

Montana GLCI Demonstration Project Report: 2017

Montana Range Days 2017

Introduction:

Montana Range Days (MRD) is an annual event which rotates across the state every two years and is hosted by a local conservation district and comprised of a local planning committee. It is the largest range education program in Montana and began in 1976 in Jordan, MT. and features our state's largest natural resource is rangelands, grazable pasture and forestland, which comprises approximately 70% of Montana. For 2017 and 2018, Carbon Conservation District, located in Joliet, MT is excited to host MRD, which will be held at the Carbon County Fairgrounds, Red Lodge, MT, June 19-21, 2017.

Objective:

The objective of this educational event is to introduce, teach and test participants about range plants in their natural environment. Areas of competition include plant identification, anatomy and physiology, range management, plant and weed collection, soil health and public speaking.

Study Area:

For 2017, the study area was located in Carbon County, specifically; the base camp was located at the fairgrounds in Red Lodge, MT. A plant identification site was set up just outside the fairgrounds within a block of the area. The field area, for the training and testing sites were located at the Ellis Cattle Company, participants traveled in busses to the site, which was approximately 20 miles from Red Lodge toward Luther, MT.

Methods:

Monday Evening the illustrated talks began at the Red Lodge High School. Participants in this event can be from 4-19 years old. Each person chose a range related topic and presented an illustrated (PowerPoint) talk, which lasted 6-8 minutes. After the talk, each participant answered questions from a panel of three judges. Jean Blackman, Cascade, MT was the winner of the illustrated talk's event.

Tuesday morning after breakfast, the participants were loaded in buses and driven out to the training site; the Ellis Cattle Company graciously hosted the day. The lunch of BBQ lamb donated and prepared by the Montana Woolgrowers was served at the ranch. The Ellis Cattle Company also hosted the testing site on Wednesday. "We cannot do this event without the ranchers, like Alvin and Maureen Ellis and family, who provided the land for the competition," said Scott Blain, chairman of the local planning committee.

Divisions include: Buckaroos (age 4-6), Ecosystem Explorers (age 7-8), Superstarters (age 9-11), Wranglers (age 12-13), FFA Youth/Open Youth (age 14-19, not graduated from high school) and Rancher/Open Adult. Workshops in an outdoor setting include plant anatomy, plant identification, range and soil sites, inventory and monitoring, stocking rates and utilization and ranch planning.

Tuesday evening banquet provided an opportunity to for participants to unwind and enjoy a delicious meal. All meals were catered by the Carbon County 4-H Interstate Exchange, with Nikki Bailey and Sheri Hatten from the Carbon County Extension Office heading up the team. The beef for the supper was provided by The Montana Beef Council along with Sysco.

Three \$1000 scholarships were awarded during the banquet. The Montana Range Days scholarship was awarded to Daniel Levy, Bridger, MT; the Harold and Lillian Jensen Scholarship was awarded to Amanda Williams, Miles City, MT and the Bob and Donna Sitz Memorial Scholarship was awarded to Cache Younkin, Glasgow, MT. The Montana Range Days Hall of Fame inductee was Mike Sjostrom. Mike was hired as an Associate Loan Officer by Montana Livestock Ag Credit (MLACI) in 1981 and served as Vice President from 1986 until his retirement. Prior to working for Montana Livestock, Mike was employed by the Farmers Home Administration. He is a third generation Montanan, raised on a cow/calf/wheat operation near Malta in Phillips County. In 2006, Mike moved his family to Malta and continued to work for MLACI serving customers in the northeastern part of Montana through his retirement in February 2017. Mike and his wife, Deb, have two daughters. Mike enjoys fishing, boating, local history, attending sporting events and activities in which his daughters are involved. The banquet was followed by music by Dan Kosel and the Acoustic Waterfall where dancing was encouraged.

Results:

In 2017, Montana Range Days welcomed over 250 participants of all ages: participants of all ages, which included preschool through high school, FFA and 4-H teams, home schooled students, professional instructors, farmers and ranchers. The results of all divisions can be found on the website at www.montanarangedays.macdnet.org.

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Lake County Grazinglands Soil Health Assessments

Summary of Project

Over the past five years, Lake County CD and the Ronan NRCS Field Office have focused significant efforts towards grazinglands improvements. Producers are now beginning to implement grazingland improvements. Many of these grazers are first working to implement improvements on irrigated pastures. Irrigated pastures have the potential to respond to grazing improvements more quickly than dryland or range pastures. The purpose of this study will be to attempt to quantify soil health changes that occur as a result of management-related grazing improvements. Rarely does an opportunity present itself to do soil analysis on a broad scale with multiple producers concurrently adopting similar grazing systems. Because so many producers within Lake County are in the beginning stages of implementing grazing improvements we have an excellent opportunity to gather valuable baseline soil health data before changes are implemented. Soil testing will be conducted on an annual basis while grazing improvements are being made. It is expected that this study will last for 10 years.

Project Sponsor

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The Rumen and the Root: Exploring the Correlation between Herd Efficiency and Soil Health in Grazing Systems

Summary of Project

The project will include four (4) producers that represent the typical grazing scenarios in Pondera County. Two producers are located approximately 30 miles east of Conrad, where grazing systems are mainly introduced pasture and a limited amount of native range. The other two producers are located 45 miles west of Conrad, on the rocky mountain front, where grazing systems are predominately native range.

With a national spotlight on soil health, producers in Pondera County are focusing more and more on this topic. Historically, soil health studies in Pondera County have focused solely on cropping systems, with little to no emphasis on grazing. Producers want to know how incorporating grazing in cropping systems will affect the system; how different grazing strategies affect soil health, and is there a correlation between soil health and herd efficiency. This project will investigate all these questions by monitoring four distinctly different grazing systems found throughout Pondera County.

Project Sponsor

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2017 State Winter Grazing Seminar- Glasgow, MT

Project Summary

The winter grazing seminar is an annual event, which rotates across the state. In 2017, the event was held January 17-18 in Glasgow, MT, welcoming more than 100 people from around the state, who gathered to listen, learn and share about several aspects of livestock management. The two-day event was organized by the Valley County Conservation District with support from the Rangeland Resources Executive Committee (RREC), and several local sponsors. The first day was packed with speakers addressing topics of rangeland monitoring, song birds and livestock grazing, improving management efficiency, winter feeding and forage management and Burke Teichert discussing profitability in the beef cattle business. Participants enjoyed insight from Aaron Flint, who emceed the event.

The first day concluded with a very inspiring evening banquet. The Horse Ranch family of south west Valley County were presented the range producer of the year award and Ray Neumiller, Rangeland Management Specialist at the Glasgow BLM Field Office, was the recipient of the agency leader of the year award. Bruce Vincent; a highly sought after motivational speaker and business man; sparked the group's interest with a highly entertaining presentation on understanding societal concerns about the environment and animal husbandry.

The second day was equally informative with presentations by the National Weather Service, MSU Beef Extension Specialist, and the Lead Research Scientists from Fort Keogh Livestock Range & Research Laboratory addressing the group. Dr. Angus McIntosh, private property rights expert, concluded the seminar with an in-depth and exceptional talk on knowing your rights when dealing with federal lands.

Project Sponsor/Project Coordinator

Valley County Conservation District

Montana Range Tour- Big Timber, MT

Project Summary

This annual event is sponsored by the Rangeland Resources Executive Committee and the local Conservation Districts. For 2017, the event was held in Sweet Grass County with Big Timber as the backdrop. Write up by Marni Thompson, NRCS: “As NRCS employees, deadlines and paperwork can be overwhelming, but attending the Montana Range Tour and hearing producer’s excitement over changes they had made was just what the doctor ordered. We loaded the buses on yet another smoky September day and headed to the Dovetail Ranch located in the boonies, 45 minutes north of Winnett. Craig Iverson gave a great presentation of his large-scale water development that included a deep well, two 15,000-gallon storage tanks, 25 miles of pipe & 19 water tanks. The water development and 19 miles of cross fences converted a 3-pasture system to a 9-pasture system. The new grazing system includes full season rest for one pasture each year followed by a deferment for the other pastures. Grazing in each pasture is no longer than 30 days. All of Craig Iverson’s cross fences were 2-wire permanent electric. Craig is sold on his new fence and won’t be converted back to barbwire. The Iverson Family, with typical rancher innovation, marked the fence for sage grouse with heavy duty twine instead of vinyl markers. It has worked really well since they figured out the right knot that wouldn’t slide on the smooth wire.

After a quick bite to eat at the old Watzenluft homestead, we loaded the dusty bus and headed to the 44 Ranch ran by the Delaney Family. I think NRCS had their quota for compliments filled just after Mike Delaney started his presentation. Mike was originally very skeptical of the government but couldn’t say enough good about all of the help he has received from the NRCS. Mike installed water developments, and cross fences to facilitate a grazing system which incorporated a year of full season rest followed by a year of deferment. Mike can’t believe the difference a full season of rest has made to his rangeland. Even in a drought year he has plenty of grass and is seeing more sage grouse than he has in years. Mike Delaney and his family also recently entered into a permanent easement with Montana Land Reliance. Mike helpfully gave some tips for planning an easement, especially on the tax consequences. We ended the tour with an awesome demonstration of drones and Cowcams, which are used on the ranch to check cows and water tanks. The day concluded with great tasting beef at the Eagles in Lewistown and our uplifting keynote speaker Lane Nordlund.

The second day started under the shade of a cottonwood tree on the banks of Big Spring Creek. Karen Hoffman and an FWP biologist explained the Big Spring Restoration project which was no small feat. The large spring creek was straightened in this section in 1961 and has since been experiencing severe erosion that has actually affected landowners both up and down the creek as well as the town of Lewistown. The effects of the creek straightening were the beginning of the 310 law in Montana. The project included adding meanders back to the creek, tree plantings, grass seeding, and fencing. Trout are already responding to their new habitat. This was a very expensive project and included lots of partners that came to the table. After wandering the banks and watching trout sipping flies, we headed to the big town of Winifred. We had awesome burger at the community center and had an unexpected tour of the museum, sign shop and International Suites. Yes, International Suites in Winifred. It is a hotel with each room representing a certain location in the world. The master suite includes statues brought in from

Greece. Pretty fine digs for hunting in the breaks.

The tour ended at the Wickens Ranch hunting lodge where Matt and his wife operate a diversified operation consisting of livestock, feedlot and an outfitting business. Matt Wickens inspired the group with some major changes he has made on his operations with yearlings, temporary electric fence, water developments and intensive grazing. Matt can't believe the positive changes that he has seen on his rangeland by incorporating a grazing system that allows adequate recovery time for his plants. Other interesting operation changes are the use of swath grazing vs. feeding hay bales in the winter time and changing his calving date from Feb/March to May/June. In conclusion, we would like to thank the Petroleum and Fergus Conservation Districts who hosted a great tour and are an inspiration to all."

Project Sponsor/Coordinator

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2017 Soil Health Bus Tour- SWCS

Project Summary

The Montana GLCI was one of many sponsors for this event.

Excerpts from the story written by Shalaine Watson, Billings Field Office NRCS Soil Conservationist, Marni Thompson, Great Falls NRCS Area Planner for the SWCS newsletter:

This two-day bus tour started out in Billings with a stop in Miles City to pick up additional participants. The first official stop was at Dan Buerkle's place in Baker, MT, sharing his journey of implementing the soil health principles over roughly 27 years. On day two: The bus tour then traveled on to the Dakota Lakes Research Farm in Pierre, SD, where Dr. Dwayne Beck, research manager, spoke to participants about diverse rotations on dryland and irrigated land, chemical controls involved, grazing cover crops, as well as some ongoing trials at the farm. That evening the group arrived in Bismarck, ND, just in time to interrupt the three-day Soil Health Academy going on at the Brown Ranch just outside of town. Ray Archuleta, retired NRCS conservation agronomist, David Brandt, Ohio farmer, and Dr. Allen Williams, Co-chair of Grass Fed Exchange, joined Gabe Brown to teach the course. Our group was lucky enough to get a quick tour of cattle grazing cover crops and free-range chickens following the cattle. Gabe and Paul Brown explained their direct marketing facility with Farmers Markets and on-line ordering, and meat processing cooperative the Browns implement in their business. The final stop was at the Burleigh Co. Conservation District-owned Menoken Farm, near Menoken, ND. Jay Fuhrer, NRCS North Dakota soil health specialist, discussed the compost program, cover crops in the cash crop rotation, and implementing cattle grazing on the covers using electric fence. Fuhrer wrapped up our journey by summarizing all that we had seen and heard, and revisiting the principles of soil health – soil armor, minimizing soil disturbance, plant diversity, continual living plants and livestock integration.

Project Sponsor/Coordinator

Montana Soil and Water Conservation Society

Ann Fischer, District Conservationist, NRCS Field Office, Baker, MT