



Montana NRCS Conservation Update

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Partners Take a Look at the Field Office of the Future

Joyce Swartzendruber, State Conservationist

In March, every state conservationist for the Natural Resources Conservation Service and president of state conservation district associations received a letter from Dave White, NRCS chief, and Gene Schmidt, president of the National Association of Conservation Districts, asking them to outline a vision of what each state's field offices of the future will look like. Montana's Field Office of the Future plan was developed with our partners at the Montana Association of Conservation Districts and Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation.

We received more than 350 comments and a lot of ideas from employees and partners across the state. Most of the respondents said they were opposed to closing offices, but they were in favor of getting our field staff into the field working with customers. We analyzed the distribution of our offices in comparison to surrounding states and determined that we are well spread now and would gain no efficiencies in getting to the field for conservation planning and implementation by closing offices. The respondents wanted to see our staff in the field more, but they also wanted a presence in the office when customers drop in. That's hard to do, particularly where we have small staff numbers and only part-time assistance from the conservation districts. However, getting our staff into the field is a part of the other plan that NRCS Chief White requested: the 90% Solution. These two plans are integrally linked, and we must address both of them together.

Chief White instructed NRCS state conservationists to find ways to ensure that 90% of our technical employees' time is spent directly assisting farmers, forest landowners, and ranchers. One solution that we are pursuing is to reduce the administrative burden on some of the NRCS district conservationists. The 90% solution for Montana may include an option where two or three field offices are supervised by one district conservationist. Local district conservationists would retain their responsibilities to conservation districts, but forego some responsibilities for administrative tasks and supervision, and become more technical in their duties.

In this scenario, multi-county district conservationists would take on additional personnel to supervise, plus assume more administrative tasks and civil rights compliance for more offices. We don't have a statewide plan yet showing how some of the offices may be combined, but the ultimate goal is that more technical employees' time will be freed up to spend in the field. Area and state office technical staff will also be given specific goals to ensure a larger percentage of their time is spent on the farm or working on specific conservation plans or designs for landowners.

If you would like to see the Field Office of the Future plan or the 90% Solution for Montana, please feel free to ask for a copy at your local NRCS or conservation district office or email MT-nrcs-publications@one.usda.gov or call 406-587-6811.

NRCS Hosts Ladies Day on the Range



Participants at Ladies Day on the Range learn about rangeland monitoring from NRCS employees.

Almost 20 women from two counties participated in Ladies' Day on the Range, held near Jordan, Mont., on June 21, 2012. This event, hosted by the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service and the Garfield County Conservation District, was a chance for some "women's only" rangeland management education.

The day started with NRCS District Conservationist Sue FitzGerald of Garfield County talking about the importance of rangeland and maintaining rangeland health. Jenney Woodward, NRCS rangeland management specialist, then spoke about how to identify the plants that indicate rangeland health. Flags around the area marked important plants to identify, such as bluebunch wheatgrass, western yarrow, green needlegrass, and Wyoming big sagebrush.

Kami Kilwine, NRCS rangeland management specialist based

in the Forsyth field office, talked about identifying ecological sites by taking into consideration the topography, soil texture, and soil depth of the rangeland. By using these factors and a worksheet provided by NRCS, participants learned how to determine the kind of rangeland they were standing on, and use that information to calculate the site's potential production.

Next, NRCS specialists taught the participants how to set up and maintain rangeland monitoring sites. To monitor a site, select a representative area that can be returned to at the same time each year. By using a scientific approach to monitoring rangeland health, landowners can have a point of reference on which to base their management decisions, especially in regards to grazing.

To finish off the Ladies Day on the Range, Charlene Rich, owner of the property where the Range Day was held and

former executive director the Montana Beef Council, taught participants how to be beef industry and range advocates. She instructed them in the art of using their "elevator speeches" to convince others the importance of the beef industry. The ladies broke into small groups and discussed how they would approach someone who accused them of abusing the land or wasting natural resources.

The day concluded with a Dutch oven dinner sponsored by the Garfield County Bank. "I've lived here all my life, and there were plants I never knew. It was really beneficial to know what the grasses are used for," said Rich. Another Ladies' Day on the Range may be on next year's calendar, as NRCS continues to work to educate and inform the public about the importance of conserving rangeland.

Ladies Day on the Range



Charlene Rich, rancher near Jordan, discusses the importance of knowing facts about agriculture and being able to support the cattle industry with those facts.



Sue FitzGerald, NRCS district conservationist in Jordan, explains why rangeland conservation is important, citing facts written in the book, "The Worst Hard Time," which details reasons behind the dust storms of the 1930s.

The Dust Bowl

THE DUST BOWL, a two-part, four-hour documentary series by Ken Burns, will air November 18 and 19, 2012, 8:00-10:00 p.m. ET on PBS (check local listings). The film chronicles the environmental catastrophe that, throughout the 1930s, destroyed the farmlands of the Great Plains, turned prairies into deserts, and unleashed a pattern of massive, deadly dust storms that for many seemed to herald the end of the world. It was the worst manmade ecological disaster in American history.

A full companion website for THE DUST BOWL (<http://www.pbs.org/kenburns/dustbowl/>) will launch in November and will include clips from the series, outtakes and transcripts from interviews, information about the making of the film, archival footage and photographs and music, as well as educational outreach materials and lesson plans that will enable teachers to use the Dust Bowl as a historical lens to explore changes happening to the environment today. "The Dust Bowl: An Illustrated History," written by Dayton Duncan with a preface by Ken Burns, will accompany the film. The book will be on sale in October.

Conservation Corps for Montana

The Montana Conservation Corps was at work in Daniels County. A group of six young adults completed more than 19 acres of a shelterbelt renovation in Daniels County in just under one week. The crew planted and installed fabric for more than 500 trees after spraying the areas with a weed treatment. They then watered each tree before moving on to the next. They received the renovation plan and took it from there with little extra guidance. They camped in the farmer's yard and prepared their own meals. The farmer chose to use the crew as the project would have taken him over a month to complete on his own. The end result was the renovation of valuable shelterbelts in Daniels County, providing erosion control, a snow trap, and wildlife benefits.



NRCS Awards \$2.5 Million in Conservation Innovation Grants for Montana Projects

NRCS has awarded more than \$2.5 million in Conservation Innovation Grants (CIG) to five entities for Montana projects that test and prove innovative approaches to conserving America's private lands.

Recipients will demonstrate innovative approaches to improving soil health, increasing pollinator and wildlife habitat, addressing livestock manure management, producing on-farm energy savings and fostering water quality trading markets. Grant winners pay 50 percent of all project costs.

Awardees of Montana projects include the Cascade County Conservation District, Clark Fork Coalition, Rocky Mountain Front Weed Roundtable, Rocky Mountain Bird Observatory, and the Xerces Society, Inc. Project details are below:

Cascade County Conservation District - \$1 million, Agricultural Application of an Innovative Mid-scale Wind Turbine Design. The goal of the project is to demonstrate the viability of an appropriately scaled, reliable, cost-effective and visually acceptable wind turbine. This will fill a largely vacant mid-size niche in the turbine market. This project is intended to demonstrate that an innovative, silo-shaped, reliable, and easily-maintained 100kW wind turbine, the Zilo®, can be installed, owned and operated on site while decreasing long-term costs, displacing the use of fossil fuels, blending into the landscape and giving operators a significant degree of control over their energy futures.

Clark Fork Coalition - \$54,000, Evaluation of Watson Horizontal Flat-rate Fish Screen in Montana. The

goal of the project is to evaluate, improve and promote a promising fish screen technology for small-scale irrigation diversions that is locally fabricated in Montana.

Rocky Mountain Front Weed Roundtable - \$220,000, Implementation of a Cost-effective, Broad-scale, Integrated Weed Management Model. The project's goal is to change weed management from less effective treatment of established weed patches to cost-effective, integrated weed management using all appropriate techniques. This will be carried out while maintaining or enhancing the ecological and economic health of the Rocky Mountain Front. This project will differ from traditional approaches by focusing on strategies that will maintain agricultural economic values by preventing expansion of weed populations, based on coordinated, strategic focus on the set of highest priority actions with positive economic returns. The project will employ integrated pest management (e.g., prevention, locally successful biological controls, spraying and pulling) to focus on the priority actions necessary to achieve broad-scale success across watersheds and provide a framework for long-term sustainability.

Rocky Mountain Bird Observatory - \$257,000, Informing Habitat Enhancement and Fence-Marking Projects to Increase Greater Sage-grouse and Other Sagebrush Obligate Bird Populations. The project goal is to develop a decision support tool. Decision support systems are important tools in the adaptive management process due to the uncertain nature of managing natural resources. The tool will raise awareness for sagebrush-obligate birds

Be the First to Know



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and determine most cost-effective fence markers.

The Xerces Society, Inc. - \$998,000, Next Steps in Pollinator Conservation: Operations and Maintenance, Organic Habitat Restoration, Expanding Seed Mix Choices, and Assessing Conservation Effectiveness. This project proposes to develop a long-term operations and maintenance guidance for established habitats. This will advance the science of habitat restoration using organic technique, will increase the availability of high value plant materials and will assess the effectiveness of restoration for pollinator communities.

NRCS administers CIG as part of the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP). Grants are awarded to state and local governments, federally recognized Indian tribes, non-governmental organizations and individuals. NRCS uses CIG to invest in innovative, on-the-ground conservation technologies and approaches with the goal of wide-scale adoption to address water quality and quantity, air quality, energy conservation, and environmental markets, among other natural resource issues.

For a complete list of CIG awardees visit the [national NRCS website](#).



Working Effectively with American Indians workshop participants present a planning exercise that used the Indigenous Stewardship Guide with the conservation planning process to address a unique resource issue.

Montana Hosts “Working Effectively with American Indians” Training

Forty-six NRCS employees from Montana and four from Washington state attended the Working Effectively with American Indians training delivered by the National Employee Development Center, Sept. 10 -14, at the University of Montana’s Flathead Lake Biological Station located on the Flathead Indian Reservation, home of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes.

A cadre of three NEDC instructors from around the country (Utah, Oklahoma and Colorado) work hand-in-hand with local NRCS staff and Tribal presenters to deliver this unique learning experience.

It has been a decade or more since NRCS in Montana hosted a Working Effectively with American Indians workshop. Since that time we have many employees that are new to working with Tribes. These employees are either in a location where they will work directly with Tribes and Tribal members or are in support roles.

Providing service and delivering programs to Tribes and Tribal members can be challenging due to differences in culture, land status, Tribal sovereignty, Tribal laws or ordinances and the Department of Interior’s rules and regulations. In addition, the federal govern-



Mike Dolson, (seated front and center) Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribal member and local instructor/ historian, and Carol Crouch, (seated front and right) workshop instructor and National American Indian/ Alaska Native Emphasis Program Manager, lead a discussion at the Working Effectively with American Indians workshop. Seated to the left is Allison Milodragovich, soil conservationist, Choteau, and to the rear is Blake Stiffarm, soil conservation technician, Fort Belknap.

ment (including NRCS) has a trust responsibility to provide services to American Indians. The goal of this course is to provide an understanding of how NRCS can assist Tribes and Tribal members to participate in our programs, how we can work with Tribes in meaningful Government to Government consultation to ensure that any barriers or challenges with our programs are identified so that they may be addressed and, ultimately, how NRCS employees can provide better service so that Tribal lands and resources can participate in our programs as effectively as possible.



Levi Montoya, NRCS district conservationist from Colorado, provides instruction at the Working Effectively with American Indians workshop.

Conrad Field Office Hosts Cover Crop Tour

In June, 29 attendees visited an equipment dealer, an ongoing cover crop site, and Montana State University Western SARE (Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education) plots in Pondera County as part of a cover crop tour. Participants had the opportunity to learn about types of no-till drills and the pros and cons associated with “hoe” type and “disk” type drills. The group traveled to the Oehlke Farm to view Montana State Extension and Western SARE research plots. These plots are seeded to legumes, brassicas, tap root, and fibrous root species, totaling 10 different combinations with eight different species.

Attendees then rotated through three stations set up on a 160-acre cover crop field. Joyce Trevithick, NRCS area agronomist in Great Falls, used soil samples from sod, no-till, and conventional tilled fields to demonstrate infiltration and water holding capacity. Here the group discussed

the capability of the soil to function as desired and what properties are necessary for a healthy soil to function.

Stacy Eneboe, NRCS district conservationist in Conrad, demonstrated soil aggregation and how management such as conventional tilled soils, no-till soils, and never tilled soils react differently when suspended in water. Participants were encouraged to use the slake test and a notebook to monitor management changes over time. A quick overview of the soil food web was discussed and participants were given a demonstration on how to collect soil samples for microbial analysis.

Rick Bandy, NRCS area soil scientist in Great Falls, utilized soil pits to look at cover crop rooting depths and discussed soil properties associated with healthy soil. Participants discussed the importance of soil organic matter and its effects on the soil system. The take-home message was, “leave a living root in the soil as long as possible.”

The last stop was the Western Triangle Ag Research Center. Jane Holzer, Montana Salinity Control Asso-



ciation, the Conrad NRCS office, and the research center have been seeding cover crop demonstration plots since 2009 as part of a spring wheat rotation. Multi species cool season cover crops are being seeded in place of the fallow year and monitored throughout the growing season. Spring wheat seeded after one year of a multispecies cover crop has not shown any significant yield increases. Consequently, soil health is about the system, not about a one-time, one-year fix.



NRCS is Montana's DU Conservation Partner of the Year

Ducks Unlimited awarded the Natural Resources Conservation Service its Montana Ducks Unlimited Conservation Partner of the Year award at the DU Montana convention in Great Falls. DU CEO Dale Hall was on hand to present the award to NRCS State Conservationist Joyce Swartzendruber.

“NRCS has risen to the challenge of slowing wetland and grassland losses

here in Montana by stepping up efforts to conserve key habitats through programs such as the Wetland Reserve Program (WRP),” said Bob Sanders, DU manager of conservation programs for Montana. “Through DU’s partnership with NRCS, we have brought on additional staff to help deliver a wide range of programs across the state. It is a great example of how agencies, conservation organi-

zations and, most importantly, private landowners can combine efforts to accomplish conservation goals.”

The WRP is a voluntary Farm Bill program that gives private landowners the opportunity to restore and protect wetlands on their farms and ranches. These wetland restoration projects provide valuable ecological services on the landscape, including water quality improvement, flood control, waterfowl and wildlife habitat, and recreational opportunities.

Montana ranks number three in the United States for producing ducks. The state continues to lose grassland at a staggering rate of more than 10,000 acres of native prairie each year. In addition, some 1 million acres of CRP contracts will be expiring over the next 12 months.

The award is presented annually to agencies and individuals that made outstanding contributions to the conservation of wetland and waterfowl habitat in Montana.



Bob Sanders, manager of conservation programs, Montana Ducks Unlimited; Joyce Swartzendruber, state conservationist, Natural Resources Conservation Service; Nora Taylor, state chairperson, Montana Ducks Unlimited; and Dale Hall, chief executive officer, Ducks Unlimited, Inc.

Fifth National Conference on Grazing Lands

Plans are underway to hold the Fifth National Conference on Grazing Lands, Dec. 9-12 in Orlando, Florida. This conference is sponsored by the Grazing Lands Conservation Initiative (GLCI), which is a nationwide collaboration of individuals and organizations working together to maintain and improve the management, productivity, and health of the Nation’s privately owned grazing land. NRCS is one of the primary partners in the initiative. For more information about the conference, visit the national GLCI Web site. (<http://www.glci.org/>)

New Publications

Five additional invasive plant species pamphlets that can help you manage weeds on your land are now available:

- *Ecology and Management of Common St. Johnswort*
- *Ecology and Management of Invasive Hawkweeds*
- *Ecology and Management of Salt Cedar*
- *Ecology and Management of Sulfur Cinquefoil*
- *Ecology and Management of Whitetop*

To request copies contact MT-nrcs-publications@one.usda.gov.

Please include your name, phone number, email address and mailing address, as well as the name of the publication and the quantity you would like. There is no charge for these publications.



“EQIP” ing for Success

“Out here on my property, we have three major limiting factors: water, access, and fire danger,” says Charlene Rich, a cattle producer near Jordan, Mont., and former executive director of the Montana Beef Council. By working with the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), Rich was able to receive assistance to reduce these factors and while improving the health of her land. In 2007, Rich signed up for the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) by contacting her NRCS district conservationist, Sue FitzGerald. FitzGerald, along with her team at the NRCS field office, designed a system that would improve the health of Rich’s rangeland while addressing current concerns. With help of NRCS, Charlene was able change the limiting factors to productive factors.

To alleviate the water concern, a group of engineers helped Rich develop an alternative water source for her cattle. Before working with NRCS, Rich watered her cattle out of six marginal reservoirs and always feared losing that water during a dry year. By putting in two new water tanks at key sites, the cattle were enticed to utilize the rangeland in a more even manner, and Rich was relieved to have obtained a reliable water source.

In order to create the most efficient grazing management system possible, NRCS also worked with Rich to develop about 4,700 feet of cross-fence to be built in 2013. The fence, like the water tanks, will be installed according to NRCS design specifications in order to ensure it is long lasting and not a danger to wildlife. NRCS rangeland management specialists inventoried Rich’s land in order to

design a grazing system that was both practical for the producer and good for the soil. The fence will provide the cattle access to grass that had previously gone untouched.

The final concern, fire danger, required a bit more work for both Rich and the agency. The property had tree cover as dense as 1,900 trees per acre. With the trees this crowded, they posed a fire hazard, the excess

shade prevented grass from flourishing, and the new trees had too much competition to grow to their full height. NRCS helped cost-share a tree thinning project, reducing the fire hazard and restoring grass land. By following the recommendations given by NRCS, the trees were thinned in a sustainable manner, and her whole ranch could be utilized to its full potential



Charlene Rich, producer near Jordan, MT, stands with her EQIP-contracted water tank.

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Persons with disabilities who require alternative means for communication of program information (e.g., Braille, large print, audiotape, etc.) should contact USDA’s TARGET Center at (202) 720-2600 (voice and TDD).

Human Resources Report

New Permanent Employees

- Greg Cironi, Soil Conservationist, Chinook Field Office
- Martin Ellenburg, Biologist, Miles City Area Office
- Barry Southard, Soil Conservation Technician, Malta Field Office

Reassignments

- Amy Kaiser, Soil Conservationist, from Havre Field Office to Chinook Field Office
- Talana Klungland, District Conservationist, to Soil Conservationist, Havre Field Office
- Eric Watson, Soil Conservationist, from NRCS in Powell, WY to Shelby Field Office
- Jesse Wilk, Soil Conservation Technician, from NRCS in Wapello, IA to Fort Benton Field Office
- Ryan Witt, Soil Conservation Technician to Soil Conservationist, Fort Benton Field Office

New Temporary Employees

- Chelan Babineau, Hydrologic Technician, Bozeman State Office

Promotions

- Jeff Bird, Soil Conservationist, Forsyth Field Office
- Chad Gipson, Electronics Technician, from NRCS in Idaho to Bozeman State Office
- Jessica Heptner, Soil Conservationist, Chester Field Office
- Douglas Jones, Soil Conservation Technician, Malta Field Office, to Civil Engineering Technician, Glasgow Field Office
- Pam Linker, Soil Conservationist, Stanford Field Office
- Allison Milodragovich, Soil Conservationist, Choteau Field Office

- Nick Pairitz, Soil Conservation Technician, Sheridan Field Office
- Joel Parker, Hydrologic Technician, Bozeman State Office
- Ken Scalzone, Soil Scientist, to MLRA Soil Survey Leader, Dillon Soil Survey Office

Voluntary Change to Lower Grade

- Tom Beck, District Conservationist, Poplar Field Office, to Soil Conservationist, Culbertson Field Office

Losses

- Stacey Barta, Soil Conservationist, Joliet Field Office
- Austin Beard, Electronics Technician, Bozeman State Office
- Denise Frey, Office Assistant, Chester Field Office
- Marlin Hanson, Soil Conservationist, Glendive Field Office
- Logan Hodgskiss, Student Trainee Civil Engineer, Bozeman State Office
- Michael Shipman, Soil Conservation Technician, Cut Bank Field Office
- Riley Singer, Student Trainee Soil Conservationist, Hardin Field Office

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Upcoming Events

For up-to-date conservation and agriculture-related events and activities in Montana, visit <http://www.mt.nrcs.usda.gov/news/events.html>.

October 2012

- ❑ Alternative Energy Resources Organization, October 26-28, 2012, Lewistown
- ❑ Montana Farmers Union State Convention, October 26-27, 2012, Great Falls

November 2012

- ❑ Montana Farm Bureau Federation, November 11 - 14, 2012, Billings
- ❑ Montana Association of Conservation Districts, November 13 - 15, 2012, Kalispell
- ❑ Soil Health Workshop, November 27, 2012, Great Falls
- ❑ Soil Health Workshop, November 28, 2012, Hardin
- ❑ Soil Health Workshop, November 29, 2012, Miles City

December 2012

- ❑ Montana Grain Growers Association, December 4 - 6, 2012, Great Falls
- ❑ Fifth National Conference on Grazing Lands, December 9 - 12, 2012, Orlando, Florida
- ❑ Montana Stockgrowers Association and Montana Cattlewomen Annual Convention, December 13 - 15, 2012, Billings

