Delivering Conservation in Montana

Fiscal Year 2024

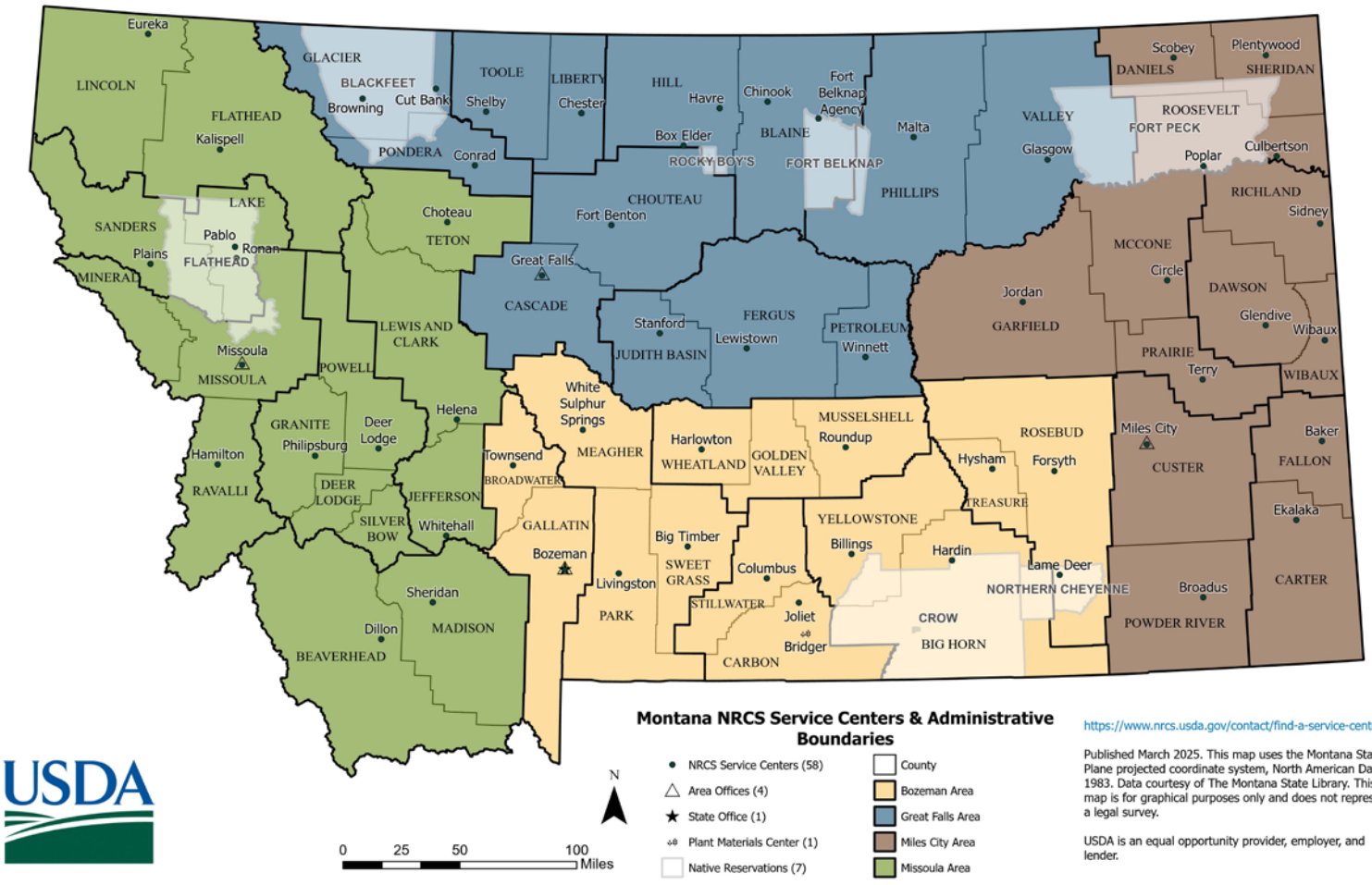
Our Purpose

The USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service provides innovative conservation solutions to restore, enhance and protect Montana's working agricultural lands. NRCS is committed to helping private landowners care for the land, use it productively and excel as stewards for the future.

NRCS is the leader in providing technical expertise in helping people make sound choices through the conservation planning process. Voluntary incentive-based programs provide technical and financial assistance to help farmers, ranchers and forestland owners address natural resource concerns such as water quality, soil erosion, wildlife habitat, and much more. NRCS leverages partnerships across the state of Montana to invest in landscape-scale conservation to support Montana's working lands. This report captures NRCS Montana's investments and successes in fiscal year 2024.

Our People

Soil conservationists, rangeland specialists, soil scientists, and other technical experts work in NRCS field offices across Montana assisting private landowners with their conservation needs. There is an NRCS field office in nearly every county and on every reservation. That's 60 offices ready to help you! Find your local USDA Service Center at nrcs.usda.gov/contact.



Our Partners

Our partnerships expand the reach and depth of conservation on the land. The federal, state and nonprofit groups that comprise our conservation partnerships have a diversity of expertise in discipline, location and focus.

While our partners are diverse and many, our earliest partner was the local conservation district. Born of the Dust Bowl era like NRCS, conservation districts operate at the local level with NRCS getting conservation on the ground.

Our Land

- 57.6 million acres in production ag
- $4.5 billion total ag production market value
- 24,266 farms/ranches
- 2,374 acres average size of farm or ranch

Top Commodities by Sales

1. Grains/oilseeds/dry beans/dry peas
2. Cattle and Calves
3. Other Crops and Hay

Source: 2022 National Ag Statistics Service Census

Our Planning

Conservation Easement Protects Historic Big Hole Valley Property

Big Hole Grazing Association property is now protected by a conservation easement in cooperation with NRCS and The Nature Conservacy.

Five families who make up the Big Hole Grazing Association are protecting working land in the Big Hole Valley. Working in partnership with NRCS and The Nature Conservancy (TNC), they've implemented a conservation easement and introduced conservation practices. The easement also provides instrumental big game migration corridors between the Anaconda and Bitterroot mountain ranges.

The main driver for the Association to enroll the land in an easement is keeping the working land in working hands for future generations. The financial support for the easement also helps the Association buy property to build their livestock operations while preventing that at-risk acreage from being sold for housing developments that disturb the viability of both grazing and wildlife habitat.

Dan High is a member of the Association and explains, "For us, it's security. Grass for our cow herd. There's a financial security that comes with that. Oftentimes our conservation efforts are to benefit the livestock, but they also benefit the wildlife. It's making sure that urban interface doesn't expand."

Dan and Colt High (Big Hole Grazing Association), Justin Meissner (NRCS) and Jim Berkey (TNC)

TNC High Divide Headwaters Director, Jim Berkey, regularly helps Montana landowners like the members of the Big Hole Grazing Association, with land conservation. He considers partnerships with NRCS to be critical to making possible conservation easements like this one.

"Conservation easements are meant to keep ag families on the land contributing to the tax base and put kids in schools. Not to be a set aside program that idles land," Meissner says. "Big Hole Grazing Association and other landowners who have decided to put easements on their property—it's a good place for other NRCS Farm Bill programs to then come in and fund infrastructure like stock water pipelines, tanks, fences, and timber thinning because the land will always be in agriculture and there's no risk of subdivision, so those investments last forever."

Rodi Farms is Blooming Under Carah Ronan's Care

Carah Ronan has worked with NRCS to expand her growing capacity while implementing conservation on Rodi Farm

Carah Ronan is a fifth-generation farmer, and her journey home was driven by practicality. "Putting my hands in the dirt, getting to work, and making some money," she says. Her goal was to ensure her grandmother could stay on the land where she'd been born over 90 years ago and in the home she enjoys.

Carah Ronan and Evan Van Order (NRCS) walk along a high tunnel extending the growing season for cut flowers.

Three years later, Rodi Farms is flourishing. Located on eight acres, Rodi Farms operates on a smaller scale than traditional farms. Ronan is currently growing on one acre with room to expand. "Flowers leave a smaller footprint, so we can grow a lot of volume in a short growing season on that smaller footprint." The property, which served as the home base for her grandparents' larger 600-acre operation was initially in good condition due to their previous organic practices like using manure fertilization.

Rodi Farms primarily sells flowers wholesale to local grocery stores like Town and Country Foods and Whole Foods in Bozeman, where they are the only contract grower. They also supply flowers to local florists and wedding venues, capitalizing on the growing popularity of Montana as a wedding destination.

Ronan partnered with NRCS to install a high tunnel in 2022, a game changer for the farm. Ronan's high tunnels have extended her growing season by several months, while also providing protection from Montana's harsh weather conditions. NRCS has also provided financial support for a micro-irrigation system and a windbreak.

Technical assistance for plant spacing, windbreak planning, micro-irrigation setup, and best practices has been just as valuable as the financial assistance. "Having NRCS as a resource to bounce ideas off of is invaluable," Ronan says. "You can talk about what's working on your place and figure out different solutions or trade ideas back and forth."

NRCS works with producers of all sizes to protect resources and ensure sustainability. "Carah's operation is a very intensive system, farming on about an acre of ground in production. It bolsters the local economy, benefiting her family and the community," says NRCS District Conservationist Evan VanOrder. "She's really been progressive in trying to expand her operation in a way to maximize her yield potential for her product that she's growing and making sure the soil is being built and healthy."

Dedicated Partnerships and Landowners Mitigate Wildfire Risk in Flathead County

This site on Jim Watson's property has been treated to improve forest health and decrease susceptibility to catastrophic wildfire.

Jim Watson and Sean Johnson (NRCS) visit a site where a thinning treatment took place the year prior.

Since 2022, private landowners Jim Watson and Carol Bibler have been working closely with NRCS, the U.S. Forest Service, and other partners like Flathead County, Northwest Montana Hazardous Fuels, and Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks on a multi-year Joint Chiefs' project in Flathead County. The Connecting Fuels Treatments in the Salish Mountains and Whitefish Range Joint Chiefs' project is reducing hazardous fuels and improving forest health with the overall goal of reducing and mitigating wildfire threats to communities and landowners.

"Our end goal for this Joint Chiefs' project is to coordinate and try to connect a series of fuel breaks to protect that west side of the county so when a fire comes from the west and starts to come toward town we have those fuel breaks in place," says Sean Johnson, NRCS district conservationist.

All work being done on the property reflects Watson's goals of creating a natural sanctuary, protecting wildlife and safeguarding biodiversity, and mitigating fire hazards. The area was once densely covered with trees that had been heavily impacted by commercial logging and invasive mistletoe before Watson started the forest treatment plan.

Through NRCS's technical and financial assistance, Watson has been able to implement conservation practices that are improving forest health and resilience. "If we did not have a strong forest industry here, and that infrastructure goes all the way down to people who drive the logging trucks, we would not be able to do the work we're doing here," says Watson. "The NRCS [financial assistance] flow through and stay within the community. We're paying truck drivers and masticators and sawmills."

On Watson's property, deciding which tool to use, and where, is an important part of the process. Depending on the concern and the area, they've brought in hand thinning crews, used machines and hand piling, as well as a masticator. Thinning allows for more robust, resilient stands to develop. As Watson reforests some areas, he is planting tree species that are more resilient when under fire and pest pressure.

"We're preventing the spread of disease, but at the same time we're not eradicating all the wildlife habitat," Watson says. "To get feedback from the neighbors who have been up here for 30 or 40 years—the back pats from them is validating. We've got neighbors going, who helped you do this? Will they come help me?"

3

5

Our Practices

Top Five Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) Conservation Practices (by funds obligated)

1. Woody Residue Treatment
2. Fence
3. Conservation Harvest Management
4. Forest Stand Improvement
5. Residue and Tillage Management, No Till

Many conservation practices are available to help meet land management goals across Montana. The best way to learn about conservation practices is to talk to your local NRCS conservation staff. You can also see Section 4 of the Field Office Technical Guide at efotg.sc.egov.usda.gov.

No-till planting (bottom left) and conservation harvest management (top left) are two conservation practices that are often used together by farmers aiming to improve the health of their soils. Both practices maintain soil cover and minimize soil disturbance, helping soil microbes to flourish.

Our Programs

Conservation Technical Assistance is the core approach NRCS has used successfully for 90 years to reach out to farmers and ranchers caring for the Nation's private lands. NRCS employees provide conservation options, recommendations, planning, and engineering assistance to individual farmers, ranchers, local and tribal governments, and urban landowners. This prepares the way for using Farm Bill and other conservation funding to implement conservation plans.

NRCS financial assistance is available to private land managers through the following programs established in the 2018 Farm Bill. Program applications are accepted on a continual basis. NRCS establishes application ranking dates for evaluation, ranking and approval of eligible applications. Visit your local field office to learn more about eligibility, application, and requirements of financial assistance programs.

- Agricultural Conservation Easements Program (ACEP)
- Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP)
- Environemntal Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)
- Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP)

In Montana, NRCS uses a "Focused Conservation" strategy to guide its EQIP investments. Montana Focused Conservation begins with goals identified in local-level Long Range Plans. Based on those plans, NRCS develops Targeted Implementation Plans (TIPs) to guide on-the-ground implementation. In 2024, nearly $35 million of the total EQIP allocation was contracted through Montana Focused Conservation in 345 contracts impacting more than 350,000 acres.

Program	Funding Allocation ($)	Funding Obligated ($)	Funding Obligated (%)	Underserved (% of Total Applications)	Acres (# in Obligated Contracts)	Funded Applications (#)	Unfunded Applications (#)
ACEP	$30,793,945	$30,793,945	100%	0.0%	34,511	14	56
CSP	$33,290,000	$32,469,179	97.5%	17.4%	941,383	189	229
EQIP	$58,641,582	$57,703,074	98.3%	45.5%	488,922	621	684
Total	**$122,725,527**	**$120,966,198**	**98.6%**		**1,464,816**	**824**	**969**

Per REAP request January 2025

In addition to the funding above, RCPP supported active projects in 2024 including 5 Entity Held Easements for $19,943,150 in project cost and 5 Land Management Rental projects for $61,148,450 in project cost.

Our Nation to Nation Assistance

NRCS Montana focuses conservation efforts on Montana's Tribal nations and producers with staff assigned to each reservation and annual funding allocated through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP). Over the past four years, tribal producers in Montana have successfully competed for more than 15% of the general EQIP funding available each year. In 2024, that totaled more than $8.5 million in EQIP alone.

Tribal producers and partners are encouraged to work with their conservation district and NRCS staff to develop a Targeted Implementation Plan (TIP) that focuses on a specific, local natural resource concern and compete for even more funding. Visit your local office for more information. Learn more about NRCS assistance to Tribal Nations.

Environmental Quality Incentives Program

FISCAL YEAR	MONTANA GENERAL ALLOCATION	TRIBAL ALLOCATION	TRIBAL FUNDS OBLIGATED	TRIBAL CONTRACTS	GENERAL OBLIGATED TO TRIBAL CONTRACTS
2021	$16,562,000	$1,652,000	$3,082,738	33	19%
2022	$18,785,000	$2,054,448	$4,071,200	76	22%
2023	$21,664,000	$2,166,400	$6,366,104	54	29%
2024	$48,146,590	$4,844,649	$8,513,669	59	17%

Conservation Stewardship Program

FISCAL YEAR	MONTANA ALLOCATION	SDFR ALLOCATION	SDFR $ OBLIGATED	SDFR CONTRACTS	SDFR ACRES
2021 Renewal	$9,300,000	$465,000	$495,433	4	57,513
2021 Classic	$10,760,000	$538,000	$29,595	2	1,101
2022 Renewal	$6,628,000	$331,400	$306,044	3	21,987
2022 Classic	$15,824,000	$771,200	$17,424	1	11
2023 Renewal	$10,900,000	$530,000	$0	0	0
2023 Classic	$16,708,372	$835,419	$792,420	6	76,017
2024 Renewal	$8,310,000	$415,500	$200,000	1	14,033
2024 Classic	$24,980,000	$1,249,000	$584,052	5	13,680

There were no applications from Tribal producers or Tribes in the FY22 Classic cycle.
2023 and 2024 renewal contracts impacted by lack of Farm Bill and associated payment limitations.

Alternative Funding Arrangements

In 2023, two of the first EQIP Alternative Funding Arrangements (AFA) in the country were developed. This type of project provides a more flexible means for NRCS to support Tribal conservation projects. Under the AFA, the Tribal nation can directly manage approved funding, qualify for higher funding amounts, and promote the use of traditional ecological knowledge among other accommodations. Both projects support the conservation efforts of Tribal producers to improve forage quantity and quality in areas that have experienced prolonged drought. The conservation objectives of the projects include development of livestock water source and delivery systems that provide efficient redistribution of livestock on grazing lands

- Chippewa Cree Range Unit Drought Resiliency - $300,000
- Fort Belknap Indian Community Livestock Water Development - $200,000

Preserving the Blackfeet Nation's Land Through Stewardship

Gus Vaile and Bud Gray ranch together on the Blackfeet Nation where they are utilizing NRCS assistance to improve t heir operation.

Gus Vaile and Lester "Bud" Gray are business partners. They ranch together on the Blackfeet Nation where they were both born and raised. For the past 13 years, they have also been working with the NRCS through EQIP and CSP.

Participation in these programs helps Gus and Bud reach their goals of reducing the impacts of knapweed while improving their forage all in support of financial success for their cattle operation. The pair started out with NRCS using EQIP to implement rotational grazing, interior fencing, and stock water development. They then enrolled in CSP to do even more management practices – like biological weed control of knapweed. NRCS has also been there to provide technical assistance as Gus and Bud have made changes to their management and infrastructure.

The adoption of grazing management has improved the health of their pastures. By giving plants time to rest and recover, they've seen a significant improvement in the quality of their forage and the health of their cattle. "I give the program a lot of credit for what it's taught us over the last few years," Vaile says. "It's allowed us to say, 'Yeah, we can actually make a profit.' We're hoping to pass it to the next generation—what we've learned."

This operation is a great example of what can be accomplished on tribal lands, according to NRCS Tribal District Conservationist Latrice Tatsey, whose Piikani name is Buffalo Stone Woman. Land stewardship is seen as a cultural responsibility, done not just for the present but for future generations. Tatsey emphasizes that Vaile and Gray's efforts are part of this natural stewardship, aimed at sustaining the ecosystem for their grandchildren and beyond.

Gus Vaile, Bud Gray, and Latrice Tatsey (NRCS) review records that support the operation's CSP contract.

Since working with NRCS, Gus and Bud have seen native grasses become more productive. "You can see the native grasses have taken the land back over instead of the knapweed," Vaile says. Better forage helps put more pounds on their cattle so when they go to market Gus and bud make more money. As a result of their efforts, Vaile and Gray have also been able to financially invest back into their program. Improved grazing lands also increase the value of the land to the Blackfeet Nation.

One of their main goals was to reduce the invasive knapweed, a species that was becoming a serious problem, and bring the grassland back. "Everyone compliments us on what the ground looks like now compared to what it was before," Gray says.

Plant Materials Program

Prescribed burn training for NRCS employees at the Bridger Plant Materials Center in a field of Goshen prairie sandreed.

The mission of the Plant Materials Program is to assemble and test plant species for use in conservation programs to solve natural resource concerns. Staff at Bridger Plant Materials Center assemble, test, and select superior plant populations for addressing specific natural resource conservation needs in Montana and Wyoming. After selections are proven, they are released to the private sector for commercial production.

Conducting studies is an integral part of the Plant Materials Program. Study topics are pursued with input from Montana and Wyoming Plant Materials Committees and the National Plant Materials Program. Two examples of studies completed based on committee topics are:

The effect of three different seeding rates and two different seeding times of sixweeks fescue (Vulpia octoflora [Walter] Rydb.) to suppress cheatgrass (Bromus tectorum L.) in a rangeland setting. Two sixweeks fescue seeding dates (fall and spring) and three seeding rates (3.0, 4.5, and 6.0 PLS lbs/acre) were tested on cheatgrass infested areas at the Bridger PMC from 2021 to 2023 to determine if a native annual grass could replace, compete, and/or create a seasonal priority effect. Sixweeks fescue did not establish in either year. Limiting factors could be the germination rates of each species, as cheatgrass has a superior germination rate to sixweeks fescue, too low of sixweeks fescue seeding rate, and overall weed competition. These results prompted plant materials staff to pursue a trial increasing seeding rates for eight early successional species. Results of the trial will inform a future study to address cheatgrass infestations.

Michelle Majeski (NRCS PMC) and Jesse Kersh (NRCS PMC) taking samples in the collard seeding rate study.

Effect of two different forage collards in the same cover crop mix and seeding rate on stand establishment and biomass production for weed suppression and forage quantity and quality. This 2022-2023 study found Bayou kale can replace Impact forage collard for a cover crop mix and achieve the same density and biomass measurements. All seeding rates (100%, 80%, and 60%) produced the same density and biomass measurements. For weed suppression, 80% or 60% seeding rates are recommended due to differences in weed biomass using 100% seeding rate in 2022. Forage quality was good for the mixes and single species.

Plant selections and study results are shared with field offices and integrated into conservation programs. Education through on-site tours, presentations and internal communication is pursued ongoing to ensure plant materials is integral for NRCS customers and the public.

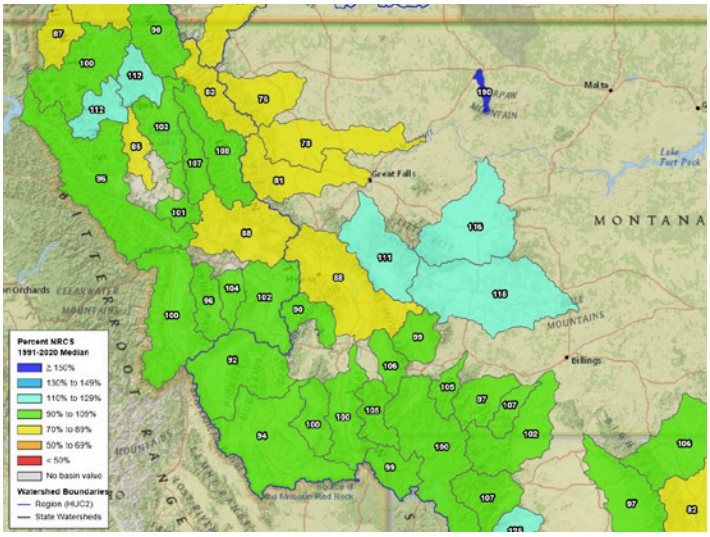
Snow Survey and Water Supply Forecasting Program

The Snow Survey Program collects data related to snow, temperature, precipitation, and more to support managers of Montana's resources.

West Yellowstone SNOTEL site in the summer.

The NRCS Montana Snow Survey Program offers mountain snowpack and precipitation data through manual snowpack measurements (Snow Courses) and the SNOwpack TELemetry (SNOTEL) network to predict snowmelt-driven runoff in the spring and summer. Individuals, organizations, and state and federal agencies rely on this information to make decisions related to agricultural production, fish and wildlife management, municipal and industrial water supply, urban development, flood control, recreation, power generation, and water quality management.

The snow survey program in Montana upgraded 2 SNOTEL stations to include "supersite" sensors in 2024 in addition to regular maintenance of the SNOTEL system. There are now four supersites in the Montana data collection network. Supersites measure additional hydrologic and meteorologic parameters including net radiation, snowpack temperature, soil moisture and temperature, and relative humidity. These parameters expand the use of the SNOTEL network as data can be used in creating physical runoff models and estimating streamflow runoff timing.



You can find Monthly Water Supply Outlook Reports, water supply forecast charts, and more at the Snow Survey Program webpage. Just one helpful tool is the interactive map that gives users control over the data displayed, like the map to the right or near real-time data for individual sites.

Watershed Programs

Sediment washed into the St. Mary River when the siphon structures failed in 2023. Photo courtesy Milk River Project.

NRCS engineers at work.

Implementing effective conservation methods on working lands helps prevent erosion, restore infrastructure, improve water and air quality, increase water filtration, enhance wildlife habitat, and provide other natural resource benefits across watersheds. Working together, NRCS, land managers, ag producers, and communities help to build resilience to drought and floods, while improving water supply.

NRCS Watershed Programs provide technical and financial assistance to local government agencies, tribal organizations and other eligible sponsors to help communities implement conservation practices that address watershed resource concerns.

In 2024, NRCS continued to advance and wrap up 2022 flood recovery efforts by finalizing streambank stabilization measures to protect approximately 16 homes, 7 irrigation diversions, and 2 bridges.

After the 2023 St. Mary siphon failure, we coordinated with the Bureau of Reclamation, the Milk River Joint Board of Control, and local partners to evaluate how to best support impacted private landowners. Part of the NRCS response included securing approximately $900,000 to assist with flood recovery efforts. This funding will be used to address sediment deposited in the St. Mary River during the failure event.

NRCS also assists communities, irrigation districts, dam managers, and others with dam assessments, watershed project investigations and feasibility reports, and project planning.

Soil Survey and National Resources Inventory

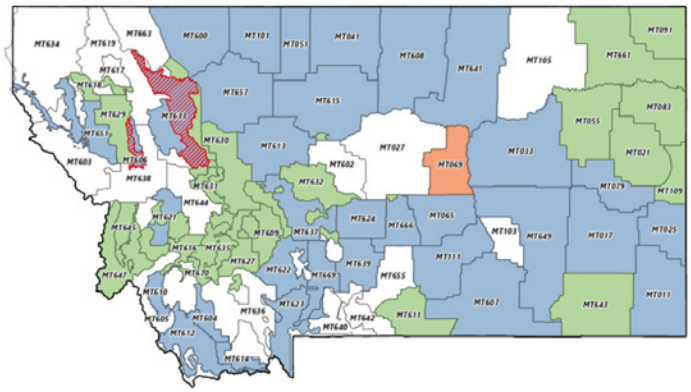
NRI crew members gather information on a rangeland site in 2024 to contribute to the 129 total collection sites.

Nathan Parry (NRCS) digs a soil pit to collect information about the site conditions.

America's vitality is rooted in the soil. Today, private landowners across the country are partnering with NRCS to conserve and improve soil. Additionally, NRCS is a leader in soil science, playing a pivotal role in classifying and mapping soils to deliver science-based soil information to help farmers, ranchers, foresters, and other land managers effectively manage, conserve, and appraise their most valuable investment – the soil.

Soil Survey

NRCS continues to conduct soil survey efforts that update the soil survey database, including the Web Soil Survey. The annual soils refresh provides new soils data, updates to existing soils data, and new soil interpretations. This map shows counties where NRCS specialists conducted surveys and updated data in 2024.



National Resources Inventory

In a related effort, the National Resources Inventory program collects and produces scientifically credible information on the status, condition, and trends of land, soil, water, and related natural resources on the nation's non-federal lands in support of efforts to protect, restore, and enhance the lands and waters of the United States. Data from the NRI provide the foundation for shaping major agri-environmental policy and land use decisions nationwide. In 2024, this meant NRCS specialists collected on-site grazing land field data on 129 non-federal range and pasture sites plus 119 sites for the Bureau of Land Management across Montana. NRI protocols at these range and pasture sites focus on core range and soil health indicators. NRCS specialists also collected cropland and pastureland records for over 1,900 sample sites with a focus on crop rotations and wind/water erosion estimates.

More Information

For more information about NRCS and our services, please visit your local USDA Service Center. Get contact information at www.nrcs.usda.gov/contact.

What's Available in My County?

Find current local financial assistanc eopportunities in Montana, listed by county on the What's Available in My County webpage. In addition to these local initiatives, producers may also apply for statewide and national programs.

NRCS Videos and Success Stories

You can watch videos of many of our conservation staff in action helping Montana's private landowners to implement practices that improve their land and their operation's sustainability.

See the videos on YouTube. Many of the videos also link to success stories that provide further details.