



The Explorer

The Official Newsletter of the Lewis & Clark Conservation District

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NRCS Program Review

Following many years of intense focus on beetle kill and forestry issues, the Helena Field Office would like to remind landowners and operators that there are a number of programs that they may want to utilize for other purposes. This issue has a review of those programs. Please contact the Helena Field Office if you have any questions or would like to participate. The office number is 406-449-5000 ext. 3.

NRCS is Currently Accepting Forest Thinning Applications for the Ten Mile Project Area--by Jim Williams

The USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) office in Helena is currently accepting applications from private landowners for forestry improvement projects in the Tenmile Creek Watershed and South Hills of Helena. These applications are part of the Two Chiefs' Joint Landscape Restoration Partnership, between NRCS and the US Forest Service, which will enable cooperative forest improvement projects on public and private land to reduce wildfire threats and protect water quality and supply. The Ten Mile watershed provides the majority of the domestic water supply to Helena and the South Hills are home to many of Helena's residents and Helena's Open Lands recreational trail system. Impacts from mountain pine beetle, spruce budworm, and decades of fire suppression have resulted in uncharacteristic fuel loading in the Ten Mile watershed and Helena's South Hills. Heavy fuel loading of dead and diseased trees have increased the potential for a large landscape-scale fire that could lead to negative post-wildfire impacts to soil, water, vegetation, as well as, property damage and possible loss of life.

NRCS is offering technical and financial assistance to private landowners in this project area which includes Grizzly Gulch, Orofino Gulch, Tucker Gulch, Unionville, Colorado Gulch, and Rimini. This assistance is targeted toward helping landowners thin forests on their property to create fuel breaks and increase the resistance of the remaining trees to future pressures from insects, disease, and fire. Landowners who are interested in participating in this assistance program can call the NRCS Field Office in Helena at (406) 449-5000 extension 3 or stop by the office at 790 Colleen Street to learn more about the program and get an application.

In addition, NRCS will host a public meeting the first week of March to provide more information about the project area and the assistance being offered. Stop by or call the office to get your name on the mailing list. Once the meeting plans are finalized, flyers will be distributed to provide the date, time, location, and agenda.

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An Overview of the Conservation Stewardship Program – CSP

by Diane Fitzgerald

One of the financial assistance programs offered by the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) is the Conservation Stewardship Program, and it was renewed last year in the 2014 Farm Bill. The CSP program helps agricultural producers maintain and improve existing conservation practices and systems, and adopt additional conservation activities that address priority resource concerns. CSP payments are based on the existing conservation to be maintained on the land and the additional conservation the landowner is willing to do. A minimum threshold level of conservation must be met, and additional conservation activities, referred to as “enhancements” must be performed as well.

Eligible lands include tribal and private lands, cropland, pastureland, rangeland, and nonindustrial private forestland. Eligible applicants may be individuals, legal entities, joint operations or Indian tribes that meet the stewardship threshold for at least two priority resource concerns when they apply. They must also agree to perform activities that result in their meeting or exceeding at least one additional priority resource concern by the end of the five year contract. Producers must have control of the land for the length of the contract, and the contract must include all eligible land in the agricultural operation. Producers must be within the adjusted gross income limits of the new farm bill, as well as highly erodible land and wetland conservation requirements. If you think you may be interested in the CSP program, please contact the Helena Field Office at 449-5000 Extension 3, stop in at 790 Colleen Street, or visit the NRCS website at:

www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/site/mt/programs/financial/

Planning for the future with EQIP

By Darcy Goodson

The Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) is the most common program that the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) administers. Program participants receive financial and technical assistance to implement conservation practices. The planning staff in the field office will work with you, the owner or manager, to choose practices that fit within your operation and help promote the goals you have for the property. There are lots of choices for the landowner under the umbrella of EQIP. There are practices for crop, forest and rangeland that address natural resource concerns and deliver environmental benefits for soil and water quality, plant and animal health, air quality and energy savings. The practices often have other benefits for the landowner and their bottom line.

For example, improving irrigation systems not only reduces labor costs and increases yields but also saves water and has positive effects on water quality. Adding reliable water sources in key areas for livestock can improve animal performance and promote more even use of pastures. In forests, thinning a stand can have long term benefits to forest health and fuels reduction, and also produces a better timber product in the long term.

Small acres to large spreads and anything in between, managing land and resources can be a huge job. NRCS is an agency that can help you accomplish your goals. Our services are free and we are accepting applications now. If you are interested in applying or want to learn more about this program please call 406-449-5000 or email me directly at darcy.goodson@mt.usda.gov.

An Overview of the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program

By Diane Fitzgerald

The 2014 Farm Bill eliminated the Farm and Ranchland Protection Program, the Grassland Reserve Program, and the Wetland Reserve Program, and replaced them with the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program, or ACEP. The purpose of ACEP is to conserve agricultural land and wetlands and the benefits they provide. Some of the benefits on working lands include protecting the long-term viability of the nation's food supply by preventing conversion to non-agricultural uses, and protection of open space and wildlife habitat, to name a few. Wetland Reserve Easements provide fish and wildlife habitat and improve water quality by filtering sediments and chemicals, ease the effects of flooding, recharge groundwater, and provide recreation.

Ag Land Easements

NRCS provides financial assistance to eligible partners for purchasing Agricultural Land Easements that protect the agricultural use and conservation values of the land. Not only for farms, Ag Land Easements can also protect grazing uses by conserving rangeland, pastureland and shrubland. Eligible partners must have farmland or grassland protection programs.

Wetland Reserve Easements

NRCS provides technical and financial assistance directly to private landowners to restore, protect and enhance wetlands by purchasing a wetland reserve easement. Landowners can choose between permanent easements, 30-year easements or term easements, each with their own rate for restoration costs and easement purchase cost.

Eligibility

Eligible landuses for ag easements include cropland, rangeland, grassland, pastureland and nonindustrial private forest land.

Land eligible for wetland reserve easements includes farmed or converted wetland that can be restored.

Applicants must meet adjusted gross income eligibility, as well as eligibility for Highly Erodible Land and Wetland Conservation.

To apply, eligible partners submit proposals to NRCS to acquire agricultural land easements on eligible land. For wetland reserve easements, landowners may apply at any time at the local NRCS office, located at 790 Colleen Street in Helena.

Non-Discrimination Policy

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) prohibits discrimination against its customers, employees and applicants for employment on the bases of race, color, national origin, age, disability, sex, gender identity, religion, reprisal, and where applicable, political beliefs, marital status, familial or parental status, sexual orientation, or all or part of an individual's income is derived from any public assistance program, or protected genetic information in employment or in any program or activity conducted or funded by the Department. (Not all prohibited bases apply to all programs and/or employment activities.)

NRCS Ten Mile Project Informational Meetings:

Baxendale Fire Department – March 4th – 6:30 pm
Unionville Fire Department – March 11th – 5:30 pm

In other Partner News



Assistance Available for Livestock Death Losses

If you experience livestock death losses in excess of normal mortality due to an eligible cause, you may be eligible for a payment through the USDA, Farm Service Agency (FSA). The Livestock Indemnity Program (LIP) provides compensation to eligible producers with eligible livestock death losses. Death losses must be a direct result of an adverse weather event, or due to attacks by animals protected by Federal law or reintroduced into the wild by the Federal Government. Following are some of the 2014 payment rates:

Beef, Non-adult, Less than 400 pounds	\$553.77
Beef, Cow	\$1,223.45

If you experience death losses, you are encouraged to contact your local FSA county office as soon as possible. Producers should record all pertinent information related to natural disaster consequences, including:

- Verifiable documentation to support beginning and ending inventory of livestock (such as Department of Revenue, financial statements or loan records).
- Documentation of the number and kind of livestock that have died, supplemented if possible by photographs (with dates) or video records of ownership and losses.
- Dates of birth, dates of death, and cause of death for applicable livestock.

Producers who suffered livestock death losses must submit a notice of loss within 30 days of the loss becoming apparent.

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Conservation Innovation Grant Completes Second Year

Erin Fairbank, Rocky Mountain Front Weed Roundtable Executive Director

The Rocky Mountain Front Weed Roundtable just completed the second year of a three-year Conservation Innovation Grant (CIG) program in the Dearborn River drainage, working with landowners in the Upper Dearborn Cooperative Weed Management Area. The grant seeks to bring best integrated noxious weed management practices to the ground in this region. Commercial applicators are hired to survey, map and treat weeds on private and state lands. Previously known weed infestations were treated and all mapping data has been entered into a database.

The accumulated data from year one of the project was used to generate maps and specifically identify weed patch locations to help the commercial applicators re-visit and treat those infestations in year two. As time allowed, new areas were surveyed for infestations. Three separate certified commercial spray applicators have been hired to work in the upper Dearborn under this program. At the end of the three-year period participating landowners will receive up-to-date weed maps and information that can be loaded into a handheld GPS unit to help the landowners in their future weed management operations.

The methods employed under the CIG project feature surveys to actively seek out isolated, small infestations of leafy spurge and spotted knapweed and treating them with herbicide. Larger patches (designated as such by proximity to other large infestations and how common the weed in question is throughout the drainage) are perimeter-sprayed to curb spread and appropriate biological control insects are released to diminish seed production. Selected new invaders, such as hoary alyssum, are also targeted for herbicide treatment. Each site will be evaluated annually for noxious weed density and spread and this information will be used to test the management approach of the program. Through research and analysis, this integrated approach to weed management is the most economical and effective way known to limit or reduce weed spread on a landscape scale.

The CIG is a federal Natural Resources and Conservation Service program that seeks to test innovative approaches to land stewardship and alternative energy techniques. Landowners had to qualify for Environmental Quality Incentive Programs and pay a 25 percent cash cost-share under provisions of this project being done along the Rocky Mountain Front. The balance of the treatment cost is covered by the grant; and the total amount of the grant is matched by 1:1 cash and in-kind contributions by the Rocky Mountain Front Weed Roundtable and its partners. Three other Rocky Mountain Front drainages, the upper Birch Creek, the upper Teton River and upper Muddy Creek, are also included in the grant which affects lands west of U.S. Highways 287 and 89.

And Finally: Farm Service Agency personnel and County Extension will be co-hosting a meeting to go over the three program options and how to use the Farm Bill Decision Tool to help landowners/operators make their decisions. The meeting will be held on Tuesday, February 3rd at 10:00 am. **RSVP to the FSA Office at 406-449-5000 ext. 2 to find out the location and reserve a seat.**



Wildflower Seed

The Conservation District has wildflower seed available to landowners. It's a mixture of native and non-native seed and costs \$35 per pound. Species include candytuft, blanket flower, clarkia, prairie aster, Palmer Penstemon, Prairie coneflower and others. For more information, contact the District office at 449-5000 ext. 112. Autumn is a great time to put this seed in the ground!!!



A New Supervisor on the Conservation District Board!

Sarah Howe-Cobb started her term officially on January 1, after Mike Cobb finished his term. While Mike will be deeply missed—he'd been on the board for 20 years—we welcome Sarah and her enthusiasm.

In Sarah's words: "I grew up in New Hampshire and came out to study Forestry in Missoula, MT in 1978 where I met Mike Cobb and switched to Anthropology(Missoula) and nursing (Bozeman) so I support both Griz and Cats teams! I have worked as a Public Health Nurse for 31 years, 27 of them in Augusta, MT. I am partners with my husband Mike, John Cobb and Cheryl Lux on the Cobb Charolais Ranch. Mike and I have 2 daughters, Morgan and Michaela Howe-Cobb. I love to hike, canoe, kayak, take photographs, art, dance, animals and spend time on the ranch and in the surrounding mountains. I am involved in our community, from past school board member to running Augusta Food Share to August Youth Center. I am very excited to be on the L&C Conservation District with very talented and knowledgeable folks...it will be a good learning challenge for me. This group has always represented the cutting edge for ideas to me."

New District Conservationist in Helena Field Office

The Conservation District welcomes our new District Conservationist at the Helena NRCS Field Office. John started in October 2014 and has been busy getting to know the county, partners, landowners and issues.

John has both a strong back ground in natural resources land management from a hands on experience as well as varied background in USDA-NRCS experience. Born in Baker City, Oregon, in Northeastern Oregon, John comes from a logging, Sawmill, Ranching, Gold Mining family. He has a Bachelor's of Science in Rangeland Management, with a minor in Crops and Soils Science. John worked as an assistant herdsman for Oregon State Universities Eastern Oregon Agriculture Research Station in Union Oregon from 1997 to 2002, operating a 200 pair cattle operation, with 400 acres of hay/small grain production.

In June of 2002 John started with the Wallowa County Soil and Water Conservation District as a Soil Conservation Technician and officially went to work for the NRCS in 2005 as a Soil Conservationist in Ontario Oregon. Since then he has worked in 3 other states, Montana (Cut Bank), Washington and lastly California as the District Conservationist in Weaverville and Tulelake CA. John has served as a Soil Conservationist, Rangeland Management Specialist, and District Conservationist, and in a detail position as an agriculture adviser in Afghanistan for 12 months from Dec. 2010 to Dec. 2011 along the Pakistan border in Eastern Afghanistan.

His interest revolves around hunting & fishing. He enjoys the mountains, Snowmobiling, ATV's and his 1962 Willys Jeep.

Water Well Test Cost-Share

The Lewis & Clark Conservation District is budgeting to help off-set the cost of well testing in the Conservation District. Pick up your test kits at the Water Quality Protection District or County Extension, get your water tested. Then when you get your results, **mail a copy of the test results to the Conservation District at 790 Colleen Street, Helena MT 59601** or email them to lccd@mt.net and you will be reimbursed \$25 for at least the minimum test. We will reimburse the first 100 tests for which we receive results.

A Friendly Reminder...

If you need to do **ANY** work in or near a stream, contact the Conservation District Office to see if you need to obtain a 310 permit. A permit takes **30-45** days to obtain. Failure to obtain a permit could result in a violation of State Law and fines for the violator. Streams covered under the law include all perennial streams including the Reservoirs on the Missouri River (Canyon Ferry, Hauser and Holter).

If an emergency occurs, and you need to work in the stream (if Life, Crops or Property are at imminent risk), please contact the Conservation District Office about filling out an Emergency Notification form. **These forms are required in the CD office no later than 15 days *after* the work is started.**

The office can be reached by calling 406-449-5000 ext. 112, or by emailing at lccd@mt.net.

District Report--Chris Evans, District Administrator

In the past quarter, the Conservation District wrapped up payments for the Weed Cost Share program for 2014, and had their 2015 planning and budgeting meeting. The updated APO and a copy of the 2015 budget will be on the CD's website when they are final. In November, many on the CD board traveled to Fairmont Hot springs to attend the annual Montana Association of Conservation Districts convention.

The board reviewed total of 38 permit applications in 2014, five Complaints and two Emergencies.

There are 2 grants from DNRC that the CD is currently working with and they plan to sponsor 2 more in early 2015.

Some of the newer projects that the CD is helping with is the Prickly Pear Re-watering project. The board allocated funding in 2014 to assist in that project so that Prickly Pear Creek doesn't go dry. In addition, the board gives financial assistance to the Sun River Watershed Group, assists with funding so that the Ten Mile stream gauge at Rimini can continue operations, and allocates funds every year to defray costs of operation of the Augusta School Insectary. In 2013, the board also gave funding to the Rocky Mountain Front Weed Roundtable and to the Montana Biological Weed Control Project.

New in 2015, the CD will be piloting a Practices Cost Share Program. There are a limited number of practices that we will be accepting applications for. Applications and more information will be available on the CD's website, along with updated Weed Cost Share materials, by the end of January.

York Gulch project

Late in 2014, there was a press release from the Prickly Pear Land Trust about a new Conservation Easement in the York Gulch area. This is the final step of a very long running project that the CD got involved with in 2008. We sponsored first a planning grant from DNRC and then a project grant from DNRC to assist with cleanup of the Old Amber Mine site. The mine cleanup was one of the very first steps leading to the finalization of the easement. At the time the project grant wrapped up, the state of the economy was such that the CD wasn't sure when (or even if) the easement process would succeed. To view the full press release: <http://pricklypearlt.org/york-gulch/>.

Come see us on the web at www.lccd.mt.nacdnet.org



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To update your mailing address, contact Chris Evans at 406-449-5000 ext. 112 or email lccd@mt.net.