Natural Resources Conservation Service U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

# Natural Resources Conservation Service Conservation Summer 2024

### In this Issue

A Note from the State Conservationist p. 1 Meet the Rocky Mountain Region Tribal Colleges and Universities Program Liaison p. 2 Prescribed Grazing Tribal Implementation Requirement p. 2 Partnerships for Climate-Smart Commodities

Project p.3

A Note from the State Conservationist

EQIP Customer Survey Deadline is 9/10/24 p. 3

Fort Belknap Indian Community Successfully Enrolled in CREP p. 4

Soil Health Presentations with the Chippewa Cree Tribe and Blackfeet Nation p.5 NRCS Programs Roadshow Series Scheduled p.6 Fort Peck Tribes and NRCS Partner to Improve Rangeland Health and Create Employment p. 7 NRCS Sets Conservation Program Funding Application Dates p. 9 Tribal Field Office Directory p. 11

Important Dates to Remember

### August 2024

Greetings,

Visit NRCS to start conservation planning! Now

> NRCS Program Meeting - Lame Deer August 27, 2024

NRCS Program Meeting - Crow Agency August 28, 2024

### September 2024

EQIP Customer Survey September 10, 2024

### October 2024

ALE Inflation Reduction Act Apply by October 4, 2024

**RCPP Land Management and Rentals** Apply by October 11, 2024

Environmental Quality Incentives Program Apply By October 25, 2024

### November 2024

Wetland Reserve Easements Farm Bill Apply by November 1, 2024

> **RCPP Entity Held Easements** Apply by November 1, 2024

Agricultural Land Easements Farm Bill Apply by November 29, 2024

#### December 2024

**Conservation Stewardship Program Classic** Apply by December 27, 2024 Summer is in full swing, and I can't help but be grateful to all the partners we have in our state that support Indian country. Just in the last year, we have seen three new tribal partners focus their work in Montana from the Office of Tribal Relations (OTR). OTR is piloting an Agricultural Ambassador Program with several Tribal Nations across the county, and two of them are in Montana - Kyle Stiffarm with Fort Belknap Indian Community and Kevin Racine with the Blackfeet Nation. These Ag Ambassadors are tribal employee who focus on working with their communities and improving access to USDA programs. The third OTR position, the Tribal Colleges

Tom Watson, NRCS State Conservationist in Montana

and Universities Program Liaison, was filled by Ryhal Rowland who works remotely from Northern Cheyenne Reservation. Ryhal will collaborate with and serve tribes and Tribal Colleges and Universities within the Rocky Mountain Region with an emphasis on Montana. Ryhal will also work with the Food and Agriculture Council.

The Farm Service Agency (FSA) has been a catalyst for getting quarterly conversations going around the state that bring our FPAC agencies to the table with Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) superintendents and Tribal Council members. These conversations facilitate regular communication and provide a platform to keep our partners aware of available programs, answer questions, and collaboration.

Many nonprofit partners are focused on building climate resiliency across the state by offering Partnership for Climate-Smart Commodities opportunities. Although these grants are nationally funded, the awardees provide technical expertise and conservation practice implementation throughout Indian Country. Check out the article later in the newsletter for information on how to navigate to each partner focused in Montana and the suite of practices they offer.

There are many other partners in Montana helping to keep agricultural working lands profitable and resilient. NRCS is proud to collaborate with many of them and continually look for opportunities to build new partnerships.

Take care. Tom Watson, NRCS State Conservationist in Montana

### Meet the Rocky Mountain Region Tribal Colleges and Universities Program Liaison



Ryhal Rowland, a citizen of the Northern Cheyenne Tribe in Southeastern Montana, stands as a shining example of dedication to community, youth development, and Native American Indian Agriculture. With a degree in Extension Education from Montana State University Bozeman College of Agriculture, Ryhal has made significant strides in enhancing the lives of those around her.

Her journey of service began long before she joined the USDA. Ryhal has devotedly served as the Northern Cheyenne Federally Recognized Tribes Extension Program (FRTEP) Extension Agent and the Chief Dull Knife Tribal College Extension Agent. She has also held impactful roles as the Chief Dull Knife Student Support Services Advisor and the Northern Cheyenne Tribal Media Specialist. Through these positions, Ryhal has successfully introduced and nurtured an array of positive programming opportunities and events for the Northern Cheyenne Reservation and neighboring communities.

Ryhal is deeply passionate about food sustainability and security, community and youth educational programming, and agricultural outreach initiatives. With deep roots in her community, she has gained the trust of producers and community members, helping them achieve success in their endeavors. Through her dedication to providing a diverse range of technical assistance, she ensures that all programmatic opportunities and information are accessible and communicated fairly. By focusing on creating positive opportunities and guiding youth towards the future of agriculture, Ryhal has equipped many with the skills and confidence needed to become successful leaders.

Outside her professional commitments, Ryhal remains steadfast in giving back to her community. She is dedicated to bridging gaps and ensuring our future agriculture leaders receive the knowledge and opportunities necessary for success. Her contributions extend beyond work, reaching into the very fabric of her community.

Ryhal is also a fourth-generation cattle rancher, managing a cow/calf operation on the breathtaking lands of the Northern Cheyenne Reservation. In her leisure time, she enjoys outdoor adventures, horseback riding, gardening, and wrangling and caring for her beloved furry companions on her ranch.

Ryhal Rowland's journey is a testament to her unwavering dedication, passion, and leadership. Her contributions continue to inspire and positively impact the lives of many, making her a true beacon in her community.

Ryhal can be reached by email at Ryhal.Rowland@usda.gov or by phone at 1-202-280-8355

## **Prescribed Grazing Tribal Implementation Requirement**

Did you know that Montana NRCS developed a prescribed grazing implementation requirement specific to Indian country? You spoke and we listened! Our Tribal producers and delegates worked alongside our state rangeland management specialist to provide the flexibilities needed to accommodate running in common on allotted lands. The prescribed grazing implementation requirement is applicable to any Tribal member or Tribal lands within the reservation where prescribed grazing will be implemented. If you are interested in learning more, you can find the MT 528 Prescribed Grazing Tribal Implementation Requirements at <u>https://efotg.sc.egov.</u> <u>usda.gov/#/state/MT/documents/</u> <u>section=4&folder=-186</u> or reach out your local Tribal conservationist (contact information at the end of this newsletter) to get started. Our Tribal conservationist will engage the producer or Tribe through the planning process, review and gather inventory, analyze data, identify a resource concern then make recommendations on changes that can

Conservation Pathways • Summer 2024 • Page 2

be made to improve the resources. The process sounds overwhelming, but we will help guide you through he process and work with you along the way to get it done.

## Partnerships for Climate-Smart Commodities Project

USDA has invested more than \$3 billion in 135 projects through the Partnerships for Climate-Smart Commodities effort across 55 states and territories. All projects have meaningful involvement of small and underserved communities. Montana has 24 partner-led projects that include this area. Here are a few tips and tricks on how to find out more about each project:

1) Visit <u>https://usda.gov/climate-solutions/climate-smart-</u> commodities

2) Click Project Dashboard

3) Click on Montana

4) Use the Commodities and Practices lists to narrow down the project options based on what you grow or what you may be

interested in implementing

5) Hover over the Lead Partner name to either sign up directly on the project webpage or get project details

You can also click on the lead partner's name to get details and a link to enrollment opportunities.

A six-minute YouTube video gives details on how to filter the information on the dashboard as well as how to enroll for the projects you are interested in <u>https://www.youtube.com/</u> watch?v=GVdf7kvPbJw.

Nate Parry, Montana Partnership for Climate-Smart Commodities project state lead, can be reached at <u>nathan</u>. <u>parry@usda.gov</u> or at 406-946-2300 for more information.



## EQIP Customer Survey Deadline is 9/10/24

Have you participated in our Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP) in the last three years? If so, we want to hear from you! Access the survey at <u>https://survey.fedw1.medallia.com/nrcs-eqip-feedless</u>.

To continually improve our flagship conservation program, we're asking our EQIP customers to participate in a survey. (Note that if you've already completed the survey, please do not submit a second response.) It's open right now through September 10, 2024.





## Fort Belknap Indian Community Successfully Enrolled in the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program

The Fort Belknap Indian Community has entered a Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) with the Farm Service Agency (FSA) to help grassland productivity, wildlife habitat and reduce soil erosion. The agreement authorized up to 635,000 acres to be enrolled in the program. Land within the reservation boundary, as well as other eligible land owned by the Tribe or by a member of the Tribe, such grassland, pastureland or other agricultural land, are eligible for this project.

Farmers, ranchers and agricultural producers can voluntarily enroll in the Fort Belknap Indian Community CREP while entering 10- to 15-year agreements to maintain existing perennial vegetation cover while maintaining their right to use common grazing practices. CREP offers incentive rental payments and financial assistance for land improvements such as fencing or livestock water development.

Once enrolled in the CREP program, the Tribe or Tribal producer will work NRCS to develop a conservation plan that meets the intent of the program. More information can be found in this article from FSA <u>https://www.fsa.usda.gov/news-room/news-releases/2024/usda-and-fort-belknap-indian-community-partner-to-support-working-lands-conservation</u>.



## Soil Health Presentations with the Chippewa Cree Tribe and Blackfeet Nation

On June 25, NRCS conservation specialists Susan Massar, Lucas Head, and Marni Thompson presented the rainfall simulator for producers of the Chippewa Cree Tribe of Rocky Boy's Reservation. We discussed how management affects soil health and the tools to use to improve it. We met at Bobby and Beau Lasalle's ranch outside of Havre. Beau Lasalle took us on a tour of his new grazing management project managing crested wheatgrass pastures using temporary electric fence. Leon Lasalle also took us on a tour of his grazing management projects and a cover crop planting. The projects we toured are projects that will be monitored for carbon sequestration with a company called Indigo.

On June 27, a different group of NRCS conservationists including Marni Thompson, Latrice Tatsey, and Ken Scheffler presented the rainfall simulator and slake test to a larger group of young adults and ranchers from the Blackfeet Nation. We used Latrice's barn for the presentation due to the weather. This discussion also focused on how soil health can be improved with different types of management. Due to the weather we weren't able to tour the Tatsey Ranch. The group listened to presentations from Indigo and Piikani Lodge Health Institute after a great lunch in Valier.



Marni Thompson, Lucas Head, and Susan Massar.



Producers from the Rocky Boy's Reservation observing the rainfall simulator.



Group of young adults and ranchers from the Blackfeet Nation.



Marni Thompson demonstrates the slake test.

## NRCS Programs Roadshow Series Scheduled



Tuesday, August 27<sup>th</sup>, 2024 1-4 pm: Chief Dull Knife College, Room 205, Lame Deer, MT

Wednesday, August 28<sup>th</sup>, 2024 1-4pm, Little Big Horn College Library Programs Room, Crow Agency MT

Do you want to learn about USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service's (NRCS) conservation programs that are available to help you address resource concerns on your ag operation? These informational workshops are scheduled on the following days:

- Tuesday, August 27, 2024 Chief Dull Knife College, Room 205, in Lame Deer, from 1:00 pm to 4:00 pm.
- Wednesday, August 28, 2024 Little Big Horn College, Library Programs Room, in Crow Agency, from 1:00 pm to 4:00 pm.

NRCS staff will present on the following topics:

- How to sign up for conservation programs
- Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)
- Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP)
- Review the new Prescribed Grazing Tribal Specification
- Community Ag

NRCS staff will also be available following the presentations to help workshop attendees fill out program applications as desired. There is no cost to attend, and no RSVP is required. Refreshments will be provided. NRCS provides reasonable accommodations for all persons with disabilities to participate in NRCS programs and activities. If you have any questions or need special accommodations, please contact the Crow Agency NRCS Field Office by calling: (406) 629-3228, or the Lame Deer NRCS Field Office by calling: (406) 740-0897. NRCS is an equal opportunity provider and employer, and lender.





The Fort Peck Tribes have been working with NRCS tribal conservationist, Paul Finnicum for a long time to implement conservation on the reservation that achieves goals outlined by Tribal members and leadership. These efforts have included Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) contracts that use wildlife friendly fencing and prescribed grazing to improve rangeland health and safe wildlife passage across the landscape. In 2023, the pace of that work accelerated thanks to the Fort Peck Reservation Rangeland Improvement Targeted Implementation Plan (TIP).

The primary goal of the TIP is to improve rangeland health on grazing land throughout the Reservation. Implementation of the Fort Peck Reservation Rangeland Improvement TIP builds on the work that has been done and significantly advances efforts to realize the collective vision of robust and resilient grazing lands on the Reservation. The primary partners in the TIP include Fort Peck Tribes' Natural Resources and Fish and Game departments.

The TIP proposal was based in local priorities and on scientific inventories of rangeland health. In 2014, the Tribes developed and adopted an Agricultural Resource Management Plan (ARMP) that identified resource concerns on rangeland. A comprehensive range unit inventory was completed for each tract within each range unit. Fifty eight of the 93 range unit inventories included rangeland health summaries. Some of the concerns that were identified include the following.

Existing fences are in poor condition and no longer facilitate proper grazing management. Existing grazing units are too large to manage for the desired objectives. Nearly two-thirds of the range units are a single pasture. Interior or cross fencing is needed to support proper management including multiple pasture rotations to control the frequency and duration of grazing.

Existing fences limit the movement or migrations of several wildlife species including deer, antelope, elk, moose, swift fox, upland game birds and greater sage-grouse.

The ARMP includes measurable goals and objectives. Finnicum stresses that these goals and objectives drive the implementation of the ARMP, along with Tribal funding and personnel. "This work really wouldn't happen without the Tribal Natural Resources Department," said Finnicum. "Myrna Walking Eagle is the director and has led the charge."

In addition to NRCS funding listed below, the Fort Peck Tribes got the ball

rolling in 2015 by making the initial investment to improve infrastructure on the first range unit to start accomplishing the ARMP goals. They dedicated \$300,000 for the work and employed Tribal members on the fencing crews. The successful effort was the foundation for applying for Federal funding through EOIP.

This isn't the only funding the Fort Peck Tribes focus on rangeland conservation. They dedicate \$3 of every tribal range unit lease for grazing land improvements. The Natural Resource Department takes applications, Finnicum reviews to make sure the proposal is feasible and needed, then develops the conservation plan for the work. The Natural Resource Department then pays for and installs the practices. This Tribal initiative uses wells with solar pumps and rubber tire tanks to develop the livestock water infrastructure needed to facilitate grazing plans.



continued on page 8



Fencing crews install wildlife-friendly fence across the Fort Peck Reservation to improve grazing management and provide safe wildlife passage.

Conservation practices implemented through EQIP funding to support improvements on grazing lands include installing new cross fences where appropriate and replacing inadequate fences or those that have exceeded their practice lifespan with infrastructure adequate to meet the stated goals and objectives through more intensively managed grazing. Rangeland planting and herbaceous weed treatment (biological control measures) are applied selectively to restore the health and productivity of the grassland plant community where appropriate. Prescribed grazing plans have been developed and all fences will be built to wildlife friendly specifications to mitigate impacts to wildlife.

Here are some of the accomplishments to date through the TIP and the initial wildlife friendly fencing project funded through EQIP.

Total estimated miles of range unit fence needed at start of project = 1746.9 miles

• Miles Completed as of July 2024 = 743.3 miles

- Miles Contracted but not yet completed = 419.6 miles
- Estimated Miles Remaining to Contract = 584 miles

Total Range Units = 91

- Range Units Completed fence installed, biological noxious weed control, prescribed grazing = 41
- Range Units Contracted (Not yet completed) = 23
- Range Units Remaining to be Contracted = 27

Range Unit Acres = 385,576.37

- Range Unit Acres Treated (Prescribed Grazing Plan Installed) = 153,704.95
- Range Unit Acres Under Contract (Not yet completed) = 72,804.74
- Range Unit Acres Remaining to be Contracted = 159,066.68
- Range Unit Acres with monitoring plan (photo plot and transects) = 385,576,37

Total funding contracted through EQIP for the wildlife friendly fencing project and TIP equals approximately \$16 million.

One of the most important benefits of this work to the community is not in miles of fence or acres of prescribed grazing. One number NRCS and all of the involved partners are really proud to report is the total number of Tribal members employed since the program started for fence installation – 170 people!



## NRCS Sets Conservation Program Funding Application Dates

The USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) in Montana is accepting applications for the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP), Wetland Reserve Easements (WRE), and Agricultural Land Easements (ALE). There are several dates to be aware of for the current funding cycle of these programs.

- ALE Inflation Reduction Act: Oct. 4, 2024
- EQIP: Oct. 25, 2024
- RCPP Land Management and Rentals: Oct. 11, 2024
- RCPP Entity Held Easements: Nov. 1, 2024
- ALE Farm Bill: Nov. 29, 2024
- WRE Farm Bill: Nov. 1, 2024
- CSP Classic: Dec. 27, 2024

"NRCS provides funding and technical assistance to help farmers, ranchers, and forestland owners implement conservation practices that improve their environmental and economic sustainability," said Tom Watson, NRCS State Conservationist for Montana. "Conservation work focused on local outcomes with the support of local partners and land managers achieves meaningful conservation across a landscape. These opportunities are open to ag operations of any scale."

Conservation funding is available for the following programs and initiatives:

Community Agriculture: Building on the high tunnel initiative available in the past, the community agriculture initiative offers an expanded set of conservation practices tailored to the conservation needs of small-scale ag producers.

Conservation Incentive Contracts: Conservation Incentive Contracts are an option under EQIP, with a focus on climate-smart forestry and agriculture and drought resilience management practices. EQIP-CIC provides financial assistance to adopt conservation activities on working landscapes.

Joint Chiefs' Landscape Restoration Partnership Projects: The U.S. Forest Service and NRCS are working together to improve the health of forests and reduce wildfire threats to communities where public forests and grasslands connect to privately owned lands. There is currently one project in Montana in the Elkhorn Cooperative Management Area.

Migratory Bird Resurgence Initiative: This initiative is focused on unmanipulated wetlands of two acres or less within working cropland as identified on the National Wetland Inventory. It is aimed at preserving, protecting, and improving habitat for migratory waterfowl, shorebirds, neotropicals, and other avian species in the Prairie Pothole Region.

National Water Quality Initiative: This initiative focuses assistance in small watersheds to improve water quality where this is a critical concern. With the help of partners at the local, state, and national levels, NRCS identified priority watersheds in Montana where on-farm conservation investments will deliver the greatest water quality benefits. The two projects in Montana are in the Lower Gallatin watershed (Camp and Godfrey Creeks) and the Shields River watershed.

On-Farm Energy Initiative: Agricultural producers work with NRCS-approved technical service providers to develop agricultural energy management plans or farm energy audits that assess energy consumption on an operation. NRCS may also provide assistance to implement recommended measures identified in the energy audit through the use of conservation practice standards.

Organic Initiative: Producers currently certified as organic, transitioning to organic, or National Organic Program exempt will have access to a broad set of conservation practices to assist in treating their resource concerns while fulfilling many of the requirements in an Organic System Plan.

Sage Grouse Initiative: Producers can work with NRCS on three different components to improve sage-grouse habitat. One is a general category to implement prescribed grazing management practices. The others are to seed cropland back to perennial species to



improve the connectivity for sage-grouse that depend on large, intact landscapes and the removal of conifers to increase nest success rates.

Targeted Implementation Plans: Montana NRCS targets its investments in very specific areas to achieve clearly defined natural resource goals as identified by local partners. This approach harnesses the power of multiple producers in one area undertaking similar conservation projects to achieve a regional or landscape-scale result. There are more than 100 local projects currently available in fiscal year 2025.

Agricultural Land Easements: Part of the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program, ALEs help private and tribal landowners, land trusts, and other entities such as state and local governments protect croplands and grasslands on working farms and ranches by limiting non-agricultural uses of the land through conservation easements. Interested landowners work with eligible easement partners in Montana.

Wetland Reserve Easements: Part of the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program, WREs help private and tribal landowners protect, restore, and enhance wetlands which have been previously degraded due to agricultural uses. These easements provide habitat for fish and wildlife, including threatened and endangered species, improve water quality by filtering sediments and chemicals, reduce flooding, recharge groundwater, protect biological diversity, provide resilience to climate change, and provide opportunities for educational, scientific, and limited recreational activities.

EQIP offers financial and technical assistance to eligible participants to install or implement structural and management practices on eligible agricultural land. In Montana, historically underserved participants, including limited resource, and beginning farmers and ranchers, socially disadvantaged, and veteran farmers and ranchers will receive a higher payment rate for eligible conservation practices applied.

Regional Conservation Partnership Program: The RCPP promotes coordination of NRCS conservation activities with partners that offer value-added contributions to expand our collective ability to address on-farm, watershed, and regional natural resource concerns. Currently, there are both RCPP land management projects and easement-based projects in Montana.

The CSP is for working lands. For farmers, ranchers, and forestland owners already taking steps to improve the condition of the land, CSP can help find new ways to meet resource and operation goals. All the land in a producer's agricultural operation must be enrolled to be eligible for CSP. In addition to applying by Dec. 27, 2024, new proposed activities must be selected by January 24, 2025, so the field office conservation planner can complete assessment and ranking of applications.

Producers willing to focus their CSP conservation efforts on solutions which promote climate-related benefits are encouraged to select activities from the Climate Smart Agriculture and Forestry Mitigation Activities List. Climate smart activities directly improve soil carbon, reduce nitrogen losses, or reduce capture, avoid or sequester carbon dioxide, methane or nitrous oxide emissions associated with agricultural production.

For additional opportunities through the Climate-Smart Commodities partnership, visit usda.gov/ climate-smart-commodities. These projects are managed directly by partner organizations.

NRCS accepts conservation program applications year-round; however, applications for the next funding consideration must be submitted by the application batching dates listed. Applications made after those dates will be considered in the next funding cycle. Additional information is available on the Montana NRCS website. Visit www.mt.nrcs. usda.gov and scroll down to State Programs and Initiatives. Or contact your local USDA service center.





### **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* - Latrice Tatsey Email: <u>latrice.tatsey@usda.gov</u> 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: <u>evan.vanorder@usda.gov</u> 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: <u>michael.kinsey@usda.gov</u> 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: <u>kathy.knobloch@usda.gov</u> 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: <u>austin.allen@usda.gov</u> 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: <u>paul.finnicum@usda.gov</u>

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: <u>lucas.head@usda.gov</u> Phone: (406) 265-6792 ext. 3 Cell: (406) 879-3348

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 <u>mt-nrcs-publicinfo@usda.gov</u>, Subject: Conservation Pathways.

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

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