



United States Department of Agriculture



Natural Resources Conservation Service Montana Conservation Update

October 2014 Quarterly Newsletter www.mt.nrcs.usda.gov

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Fiscal Year 2014 Comes to A Close

Joyce Swartzendruber, State Conservationist

Fiscal year 2014 came to a crashing close on September 30. We weathered the storms of the new Farm Bill and new conservation planning software, but I don't think any of us would call it pretty. In spite of the setbacks and changes, our field staff was very productive. We can report that we applied conservation plans on nearly 100,000 acres of forestland, 1,000,000 acres of grazing land, 31,000 acres of irrigated land, 100,000 acres of soil health measures on cropland, and more than 800,000 acres of land treated for water quality. That is a phenomenal year of conservation. For future years, the staff was able to write conservation plans on another half million acres of Montana agricultural and forest land.

Our computer planning software needs some work, but we've provided improvement suggestions to our national office, and they are working to fix things. In addition, we expect that the Client Gateway should be rolled out this spring. That will allow producers to log onto the computer to see their own conservation plans and contracts from home. The testing should be done in December, and we are seeking some progressive farmers and ranchers to volunteer for this test run. Call us if you're interested. The future still holds promise for new Conservation Desktop software to guide conservation processes in the office, as well as a Mobile Planner that will enable streamlined conservation planning on the farm or ranch.

The new Farm Bill consolidated 23 programs into 13, and we implemented them all in seven months. The newest and most innovative program was the Regional Conservation Partnership Program. I met with about 20 different groups, and we are in the process of selecting the final project for funding. The recipient group of cooperating partners will have access to their own pot of funding—through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program, Conservation Stewardship Program, and/or Agricultural Conservation Easements Program—to treat their identified resource concerns. Watch for 2016 funding opportunities for this program in the coming months.



Norwegian Creek Tour Shows Successful Weed Management

In August, project participants, agency partners and interested landowners gathered at the Sitz Angus Ranch near Harrison to discuss the 2008 Noxious Weed Special Initiative in the Norwegian Creek watershed.



This 6 year project, partially funded through NRCS's Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), was designed to treat a massive noxious weed problem at a watershed scale, rather than one ranch at a time. The project was implemented on seven cattle ranches in the Harrison area. In addition to funding on-the-ground noxious weed control efforts, NRCS also supported annual coordination and monitoring by the Madison Valley Ranchlands Group. Additional administrative funding and support came from the Madison Conservation District. The project successfully treated several thousand acres of rangeland infested with knapweed, houndstongue and leafy spurge using herbicide (applied by helicopter, 4-wheeler and backpack) and biological control.

Ron Schott, Madison Valley Ranchlands Group, shared monitoring photos from two out of 55 monitoring sites to show the remarkable change in plant communities as a result of the treatments. The pictures, compared to current condi-



tions on the ground, demonstrate a dramatic reduction in weed density over time and a corresponding increase in the abundance and vigor of native species.

There was also discussion on the tour about the value of extensive monitoring and how this aspect is often lacking in projects due to time and financial constraints. Everyone agreed that having the additional funding for monitoring and coordination was absolutely crucial for identifying new problem areas, keeping landowners and contractors on task, documenting results, and allowing this project to be successful.

The EQIP participants agreed that both the NRCS funding and the cooperation from neighboring ranches were critical for implementing this project. They expressed strong support for watershed-scale conservation planning. Everyone acknowledged that their noxious weed battle is not over yet, and they need to remain dedicated to this effort.



Julie Taylor, (left) and Paula Gunderson, NRCS (right) examine barley residue on one of Taylor's no-till fields.

Soil Health, A Montana Perspective

While burning crop residue each spring on the Fairfield bench in north central Montana may be the norm, you won't find a burned field on land Julie Taylor farms with her husband, Curt. Taylor, a third generation farmer, grew up using conventional agricultural practices. But her view of conventional methods began to change when she and her husband bought their farm and started breaking out old hay stands. She said they could see the difference between the hay land soil that had not been tilled for 30 or 40 years and the cropland that had been tilled and monocropped every year. "The hay land soil was much richer in color and more resilient; we didn't want to lose that."

Taylor's story is a part of "Soil Health, A Montana Perspective," an interview series featuring Montana farmers and ranchers detailing how they have worked to improve soil health. You can read the rest of Taylor's story on the Montana NRCS website at <http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detail-full/mt/home/?cid=stclprdb1248110> and read about and watch interviews of other Montana producers implementing soil health practices.

Soil Health Workshops Scheduled for November Across Montana

Agricultural producers and soil health experts will discuss different facets of soil health at six workshops across Montana the week of November 3, 2014. The workshops are sponsored by the NRCS and the Montana chapter of the Soil and Water Conservation Society.

Workshop Dates and Locations:

Monday, November 3, 2014

Missoula, Montana
 Ruby's Inn and Convention Center
 4825 North Reserve Street
 9:00 a.m. - 4:00 p.m.
 \$15 includes lunch; RSVP by October 24; 406-676-2841 ext. 111
 Speakers: Josh Dukart, Ken Miller

Tuesday November 4, 2014

Bozeman, Montana
 Holiday Inn
 5 Baxter Lane
 9:00 a.m. - 4:00 p.m.
 \$15 includes lunch; RSVP by October 24; 406-587-6852
 Speakers: Keith Berns, Josh Dukart, Ken Miller

Great Falls, Montana
 Holiday Inn
 400 10th Ave. South
 9:00 a.m. - 4:00 p.m.
 \$20 includes lunch; RSVP by October 24; 406-727-7580 ext. 127
 Speakers: Dan Buerkle, Scott Ravenkamp, Jay Fuhrer

Wednesday November 5, 2014

Billings, Montana
 Big Horn Resort
 1801 Majestic Lane
 9:00 a.m. - 4:00 p.m.
 \$15 includes lunch; RSVP by October 15; 406-665-3442 ext. 110
 Speakers: Josh Dukart, Keith Burns, Ken Miller

Glasgow, Montana
 Elk's Club
 304 Main Street
 9:00 a.m. - 4:00 p.m.
 \$15 includes lunch; RSVP by October 24; 406-487-5366 ext. 3
 Speakers: Scott Ravenkamp, Jay Fuhrer

Thursday November 6, 2014

Miles City, Montana
 Country Club
 4th and Eagle
 9:00 a.m. - 4:00 p.m.
 \$15 includes lunch; RSVP by October 24; 406-232-7905 ext. 115
 Speakers: Keith Berns, Ken Miller, Josh Dukart



Private applicator recertification credits and Continuing Education Units (CEUs) for Certified Crop Advisors will be awarded for attending. Sign up for credits at the door when arriving at the workshop.

NRCS provides reasonable accommodations for all persons with disabilities to participate in NRCS programs and activities. If you require special accommodations, please contact Mary Ann Quinn (406) 587-6859 prior to the workshops.

New Grazing Recordkeeping System Offers Ranchers Better Tool

The Montana Grazing Lands Conservation Initiative (GLCI) recently launched a new web-based planning and record keeping program for ranchers and grazing managers. GrazeKeeper is an electronic tool to manage livestock and pasture inventory, grazing plans, and grazing records.

GrazeKeeper, on the web at www.grazekeeper.com, allows users to inventory resources, track in- and out-dates of numerous herds, automatically track weather and precipitation using NOAA data, and map the ranch and pastures with Google Maps. GrazeKeeper is uniquely capable of providing reports by management group (animal herd) or by pasture and

mining several years of data to compile in-depth reports.

Interested users can sign up for GrazeKeeper at www.grazekeeper.com under a free 90-day trial period, which offers full functionality of the program and its valuable reports to users. After the free 90-day trial period, users will receive a payment window to purchase the product. Depending on the number of pastures a user wishes to track with GrazeKeeper, subscriptions run from \$12 per month (for 10 pastures or less) to \$48 per month (for unlimited pastures).



GrazeKeeper

For more information about GrazeKeeper, visit www.grazekeeper.com.

Key Features of GrazeKeeper:

- **Simplifies the task of keeping pasture records**
- **Simplifies the process of creating grazing reports, either by pasture or management group**
- **Facilitates making informed decisions regarding stocking rates, carrying capacity, and grazing movements**
- **Customizes pasture, livestock, and grazing reports**

NRCS Provides \$6.2 Million for Ag, Wetland Easements in Montana



NRCS will invest \$6.2 million to help Montana landowners protect and restore key farmlands, grasslands and wetlands. The 2014 Farm Bill created the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program, or ACEP, to protect critical wetlands and keep lands in farming and ranching for the future.

Nationally, the agency is providing \$328 million for 380 easement projects to protect and restore 32,000 acres of prime farmland, 45,000 acres of grasslands and 52,000

acres of wetlands. In Montana, NRCS will fund three prime farmland easements, two in Gallatin County and one in Ravalli County; one grassland easement in Valley County; and two wetland easements, one in Gallatin County and one in Phillips County.

Through ACEP, private or tribal landowners and eligible conservation partners working with landowners can request assistance from NRCS to protect and enhance agricultural land through an agricultural or wetland easement.

ACEP consolidates three former NRCS easement programs – Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program, Grasslands Reserve Program and Wetlands Reserve Program – into two components – one that protects farmlands and grasslands and another that protects and restores agricultural wetlands.

Learn more about ACEP and other Farm Bill programs on the NRCS website at <http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/national/programs/farmbill/> or visit your local NRCS office.

Arctic Grayling Does Not Warrant Protection Under Endangered Species Act



Big Hole River valley. Photo courtesy Dennis Loreth.

On Aug. 19, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced its finding that the Upper Missouri River Distinct Population Segment (DPS) of the Arctic grayling does not warrant protection under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). The Service reached this conclusion after analyzing the significant conservation efforts carried out by private landowners, as well as federal and state agency partners, to improve conditions for Arctic grayling in the Upper Missouri River basin. These efforts have helped bring the species to the point that it is not in danger of extinction now or in the foreseeable future, i.e., does not meet the definition of an endangered or threatened species under the ESA.

Private landowners in the Big Hole and Centennial valleys worked through a voluntary Candidate Conservation Agreement with Assurances (CCAA) to achieve significant conservation of grayling within its range. Since 2006, more than 250 conservation projects

have been implemented under the CCAA to conserve Arctic grayling and its habitat, including: riparian fencing, irrigation flow reductions, improved irrigation infrastructure, fish ladders, improved stock water systems, and both passive and active stream restoration. Habitat quality



U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Director Dan Ashe announced that the Upper Missouri River Distinct Population Segment of the Arctic grayling does not warrant protection under the Endangered Species Act due to conservation efforts by private landowners and partners.

has improved and grayling populations have more than doubled since the CCAA began in 2006.

The cooperation between the federal and state partners serves as a model for voluntary conservation across the country. Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation developed a new system to improve in-stream flows in the Big Hole Watershed, while the Natural Resources Conservation Service helped implement conservation measures for grayling. Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks administered the Big Hole CCAA, hired biologists to work directly with landowners, and raised grayling to bolster existing populations.

The Federal Register notice and additional information can be found on the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service website at <http://www.fws.gov/mountain-prairie/species/fish/grayling/grayling.htm>.

Montana Joins Drought Resilience Partnership

In July, Montana Governor Steve Bullock announced a new effort to improve long-term drought resilience in Montana through a partnership involving local, state and federal agencies.

“I’m pleased that we are partnering with the Drought Resilience Partnership to host a demonstration project in Montana,” Bullock said. “We’ve been recognized for some time as a leader in proactively addressing drought through planning and mitigation strategies derived from folks on the ground. This demonstration project will add the resources of seven federal agencies to support watershed groups and communities already working to manage the impacts of drought.”

Announced by the White House in November of 2013, the National Drought Resilience Partnership includes the Natural Resources Conservation Service, National Ocean and Atmospheric Administration, the U.S. Department of the Interior, Assistant Secretary for the Army Civil Works, Federal Emergency Management Agency, the Environmental Protection Agency, and the Department of Energy.

Bullock said the demonstration project will focus on the Upper Missouri River Basin above Fort Peck Reservoir, a region where several federal agencies are already working with local communities to improve drought resilience.

The Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation will serve as lead state agency for the partnership. The Montana Department of Environmental Quality, Fish Wildlife and Parks, and the Montana Department of Agriculture will also participate.

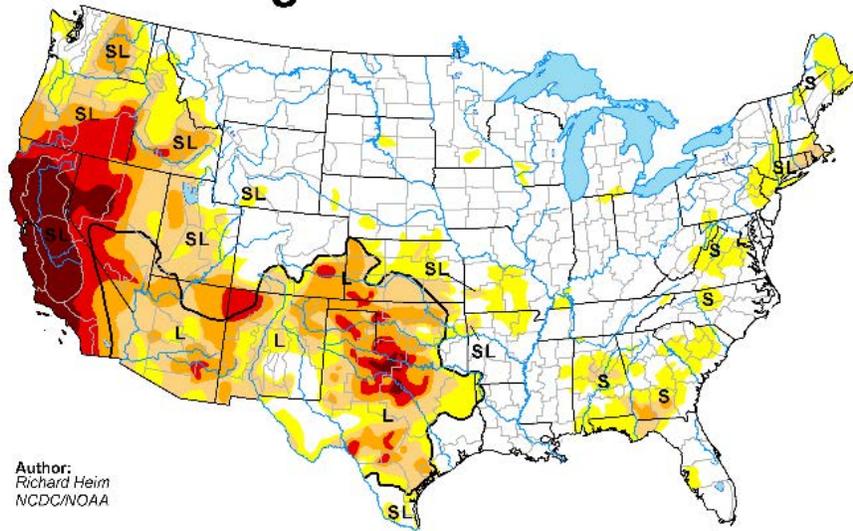
Bullock said some of the possible actions could include better measurement and analysis of water, snowpack and soil moisture data; resources to assist watershed groups in the development and implementation of watershed drought plans, including funding for Big Sky Watershed Corps AmeriCorps members; and resources that help water users, farmers and irrigation districts measure and conserve water, enhance soil health, and complete other “on the ground” projects as part of a watershed drought plan.

For more information, visit <http://www.drought.gov/drought>.

2014 NRI Rangeland Resource Assessment Now Available

The 2014 National Resources Inventory, Rangeland Resource Assessment is now available on the NRCS website at <http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detail/national/technical/nra/nri/?cid=stelprdb1253602>. Results in this report are derived from National Resources Inventory rangeland data collected on-site from 2004 to 2011. The findings reported focus on key issues in rangeland science, including rangeland health, non-native plant species, nonnative and native invasive plant species, bare ground, intercanopy gaps and soil surface aggregate stability. Regional and some state level results are included.

U.S. Drought Monitor



Author:
Richard Heim
NCDC/NOAA

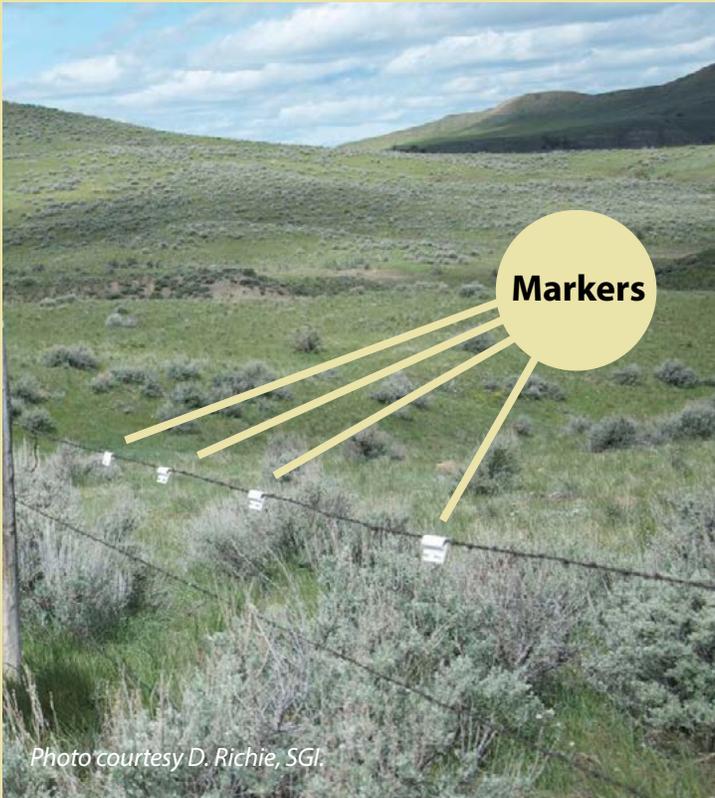


Photo courtesy D. Richie, SGI.

Field and Stream Magazine Hero for a Day Video Series Featured Sage-Grouse Initiative

Field and Stream magazine's Hero for a Day video series chose the Sage-Grouse Initiative to highlight, and filmed on May 9 and 10 near Billings. The focus was on volunteers helping mark fences on ranches to prevent sage-grouse collisions. The story began in Billings with COR Enterprises, which provides adults with disabilities meaningful work and how they produced box after box of the vinyl fencemarkers destined for ranches. Filming ended on the Bequette Ranch near Joliet where volunteers marked fences and planted sagebrush for nesting habitat, food, and cover. The video can be viewed on the *Field and Stream* website <http://www.fieldandstream.com/hero-for-a-day/billings/videos>.



Little Bighorn FFA crew bends the metal into the right shape for an escape ramp. Left to right: Dakota Dossan, Tori North Piegan, Dillon Dossan, Pernell Brown, Isiah Brown. Photo courtesy D. Richie, SGI.



Brothers Dakota (left) and Dillon Dossan—alumni of Little Bighorn FFA just placed the escape ramp in the tank. Photo courtesy D. Richie, SGI.

USDA, MSU Extension to Hold 2014 Farm Bill Meetings Across Montana

USDA and MSU Extension are conducting meetings to inform Montana producers about new programs authorized by the 2014 Farm Bill. These meetings will focus on the Price Loss Coverage, Agricultural Risk Coverage, and the Supplemental Coverage Option, administered by the Risk Management Agency through federal crop insur-



ance providers. MSU Extension will explain a new online Farm Bill decision tool that will be available this fall to assist producers in understanding their options.

A printable schedule with local contact information is available on the Montana Farm Service Agency website at http://www.fsa.usda.gov/Internet/FSA_File/2014mtusdamsufarmbillmtgs.pdf



Upcoming Events

For up-to-date conservation and agriculture-related events and activities in Montana, visit

<http://www.mt.nrcs.usda.gov>.

October 2014

- ❑ Young Ag Leadership Conference, October 3-5, 2014, Bozeman
- ❑ General Composting Principles Workshop, October 21, 2014, Shelby
- ❑ General Composting Principles Workshop, October 22, 2014, Hobson
- ❑ Montana Farmers Union Convention, October 23-25, 2014, Great Falls

November 2014

- ❑ Soil Health Workshop, November 3, 2014, Missoula
- ❑ Soil Health Workshop, November 4, 2014, Great Falls
- ❑ Soil Health Workshop, November 4, 2014, Bozeman
- ❑ Soil Health Workshop, November 5, 2014, Wolf Point
- ❑ Soil Health Workshop, November 5, 2014, Billings
- ❑ Soil Health Workshop, November 6, 2014, Miles City
- ❑ Montana State University Celebrate Agriculture, November 7-8, 2014, Bozeman
- ❑ Montana Farm Bureau Federation Convention, November 9-12, 2014

December 2014

- ❑ Montana Grain Growers Convention, December 2-4, 2014, Great Falls
- ❑ Soil Health Workshop, December 3, 2014, Hardin
- ❑ Montana Organic Association Conference, December 4-6, 2014, Great Falls
- ❑ Montana Pulse Day, December 5, 2014, Great Falls

Human Resources Report

New Permanent Employees

- *Austin Allen, Soil Conservation Technician, Ronan*
- *Zach Rich, Hydrologic Technician, Bozeman*
- *Chelan Babineau, Hydrologic Technician, Bozeman*
- *Landon Krogstad, Rangeland Management Specialist, Roundup*
- *Lauren Manninen, Soil Conservationist, Ekalaka*

Promotions

- *Eric Larson, Hydrologic Technician to Hydrologist, Bozeman*
- *Krist Walstad, District Conservationist, Roundup, to District Conservationist, Joliet*
- *Carlee Elke, Soil Conservationist, Dickinson, ND, to Soil Conservationist, Rocky Boy*
- *Paul Smidansky, Civil Engineer, Glendive, to Civil Engineer (Area), Great Falls*
- *Suzann Kienast-Brown, Soil Scientist, Ogden, UT, to Soil Scientist (GIS Specialist), Bozeman*
- *Austin Shero, Soil Conservationist, Corsicana, TX, to District Conservationist, Roundup*

Reassignments

- *Scott Morton, District Conservationist, Fort Belknap to Havre*
- *Danny Pratt, Soil Conservationist, Roundup, to District Conservationist, Chinook*
- *Mike Lucas, Soil Conservationist, Las Animas, CO, to Rangeland Management Specialist, Lewistown*
- *Jonathan George, District Conservationist, Tule Lake, CA, to Helena*
- *Monty Lane, Rangeland Management Specialist, Douglas, WY, to Harlowton*
- *Dezerae Lorash, Soil Conservationist, Lewistown to Chinook*
- *Stephanie Shoemaker, Ecologist, Idaho Falls, ID, to Missoula*

Losses

- *Bobbi Sinks, Student Trainee Soil Conservationist, Jordan*
- *Larry Fox, Soil Conservation Technician, Forsyth*

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