

**Resource Conservation Advisory Council (RCAC),
Department of Natural Resources
Report to MACD, Spring Board Meeting
June 9, 2021**

Background:

The 47th Legislature provided to the conservation districts one half of one percent of the coal severance tax monies. The Department of Natural Resources and the Conservation (DNRC distributes these funds on the basis of need to conservation districts for any purpose that they are authorized to perform pursuant to MCA, Title 76, Chapter 15, Part 4. Since 1981, conservation districts have used these funds for conservation related equipment purchases, saline seep and weed control projects, conservation education and information projects, soil survey and various other water and soil conservation related projects.

Purpose:

1. Advise and assist the DNRC on all programs and activities relating to conservation entities, including programs and activities relating to the:
 - a. Formation, organization, and operation of districts.
 - b. Control and prevention of soil erosion.
 - c. Conservation, development, utilization, and disposal of all water resources.
 - d. Prevention of flood water and sediment damage.
 - e. Conservation, protection, restoration, and proper utilization of soil and vegetative resources of the state; and
 - f. Cooperation with other state, federal, and local agencies, and citizens groups, in land uses related to natural resources and the environment.
2. Advise and assist DNRC in approving applications for assistance under PL 566 (Watershed Act) prior to submission to the Department.
3. Recommend changes, if necessary, in existing state or federal laws or regulations to protect and conserve soil, vegetation, and water resources of the state.
4. Provide a liaison between DNRC, conservation districts, grazing districts, the MACD, and the Montana Association of State Grazing Districts.
5. Advise and assist the Department in reviewing grant guidelines and applications to qualify conservation districts under the conservation district grant program
 - a. The RCAC advises disbursement of:
 - i. 223 Grants primarily used for on-the-ground projects.
 - ii. District Development Grants generally are used to improve CD administrative capabilities and implement conservation plans.
 - iii. Mini-Education Grants to assist conservation districts with a variety of educational projects.
 - iv. CD Administrative Grants to provide funding for capacity building.
 - v. 310 Permit allowance.

6. Advise on other issues as deemed necessary by the Council or as requested by the Department.

Current Council Members:

The Council members are selected to 2-year terms according to MCA Title 2, Chapter 15, Part 1, Creation of Advisory Councils (see attached). This current Council was appointed July 1, 2020 and will be renewed or sunset by July 1, 2022. The current RCAC seven members are:

Doug Bonsell, Eastern Montana	Ramsey Offerdal, North Central Montana
Bob Breipohl, Eastern Montana	Gayla Wortman, North Central Montana
Bob Schroeder, Western Montana	Judi Knapp, South Central Montana
Kathleen Johnson, North Western Montana	

Currently, the RCAC holds grant hearings on a quarterly basis (see below). The Council also reviews processes, grant guidelines and application format, and the DNRC budget. In recent months, the Council has discussed how they could better perform their statutory duties and authorities to maximize their assistance to DNRC.

Last Biennium Projects:

Conservation Districts submit applications for projects that range from riparian health improvement projects to computer equipment upgrades. From pollinator projects to educational outreach. From irrigation system modifications to outdoor classrooms, and from equipment purchases to salt cedar management. The Council is very conscientious and thoughtful in their review and ranking of grants. They are aware of their responsibility and work diligently to effectively assist DNRC in the effort to empower Districts in a fair and equitable manner. The Council encourages applicant testimony during grant hearings.

\$205,460.76 dollars were expended in the last fiscal year. The exact budget for FY22 was not released in time for this report, but it appears it will be adequate for the biennium.

Council Activity:

DNRC was tasked to improve operations and efficiencies by defining roles of the staff and role of the RCAC. To that end, Mark Bostrom brought the Council together in March to talk about their upcoming meetings, the budget, the likely outcome of the Legislature, and the structure and authority of the Resource Conservation Advisory Council. Mr. Bostrom said he thought the RCAC is at a “reset moment” – meaning that there were significant changes in DNRC, so it perhaps was a good opportunity to explore the roles and responsibilities of the RCAC.

The Council talked about their purpose, which was distilled down to “assist DNRC in providing services to Districts.” The statute was reviewed and discussed as were the general guidelines under which the RCAC operates. In a “reimagined role” would the RCAC oversee services delivery to increase District capacity? Would they take an active role in the development of the DNRC budget? Could the RCAC be able to assist with District training opportunities such as the Supervisor Summit, grant writing and reporting workshops, and supervisor succession plans.

Some Council members expressed concern that members signed on to do one thing – review grants. If the Council role is expanded, maybe the current members are not the right people for that job. If not, then who are those that are the “right people?” Other concerns centered around the frequency of meetings, identifying and delivering services, and the roll out of policy.

During the May 26 meeting of the Council, the distribution of Administrative Grants was discussed. In the past, grants were used to bring Districts to a base funding of \$36,000 per District. Mark thought that it would be possible to leave this amount in place, but, depending on funding, offer a second round of funding to bring that level a bit higher. The Council agreed.

The Council will have to revisit the Administrative Grant guidelines since some Districts are eligible, but do not apply for a grant, and there are Districts that do not have a shortfall in their budget, but apply for money for building repairs, equipment purchases, the development of a termination account, etc.

Finally, the Council discussed the distribution of the 310 permit allowance and settled on a \$76 per permit amount with a \$2700 cap. They determined that Districts should be encouraged to charge a fee for each permit to help offset their costs. ***[Note: Mary Hendrix reported that after the meeting and staff had a chance to look more closely at the accounts, it was determined that the amount would be lowered to \$62.37 and the cap was removed.]***

FY22 Grant Cycle:

The Council set its FY22 schedule, however, hearing dates may be adjusted to accommodate member schedules.

July 16, 2021 August 25, 2021	223 Grant Application Deadline Grant Hearing – Billings
October 15, 2021 November 16, 2021	223 Grant Application Deadline Grant Hearing - Great Falls (MACD Convention)
January 14, 2022 February 23, 2022	223 Grant Application Deadline Grant Hearing – Missoula
April 8, 2022 May 11, 2022	223 Grant Application Deadline Grant Hearing – Helena

Respectfully submitted:

/s/ Gayla Wortman
Resource Conservation Advisory Council