

PARTNER UPDATES

Presented at MACD's 2018 Spring Board Meeting June 13, 2018 - Montana State Capitol

Mark Bostrom, CARRD Division Administrator from DNRC gave an update:

- State agencies have taken significant financial hits overall. CARRD lost over \$2 million, or just about 10% of the budget. RRGL grants ended up taking the largest chunk of hits; Broadwater CD, Pondera CD, Lincoln CD, Richland CD all lost grants in the fits. Some of them have reapplied in the new round, and there is likely to be a fix in the next legislative session.
 - Other cuts: The Flathead Basin Commission lost 90% of its budget. Jim Simpson and Dean Sirucek are on the commission, so this is an important partner. The other significant cut was in the 310 reimbursement program, in favor of keeping CD administrative grants. Mark said that in the next session support from districts and MACD to restore funding would be helpful.
 - CARDD was provided \$200,000 for conservation districts to help with fire restoration efforts. Mark thinks that CD's involvement in natural resource recovery after natural disasters is a potential good opportunity for districts.
 - The other place where districts are doing new work is through invasive species. There are some species in particular where there is a gap between Department of Ag and FWP covering this topic.
 - Montana Women From the Ground Up has finally gone to the publisher and is now available for purchase from local districts and on Amazon.
 - Mark thanked everyone for their hard work and service.
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Jerry Shows, Assistance State Conservationist for Partnerships with NRCS gave an update:

- A State Conservationist has finally been selected, his name is Tom Watson. He is currently serving as the assistant state conservationist in Oregon. His son is a district conservationist in Cut Bank.
 - NRCS still does not have a Chief, and they don't know when they will get a chief. They had one that made it all the way through the process to the White House, but was denied. Leonard Jordan continues to be the acting chief.
 - Farm Bill: the Senate Ag committee did mark the bill up this morning, and so it will go to the floor. It is a little different from the House version that was hung up on SNAP benefits. The Senate bill is bipartisan, so it may do better.
 - CSP & EQIP: they are currently obligating these programs and it is going well.
 - They are finally able to fill many DC positions across the state.
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Jane Holzer of Montana Salinity Control Association gave an update on MSCA activities:

- They are focusing on Soil Health, and just finished up a 5 year cover crop project. They documented the change in the soil biology, which did improve slightly over the course of the project.
- They were awarded an RCPP grant through NRCS. It is \$1,310,000 over 5 years to do initial reviews and groundwater investigations, with an estimate of 10 projects per year. This is a good boost, as EQIP has been unable to fund salinity projects in recent years.

- 19 counties have documented acid soil, which is typically seen as a yellow area in a field. The treatment is very expensive, so prevention is the best thing.
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Rachel Frost of Missouri River Conservation Districts Council gave an update on MR CDC's work:

- She invited everyone to the 2018 River Rendezvous in Great Falls July 11 & 12.
 - She had a handout about their salt cedar floating treatment project.
 - They have been coordinating CMR CWG meetings
 - They formed CEMR to help combat invasive mussels in Eastern Montana, as most of the state's efforts have been focused on the West. They have been trying to raise awareness about mussels amongst agricultural users.
 - Ranching for Rivers is continuing, and they have been able to put together some demonstration and showcase projects; they are working with SWCDM to hold riparian grazing workshops.
 - They have been working to monitor donated and purchased hay from out of state following the Lodgepole fire to ensure that foreign noxious weeds have not been transported into the state.
 - They're working on a website called Living on the Banks to educate people on best practices about living near rivers.
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Laura Demmel, Northern Plains region representative for the National Association of Conservation Districts gave an update on NACD activities:

- She mentioned the Soil Health Champions network, the Urban Agriculture Grants, Water Quality and Soil Health case studies, and a few other programs.
 - She also talked about the survey of districts that they recently conducted.
 - Their Technical Assistance grants funded 5 positions in Montana. The positions are meant to help with EQIP obligations and conservation planning. There were also 6 positions placed with tribes in Montana.
 - They have a relatively new tribal policy project with tribal districts, and they are looking for stories about how districts are working with tribes to solve problems.
 - She talked about how NACD and NRCS are working together to expand the use of RSET among agricultural producers. In the future it may become a ranking tool for NRCS conservation programs.
 - Steve Hedstrom talked about the Northern Plains Regional meeting, which was last week in Charlo. Steve said it was a good opportunity to pull in some important people and showcase Montana.
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Jon Kenning gave an update on DEQ activities:

- They are entering into the field season. Their focus this year is on the Yellowstone, they are also looking a little bit at the Beaverhead. They are thinking more about doing volunteer monitoring. Right now their model of sending technicians to far flung places to take a sample is inefficient, so in the future they'll be looking at funding local stakeholders to take samples.
- 319 grants: they use 319 money to pass money to projects. Right now the project is not very competitive and basically everyone who asks gets funded. A good portion of the money is passed through to SWCDM for mini-grants, which reduces the paperwork for smaller applicants.

- They are also taking a new look at 319 to determine how they should use that money, whether it should go to a lot of smaller projects or whether they should pick a watershed and focus in depth.
 - They are updating their website, and at the end of the month they'll go live with an online application for permits.
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Mark Nechodom from the Department of Agriculture introduced himself (he is new to the state):

- He is excited about attending the meeting and is hoping to strengthen the relationship between DofA and conservation districts. He comes from California where those agencies worked very closely.
 - He would like to coordinate more closely amongst agencies to combat noxious weeds.
 - He is also trying to get ahead of the soil acidity problem mentioned by Jane Holzer and figure out the most effective and efficient means to solve the problem before it gets too large.
 - One of the things that he would like to work with Conservation Districts on is using Soil Carbon Sequestration services as a revenue stream for conservation districts.
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Dan Rostad of YRCDC updated on their projects:

- Over the last decade the YRCDC was working on the Cumulative Effects Assessment study, which was completed two years ago. They are now working to implement the findings and recommended practices of the study.
- The council has started with two working groups: Invasive Plant and Woody Species control, and Irrigation Efficiency.
- After the spill in 2013, there is money to address cleanup. Some of that is being directed toward some of the recommended practices identified by the CEA.
- They are starting to look at finding sources of private funding to soften their reliance on government.

Thank you to each of these partners for taking the time to present and share their work and their respective organization's contribution to conservation efforts with the MACD board.