozeman*
- *Allison Makoutz, Rangeland Management Specialist, Big Timber*
- *Ben Moore, Soil Scientist, Dillon*
- *Justin Morris, Rangeland Management Specialist, Dillon, to Rangeland Management Specialist, Missoula*
- *Danny Pratt, Soil Conservationist, Roundup*
- *Alix Wittmayer, Soil Conservationist, Wibaux, to Soil Conservationist, Columbus*

## Reassignments

- *Johnna Blankenship, District Conservationist, Santa Rosa, NM, to Circle*
- *Travis Caudle, Soil Conservationist, Lewistown to Hardin*
- *Bill Drummond, Assistant State Soil Scientist, MLRA Soil Survey Staff, to the State Resource Conservationist's Staff, Bozeman*
- *Allison Makoutz, Rangeland Management Specialist, from Circle to Big Timber*
- *Tyler Martindale, Agricultural Engineer, North Vernon, IN, to Civil Engineer, Bozeman*
- *Nancy Sweeney, Soil Conservationist, Deer Lodge, to District Conservationist, Whitehall*

## Losses

- *Lexie Hildebrand, Student Trainee Soil Conservationist, Townsend*



### "What Is It?"

The pick-up as the canvas, a little bit of eastern MT mud as the medium, and Mother Nature's rain drops the brush would make a cool paint job. Alas it won't last.

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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>.

## November 2013

- ❑ **Hard Work and Harmony: Effective Relationships in Family Business, Nov. 7, 2013, Helena**
- ❑ **Montana Farm Bureau Federation Annual Convention, Nov. 10-13, 2013, Billings**
- ❑ **Soil Health Workshop, Nov. 18, 2013, Missoula**
- ❑ **Soil Health Workshop, Nov. 19, 2013, Great Falls**
- ❑ **Soil Health Workshop, Nov. 19, 2013, Bozeman**
- ❑ **Montana Association of Conservation Districts Annual Conference, Nov. 19-21, 2013, Great Falls**
- ❑ **Soil Health Workshop, Billings, Nov. 20, 2013**
- ❑ **Soil Health Workshop, Nov. 20, 2013, Glasgow**
- ❑ **Soil Health Workshop, Nov. 21, 2013, Miles City**

## December 2013

- ❑ **Montana Grain Growers Convention, Dec. 3-5, 2013, Great Falls**
- ❑ **Montana Woolgrowers Association Annual Meeting, Dec. 6-7, 2013, Billings**
- ❑ **Montana Organic Association Annual Conference, Dec. 12-14, 2013, Kalispell**
- ❑ **Northern Pulse Growers Meeting, Dec. 17, 2013, Great Falls**

## January 2014

- ❑ **Montana Weed Control Association Annual Conference, Jan. 15-17, 2014, Great Falls**

## February 2014

- ❑ **Montana Agri-Trade Exposition, Feb. 14-16, 2014, Billings**

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