

Important Dates to Remember

May 2024

Visit your local NRCS office to start conservation planning!

2501 Program Webinar Join on May 22, 2024

Conservation Innovation Grants Apply by May 31, 2024

June 2024

406 Grazing Academy June 11-13, 2024

Montana Range Tour June 20, 2024

Virtual Peer Network Meeting June 25, 2024

> 2501 Program Webinar Join on June 26, 2024

July 2024

Regional Conservation Partnership Program Apply by July 2, 2024

> 2501 Program Apply by July 5, 2024

Federal Advisory Committee for Urban Agriculture and Innovative Production Apply by July 7, 2024

Montana State Technical Committee Meeting July 16, 2024

A Note from the State Conservationist

Greetings,

Consultation with Tribal Nations is critical to the success of the partnership between NRCS and tribal partners and producers. The Tribal Conservation Advisory Council is one way we strive to gain insight into the successes and needs related to conservation on tribal lands. I want to thank all of the representatives at the most recent advisory council meeting. There was a lot of meaningful discussion and I appreciate the dedication it takes for Tribal Nations to manage their lands and take time to meet with Federal agencies.

The Tribal Conservation Advisory Council (TCAC) mission is to increase Tribal Nation and tribal producer participation in federal programs, improve



Tom Watson, NRCS State Conservationist in Montana

agricultural practices and conservation activities on tribal lands, restore natural resources, while also respecting cultures and traditions. TCAC provides a forum for the eight federally recognized Tribes in Montana to provide direct consultation to NRCS and to the Farm Service Agency (FSA) at the state, regional and national levels to provide input on agency rules, policies and programs and their impacts on Tribal Nations.

In addition to the agencies listed above, the Intertribal Agriculture Council (IAC) has a mission to provide a unified effort to promote change in Indian agriculture for the benefit of Indian people.

The Montana TCAC is convened jointly by the IAC, NRCS and the FSA. The NRCS state tribal liaison provides coordination for the council in conjunction with IAC, FSA and Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) representatives. This coordination includes setting meeting dates, meeting locations, collaborating with tribal representatives to develop meeting agendas and facilitating of meetings. Additional participation from agency staff will depend on the needs identified by the topics proposed for the meeting agenda.

[Continued on page 2]



[Continued from page 1]

The first TCAC meeting of 2024 was held on May 14 in Billings. Tribal delegates were present from Northern Cheyenne Tribe, Fort Belknap Indian Community, Blackfeet Nation, Fort Peck Assiniboine and Sioux Tribes and the Chippewa Cree Tribe of Rocky Boy's. The meeting was also attended by several Intertribal Agriculture Council staff, NRCS tribal conservationists and state leadership from the Farm Service Agency and NRCS. A total of 30 people participated in the meeting. Meeting topics covered tribal success stories, action items from the October 2023 meeting with an update on what has been done to date on the topics, USDA barrier consultation topics relevant to Montana, NRCS update on the Inflation Reduction Act, Alternative Funding Arrangement, Environmental Quality Incentives Program and Conservation Stewardship Program funding and program barriers, a presentation on the Bridger Plant Materials Center, and Piikani Lodge snow fence project. Several Climate Smart Commodity Grants and other potential grants (i.e. Intertribal Buffalo Council) were also discussed to update the delegates on the projects and/or to gauge awareness across the state. NRCS also asked delegates to help identify different ways to be doing outreach in Indian Country and if these meetings were meeting the intended objective for nation-to-nation consultation.

The Farm Service Agency discussed County Committee Elections and tribal voter eligibility as well as changes coming to the Grasslands CRP cost share policy. IAC discussed program updates and the Farm Journal Climate Smart Commodities grant that they are providing outreach to native producers for.

For questions or more information, please contact Trisha Cracroft, Montana State Tribal Liaison, at trisha.cracroft@usda.gov or at 406-596-0500.

I look forward to the next Tribal conservation Advisory Council meeting!

On a different note, I encourage all producers that may be interested in working with NRCS to visit your local field office early. Montana's short summer is the perfect time for NRCS staff to conduct the field inventories and planning needed to develop a conservation plan for farmers, ranchers, and private forestland managers looking to improve their natural resources. Because the timeframe before snow is unpredictable and because the NRCS application ranking period for funding opportunities usually happens in the fall, visit your local office now.

The local NRCS staff can help to figure out current problems, assess the condition of the land, and determine options for improvement all based on individual operational goals. A conservation plan is a customized collaboration between the planner and the customer. A final plan may include land use maps, soils information, inventory data, recommended practices, and other tools and resources to help landowners make management changes or install other conservation practices.

Take care.

Tom Watson, NRCS State Conservationist in Montana

Blackfeet Natural Resource Conservation District: 25 Years of Conservation and Problem Solving

"When you start with nothing and there's so much out there, every challenge is an opportunity."

- Terry Tatsey, founding board member

The Blackfeet Natural Conservation District is celebrating their 25th anniversary this year in Browning, Montana. 25 years of conservation practices and concerns have been addressed and worked on to assist the Blackfeet community. Terry Tatsey, president of the Blackfeet Natural Resource Conservation District (BNRCD), tribal member, and producer living on the Blackfeet Indian Reservation, is a founding member of the conservation district and still sits on the board to this day. "In 1999, we actually recruited and got four board members, including myself, to serve as the first founding board members," Tatsey stated.

The creation of the BNRCD came when there was a need to have access and understand the opportunities the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the Natural Resources Conservation Services (NRCS) programs offered. There was a gap that needed to be filled so the underserved tribal members, farmers, and ranchers would have an equal opportunity and a better chance to apply for programs. Tatsey said, "There was a need to have access and understanding of all these USDA programs and services that were available to us, but we just were not getting educated and understanding what they were." Tatsey added, "We weren't very well represented from the county conservation districts... so they felt it was important to form our own Blackfeet resource conservation district."

In 1996, the charter was passed, and the formation of the interim board was created. Verna Billedeaux, current ex officio and Blackfeet Reservation Montana State University extension agent, was an original member of the steering committee. Billedeaux thought it was a perfect fit to participate and work with the board, since everyone involved was associated with agriculture and conservation. "We had to do research of how we wanted to form and that was put together by the tribal council," Billedeaux said. With the four original members, the BNRCD took on tasks and accomplishments in unknown territory, creating an all-new conservation district. Coming from diverse backgrounds, the board members brought in an array of perspectives. Ranging from farming to livestock, everyone had their own idea of what the conservation district



Current staff and board members (March 2024). Top (left to right): Coco Boggs, Terry Tatsey, Emerald Grant, Wayne L Smith, Danny Barcus, Jonathan St. Goddard. Bottom (left to right): Latrice Tatsey, Verna Billedeaux, Tierra Iron Shirt.

should look like. "I felt that being a tribal conservation district, we should be incorporating our ways and practices of tribal people and how we understood the natural world and using resources," Tatsey explained. The various perspectives, motivational outlooks, and knowledge all aligned and allowed the board to participate in successful strategic planning sessions to create their vision and mission.

With the strategic planning, they looked at the immediate needs and long-term challenges that they would face. The board needed to create relationships and connections to assist with their goals and getting started. "The immediate thing that we recognized as the Blackfeet Resource Conservation District board was that we didn't have any communication with the Glacier County Conservation District Board. We didn't have any communication with the Pondera Conservation District. So, we started building those relationships, started building those partnerships and what that did was [allow] those discussions with the other two boards." Tatsey said.

NRCS was there to assist with funding, types of projects, and resource concerns that the Blackfeet community wanted to address from the beginning. With conversations and collaboration still ongoing, the relationship between NRCS and BNRCD is still actively building and growing. Thedis Crowe, former NRCS district conservationist, was involved in the creation of the conservation district. Being an NRCS employee and growing up on the Blackfeet Reservation. Crowe was an instrumental voice and resource in the development on the BNRCD. Stacy Eneboe, former NRCS Supervisory District Conservationist for the Conrad Work Unit, was also around and involved during the fruition of BNRCD. Eneboe went on to explain, "We were gearing our workload and expectations to meet their goals and objectives for the Blackfeet producers."



Original board members (1997). Top (left to right): Bimbo Hirst, Chuck DeBoo, Verna Billedeaux, Thedis Crowe, Terry Tatsey, Gordon Monroe. Bottom (left to right): Ross Denny, Loretta Berthelson, Dave White, Jess St Goddard, Roy Doore

An immediate challenge that Tatsey noticed was bridging the gap between tribal and Western world perspectives of agriculture, understanding the meaning of conservation, and how it would fit into the Blackfeet Indian Reservation. Tatsey explained, "The old ways of conservation, you didn't look at the animal, you didn't look at the plant, you didn't look at that rock, you didn't look at that water as something separate. Those were your relatives. The Western world, those animals become possessions and that's the difference in the challenges, as a tribal conservation district member, that you got to understand and figure out how to bridge those and find some balance."

An ongoing task that the BNRCD board faces is recruiting new members. All board members are volunteers, giving their time and effort to improve the resource conservation district and community. Currently, there are six to seven active members. It can be overwhelming being a volunteer on the board and finding the balance between your job, personal life, and contributing as a board member. Tatsey said, "Sometimes when you're volunteering, it's more work than your other

obligations. It's your whole life and your full-time job. It's challenging, it's taxing, but if you believe in it, believing in what you're doing, you just keep plugging away."

Taking the challenge head on, Wayne Smith, vice-chairman of the BNRCD board, tribal member, and producer living on the Blackfeet Indian Reservation, sat on the board for a few years before recently becoming the vicechairman. Smith commented, "I'm a farmer and rancher and I saw that we've been fighting to improve things here. That was the whole idea behind it is to put the Blackfeet producers and people in charge of the future and that includes agriculture to culture, water, and it encompasses pretty much everything we deal with on a daily basis." Smith went on to say, "We've been really concentrating on climate change and then our water resources and trying to get that up and into the limelight, you know, address our needs now and then in the future."

A major accomplishment that the BNRCD completed was a range inventory on the reservation. The last

[Continued on page 5]

time an inventory was completed was in the 1960s. This outdated data led to inaccurate rangeland lease fees and caused negative effects to the natural resources. "Some were paying more for a resource that wasn't even there. So, you know, we can hurt our grassland resource by not managing what's there," Billedeaux said. "NRCS has helped over the years with different stages of range inventory for them," Eneboe commented. BNRCD was able to work with NRCS and do long term planning to coordinate resources and complete the first range inventory in years.

A huge accomplishment that the BNRCD has been working on is the Blackfeet Agriculture Resource Management Plan (ARMP). Billedeaux said, "It is a plan that says here's all of our resources, here's from departments to actual resources to everything. Agriculture is what we have. What can we do to improve upon this and do more with agriculture." This plan is years in the making and will be a massive asset to the Blackfeet Nation. "Even though it's a written and approved document, we like to look at it as a living, breathing document," said Smith who went on to say, "I saw what it could do and what the overall objective of it is. And, you know, like I say, to put more control for the producers here, to be able to control our future and our destiny." Not only is the ARMP a plan to help natural resources within the reservation, but it also inspired new members for the BNRCD board. Smith attended ARMP meetings before he found out about the BNRCD board and joined.

Every member, original and new, has their own vision of priorities and goals for the BNRCD for the next 25 years. Billedeaux hopes for the board to grow, have more board members, and keep inspiring conservation in agriculture. "I would like to see more people come to the table and be a bigger part of it. We get a lot of folks that come in and are part of the board that really know what it's about and are a part of it and have great ideas... I would really like to see this continue, so that these up-and-coming agriculturists and conservationists can be a part of the change," Billedeaux stated. Tatsey commented he would like to see more office locations in the isolated areas of the Blackfeet reservation, a comprehensive plan, and practices in place, and to see more native plants back in the area. Tatsey said, "If we could get good range management, soil management, people management going, that would be a good 25-year project."

The Blackfeet Natural Resource Conservation District and its board members have made great strides in 25 years, we cannot wait to see what happens in the next 25.

Spring Tribal College Fair Attendance

NRCS staff attended the seven Montana Tribal College Fairs hosted by the Montana's Tribal College Team and the Montana Post Secondary Education Opportunities Council (MPSEOC) in April where nearly 900 people attended. For the last 15 years, these fairs have been open to anyone interested in pursuing a post-secondary education with an emphasis on college transfer students, high school students and parents. Over 75 vendors were present with a healthy diversity of organizations ranging from colleges, university, technical schools, military branches, private businesses, non-governmental organizations, as well as local tribal opportunities. NRCS Tribal Conservationist, Civil Rights Committee members, and field office staff worked hard to promote the great work NRCS does in Indian County as well as recruit interest for the scholarships available to tribal members through the USDA 1994 Tribal Scholars and Pathways programs.

Top photo: Evan VanOrder, Tribal Conservationist, at the Little Big Horn College fair with a representative of the USDA Farm Service Agency.

Bottom photo: Michael Kinsey, Tribal Conservationist, talks with a student at the Aaniiih Nakoda College fair.





America's Conservation Ag Movement Presents: 2024 Virtual Peer Networks

Join America's Conservation Ag
Movement in a live, farmer-led
networking event where you'll hear
the latest from experts and innovators
moving the needle in conservation ag.
Glean insights and meet other likeminded farmers and ranchers in your
state at these interactive virtual events.

This spring, America's Conservation Ag Movement's Virtual Peer Network series kicks off by shining a light on regenerative agriculture in the sovereign nation, Iowa Tribe of Kansas and Nebraska and Oklahoma Association of Conservation Districts' and Oklahoma Black Historical Research Project's C.A.R.E. program. "Together with our partners, we are working towards a more inclusive agricultural landscape, ensuring that ALL farmers and ranchers have equal opportunities to benefit from conservation programs." – Sarah Blaney, Executive Director of the Oklahoma Association of Conservation Districts

The C.A.R.E. program seeks to not only improve soil health and water quality across agricultural landscapes, but also strengthen conservation organizations to better serve minority and veteran producers.

The Montana event is scheduled for June 25, 2024, at 10:00 a.m. MST. Register at https://americasconservationagmovement.com/acam-virtual-peer-networks/.

Speakers include:

- Timothy Rhodd, <u>Iowa Tribe of</u> Kansas and Nebraska
- Missty Slater, <u>Iowa Tribe of Kansas</u> and <u>Nebraska</u>
- Sarah Blaney, <u>Oklahoma Association</u> of Conservation Districts
- Willard Tillman, Oklahoma Black Historical Research Project, Inc.
- Jimmy Emmons, America's Conservation Ag Movement and Oklahoma rancher
- Andrew Lauver, America's Conservation Ag Movement and fifth generation Iowa farmer
- NRCS technical experts and ACAM private partners

Organized by Trust in Food and Farm Journal Foundation with technical and financial support from NRCS, America's Conservation Ag Movement's public-private partnership empowers collaborators to accelerate adoption of regenerative practices, products and technologies. Learn more at https://americasconservationagmovement.com/.



USDA Seeks Members for Federal Advisory Committee for Urban Agriculture and Innovative Production

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) is seeking nominations for four positions on the Federal Advisory Committee for Urban Agriculture and Innovative Production. USDA will accept nominations from May 7, 2024, to July 7, 2024. The 12-member Committee, which first convened in March 2022, is part of USDA's efforts to increase support for urban agriculture and innovative production. Members of the committee provide input on policy development and help identify barriers to urban agriculture as USDA works to promote urban farming and the economic opportunities it provides in cities across the country.

Members of the committee include representative from urban and innovative agricultural production, higher education or extension programs, non-profits, business and economic development, supply chain, and financing. Last year, Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack appointed four new members to the Committee to replace members whose terms expired. The committee's last public meeting was held in April 2024.

Nominations

USDA is seeking nominations for individuals representing a broad spectrum of expertise. Four positions are open for nominations including:

 One individual who is an agricultural producer or farmer using innovative technology.



- One individual representing an institution of higher education or extension program.
- One individual with supply chain experience, which may include a food aggregator, wholesale food distributor, food hub, or an individual who has direct-to-consumer market experience.
- One individual representing related experience in urban, indoor and other emerging agriculture production practices.

Individuals who wish to be considered for membership must submit a nomination package including the following:

- A completed background disclosure form (Form AD-755) signed by the nominee.
- A brief summary explaining the nominee's interest in one or more open vacancies including any unique qualifications that address the membership composition and criteria described above.
- A resume providing the nominee's background, experience, and educational qualifications.

- Recent publications by the nominee relative to extending support for urban agriculture or innovative production (optional).
- Letter(s) of endorsement (optional).

Submit nomination packages to UrbanAgricultureFederalAdvisory Committee@usda.gov or postmark by July 7, 2024. If sending by mail, packages should be addressed to USDA NRCS, Attn: Brian Guse, 1400 Independence Avenue SW, Room 4083, Washington, DC 20250. Any interested person or organization may nominate qualified individuals for membership, including self-nominations. For special accommodations, contact Markus Holliday at UrbanAgricultureFederalAdvisory Committee@usda.gov.

Learn More

Learn more about the Federal Advisory Committee for Urban Agriculture and Innovative Production and what they do at <u>usda.gov/partnerships/federal-advisory-committee-urban-ag</u>.

USDA Announces \$22 Million to Support Underserved and Veteran Farmers and Ranchers through the 2501 Program

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) has made approximately \$22.3 million available to community-based and nonprofit organizations, institutions of higher education, and Tribal entities that help underserved and veteran farmers and ranchers own and operate successful farms. Funding is made through USDA's 2501 Program. This program is administered by USDA's Office of Partnerships and Public Engagement (OPPE).

"2501 Program partners are based in local communities and rural areas where they serve a critical role in maximizing USDA's outreach efforts to underserved communities," said OPPE Director Lisa Ramírez. "They provide training and technical assistance to help these agricultural producers succeed and also connect them to USDA programs and services."

For more than 30 years, and in partnership with organizations

nationwide, the 2501 Program has helped reach underserved farmers and ranchers. The 2014 Farm Bill expanded the program to include assistance to veteran farmers and ranchers. The 2018 Farm Bill increased mandatory funding for the program through fiscal year 2024. With 2501 funding, organizations conduct education, training, farming demonstrations, and conferences on farming and agribusiness.

Since 2010, the 2501 Program has continued to increase access to USDA's programs and services and awarded 615 grants totaling more than \$194 million. For example, FY 2023 grantee Farm to Table Guam is helping farmers in Guam with business training, financial planning, and technical assistance in crop production and distribution. Quivira Coalition is reaching rural producers in New Mexico with radio spots in English, Spanish, and Diné Bizaad (Navajo) about arid land stewardship practices and

conservation.

Eligible applicants include not-forprofit organizations, community-based organizations, and a range of higher education institutions.

Applications must be submitted through grants.gov and received by Friday, July 5, 2024. Visit the 2501 Program page for more information on the 2501 funding opportunity.

Learn more through upcoming webinars:

Session 1: May 22, 2024, at 2 p.m. EDT Session 2: June 26, 2024, at 2 p.m. EDT

For more information, contact:

Benjamin Chan Program Director USDA Office of Partnerships and Public Engagement

Phone: 202-720-6350

Email: <u>2501Grants@usda.gov</u>



Conservation Pathways • Spring 2024 • Page 8

USDA Makes \$1.5 Billion Available to Help Farmers Advance Conservation and Climate-Smart Agriculture

The USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) has announced the availability of an historic \$1.5 billion in fiscal year 2024 to invest in partner-driven conservation and climate solutions through the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP). The NRCS is accepting project proposals now through July 2, 2024.

RCPP proposals should focus on climate-smart agriculture, urban agriculture, and conservation projects that will help farmers, ranchers, and forest landowners adopt and expand conservation strategies to enhance natural resources while tackling the climate crisis. These projects in turn can save farmers money, create new revenue streams, and increase productivity.

This investment is made available through the Farm Bill and the Inflation Reduction Act, the largest climate investment in history, which has enabled NRCS to boost funding for RCPP.

"There is an unprecedented demand for the Regional Conservation Partnership Program funding from partners dedicated to supporting our private land managers and the rural communities that depend on agriculture," said Tom Watson, NRCS State Conservationist for Montana. "With an increased investment, we're able to boost our impact across the landscape, especially when considering the collective resources and collaboration leveraged through these public-private partnerships."

Two separate funding opportunities are available: RCPP Classic and RCPP Alternative Funding Arrangements (AFA). RCPP Classic projects are implemented using NRCS contracts and easements with producers, landowners and communities in collaboration with project partners. Through RCPP AFA, the lead partner works directly with agricultural producers to support the development of innovative conservation approaches that would not otherwise be available under RCPP Classic. NRCS will set aside \$100 million for Tribal-led projects to be used between both funding opportunities.

Project proposals for RCPP are being accepted through the <u>RCPP portal</u>. Details on the RCPP Classic and RCPP AFA funding opportunities are available on <u>Grants.gov.</u>

NRCS will be hosting webinars to provide additional information. Learn how to participate at the RCPP website under How to Apply.

More about RCPP

RCPP is a partner-driven approach to conservation that funds solutions to natural resource challenges on agricultural land. By leveraging collective resources and collaborating on common goals, RCPP demonstrates the power of public-private partnerships in delivering results for agriculture and conservation.





If you or anyone you know would like to be added to the mailing list for the Montana NRCS' Conservation Pathways Newsletter, please send your email address to mt-nrcs-publicinfo@usda.gov, Subject: Conservation Pathways.

If you require a hard copy of the newsletter, send your mailing address to the email address above or:

USDA-NRCS Public Affairs Attn: Conservation Pathways 10 E Babcock St, Rm 443 Bozeman, MT 59715

USDA-NRCS 10 E. Babcock St., Rm 443 Bozeman, MT, 59715 www.mt.nrcs.usda.gov 406-587-6811

USDA is an equal opportunity provider, employer, and lender

Tribal Field Office Directory

Browning Field Office

Phone: (406) 338-3153

Serves: Blackfeet Reservation Blackfeet Tribal Headquarters 640 All Chief's Rd. Browning, MT 59417

Tribal Conservationist - Latrice Tatsey

Email: latrice.tatsey@usda.gov Phone: (406) 338-3153 ext. 100

Crow Agency Field Office

Serves: Crow Reservation Hardin Service Center 205 13th West Street Hardin, MT 59034-0205 Phone: (406) 629-3228

Tribal Conservationist-Evan Van Order

Email: evan.vanorder@usda.gov

Phone: (406) 629-3228 Cell: (406) 551-3952

Fort Belknap Field Office

Serves: Fort Belknap Reservation Currently serviced by the Chinook Service Center 228 Ohio St. P.O. Box 189 Chinook, MT 59523-0189

Tribal Conservationist - Michael Kinsey

Email: michael.kinsey@usda.gov Phone: (406) 357-2320 ext 117

Cell: (406) 408-0417

Lame Deer Field Office

Serves: Northern Cheyenne Reservation

Phone: (406) 477-6494 19 W. Chief's St. P.O. Box 330

Lame Deer, MT 59043-0330

Tribal Conservationist - Kathy Knobloch

Email: kathy.knobloch@usda.gov

Phone: (406) 740-0897

Pablo Field Office

Serves: Flathead Reservation Phone: (406) 675-2700 **Tribal Land Department** 42487 Complex Boulevard

P.O. Box 871

Pablo, MT 59855-9700

Tribal Conservationist - Austin Allen

Email: austin.allen@usda.gov Phone: (406) 768-3964

Poplar Field Office

Serves: Fort Peck Reservation Phone: (406) 768-3964 500 Medicine Bear Road Box 1027

Poplar, MT 59255-1027

Tribal Conservationist - Paul Finnicum

Phone: (406) 768-3964

Email: paul.finnicum@usda.gov

Rocky Boy Field Office

Serves: Chippewa Cree Reservation Currently serviced by the

Havre Service Center 206 25th Ave. W., Ste. 1 Havre, MT 59501-6008

Tribal Conservationist - Lucas Head

Email: lucas.head@usda.gov Phone: (406) 265-6792 ext. 3

Cell: (406) 879-3348