



Natural Resources Conservation Service

Conservation Pathways

Winter 2022

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Important Dates to Remember

March 2022

Conservation Incentive Contracts
Apply by
March 4, 2022

Northern Great Plains Grassland
Conservation Project
Apply by March 11, 2022

WaterSMART Cooperative Watershed
Management Projects
Apply by
March 31, 2022

April 2022

Partnerships for Climate-Smart Technologies
Apply for large-project funding by
April 8, 2022

Regional Partnership Partnership Program
Submit project proposals by
April 13, 2022

WaterSMART Drought Contingency Projects
Apply by
April 14, 2022

May 2022

Partnerships for Climate-Smart Technologies
Apply for small-project funding by
May 27, 2022

A Note from the State Conservationist

Greetings Tribal producers and partners,

In the last newsletter, I outlined some of the successes we've had working together. In this issue, I'd like to present some opportunities for us to collaborate on projects big and small that will improve our natural resources, make agricultural operations more sustainable, and support our communities. Whether the opportunity is open to Tribal governments or agricultural producers, begin by contacting your local NRCS office for more information. You can also stay up to date with current opportunities by checking out our news releases by visiting the newsroom at www.mt.nrcs.usda.gov.

- **Watershed Assistance:** NRCS has several programs that may help Tribes address watershed concerns. These range from watershed and flood prevention operations, dam rehabilitation or augmentation, and flood and erosion control measures after natural disasters. Each program requires the Tribal government, as sponsor, to partner with NRCS. In some cases, an approved watershed plan must be in place prior to completing solutions. NRCS may have funding to help develop watershed plans.
- **The Partnerships for Climate-Smart Commodities** is a brand new opportunity that will fund pilot projects that create market opportunities for agricultural and forestry products that use climate-smart practices and include methods to measure and verify greenhouse gas benefits. This new opportunity is open to entities like Tribal, state, and local governments, businesses, colleges and universities, and other organizations. Submit proposals to grants.gov by **April 8, 2022**, or **May 27, 2022**, depending on the amount of funding requested. Get information at usda.gov/climate-smart-commodities.



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A Note from the State Conservationist

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- Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP): Tribal governments should submit project proposals through [grants.gov](#) by **April 13, 2022**. RCPP projects are driven by the partners proposing the project. They are collaborative and support farmers, ranchers, and forest landowners in addressing natural resource challenges on their lands in a way that has a positive impact on a larger scale.
- One example of an RCPP project is the Northern Great Plains Grassland Conservation project. Together, Pheasants Forever, NRCS, and other partners are focused on restoring marginal cropland and unproductive monoculture pastures to support high quality forage for livestock and wildlife in southeastern Montana, including the Northern Cheyenne and Crow reservations. This opportunity is open to agricultural producers. Contact your local NRCS office before **March 11, 2022**, for the current round of funding.
- Another opportunity for agricultural producers is the Conservation Incentive Contract. This opportunity is targeted to support Tribal producers in using practices that improve soil health and store carbon in the soil. Practices include conservation crop rotation, cover crops, prescribed grazing, and other management practices as well as monitoring activities. Interested agricultural producers should contact the local NRCS office before **March 4, 2022**, for the current round of funding.

While these programs currently have application funding cycles with deadlines, NRCS accepts program applications year-round for all our programs. If you have a concern about the soil, water, air, energy, plant, or animal resources of your agricultural operation, contact your local NRCS office. We can provide technical information to help identify the issue, your goals, and some potential solutions. Your local Tribal conservationist or planner can also help you make the decision that works best for your farm, ranch, or small-scale community ag operation. NRCS may also have financial assistance available to help implement solutions.

NRCS is a grass-roots agency. We want to know about the concerns you have about natural resources. Your input helps us to prioritize Farm Bill program funding. We call this Montana Focused Conservation.

NRCS is here to help people help the land. It all starts with your local NRCS field office. Get to know our Tribal conservationists and planners. We introduced them in the [Fall 2021 Conservation Pathways](#).

Take care,
Tom Watson

NRCS State Conservationist in Montana

WaterSMART Funding Opportunities

The Bureau of Reclamation currently has two WaterSMART opportunities available.

Drought Contingency Projects

The first supports irrigation districts in developing drought contingency plans. Financial assistance is available for planning that will increase water reliability and improve water management through the use of expanded technologies and improved modeling capabilities. Applicants may request up to \$200,000 for plans to be completed within two years. Generally, a 50 percent minimum recipient cost-share is required.

The funding opportunity is available on [grants.gov](#) by searching for opportunity number R22AS00178. Applications are due by **April 14, 2022**, at 4 pm MDT.

The Bureau of Reclamation will host a Microsoft Teams webinar on Thursday, **February 24, 2022**, at 2 pm MST to discuss eligible applicants, program requirements, and the evaluation criteria for the Drought Contingency Planning Grants funding opportunity. A recording is available at the same link after the webinar.

Find out more about the Drought Response Program by visiting www.usbr.gov/drought.

Cooperative Watershed Management Projects

Financial assistance is available to develop a watershed group, complete watershed management planning activities, and design watershed management activities. Applicants may request up to \$200,000 for projects to be completed within two years. A non-federal cost-share is not required for this funding opportunity.

The funding opportunity is available on [grants.gov](#) by searching for opportunity number R22AS00163. Applications are due on **March 31, 2022**, at 4 pm MDT. A recording of an informational webinar is available.

Find out more about the Cooperative Watershed Management Program by visiting our website at www.usbr.gov/watersmart/cwmp.

People to Know at NRCS

Faith Hill

USDA Beginning Farmer Rancher state coordinator in Montana



Faith Hill

Hello, my name is Faith Hill and I am the USDA Beginning Farmer Rancher state coordinator in Montana.

I work with a team representing USDA's Farm Service Agency (FSA), Risk Management Agency (RMA), Rural Development (RD), and Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). We offer technical assistance and help guide new farmers in navigating the many resources USDA has to offer by working with them

one-on-one. Our team also works with organizations that serve beginning farmers and ranchers. By collaborating with stakeholders and service providers, we increase awareness and understanding of USDA programs and resources and create a network of support for beginning farmers.

While many USDA programs support all farmers, regardless of how long they have been farming, we also offer special provisions just for beginning farmers and ranchers. Some USDA programs have targeted funding, while others have reduced or waived fees for beginning farmers. Programs that are competitive may award additional points to beginning farmers when they are considered for funding. USDA considers anyone who has operated a farm or ranch for less than ten years to be a beginning farmer or rancher.

For beginning farmers who are just starting out and don't have an operation of their own, we have information and resources on business planning, getting

started with USDA, and helping them connect to local workshops offered through different organizations.

I am a beginning farmer myself. My husband and I own a handful of commercial cattle and are trying to find our place in agriculture. Being born and raised in Montana, I have a love for the agricultural lifestyle and want to see others succeed in living it out. I have been an engineer with NRCS for four years and jumped at the opportunity to add beginning farmer coordinator to my duties.

Whether you are ranching on a big operation or growing a garden for local food sale, USDA can help you.

Beginning farmers can explore the resources USDA has to offer by visiting newfarmers.usda.gov, farmers.gov, or by contacting your local office.

If you are a new producer and you'd like some help getting started with USDA programs, please feel free to reach out to me. I can be contacted at (406) 7018-3016 or faith.hill@usda.gov.

Katie Pacholski

NRCS Outreach Coordinator

Hello! My name is Katie Pacholski, and I am a Natural Resource Specialist working out of Dillon, Montana. I am originally from the Midwest but have spent the last nearly 10 years learning about and participating in western conservation through field jobs and range-related research with the Bureau of Land Management and Department of Environmental Quality in Wyoming and Montana. I also graduated in May of 2021 with master's degrees in public affairs and environmental science. In my free time, I enjoy anything outdoors. Some of my favorite activities include hiking, camping, kayaking and taking road trips. All that being said, I am

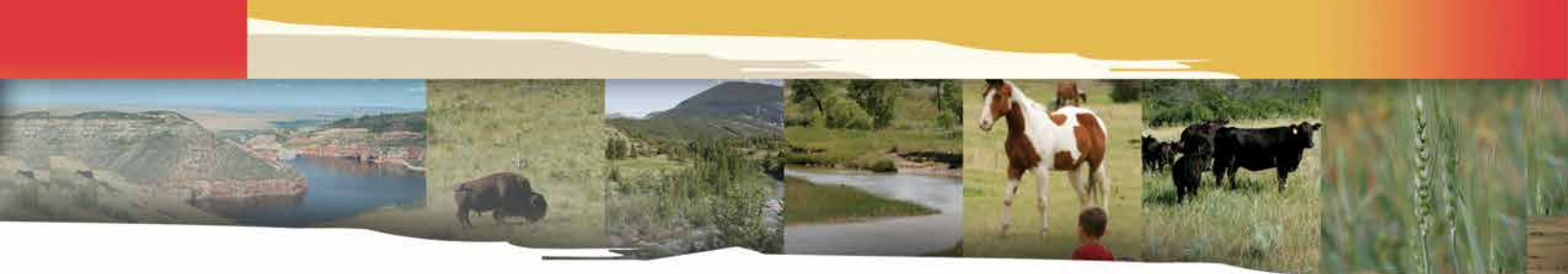
excited to be back in a part of the world that has endless opportunities for these activities and beginning my career with the NRCS!

I was hired by the agency in this position in November of 2021. My position is new in the agency, so there are a lot of opportunities to explore how I can help our offices fulfill their duties and meet additional needs for the office and community. Being so new, it is a learning experience every day about what the NRCS has to offer to help people help the land. One aspect of my role is to help our Tribal conservationists communicate the opportunities available to Tribal producers through the NRCS and help continue building relationships between

the NRCS and Tribes here in Montana. I am excited to continue to learn about opportunities for collaboration between NRCS and our Tribal producers and potentially serve as a point of contact for the NRCS moving forward.



Katie Pacholski



Partnerships with Tribal Conservation Districts

What are Tribal Conservation Districts and How Are They Formed?

One of the important ways conservation is implemented on Tribal lands is through Tribal conservation districts. Tribal conservation districts act as a Tribal entity focused entirely on the needs of the Tribal community for the use, protection, and restoration of their natural resources. These districts are established by the Tribal Council through development and signing of a resolution that grants the district the ability to identify, lead and support efforts to address the natural resource needs of the Tribal community. They are governed by a board of directors with diverse knowledge and experience, typically 5 to 7 members, that coordinate efforts to establish and address local resource needs and projects. Each board member operates under established by-laws that dictate their individual duties and responsibilities, and those of the district as a whole.

What Do Tribal Conservation Districts Do?

Tribal conservation districts serve a number of roles for the Tribal community. They provide crucial support for Tribal efforts to protect, conserve and restore the environment on Tribal lands. They act as a leading voice for the Tribal community in prioritizing and addressing local natural resource concerns. These efforts also help to develop and strengthen government-to-government relationships through partnerships on conservation projects with entities such as the USDA and NRCS. Tribal conservation districts provide Tribal members access to federal conservation programs with agencies such as the NRCS that can help the Tribal community reach their conservation goals. Not only do Tribal conservation districts act as a liaison to these programs, but they also provide technical, financial, and educational assistance to address the community's resource concerns. All of these roles serve to benefit the Tribal community so that the land can continue to be utilized and enjoyed for both production and recreation for generations to come.

Why are Tribal Conservation Districts Important?

Tribal conservation districts are an important part of protecting and improving the landscape on Tribal lands. Tribal conservation districts are relatively new to Montana, but nationally they have been around and doing work on Tribal lands throughout the U.S. for over 50 years. They work in partnership with the USDA and NRCS to carry out programs that conserve soil and water, protect streams and rivers, and improve wildlife habitat on Tribal lands. Currently, there are three active Tribal conservation districts in Montana: The Blackfeet Conservation District, the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes Conservation District, and the Fort Belknap Indian Community Conservation District. All of these entities work in partnership with NRCS Montana to continually develop and implement conservation strategies on Montana's Tribal lands.

Tribal conservation districts act as a Tribal entity focused entirely on the needs of the Tribal community for the use, protection, and restoration of their natural resources.

To learn more about Tribal conservation districts here in Montana and nationally, and the work that they are doing with the NRCS, please visit the following websites:

Indian Nations Conservation Alliance
<https://inca-tcd.org/>

NRCS Tribal Assistance
<https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/mt/about/outreach/tribal/>



Planning Begins for Aspen Regeneration Project

In the past several decades there have been continued reports of widespread “aspen decline” throughout the western United States. Many foresters are of different opinions as to the exact cause of this reduction in aspen stands. Some stands are not recovering from historical disturbances, such as fire, the same way they have in the past. Others point to climate change as a contributing factor, along with many other factors such as pine beetle outbreaks and drought. Western Montana and the Flathead Indian Reservation are also seeing a similar pattern as historic aspen stands have declined in the last century.

Through Montana Focused Conservation, the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) is partnering with the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes (CSKT), the Lake County Conservation District, and the Intermountain West Joint Venture to restore aspen stands across the Flathead Indian Reservation. Aspen is a culturally and ecologically important species. Historically, aspen was used by many tribes as food, medicine, and wood, giving the species significant cultural value. Aspen stands are also important to a variety of wildlife and plant species and typically contain more diversity and abundance than their associated, adjacent forest types. Interestingly, aspen can also be incredibly long-lived. Researchers have documented one individual in Utah that is at least 10,000 years old!

In the last century, aspen stands within the Flathead Indian Reservation have experienced declines similar to other areas. These declines could be due to fire suppression, over-grazing (by both wild and domestic grazers), drought, and climate change. These factors all interact allowing conifers to encroach,



Example of conifer encroachment at an aspen stand on the Flathead Indian Reservation.

and in some cases take over aspen stands.

CSKT foresters and biologists have identified several aspen stands within the reservation that are good candidates for restoration and regeneration efforts. In 2021, the CSKT Forestry Department applied for the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) through a Targeted Implementation Plan, to begin the regeneration process. Developing conservation plans that use multiple conservation practices will accelerate these efforts. Conifer removal through pre-commercial thinning and prescribed controlled burns will reduce conifer encroachment and competition. This should allow existing aspens to regenerate. In some cases, planting additional seedlings may be needed to

enhance the natural regeneration process. Finally, fencing these areas to reduce browsing pressure will also contribute to these efforts. These restoration efforts will be ongoing for several years as plans are put into place and conservation practices applied throughout the reservation. Over the next several years, we will partner with the CSKT to promote healthy aspen stands on at least 700 acres across 16 locations within the reservation. We are honored to be a part of this important work that will conserve both cultural and natural resources for future generations.

Fort Peck Reservation Conservation Update

*By Paul Finnicum, Tribal Conservationist
Poplar Field Office*

The Fort Peck Reservation is in northeastern Montana within Roosevelt, Valley, Sheridan, and Daniels counties. The southern boundary of the Fort Peck Reservation is the Missouri River. The reservation is comprised of seven sub-watersheds including the Porcupine, Lower Milk, Prairie Elk-Wolf, West Fork Poplar, Big Muddy, Poplar, and the Charlie-Little Muddy.

The Fort Peck Assiniboine and Sioux Tribes manage 371,062 acres of Tribal and allotted native rangelands broken into 93 range units varying in size from 518 acres to 34,272 acres. There are 90 permittees utilizing 70,763 AUMs with over 12,000 head of cattle, horses, and bison. The 93 range units are delineated by 1,700 miles of fence.

In 2014, The Tribes dedicated \$300,000 to start a fencing project knowing that to support sound management you had to have sound infrastructure. The project was a success, so in the fall of 2014, the Tribes requested Environmental Quality Incentives Program funding to continue with the project. Since the project's inception, the Tribes have employed 160 Tribal members, installed 494 miles of fence on approximately 100,000 acres with prescribed grazing plans, while securing nearly \$9,000,000 through EQIP since 2015. The Tribes have also dedicated \$3.00/Tribal AUM for other range unit improvements which generates an additional \$130,000 per year in conservation funds. The Tribal Natural Resources Department has also established monitoring sites with exclusions and photo plots on all the range units representing 371,062 acres.

This year, with assistance of the Fort Peck Tribes Natural Resources Department, NRCS has developed a Targeted Implementation Plan (TIP) in hopes of securing funding to continue the project. The focus area of this TIP will be reservation-wide, continuing the prioritization process established in 2015 that weighs the severity of the degradation of each range unit and its ability to support increased management. This prioritization is conducted by Tribal Natural

Resources Department staff each year. Our goal for the TIP is to secure funding to install 225 miles of wildlife friendly fence on 60,000 acres on 15 separate range units all with prescribed grazing plans, monitoring sites, and biological noxious weed control included.



Tribal members build wildlife-friendly fencing in support of prescribed grazing systems that improve rangeland resources across the Fort Peck Reservation in the summer of 2015.



Paul Finnicum (left), NRCS Tribal Conservationist and Robert Magnum, Director of the Fort Peck Tribe Fish & Wildlife Department, look at fencing supporting grazing management on the Fort Peck Tribes' bison ranch.

Snow Survey

Most of the annual streamflow in the western United States originates as snowfall that has accumulated in the mountains during the winter and early spring. As snowpack accumulates each year, NRCS hydrologists measure the snow and estimate the runoff that will occur when it melts. Individuals, organizations, and state and federal agencies use the information provided for decisions relating to agricultural production, recreation, fish and wildlife management, municipal and industrial water supply, urban development, flood control, recreation, power generation, and water quality management.

In 1935, the Natural Resources Conservation Service established a formal, cooperative Snow Survey and Water

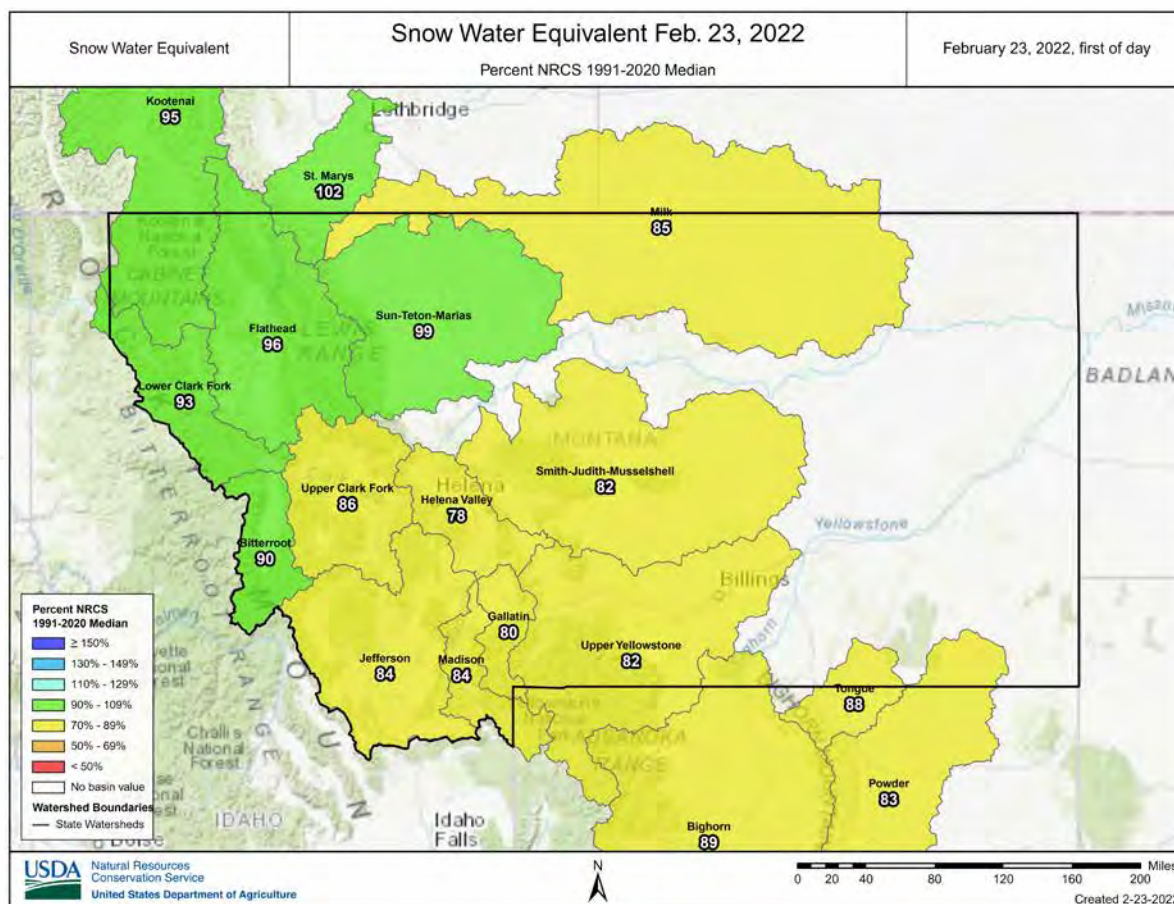
Supply Forecasting (SSWSF) Program to conduct snow surveys and develop accurate and reliable water supply forecasts for the western U.S.

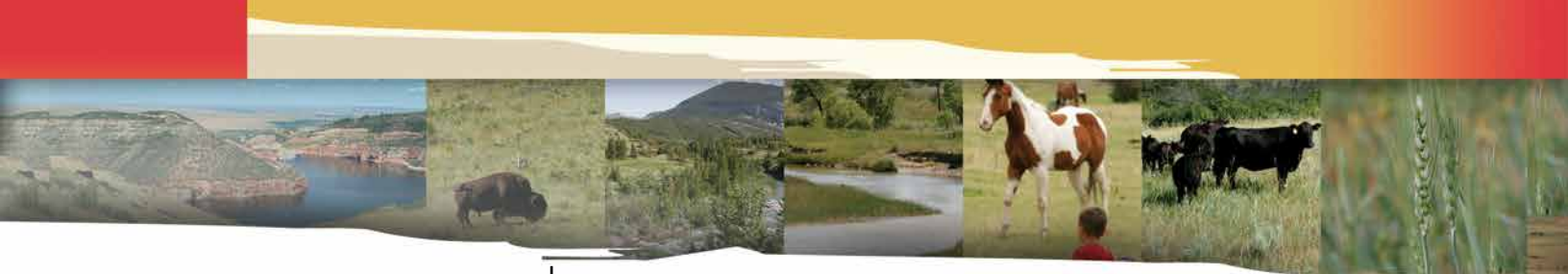
In the early days of the snow survey program, snow surveyors on skis or snowshoes manually measured snowpack along a series of remote, high-elevation snow courses. The invention of snowmobiles made travel to snow courses less challenging. Some years later, aerial markers were introduced, allowing for snow measurement using airplane flyovers. The program currently measures more than 1,300 snow courses and aerial markers.

In 1977, the automated Snow Telemetry (SNOTEL) system was introduced. SNOTEL data collection sites are used to monitor snowpack, precipitation, temperature, and other climatic conditions. Since its inception, the network

has grown to include over 900 automated SNOTEL sites across the West. The configuration at each site is tailored to the physical conditions, the climate, and the specific requirements of the data users. The data collected at SNOTEL sites are generally reported multiple times per day, with some sensors reporting hourly.

Get Montana snow survey and water supply forecasting data at www.mt.nrcs.usda.gov under Snow Survey. Here, you'll find automated maps showing snow water equivalent data in basins across Montana like this one. You can use the interactive map under Data Access to get tailored information or to get information for a specific SNOTEL site. Monthly Water Supply Outlook Reports for Montana are also posted under Water Supply. Watch for these reports in the first 5 business days of each month from January through June.





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
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Bozeman, MT 59715

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Tribal Field Office Directory

Browning Field Office

Serves: Blackfeet Reservation
Blackfeet Tribal Headquarters
640 All Chief's Rd.
Browning, MT 59417
Phone: (406) 338-3153

Tribal Conservationist - Cassie Powell
Email: cassie.powell2@usda.gov
Phone: (406) 338-3153 ext. 100
Cell: (406) 224-5112

Soil Conservationist -
Dezerae Lorash-Knoll
Email: dezerae.lorashknoll@usda.gov
Phone: (406) 338-3153 ext. 103

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: 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

Supervisory District Conservationist -
Kailee Calnan
Email: kailee.calnan@usda.gov
Phone: (406) 357-2320 ext 117

Tribal Planner - Zach Lenning
Email: zach.lenning@usda.gov
Phone: (406) 357-2320 ext 18

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: 477-6494

Pablo Field Office

Serves: Flathead Reservation
Phone: 675-2700
Tribal Land Department
42487 Complex Boulevard
P.O. Box 871
Pablo, MT 59855-9700

Tribal Conservationist - Herb Webb
Email: herb.webb@usda.gov
Phone: 675-2700 ext. 1245

Poplar Field Office

Serves: Fort Peck Reservation
Phone: (406) 768-3964
500 Medicine Bear Road
Box 1027
Poplar, MT 59255-1027

Tribal Conservationist - Paul Finnium
Phone: (406) 768-3964
Email: paul.finnium@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 - Elizabeth Ballou
Email: elizabeth.ballou@usda.gov
Phone: (406) 265-6792

Supervisory District Conservationist -
Kailee Calnan
Email: kailee.calnan@usda.gov
Phone: (406) 357-2320 ext 117