

Natural Resources Conservation Service Conservation Pathways

Summer 2023

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Important Dates to Remember

October 2023

Big Game Habitat Improvement Project
Apply by
October 6, 2023

Montana State Technical Committee
Meeting
October 17, 2023

NRCS Conservation Programs
(CSP, EQIP, RCPP, ACEP-WRE)
Apply by
October 27, 2023

Conservation Innovation Grants (CIG)
Apply by
October 30, 2023

Discrimination Financial Assistance
Program – Inflation Reduction Act
Apply by
October 31, 2023

April 2024

SBA Economic Injury Disaster Loans
Apply by
April 1, 2024

A Note from the State Conservationist

Hello, partners in conservation,

I'm happy to be back to work as the state conservationist for Montana. My short-term experience with the regional conservationist's office was a front row seat to "how the sausage is really made" at that regional and national level as some would say. By almost any measure, this has been a record-setting year of conservation delivered to and by our many important customers and partners across the state.

Many people stepped in to keep the wheels turning, including Kyle Tackett who was the acting state conservationist. I appreciate all of their hard work. One thing that we are proud to accomplish recently is updating our prescribed grazing specification to be more inclusive.

Through feedback and consultation with Montana's tribal communities, NRCS has added a prescribed grazing specification. The new specification removes barriers to financial assistance for contracted grazing management that conflicted in the past with BIA and tribal land management and leasing practices. This change provides more opportunity for tribal members and tribal entities to continue making improvements on the tribal lands they operate. This new specification is available to members of federally recognized tribes on tribal lands within reservation boundaries and on submarginal lands. Through our usual conservation planning process, NRCS can help ranchers conduct forage inventories, monitoring, and record keeping. With that data and producer management goals in mind, we can support tribal land managers to develop grazing contingency plans, adjust stocking rates, and plan grazing management to address resource concerns and improve the land.

As you will see by their introductions, we have two recent hires filling the tribal conservationist positions for the NRCS offices serving the Chippewa Cree Tribe of the Rocky Boy's Reservation and the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes. Offers have also gone out to applicants for NRCS tribal conservationist positions servicing the Blackfeet Nation and the Nakoda and Aaniiih Nations of the Fort Belknap Indian community.



Tom Watson, NRCS State
Conservationist for Montana.

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A Note from the State Conservationist

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NRCS Montana will be considering applications received by October 27, 2023, for the current financial assistance funding cycle. This application date applies to the EQIP, CSP, RCPP, and WRE programs and associated initiatives. See the article in this newsletter for more information. Tribal, veteran, and beginning farmers and ranchers as well as other historically underserved producers may qualify for higher payment rates for implementing conservation practices.

Contact your NRCS field office now for more information. Find addresses, phone numbers, and email addresses on the last page or visit nrcs.usda.gov/contact.

I'm looking forward to connecting with Montana's conservation partners and land managers again over the coming months.

Tom Watson,
NRCS State Conservationist in Montana

NRCS Sets Conservation Program Funding Application Date for October 27, 2023

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), and Wetlands Reserve Easements (WRE). To be considered for funding in the current cycle, producers and landowners should apply by October 27, 2023.

"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.

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 are currently five projects in Montana, including the Connecting Fuels Treatments in the Salish Mountains and Whitefish Range Project, Elkhorn Cooperative Management Area, Fire Adapted Bitterroot Project, Gallatin Valley Forest Resiliency and Watershed Health Project, and the Libby Surround Project.

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 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.

National 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.

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

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NRCS Sets Conservation Program Funding Application Date for October 27, 2023

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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.

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 2024.

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.

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 RCPP land management projects in Montana and easement-based projects, including Northern Great Plains Grassland Conservation Project, and the Gallatin Valley Land Trust project, Bitterroot Conservation Connectivity Project, Flint Creek Valley Conservation Partnership Project.

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.

Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)

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.

Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP)

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 October 27, 2023, new proposed activities must be selected by January 26, 2024, 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.

NRCS accepts conservation program applications year-round; however, applications for the next funding consideration must be submitted by October 27, 2023. Applications made after that date 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.

Discrimination Financial Assistance Program – Inflation Reduction Act Section 22007



On July 7, USDA and its partner vendors announced the opening of the application period for Section 22007 of the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA), which directs USDA to provide financial assistance to farmers, ranchers, and forest landowners who experienced discrimination in USDA farm lending programs prior to January 2021. The opening of the application process is an important step in delivering on USDA's commitment of providing financial assistance to those who have faced discrimination in USDA farm lending programs. The application process is open now and will close on October 31. Borrowers will have the option to apply for assistance online via 22007apply.gov or through a paper-based form.

Details about the program, including an application and e-filing portal, are available at 22007apply.gov. The website includes an English and Spanish language application that applicants can download or submit via an e-filing portal, information on how to obtain technical assistance in-person or virtually, and additional resources and details about the program. Applicants can also call the free call center at **1-800-721-0970**, or visit one of several dozen brick-and-mortar offices the program has set up around the country. Locations are provided on the program website and vendors will update the local events schedule with more information as it becomes available. It is important to note that filing an application is FREE and does not require a lawyer.

Farmers, ranchers, and forest landowners who experienced discrimination by USDA in its farm loan programs prior to January 1, 2021, and/or are currently debtors with assigned or assumed USDA farm loan debt that was the subject of USDA discrimination that occurred prior to January 1, 2021, are eligible for this program.

Under the planned timeline, applications will be reviewed in November and December, with payments reaching recipients soon thereafter. Importantly, applicants should know that the application process is not on a first come, first served, basis. All applications received or postmarked before the **October 31** deadline will be considered.

To support producers throughout the application process, USDA is ensuring that organizations with extensive experience conducting outreach to farm organizations are able to support individuals who may be eligible for the program. These groups include [AgrAbility](#), the [Farmer Veteran Coalition](#), [Farmers' Legal Action Group](#), [Federation of Southern Cooperatives](#), [Intertribal Agriculture Council](#), [Land Loss Prevention Project](#), [National Young Farmers Coalition](#), and [Rural Coalition](#).

In standing up this program, USDA has become aware of some lawyers and groups spreading misleading information about the discrimination assistance process, pressuring people to sign retainer agreements, and asking people to fill out forms with private and sensitive information. The official application process and filling out an application is free and does not require a lawyer.

For more information, please visit 22007apply.gov.

If you want to get weekly updates on the program's events and progress, there's a button there to subscribe to a weekly newsletter.

Discrimination Financial Assistance Program

Section 22007 of the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) provides financial assistance for farmers, ranchers, and forest landowners who experienced discrimination by USDA in USDA's farm lending prior to 2021.

[Apply Here](#)



SBA Economic Injury Disaster Loans Available to Montana Small Businesses

Small nonfarm businesses in 10 Montana counties and neighboring counties in Idaho are now eligible to apply for low interest federal disaster loans from the U.S. Small Business Administration, announced Director Tanya N. Garfield of SBA's Disaster Field Operations Center-West. These loans offset economic losses because of reduced revenues caused by drought in the following primary counties that began June 1.

Primary Montana counties: Flathead and Lincoln;

Neighboring Montana counties: Glacier, Lake, Lewis and Clark, Missoula, Pondera, Powell, Sanders and Teton;

Neighboring Idaho counties: Bonner and Boundary.

"SBA eligibility covers both the economic impacts on businesses dependent on farmers and ranchers that have suffered agricultural production losses caused by the disaster and **businesses directly impacted by the disaster,"** Garfield said.

Small nonfarm businesses, small agricultural cooperatives, small businesses engaged in aquaculture and most private nonprofit organizations of any size may qualify for Economic Injury Disaster Loans of up to \$2 million to help meet financial obligations and operating expenses which could have been met had the disaster not occurred.

"Eligibility for these loans is based on the financial impact of the disaster only and not on any actual property damage. These loans have an interest rate of 4 percent for businesses and 2.375 percent for private nonprofit organizations, a maximum term of 30 years and are available to small businesses and most private nonprofits without the financial ability to offset the adverse impact without hardship," Garfield said.

By law, SBA makes Economic Injury Disaster Loans available when the U.S. Secretary of Agriculture designates an agricultural disaster. The Secretary declared this disaster on July 31.

Businesses primarily engaged in farming or ranching are not eligible for SBA disaster assistance. Agricultural enterprises should contact the Farm Services Agency about the U.S. Department of Agriculture assistance made available by the Secretary's declaration. However, nurseries are eligible for SBA disaster assistance in drought disasters.

Applicants may apply online, receive additional disaster assistance information and download applications at <https://disasterloanassistance.sba.gov/>. Applicants may also call SBA's Customer Service Center at (800) 659-2955 or email disastercustomerservice@sba.gov for more information on SBA disaster assistance. For people who are deaf, hard of hearing, or have a speech disability, please dial 7-1-1 to access telecommunications relay services. Completed applications should be mailed to U.S. Small Business Administration, Processing and Disbursement Center, 14925 Kingsport Road, Fort Worth, TX 76155.

The deadline to apply for economic injury is **April 1, 2024.**

Spring Development and Fence Design Workshop

Crow and Hardin NRCS hosted a workshop with sessions held at the Little Big Horn College Cultural Building in Crow Agency on June 14 at the Chief Plenty Coups State Park in Pryor on June 15. There was a good turnout of interested participants to both sessions. Participants received information on identifying types of springs, how to monitor flows and decide whether to develop the spring, fence construction options, wildlife friendly fencing, and the technical and financial assistance that NRCS can provide for Big Horn County residents.



Seanna Torske, NRCS Supervisory District Conservationist, presenting on NRCS programs and assistance available.



Evan Van Order, NRCS Tribal Conservationist, presenting on spring developments, photo from Zane Not Afraid, Intertribal Ag Council.



Noxious Weed Assistance

NRCS has technical assistance available to producers that have or suspect they might have noxious or invasive weeds present on their operation. This includes mapping, identifying species, and providing treatment guides from MSU and NRCS.

NRCS has financial assistance for control of noxious weeds, with targeted implementation plans in several counties. See nrcs.usda.gov/montana and search the interactive map of current local funding opportunities under What's Available in My County to learn more about what is offered in your area. For sulfur cinquefoil and invasive winter annual grasses (ventenata and cheatgrass) treatment projects are available in Big Horn County. Please reach out to the Crow and Hardin field office at 406-629-3230 for more information.

Sulfur Cinquefoil



Sulfur Cinquefoil.



Morning, before fSulfur Cinquefoil lowers open for the day.



Yellow Sweetclover is the other yellow flower present outside of drawn polygon.



Ventenata (African Wiregrass)



Ventenata Photo by Pamela Scheinost, USDA NRCS Pullman Plant Materials Center.



Ventenata treatment plot with skip line in chemical application. The annual grass looks like a blond mist on the landscape and is quick to invade range and pasture ground.

Soil Your Undies Challenge 2023

In May, a pair of 100% cotton briefs were "planted" into Zoe Craft's garden bed. Zoe is the NRCS District Conservationist in the Hardin field office.



The garden bed grew squash and pumpkins last year. This year, it was a lettuce and salad green bed with buckwheat cover crop. The buckwheat is what you can see coming up in the picture above.



The garden bed grew squash and pumpkins last year. This year, it was a lettuce and salad green bed with buckwheat cover crop. The buckwheat is what you can see coming up in the picture above.



Why Bury Underwear?

Since they are made of cotton, undies are a natural plant material and can be used as a food source by life in the soil. The healthier the microorganisms in our soil, the healthier and more productive our soil will be. Microorganisms deliver necessary nutrients to plants and help to breakdown plant residue. You don't always need a fancy tool to understand and gauge the health of your soil. Soil health is directly tied to that soil's ability to be resilient, productive, and function.

IT'S ALIVE! Healthy soil contains billions of microbes that consume organic material (in this case, cotton underwear). In fact, one teaspoon of healthy soil contains more microbes than there are people on the planet. In addition to chowing down on organic matter like cotton, microbes help soil resist erosion, cycle nutrients, and store water.

WHY healthy soil matters: Keeping our soil healthy and productive is of paramount importance. Using soil health principles and systems that include no-till, cover cropping and adaptive grazing, more and more ranchers and farmers are increasing their soil's organic matter while improving microbial activity. Healthy soils are sequestering more carbon, increasing water infiltration, improving wildlife and pollinator habitat—all while harvesting better profits and often better yields.

The Hardin & Crow NRCS office also tried cotton washcloths to test other cotton items.



*Curious about life in the soil and ways to improve your production and soil health?
Contact your local NRCS field office at nrcs.usda.gov/contact to learn more.*



New NRCS Tribal Conservationists

Austin Allen

Austin Allen is excited to begin his new role as Tribal Conservationist for the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes in Pablo, Montana. Austin and his wife Jill have lived in the Moiese Valley within the CSKT Reservation for the past ten years and he is excited to again be working within his local community. Austin brings to the table a wealth of experience and expertise. He began his NRCS career as a soil conservation technician in the Ronan field office in 2014 where he was then promoted to soil conservationist. For the past year, Austin has been working in the Philipsburg field office as the district conservationist. Austin's vast technical skill set and diverse experience set him apart. He is passionate about working with clients and partners to deliver the best conservation planning and program guidance possible. Those who know Austin would agree that his passion for conservation and customer service are second to none. His favorite bird is the goldfinch.



Austin Allen

Lucas Head

Lucas Head is the new Tribal Conservationist working with the Chippewa Cree Tribe of the Rocky Boy's Reservation. He recently relocated to the Hill County area from northwest Arkansas where he was a soil conservationist since the fall of 2018. Head was raised on a cow/calf operation and has always had an interest in production agriculture. Through participation in events with the National FFA Organization and other endeavors, Head gained a deeper appreciation for the management of natural resources and conservation efforts. This led to him working for his local conservation district and soon after beginning his career with NRCS as a Pathways Intern. He completed his studies at Southern Arkansas University majoring in agriculture business and later received a Master of Science from the University of Arkansas in agriculture economics. Lucas is married to his wife, Sophia, who teaches in the public school system. They have a one-year-old Boykin spaniel who is eager to explore what Montana has to offer.



Lucas Head



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:

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Tribal Field Office Directory

Statewide

Tribal Liaison-
Trisha Cracroft
Email: trisha.cracroft@usda.gov
Phone: (406) 596-0500

Browning Field Office

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

Supervisory District Conservationist –
Stacy Thornbrugh
Email: stacy.thornbrugh@usda.gov
Phone: (406) 576-1062
Cell: (406) 450-8678

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

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

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) 477-6494

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) 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 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