The Explorer

Volume 65, Issue 1 **Winter 2026**



Lewis and Clark Conservation District Pollinator Initiative 2026

The 2026 Pollinator Program is taking signups! We were notified that we will receive a grant from the Department of Natural Resources and Conservation for the program for 2026. We plan to have similar seed and amounts as last year.

This year, **we will be prioritizing sign ups from those who commit to follow up monitoring** for us, which consists of monitoring photos the 2nd and following growing seasons. Requests for photos will happen once per year after the first year that you plant, and are provided to the DNRC in grant reports and used in other outreach that the Conservation District does.

Mixes for 2026 are:

- The Native Mix, which comes with a separate packet of native grass which is optional to plant with the flower seed
- The Conservation Mix, which is a mix of native and non-native seed, and includes 2 types of grass in the mix itself. This mix is weed competitive so is really great for those areas that have persistent weeds, noxious or just obnoxious.
- The “Backyard Mix” or Urban Mix, is almost 100% native seed. The non-native is approved to not become obnoxious. This mix is ideal for small areas--pollinator pitstops, if you will--and doesn’t have any grass in it.
- The High Elevation Mix-This is specifically designed for sites above 4000+ feet. There’s not as much of this mix and its all native seed.

The general idea with our program is to provide educational materials to participants on how to prepare the seed bed, how to plant, how to maintain the plots, etc.

We have had 370 participants in the past 6 years, with over 20 acres worth of seed distributed. Many participants have been building their plot or plots for the past six years and have received seed multiple years.

You can sign up online or you can fill out a form and email it to admin@lewisandclarkcd.org or mail to Lewis and Clark CD, 790 Colleen St, Helena MT 59601.

Read more on our website. Mix packets have not yet been updated, so they aren’t linked yet.

Stream Permitting in Lewis & Clark County

A reminder for landowners and managers in Lewis & Clark County, applying for a permit to do **any work that may affect the stream bed or the banks of any perennial stream** in the county, **as well as the shores of Canyon Ferry, Hauser and Holter Reservoirs is mandatory.**

There is no fee for the 310 permit with Lewis & Clark Conservation District. We work closely with landowners to make sure that their project is the best project possible.

Projects include, but aren't limited to, culverts, bridges, boat ramps, docks, bank stabilization etc. If a project might impact, directly or indirectly, the bank or shore, a permit will be required.

We work with the Gilly App's **online permitting application**, or you can fill out the **pdf version**.

You can also scan the QR code with your smart phone and go right to the Gilly App.

For more information, email **joe@lewisandclarkcd.org** or call Joe at 406-594-9823.

Composting Simplified



Discover how to make nutrient-rich soil for free with natural materials you have around your garden.

WHAT IS COMPOST?

Organic gardening is all about feeding the soil to grow healthy plants, and the best food for your soil is compost. Adding compost to your garden soil provides nutrients for your plants, improves the structure of your soil, and helps it retain water. And the great news is that you can make it yourself for free with natural materials you have around your yard and garden.

Compost is a rich, earthy material created by the natural decomposition action of soil dwelling bacteria, fungi, earthworms and insects. You can make compost out of natural materials like leaves, grass clippings, food scraps, and the weeds that you pull out of your garden. By keeping these materials on-site instead of throwing them away, you help keep natures nutrient cycle going and ensure a steady harvest of healthy food.

BUILDING THE PILE:

You need four basic things to make good compost: moist green material; dry brown material; air; and water.

- Start your compost pile with a coarse layer of small sticks or other rough material. This will let air circulate at the bottom of the pile. The minimum size for an effective compost pile is 3 x 3 x 3 feet, so make the bottom layer at least that big to get you started.
- Build your pile by alternating layers of green and brown material. Whatever you have on hand is perfect!
- Green materials provide nitrogen to your pile and can include grass clippings, food scraps, rotten vegetables, weeds, or uprooted plants from the garden. Animal manures like horse or cow manure are also considered green because of their high nitrogen content.
- Brown materials provide carbon and can include dry leaves, straw, corn stalks, or other dried plant material from the garden. If your weeds have dried up and are more brown than green, they go in the dry layer.
- Avoid putting meat or dairy in your pile because it attracts critters and takes a long time to break down.
- Ideally, you want to build a pile that has 1 part green to 3 parts brown materials. But don't worry too much about exact proportions — simply alternating the layers usually works out fine.
- Sprinkle the dry layers with a little bit of water to keep things moist, but don't drown it.
- The top layer should be dry material to insulate the pile and keep it moist.

TURNING THE PILE:

Once you have built your layer cake for the microbes, your pile will go through hot and cold phases and gradually shrink in size.

The hot phase is the most active, and temperatures in the pile can reach 130˚–140˚F which kills most weed seeds as well as soil pathogens. A few days after you build your pile, dig into the center and feel the heat. This heat is created by the digestive activity of the microbes. This hot phase usually lasts about 4–7 days before beginning to cool down.

If you want compost fast, turn your pile after 10 days to introduce more air and kick off another hot phase. Do this a couple of times and you can have ready-to-use compost in 6–8 weeks!

Once the pile has cycled through a few hot phases, it cools down and the earthworms and soil insects move in to finish the work. You can tell that your compost is ready to use when you can no longer recognize any of the original materials. It should look like light, crumbly soil, and smell rich and earthy.

TROUBLESHOOTING:
Each time you turn your pile you will notice the original materials you put in the pile breaking down. You can troubleshoot your pile easily at this time.

- If the materials are too dry and not breaking down, you need to add more water.
- If there is a bad smell, it might mean the pile is too wet. Add more dry material, or just mix the dry and wet layers better.

CONTAINERS AND BINS:
You can follow the same basic instructions described above to make compost in bins or other containers. You can make your bins out of recycled pallets, chicken wire, concrete blocks, or hay bales. Each bin must be at least 3x3x3 feet to hold enough material for the decomposition process to be effective.

One of the most widely used is the classic three-bin system. This system is perfect for larger yards and gardens, and makes it easy to have a constant supply of compost to add to your garden. When you fill up one bin with enough material, you leave that one alone and start filling the next bin, and so on. By the time you have filled your third bin, the first bin will be ready to use.

Our contact information has changed. You can reach Chris Evans at 406-502-8591 or by email at admin@lewisandclarkcd.org, and Joe Kremer-Herman at 406-594-9823 or by email at joe@lewisandclarkcd.org.

District Report--Chris Evans, District Administrator

Wrapping up a working year is always a bit daunting, especially with the holiday season craziness.

CD staff have been working on reports for 2025, including website and social media activity and reviewing our 2025 operations to determine what work needs to carry over into 2026.

Resource Specialist, Joe Kremer-Herman, has been wrapping up some monitoring work for 2025 (see next page) and winterizing and storing the CD's Rolling Rivers Trailer.

A few members of the CD board met with staff to do a comprehensive policy review, putting all of the CD policies in one document. This will be reviewed by all of the board members and will be approved once they've had a chance to make edits as desired.

District staff have also been busy working on the draft budget for 2026, a review/revision of the CD's 5 year strategic plan, and a new operations plan for 2026. A few members of the board and the CD staff met recently to review those draft documents and they will be reviewed by the full board and approved at the January board meeting.

Looking forward to the first quarter of 2026, the CD's annual report will be available for review on our website sometime in mid-January. It will be located on the CD's website. We will be working on planning for the Local Work Group meeting for 2026, where agencies, landowners and anyone else will be invited to provide feedback on natural resource concerns in Lewis and Clark County. This meeting helps us, and the Helena Field Office in our planning processes.

After the 2024 Horse Gulch fire, Lewis and Clark Conservation District reached out to the residents who have property on Magpie Creek about potential flooding issues. After a large persistent fire goes through an area, the soil can't absorb precipitation like it used to. The LCCD decided to visually monitor the site. The goal behind this is to show the long term restoration of these burn sites.



Partner News

WINTER UPDATE
December 17, 2025

This has been a busy year for SRWG and we are looking forward to many new things in 2026.

In 2025, SRWG hired Madison Colyer as a full-time Watershed & Outreach Program Coordinator. Madison volunteered with SRWG in 2024 when she was a BSWC member for Hill County Conservation District. She has been managing SRWG's water quality and water measurements programs and organizing events for nearly a year and has been an excellent addition to the team.

SRWG has moved into an office in downtown Great Falls, at 423 Central Avenue, located inside the Brett Harris Insurance Agency's office. Bayley Sbardellati is joining SRWG in January as a Big Sky Watershed Corps member, supporting field work and events.

SRWG has two workshops in early 2026 that are free and open to the public:

January 29 – Home on the Range Workshop @ Harvest Hills Golf Course, Fairfield
Aimed at realtors and new rural homeowners, topics will include water rights, irrigation districts, noxious weed control, grazing on small acreage, and bear aware. And of course, an overview of SRWG's work to improve the watershed. This is 9 am – noon, co-hosted by The Front real estate agency and Lewis & Clark CD.

February 26 – Irrigation Efficiency Workshop @ Stage Stop Inn, Choteau
This is partially a follow up from last year's workshop and will include updates about the MSU study at Mitch Konen's property and the Montana Bureau of Mines & Geology's Ground Water Investigation on the Greenfields Bench. We will also have DNRC presenting about "exempt" wells and updates to procedures for obtaining one. 9 am until noon.

SRWG will still have all your favorite events, like the Weed Whacker Rodeo and the Rain Barrel Workshop, and several projects under way. Details can be found at www.sunriverwatershed.org and on Facebook later in the year. For more information, contact tracy@sunriverwatershed.org or madison@sunriverwatershed.org.



Partner News, continued

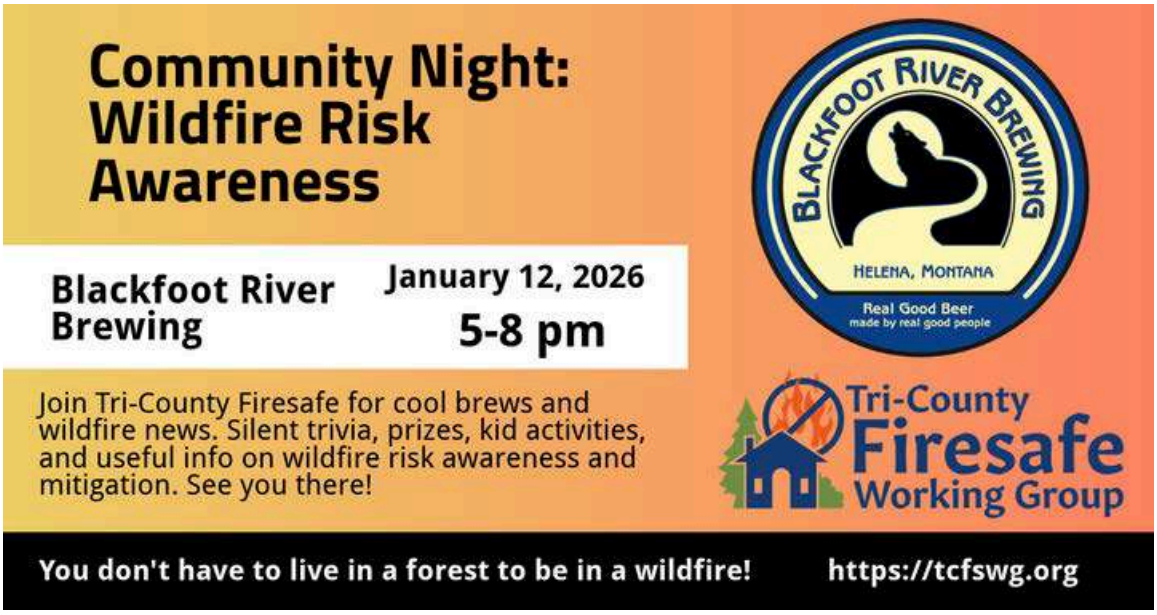
Water Test Cost Share Program



Lewis & Clark Conservation District will reimburse landowners in Lewis and Clark County $25 when they get their well water tested.

Your first call should be to the Lewis and Clark County Water Quality Protection District at 406-457-8584 for recommendations on what tests would be best to run. They should also have test kits available from the Well-Educated program from MSU. You may also get your test kits from other labs that do water testing.

Once you've gotten your results back, email a copy of your results and invoice to us at chris@lewisandclarkcd.org or mail to LCCD, 790 Colleen Street, Helena MT 59601. There is a limited amount of funding for this program so get your information in soon!





Partner News, continued

WE WANT TO HELP YOU AND YOUR NEIGHBORS
REDUCE YOUR WILDFIRE RISK



BE A PART OF REDUCING WILDFIRE RISK FOR GENERATIONS TO COME.

In this beautiful portion of central Montana, the landscape requires active management to reduce wildfire risk and maintain ecosystem health. The **Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS)** would like to help you with this process, and we have financial assistance that you may qualify for! Some of your neighbors in the area have already started working with the NRCS partnership to actively manage their forests and rangelands.

andrew.kretschmer@usda.gov

406-389-3882

JOIN THEM.

The more neighbors that take action, the better off the community will be when a fire occurs. Our team at USDA is here to help guide you through the landscape management process - from connecting you with a local professional conservation specialist to matching you with available financial assistance to get work done.

CONTACT US TODAY TO LEARN MORE.

USDA is an equal opportunity provider, employer, and lender.

The NRCS provides financial and technical assistance to landowners through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program.

USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Fill out the application and return it to NRCS at 790 Colleen St, Helena MT 59601 of by email at andrew.kretschmer@usda.gov

Partner News, continued

Citizen Science 101

The term "citizen science" refers to research conducted by or with participation from the general public or amateur/nonprofessional researchers of natural sciences, social sciences and many other disciplines. While the definition and scope of citizen science may differ between individuals and organizations, it is ultimately the effort to expand the "sample size" of observations for research- something especially important for invasive species prevention and management.

Numerous organizations, governmental agencies, and other entities use citizen science as a means to conduct their research efforts and support their mission. For example, when an individual reports a plant or animal that they deem "unusual" given the known species in the area, that report can be shared with the proper professionals- the local extension office, FWP, etc.- to confirm the identification of the species. Citizen science is critical to support the work of Montana's invasive species management organizations and agencies.



With today's advances in technology and AI, there are more online platforms and smartphone applications available to help the public identify and report observations. One of the most popular and user-friendly apps is iNaturalist.

It works like this: you download and open the app to your mobile phone, take a photo (or several) of the organism, and the app searches an international database to for organisms that best match what you have photographed. Once the identification is complete, you can choose to post it onto the iNaturalist database. This allows the observation- and its exact or obscured location on a map- to be reviewed and verified by experts. Once that is done the data becomes "research grade" and is available to researchers, organizations, and any interested individuals worldwide.

Alternatively, you can use a conventional camera to take photos and upload them to the iNaturalist website. To learn more about iNaturalist visit **www.inaturalist.org**

The use of iNaturalist and similar apps has allowed researchers and agencies to better determine the impact and range of species of interest- whether they be invasive or sensitive, threatened, or even endangered. After all, there are many more citizen scientists than there are professionals, and using citizen-collected data is a critical way for invasive species managers to learn about new invasives, new range expansions, and how to best protect their lands and operations.

You can help manage and prevent the spread of invasive species by becoming a citizen scientist to protect Montana's ecosystems and economy. Contact CEMIST, your local Conservation District or MSU Extension Office to learn more!

CEMIST
CENTRAL AND EASTERN MONTANA INVASIVE SPECIES TEAM

USDA Water Report

If you are interested in keeping track of water predictions for 2026, take a look at the **Snow Survey and Water Supply Forecasting Program** .

BOARD OF SUPERVISORS

Jeff Ryan--Board Chair, and At Large Supervisor
Karl Christians--Vice Chair and Area 4 Supervisor
Jeanette Nordahl--Treasurer and At Large Supervisor
John Baucus--Member and Area 2 Supervisor
Stan Frasier--Member and Area 3 Supervisor
Sarah Howe-Cobb--Member and Area 1 Supervisor
Elena Frederick-At Large Supervisor

LCCD STAFF

Chris Evans--District Administrator
Joe Kremer-Herman--Resource Specialist

NRCS STAFF

Rebecka Ayre--Supervisory DC
Andrew Kretschmer--District Conservationist
Jason Saari--Soil Conservationist
Zach Williams--Forester

Stream Permitting Required!

If you are planning any work that may affect the streambed or the banks of any perennial stream, or on the shores of Canyon Ferry, Hauser or Holter Reservoirs, in Lewis & Clark County, you are required to fill out a permit application with the Conservation District, along with a number of other agencies, using the **Joint Application.** Culverts, bridges, fords, streambank work, construction etc. all require a permit.

In the event of any emergencies, where life, crops or property may be at risk, landowners are allowed to do the minimal amount of work to protect their property, but need to file a Notice of Emergency within 15 days of completing the work. Before and after photos are particularly helpful in these cases.

If you see a project that is affecting a stream somewhere in the county, and want to know if it's permitted, please contact our Resource Specialist, Joe Kremer-Herman at 406-594-9823 or via email at **joe@lewisandclarkcd.org**.

Our Thanks to our Education Program Sponsors!

LCCD SPONSORS "Those who assume responsibility"

Power Townsend
Bank of the Rockies
Schatz Ranch & Leasing

LCCD STEWARDS "Those in charge of a large estate"

Prickly Pear Simmental Ranch
Westech Environmental Services
Murdoch's Ranch and Home, Helena

LCCD CHAMPIONS "Those who fight for a cause"

Action Print
Northwestern Energy

If you would like to be a sponsor for our Education Programs, you can Sign Up!!!

For more information about the Conservation District, check out our website, or find us on Facebook or Instagram!