

THE MONTANA CONSERVATIONIST

News from Montana's Conservation Districts

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To all of you who contribute so much to the conservation of our beautiful state's most precious resources, we'd like to wish you Merry Christmas, and sincerest wishes for a joyful and prosperous New Year full of benevolent weather and good harvests.

2015 was a year of many successes for MACD & SWCDM: keeping Sage Grouse off the Endangered list through hugely successful partnerships & voluntary conservation; another year of the ever-growing Big Sky Watershed Corps; adding three new positions to our staff; and so much more. We look forward to a 2016 filled with new partnerships & collaborations, strengthening of those we already have, and furthering our mission of local common sense conservation.

Thank you to the administrators & employees, supervisors, agency folk, partners, and dedicated citizens who make working in the world of Montana conservation such a pleasure, and such a success!

USDA removes program payments for inactive farm managers

Yesterday the USDA finalized a rule to ensure that farm safety-net payments are issued only to active managers of farms that operate as joint ventures or general partnerships, consistent with the direction and authority provide by Congress in the 2014 Farm Bill. The action, which exempts family farm operations, closes a loophole where individuals who were not actively part of farm management still received payments.

"The federal farm safety-net programs are designed to protect against unanticipated changes in the marketplace for those who actively share in the risk of that farming operation," said Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack. "To ensure that help goes to those who genuinely need it, such as America's farm families, the Farm Bill authorized USDA to close a loophole and limit payments from those not involved on a daily basis in non family farm management."

Since 1987, the broad definition of "actively engaged" resulted in some general partnerships and joint ventures adding managers to the farming operation, qualifying for more payments, that did not substantially contribute to management. The rule applies to operations seeking more than one farm manager, and requires measureable, documented hours and key management activities each year. [READ MORE](#)

Tongue River Ranchers Challenge Attempt to Freeze Railroad Proceedings

From Northern Ag: On Friday, December 11th, Northern Plains Resource Council and Rocker Six Cattle Company made a formal filing with the Surface Transportation Board opposing the Tongue River Railroad Company's request to indefinitely suspend their application to construct the Tongue River Railroad (TRR). They argued that the Board should instead deny the permit application. If permitted, the TRR would condemn up to 90 miles of working family farm and ranchland in southeastern Montana to build a new rail line to

ship coal from the proposed Otter Creek coal mine to proposed Pacific Northwest coal export facilities.

Landowners are concerned that freezing the permitting process dangles the threat of eminent domain over their properties for potentially untold years to come. "My family and our neighbors have been facing federal condemnation of our private land for this speculative project for 38 years," said Clint McRae, whose ranch is crossed by up to 9 miles of the proposed railroad. [READ MORE](#) Hi Elena,

EPA broke the law with WOTUS social media

Agency used "covert propaganda" and constituent lobbying to promote controversial rule

From The Hill: Congressional auditors say the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) broke the law on multiple occasions with "covert propaganda" in support of a controversial regulation that gives the agency power over smaller streams of water.

The Government Accountability Office (GAO) said a pair of social media campaigns by the EPA in support of its "waters of the United States" rule broke laws that prohibit federal agencies from promoting or lobbying for their own actions.

GAO faulted the EPA for using Thunderclap, a social media amplification tool, to recruit hundreds of Twitter users to tweet in support of the rule.

It also said the EPA broke the law with a blog post that linked to two environmental groups' pages urging readers to contact members of Congress to oppose legislation.

"We conclude that EPA's use of Thunderclap constituted covert propaganda, in violation of the publicity or propaganda prohibition," GAO wrote.

"We also conclude that EPA hyperlinks to the [Natural Resources Defense Council] and Surfrider Foundation webpages provided in the EPA blog post constitute grassroots lobbying, in violation of the grassroots lobbying prohibition."

The EPA defended its practices, saying in a statement that it disagreed with the watchdog's findings. [READ MORE](#)

Montana officially joins grape wine industry

By Larry Robertson, NRCs Soil Conservationist, Ronan:

Montana's fledgling grape wine industry was introduced to the world in November at the 2015 VitiNord conference in Nebraska. VitiNord is an international cool climate wine grape conference to promote viticulture and oenology in northern environments and is held every three years.

Recent studies to improve grape varieties for Montana have shown success. Montana has had good results growing new cold hardy grape cultivars that will withstand winter temperatures from 25 to 40 below zero.

Montana has the additional benefit of reduced pest pressure and low humidity that reduces dependence on fungicides, and our consistently cool nights heighten fruit flavors. At the conference it was shown that cold climates can produce superior wines and grape products. This is a great

opportunity to diversify into a specialty crop that has good potential to increase farm income or as an alternative for small acreage producers.

Grape variety trials in Montana started in 2011. The trials emphasized the need for management of weeds and grass during establishment and crop/canopy manipulation.

Maybe the greatest accomplishment was getting growers and winemakers together to start the Montana Grape and Winery Association (MGWA). The MGWA formed in 2014 and held their First Annual Meeting June 2015 that drew 70 participants, mostly from western Montana.

Some folks in eastern Montana, notably Tongue River Winery in Miles City, have ventured into grape growing. The truth is, if you can successfully grow grapes in Miles City you can grow them almost anywhere in eastern Montana!

Soils and water quality are the limiting factors there, if you can avoid high pH sodic, clayey soils and find suitable surface or ground water, vines are available that will survive the frigid winters. Finding good, upslope sites that drain off cold air can also minimize cold events by 10 degrees or more.

In addition, a lot of eastern Montana has longer growing seasons than the west and accumulates more growing degree-days to be able to ripen grapes well.

CRP program marks 30th anniversary

From NACD: This month marks the thirtieth anniversary of the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP).

Last week, several conservation and agriculture organizations, including NACD, sponsored a celebration of the anniversary. The all day celebration included events at the USDA and Congress. NACD President Lee McDaniel, along with other producers in attendance, was recognized at a luncheon at USDA and at a Congressional reception as a farmer who participates in CRP.

Many agriculture and conservation leaders in Congress attended the reception, including Senate Ag Committee Chair Pat Roberts and Senator, farmer, and CRP participant Jon Tester.



Fighting Flu with glow in the dark chickens

From On Pasture: In a typical year 500 million people will get the flu and more than 500,000 will die from the virus.

Unfortunately, influenza vaccines are only effective on 70 to 80% of the people who get them, and because we never know for sure which flu is going to be that winter's problem, we don't always make up the correct vaccine. This led scientists to think of new ways to prevent the spread of influenza viruses, and that's where the glow-in-the-dark chickens come in.

That the chick in this picture has glowing feet and a beak isn't really what makes it so important

to us. That's just a marker that researchers at the Roslin Institute and the University of Cambridge use to make sure they can tell one bird from the next in their research. What makes this chick important is that it has a small genetic modification that prevents it from spreading the flu to any other bird or person.

In the case of the genetically modified chickens, researchers inserted a "decoy" molecule that mimics the region of the flu virus genome that allows it to replicate. This molecule binds to an enzyme in the flu virus that



prevents it from replicating. Though the genetically modified chicken still gets the flu, and will still die, it can't transmit the virus to others. Thus, the virus stalls and dies without harming all the chickens, or without getting the chance to adapt so that it can possibly infect people. [READ MORE](#)

No harm to soils when cattle graze cover crops

From Ag Research Mag: For years, some growers in the Southeast have used cover crops to reduce soil erosion, boost organic matter, and keep more moisture in soil. Combined with no-till production, cover crops are credited with sequestering more carbon in soil so that less of it is released as a greenhouse gas.

But more growers could be using cover crops.

[Alan Franzluebbbers](#), an ecologist in the [Agricultural Research Service's Plant Science Research Unit](#) in Raleigh, North Carolina, wanted to see if the use of cover crops could be encouraged by allowing cattle to graze cover crops.

Conventional wisdom holds that

grazing would remove the nitrogen and carbon otherwise left on the soil in the cover crop plant residue. Allowing cattle to tread on the soil could also compact it, preventing air and water from passing through the soil to reach plant roots. But if grazing wouldn't harm the soil, it might encourage more growers to try using cover crops.

Franzluebbbers and his colleagues conducted a 7-year study to assess whether grazing cover crops at a site near Watkinsville, Georgia, affects the health of soils typical of the Piedmont region of the Southeast. They looked at growing winter and summer grains, with cover crops planted in the off-season for each grain crop. They compared no-till versus tilling, and grazing versus no grazing. Cow/calf pairs

were allowed to graze at a rate of one animal per 4 acres. The scientists took periodic samples of the soil to a depth of 1 foot.

The results showed that the relatively low rate of grazing did not significantly affect the amount of organic matter in soil and did not cause soil compaction. Additional studies should be conducted to determine a stocking threshold that increases compaction, Franzluebbbers says. The findings also showed that cover crops make for high-quality forage. Organic matter lost by allowing cattle to graze on cover crops is likely made up in the organic input from manure. As in previous studies, the team found that using no-till generally keeps more carbon and nitrogen in soil than using conventional tillage.

[READ MORE](#)

Grants

Trout Unlimited Water-related resource & recreation grants

State and federal agencies, watershed committees, and other resource groups are invited to submit project ideas not to exceed \$5,000. Proposals due 1/6/2016. [More Info](#)

Forests in Focus Grants

The DNRC is soliciting proposals for grants totaling \$2 million for forest restoration and fuel reduction projects on non-industrial private, state, and/or tribal lands in Montana. Proposals due 1/7/2016. [More Info](#)

Reclamation & Development Planning Grants

Approximately \$200,000 is available from DNRC for planning for natural resource projects that provide natural resource benefits of mineral development impacts or crucial state need. Due Jan. 8 2016. [More Info](#).

Community Forest & Open Space Grants

Through this program, the Forest Service is authorized to provide financial assistance grants to local governments, Indian tribes, and qualified nonprofit organizations to establish community forests that provide defined public benefits. Due 1/15/2016. [More Info](#)

The Montana Conservationist strives to present news & information relevant to Montana's Conservation Districts. However, the views and opinions expressed here do not necessarily represent those of MACD or its affiliates.

Workshops/Meetings /Trainings/Events

Neal Kinsey in Great Falls

Soil fertility specialist Neil Kinsey will be speaking in Great Falls twice this winter. Jan 11-13: Introductory Soil Fertility Course. \$150. [More Info for both.](#)

Succession Planning Workshops

Monday, January 11 will be in Winnett. Tuesday, January 12 will be in Roundup. Burke Tiechert will talk about being successful in an intergenerational or long term ranch business. Marsha Goetting's presentation will be on setting up the farm/ranch for the next generation. A roundtable of professionals will be present to explain their jobs and answer questions. Call Donna Pedrazzi [406-323-2103 ext.101](tel:406-323-2103) to RSVP.

Scholarships Available

The application period is now open for MACD's annual scholarships. Two \$500 Scholarships are available for Montana students—high school seniors or students who are attending an accredited post secondary institution in Montana may apply.

Students must have a minimum 3.0 GPA, and enrollment or plans to enroll in a natural resource course of study.

Application deadline is February 26, 2016. Visit www.macdnet.org/scholarship for more info & the application.

Jobs

Programs Director, MCC

The Director of Programs ensures that MCC programs remain at the leading edge of positive youth development, excel in the teaching of leadership and civic engagement, and use best practices in corps programming. [More Info](#)

Treasure State Endowment Program Specialist

This position is responsible for administering TSEP construction grants and contracts; coordinating and performing grant application, evaluation, and award processes; and providing detailed technical assistance, outreach, information, and expertise to local governments, water and sewer districts and other TSEP partners. [More Info](#)

River Restoration Specialist

The Clark Fork Coalition is seeking a restoration specialist. Closes January 25. [More Info](#)

Did you attend Convention?

Let us know what you thought!

MACD is currently soliciting feedback on our recent convention through an online survey. If you have a minute and an opinion, please fill it out!

[Click this link](#), or go to macdnet.org to find the form.

Coming Up:

January

- 11** MACD Board Conference Call
Succession Planning workshop, Winnett
- 11-13** Intro to soil fertility with Neil Kinsey, Great Falls
- 12** 310 Workshop, Dillon
Succession Planning workshop, Roundup
- 15** 223 Grant deadline
- 25** MACD Executive Committee Conference Call

Have an event to share?

Please email tmc@macdnet.org with details on your organization's upcoming workshops & events, so we can let the rest of the conservation community know!

Lessons from the Forsyth Soil health workshop

By Kami Kilwine, NRCS Rangeland Management Specialist - Forsyth

Almost 200 people attended Rosebud Conservation District's Soil Health Workshop last week. A strong showing of producers from Montana attended, as well as people from Oregon, Colorado, Idaho, North Dakota, South Dakota, and even Canada.

Burke Teichert, a rancher and consultant, advised the crowd on improving ranch profits. Successful ranches decrease overhead costs by increasing production and efficiency, and reducing fed feed through extended grazing. Profitable ranches limit the number of facilities and equipment they have, but the ones they have are functional. They employ well trained, well led, and efficient workers that share the same vision for the ranch.

Dr. Don Huber talked extensively on the effects of glyphosate and GMOs on soil and human health. The complexity of this talk makes it hard to summarize, but some take away points are as follows. Glyphosate is more than an herbicide. It is a mineral chelator, meaning it binds to minerals in the soil making them unavailable to plants. It is also a strong antibiotic, killing beneficial soil microorganisms, increasing disease severity in crops, and depleting soil health. Dr. Huber presented research showing that glyphosate affects far more than its intended use, he suggested that it is toxic, enhances pathogens, and is persistent in soil, plants, animals, and even humans. Dr. Huber's presentation, research, and library of peer-reviewed articles on the subject of glyphosate and GMOs can be obtained from the Rosebud Conservation District.

Next, Elaine Ingham, a microbiologist, taught about the life in the soil. She explained that a healthy soil food web will suppress disease, retain nutrients, reduce erosion, increase nutrient availability, decompose toxins, build soil structure, and increase water holding capacity. She suggested that producers should manage for fungi through reduced use for tillage, pesticides, and inorganic fertilizer. Dr. Ingham has information on soil biology, microscopes, and learning opportunities on her website, www.soilfoodweb.com.

Gabe Brown, a farmer and entrepreneur from Bismarck, told the story of how he was going broke as a conventional farmer. He realized that he was disconnected from the land and accepting a degraded resource, his soil. He has focused on educating himself, solving problems instead of treating symptoms, and making his soils work for him instead of against him. As a result of Gabe's efforts, he has seen drastic increases in his soil health, structure, and fertility. He believes he will never see any run off; he will capture every drop of water that lands on his property. Currently, his soils can infiltrate 2" in 25 seconds. He has increased his soil organic matter from 2% in 1995 to 11% in 2013. For more information, visit www.brownsranch.us.

Rosebud Conservation District would like to thank the speakers, their sponsors, and all those who showed up for making the event a success.