

# Natural Resources Conservation Service Conservation Pathways

Fall 2024

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## A Note from the State Conservationist

Greetings, Tribal leaders and producers.

This is my last message to you in the Conservation Pathways newsletter. I will be retiring at the end of December after 34 years of service with NRCS. Working here in Montana has been one of many amazing experiences I've had in that time. I thank you all for your work to ensure meaningful conservation is happening on lands managed by Tribal Nations and producers. Our collaboration and partnership help to make sure NRCS services are provided at an ever-higher standard. I know these efforts will continue seamlessly as Kyle Tackett, assistant conservationist for partnerships, takes over as the acting state conservationist while the search for a new state conservationist begins.

The NRCS investment in conservation with tribal producers in 2024 was significant. Through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), we obligated more than \$8.4 million dollars through 59 contracts with Tribal producers. This assistance includes both Farm Bill and the Inflation Reduction Act. The historic IRA funding alone allowed us to enroll 18 of the 59 contracts for about \$3.7 million dollars.

When it comes to implementing the Conservation Stewardship Program with Tribal producers, we know we have work to do. In 2024, we funded 6 contracts for nearly \$800,000. To try to help more producers participate, we are providing flexibility on land control when multiple producers operate in common on a land unit and are willing to work together to achieve conservation goals for the land. Producers interested in the CSP must continue to meet eligibility with the Farm Services Agency and meet stewardship threshold eligibility for their ranching or farming operation.

Please visit your local NRCS office or call the Tribal District Conservationist (listed on the last page) to learn about CSP. The application batching date for this funding cycle is Dec. 27. Apply now. CSP has similar opportunities for beginning or historically underserved farmers or ranchers as our other conservation programs. These include higher payment rates and advance payments.



Tom Watson, NRCS State Conservationist in Montana



Kyle Tackett, acting NRCS State Conservationist in Montana

*Continued on page 2*



## *Important Dates to Remember*

### **November 2024**

Agricultural Land Easements Farm Bill  
Apply by  
**November 29, 2024**

### **December 2024**

Conservation Stewardship Program Classic  
Apply by  
**December 27, 2024**

If there are reasons you can't participate in CSP, please discuss them with the Tribal DC. We can use that information to change what we have control over at the state level and can provide that input to national program managers to make possible improvements.

Again, thank you all for the conversations and hard work over the past 6 years. I have enjoyed my time in Montana and wish everyone the best as you continue this important work.

Take care,

Tom Watson

NRCS State Conservationist in Montana

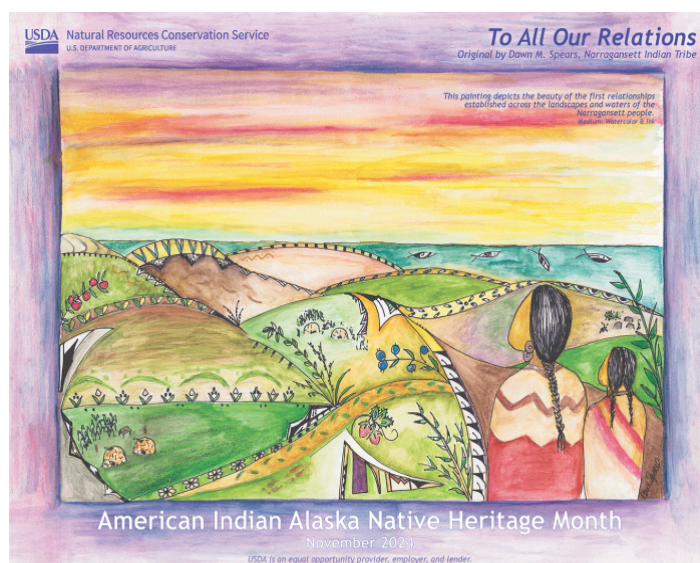


## NRCS Creates Poster with American Indian Artist to Celebrate Native American Heritage Month

Each November, NRCS creates a poster from the artwork of an American Indian or Alaska Native artist to celebrate Native American Heritage Month. This year's winner is Dawn M. Spears, a member of the Narragansett Indian Tribe and the Director of the Northeast Indigenous Arts Alliance (NIAA). She and her husband, Cassius Spears, Sr., formed the Narragansett Food Sovereignty Initiative in 2014, a farm-based organization devoted to reclaiming food and cultural ways for the Narragansett people. They currently own and operate Ashawaug Farm in Ashaway, RI.

The poster, titled "To All Our Relations," references this year's theme of "Facing East, Where Land Meets Water," which was selected to honor the Indigenous peoples whose homelands and ancestral territories reside in the coastal northeast.

If you would like to order copies of the poster, email the NRCS State Office at [mt-nrcs-publicinfo@usda.gov](mailto:mt-nrcs-publicinfo@usda.gov)



"My work reflects my culture and our relationship with mother earth and father sky. I use the symbols from nature, deconstructing every image from land, sea and sky. The lines, curves and contrasts are where I gain my inspiration. I like creating work that is subjective, bright and thought provoking." - Dawn Spears

## USDA Requests Your Tribal Flag for the Hall of Tribal Nations

In recognition of the diplomatic nation-to-nation relationship, between Tribes and the Federal government, USDA is proud to host a Hall of Tribal Nations, akin to our sister agency, the Department of Interior's Bureau of Indian Affairs. Agriculture Secretary Vilsack shared a video dedicating the new space during the November 2021 White House Tribal Nations Conference. Watch the video at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f-V4\\_8RIgs0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f-V4_8RIgs0)

USDA invites more tribal nations to contribute flags to this growing collection. Please contact [Tribal.Relations@usda.gov](mailto:Tribal.Relations@usda.gov) to learn more. You may send your 3 ft. x 5 ft. tribal flag to:

U.S. Department of Agriculture

Attention: Tribal Flags/Office of Tribal Relations

1400 Independence Avenue SW

Room 501-A Whitten Building

Washington, DC 20250



# USDA Invests More Than \$46 Million for Underserved, Veteran, and Beginning Farmers and Ranchers Development Projects Nationwide

**WASHINGTON, Oct. 9, 2024** – U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Deputy Secretary Xochitl Torres Small today announced a more than \$46 million investment in projects supporting America's veteran, underserved, and beginning farmers and ranchers to help aspiring producers enter the business and improve their skills and knowledge to sustain their operations for years to come.

"Starting or taking over a farm takes courage, and USDA wants to make sure our next generation of farmers have the resources and support they deserve to take that leap," said Deputy Secretary Xochitl Torres Small. "Today, the Biden-Harris Administration is announcing investments to support beginning, underserved, and veteran farmers with technical assistance and mentoring to build successful operations. These partnerships with local experts help ensure all farmers and ranchers have fair access to USDA's programs and market opportunities."

According to the 2022 Census of Agriculture report from the USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service, the average age of all U.S. farm producers was 58.1, up 0.6 years from 2017, and more than one-third are 65 or older. This continues a long-term trend of aging in the U.S. producer population. View the report at [https://www.nass.usda.gov/Publications/Highlights/2024/Census22\\_HL\\_FarmProducers\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.nass.usda.gov/Publications/Highlights/2024/Census22_HL_FarmProducers_FINAL.pdf)

USDA's Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program (BFRDP) and 2501 Program provide education, mentoring, and technical assistance to help underserved, veteran, and beginning farmers and ranchers own and operate successful farms. These investments also help provide equitable participation in USDA agricultural programs.

## Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program Grants

The Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program (BFRDP) is administered by USDA's National Institute of Food and Agriculture. Go to <https://www.nifa.usda.gov/grants/programs/beginning-farmer-rancher-development-program-bfrdp> for more BFRDP information. The 46 projects funded at \$23.7 million include:

- Washington Farmland Trust will recruit and provide 50 beginning producers with personalized technical assistance and connect them with landowners who are ready to transition their farmland to a new operation and ultimately allow beginning producers to establish or expand their farm businesses.
- Nirvana Tea, Inc., in Detroit, Michigan will provide underserved beginning farmers with education, financial literacy, technical assistance and mentoring with a special focus on hydroponic farming, a sustainable, year-round farming system.
- Augusta Locally Grown, Inc. in Georgia will provide individual farm plots, mentorship, climate-smart agricultural training, business plan development, and more to help beginning farmers improve and sustain farming operations.

## 2501 Program Grants

The 2501 Program is administered by the USDA Office of Partnerships and Public Engagement (OPPE). The program awarded \$22.6 million to 31 Fiscal Year 2024 grantees. Among them:

- Tanka Fund in South Dakota will provide technical assistance to Native American and Native veteran buffalo producers on marketing, food distribution, and value-added product development for local and regional food supply markets.
- The Florida International University Board of Trustees will teach veterans and youth from underserved neighborhoods in Broward and Miami-Dade counties about climate-smart and sustainable farming, incubator farms, local food system production, and financial management.
- Wakulima USA in Washington State will provide a support system for immigrant and refugee farmers in South King County including training to help access farmland, improve production skills and facilities, and establish and expand market connections.

More information about the funded projects is available at the USDA 2501 Program website <https://www.usda.gov/partnerships/underserved-veteran-farmers-ranchers-foresters>.





# USDA Announces New Investments in Tribal Students and Higher Education

**WASHINGTON, Nov. 15, 2024** – U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Secretary Tom Vilsack today announced Tribal higher education opportunities and investments to train the next generation of agricultural professionals. During his remarks, Secretary Vilsack announced \$5 million in grants to support Tribal students at land-grant colleges and universities through the New Beginning for Tribal Students (NBTS) Program. These programs reflect USDA's commitment to advance equity and remove barriers to service for Tribal Nations and encourage Tribal workforce development. Secretary Vilsack made the announcements at the 2024 White House Tribal Youth Forum during remarks ahead of roundtable youth discussions on food sovereignty. He also announced the opening day of the USDA 1994 Tribal Scholars Program, which offers a fast-track career path with USDA, and the Terra Preta do Indio Tribal Fellowship, which engages Tribal college faculty with USDA resources and research.

"These USDA investments reinforce our commitment to empowering Tribal Nations by cultivating tomorrow's agriculture sector professionals and building a USDA workforce more representative of America," said Secretary Vilsack. "It is important that USDA continues to uplift Tribal communities and provides pathways of representation by working with universities and colleges to improve the lives of Native American students and communities through higher education."

## The Tribal Scholars Program

The USDA 1994 Tribal Scholars Program provides full tuition, fees, books, and paid workforce training to any interested and eligible student pursuing degrees in agriculture, food, natural resource sciences, or related academic disciplines at a Tribal college or university. The tuition coverage can follow the student from a two-year associate program at a Tribal college or university (TCU) to a four-year bachelor's degree program (at a TCU or another land-grant institution). When the student has completed the scholarship requirements, including a paid USDA internship, USDA may convert the student to a permanent USDA employee without further competition.

Eligible applicants include graduating high school seniors, full-time students currently enrolled at a 1994 land-grant Tribal college or university, or recent TCU associate degree graduates. Once accepted into the Tribal Scholars Program, scholarship recipients are eligible for year-over-year support until they graduate. The program timeframe begins Fall 2025 and the application deadline is January 31, 2025. Visit the USDA 1994 Tribal Scholars Program website at <https://www.usda.gov/tribalrelations/1994-tribal-scholars-program> or email [1994@usda.gov](mailto:1994@usda.gov) for further information.

## Terra Preta do Indio Tribal Fellowship Program

This fellowship program seeks to strengthen Tribal college and university research capacity and introduce TCU faculty and staff to USDA programs and services. The program seeks faculty and staff from Tribal high schools and Tribal colleges and universities, including positions focused on agriculture, food, and natural resource sciences. In Summer 2025, all the fellows will spend a week in Washington, D.C. to meet with USDA program leads, identify areas for collaboration, and learn more about USDA resources. During a second week, the science fellows are placed at a USDA research facility that aligns with their academic research interests. The research collaborations will take place with USDA's Agricultural Research Service. The program allows the fellows to return to their institution with new knowledge to benefit their community, enhance cooperative research opportunities, and advance their Tribal college land-grant mission of research, education, and extension. The application deadline is December 30, 2024. Learn more at USDA's Tribal College Program website at <https://www.usda.gov/tribalrelations/tribal-college-program>.

*Continued on page 6*



### New Beginning for Tribal Students Program

USDA also announced an investment of \$5 million to support Tribal students at land-grant colleges and universities on their path to higher education. This announcement is part of USDA National Institute of Food and Agriculture's (NIFA) New Beginning for Tribal Students (NBTS) Program that supports land-grant colleges and universities. The NBTS grant program helps increase the retention and graduation rate of Tribal students attending 1994, 1862, and 1890 land-grant universities. More information about NBTS is available at <https://www.nifa.usda.gov/grants/programs/nifa-tribal-programs/new-beginning-tribal-students-nbts>.

The 15 funded awardees are: Cankdeska Cikana Community College; Colorado State University; **Montana State University**; Oregon State University; Regents of the University of Idaho; Salish Kootenai College; South Dakota State University; University of Alaska Fairbanks-Kuskokwim Campus; University of Alaska Fairbanks-Northwest Campus; University of Arkansas; University of Maine; University of Nevada Reno; University of Wyoming; and Utah State University (two awards). Go to <https://portal.nifa.usda.gov/enterprise-search/ss/2478> to learn more information about the funded awardees.

### USDA and Tribal Colleges and Universities

This year marks the 30th anniversary since Tribal colleges joined the land-grant college network through the Equity in Educational Land-Grant Status Act of 1994. This Act authorized Tribal colleges and universities to receive federal support and train future agricultural professionals. Visit [https://www.nifa.usda.gov/land-grant-colleges-and-universities-partner-website-directory?state=All&field\\_map\\_filter\\_value=1994](https://www.nifa.usda.gov/land-grant-colleges-and-universities-partner-website-directory?state=All&field_map_filter_value=1994) to see the 36 federally recognized Tribal colleges and universities that are designated as land-grant institutions. Collectively, they enroll more than 15,000 students and provide vital services to more than 120,000 Tribal community members annually. These institutions provide high school completion, job training, college preparatory courses, and adult basic education programs. They serve as community libraries and centers, Tribal archives, career and business centers, economic development centers, public meeting places, and elder and childcare centers. Tribal colleges offer the distinctive land-grant mix of research, education, and extension, while framing that education in the context of Native American history, Indigenous knowledge and traditions, and Tribal self-determination. Recently, the Department announced a renewed partnership with Tribal colleges and universities. Read the announcement at <https://www.usda.gov/media/press-releases/2023/02/10/usda-announces-renewed-partnership-tribal-colleges-and-historic>.





## The Fort Peck Tribes Community Agriculture Plan

Following in the footsteps of the highly successful Agricultural Resource Management Plan (ARMP), The Fort Peck Tribes have started to focus their conservation efforts to community agriculture. With assistance from the Poplar NRCS Field Office, The Tribes have hired a natural resource consulting firm to help gather information from each community and facilitate community meetings. The Tribes' goals are to increase community collaboration in personal food production and improve diets and food security.

Community agriculture involves growing, sharing, and/or selling vegetables, fruits, and other agricultural products within a community. Community agriculture can also include things like community gardens, home gardens, green houses, small livestock, classes on food preparation, and seed and equipment sharing. NRCS provides technical and financial assistance to growers with topics such as soil health, irrigation and water conservation, wildlife habitat, and season extension.

The plan focuses on each of the five communities on the Fort Peck Reservation (Poplar, Wolf Point, Fort Kipp, Brockton, and Frazer). Each community has had their first public meeting to discuss their goals, fill out questionnaires, and to share a meal. Different projects and goals will be established for each community and will be identified using the results from the discussions and survey. With the assistance from the NRCS, a plan for each community will be developed and The Fort Peck Tribes Natural Resources Department will pursue funding to bring each community's projects to life.

Go to <https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs-initiatives/eqip-environmental-quality-incentives/montana/community-agriculture-montana> to learn more about community agriculture in Montana.





## \$1 Million in Funding Available for People's Garden

Approximately \$1 million in funding is available from the People's Garden Initiative through USDA's Office of Urban Agriculture and Innovative Production, in partnership with The National Fish and Wildlife Foundation's (NFWF) 2025 Five Star and Urban Waters Restoration program. The program will fund projects that support community-based gardens promoting sustainable agriculture practices that benefit people and wildlife. Applications will be accepted until January 30, 2025.

### Eligibility

Eligible applicants include non-profit 501(c) organizations, state government agencies, local governments, municipal governments, Tribal governments and organizations and educational institutions. Ineligible applicants include unincorporated individuals, businesses, international organizations, state agencies and U.S. Federal government agencies.

Applicant gardens do not need to be registered as People's Gardens prior to applying, however, they will be asked to sign up once funding is awarded. Gardens of different sizes and types, including school gardens, community gardens, urban farms, and small-scale agriculture projects in rural and urban areas, can be recognized as a People's Garden.

Project must meet the People's Garden criteria:

- **Join** the People's Garden community by registering a garden at <https://www.usda.gov/peoples-garden>
- **Grow** the garden using sustainable practices that benefit people and wildlife
- **Teach** about gardening and resilient, local food systems

Priority will be given to projects that:

- Educate and train local citizens, build diverse partnerships, foster local food systems and provide other socio-economic benefits
- Provide measurable ecological, educational and community benefits
- Support the conservation of fish, wildlife, and habitat, especially at-risk species including migratory birds and pollinators

For more information and instructions on how to apply, please see the Request for Proposals at <https://www.nfwf.org/programs/five-star-and-urban-waters-restoration-grant-program/five-star-and-urban-waters>. For more information about the People's Garden Initiative please visit The People's Garden website at <https://www.usda.gov/peoples-garden>.





## Beloved Bison: Northern Cheyenne Indian Reservation Finds Balance Between Land, Bison, and Man

Encompassing approximately 15,244 acres, the new Northern Cheyenne Buffalo Pasture has taken shape over the last few years in Lame Deer, Montana. Brandon Small, a Northern Cheyenne tribal member and the new manager of the Northern Cheyenne Bison Ranch went on to explain, “The tribe, they want to maintain a buffalo herd. It’s an important part of, as a Plains tribe, their cultural identity.”

However, the 215 head of free roaming wild buffalo were creating high maintenance costs and hard feelings for individual ranchers that were dealing with the impacts of these large, ox-like shaggy-haired mammals. Rangeland health was also suffering from overuse by a combination of cattle, bison, and feral horses.

Cohabitation between the buffalo and the ranchers was key in the planning of practices and what would be best for the land, the buffalo, and the people. By working with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and other partnerships, the Northern Cheyenne Indian Reservation land managers are consistently resolving issues they face on the ranch.

“This is home for me, and I love helping local people utilize NRCS programs to accomplish their conservation goal,” stated Kathy Knobloch, NRCS Tribal Conservationist. For 28 years, Knobloch has worked for NRCS in Lame Deer, Montana, her hometown, and works closely with Northern Cheyenne tribal members. Knobloch has played a vital role in building the relationship between NRCS and the Northern Cheyenne nation, who have been working to improve the Tongue River Watershed since 1994 with various practices and technical advice.

Fencing is one of the practices that was implemented with the assistance of NRCS. The fences needed to be designed well enough and built strong enough so a giant buffalo would not be able to tear down or break through it. It was a situation that Knobloch and fellow NRCS staff had to reevaluate, as the specifications would be different than for a cattle fence.

Small explained, “The fence is a big deal and it’s holding the buffalo and that is a big deal, too, because, you know, these buffalo have never lived in confinement of any kind. They were a free roaming wild herd. And so, nobody really knew what they were going to do when those gates closed.” The fencing and confinement have been a success and is allowing the tribe to manage where the buffalo are and how they are using the land, ensuring they are not overgrazing.

An array of practices are being implemented by the tribe with NRCS assistance, including, livestock pipeline, watering facilities, aquifer flow tests, ground water testing, and solar pumping plant. One water system has already been completed and provided “A reliable, frost free supply of water last winter,” Knobloch stated. Currently, a stock water pipeline is in the works.

Engineering played a key role in exploring an efficient water system for the bison ranch. NRCS Civil Engineering Technician Ty Morin, assisted in the specifications for the watering facilities and livestock pipeline installation. The NRCS staff worked diligently on the project and found ways to utilize their resources and engineering magic. Morin excitedly stated, “Because [of] the brilliance of our staff, we were able to save all this time.” Through hard work and dedication, they were able to proceed with installation in a timely manner.

Out on the bison ranch, Knobloch looked around and proceeded to describe several projects that were started or completed recently. Speaking highly of what Small has accomplished within his short time as the buffalo manager, Knobloch said, “If you look around at this infrastructure that’s here, all the solar panels, everything, nothing that you see here [was here] 16 months ago when Brandon started. I mean, the pace of change over that time has been pretty phenomenal.”

Diving into his new position, Small had to pick up in the middle of a few different projects, some that started long before he was the buffalo pasture manager, a position that has been vacant for the past few years. Working with NRCS, he was able to smoothly transition into his role, “they have been great. I mean they’ve been so helpful. I can call them anytime,” Small said.

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Brandon Small and the Northern Cheyenne tribe are looking forward to expanding and completing more practices to improve their land, including secondary storage tanks, and improvements on the pipeline. Expanding on what they have started, the future of the Northern Cheyenne Bison Ranch is a bright one.

“My kids are getting older, and I just wanted to leave this reservation, this land better than when I had it. And so, they can have it, and their kids can have it, and it’s going to be great for them,” Small stated with a smile.



*Brandon Small, manager of the Northern Cheyenne Bison Ranch.*



*Water source for buffalo on the ranch.*



*Buffalo on the Northern Cheyenne buffalo pasture in Lame Deer, Montana.*





*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](mailto: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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**Attn: Conservation Pathways**  
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**Bozeman, MT 59715**

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406-587-6811

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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 - Latrice Tatsey*  
Email: [latrice.tatsey@usda.gov](mailto: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](mailto: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](mailto: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](mailto: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](mailto: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](mailto: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](mailto:lucas.head@usda.gov)  
Phone: (406) 265-6792 ext. 3  
Cell: (406) 879-3348