

The Montana Conservationist

December 2021

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News from Montana's Conservation Community



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Montana Association
of
Conservation Districts

Monitoring the Clear Lake Aquifer

Sheridan County Conservation District provides an essential conservation service in Northeast Montana

Sheridan County Conservation District

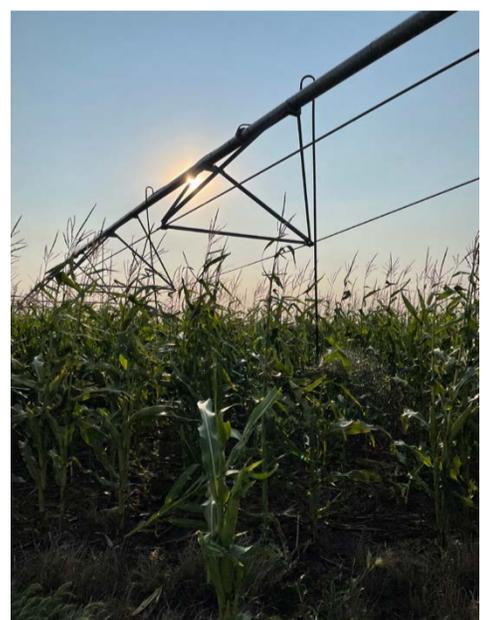
In the far Northeast corner of the state, Sheridan County Conservation District (SCCD) has a unique program that is essential to the area's water management, especially as droughts across the West continue to worsen. The Clear Lake Aquifer occupies this region and is a significant water resource for the area. Thousands of acres of lakes and wetland overlay this groundwater and create important migratory bird and wildlife habitat, but farmers, ranchers and the community also depend on this water.

Starting in 1994, SCCD was authorized by DNRC to manage 15,479 acre/feet of the aquifer. Of this 15,479, SCCD may allocate the use of up to 10,000 acre/feet through permits for irrigation or stock water. In order to understand the impacts of allocating this water, SCCD has developed an effective water management and monitoring program.

Through this program, staff at Sheridan County Conservation District monitors the static water levels of the aquifer once a month, roughly March-November. There are 180 monitoring wells and pivots total throughout the aquifer, 80 of which have data loggers that report data on static water levels each hour. SCCD does some of the data interpretation, however all data is sent to the Montana Bureau of Mines and Geology (MBMG) where it is put on their [public website](#). MBMG also further analyzes data and uses it to make appropriate recommendations for future irrigation sites.

Currently, the 10,000-acre/feet permitting allotment is enough to meet community demands. However according to SCCD staff member Amy Yoder, if drought continues, the number of producers requesting water for irrigation increases, or other competing users come into play, demand may not be fully met. The monitoring program must ensure that water levels are not drawn down too much and that recharge from spring snow melt is sufficient. Continued monitoring of the ground and surface water is needed to decide whether the remaining 5,479-acre/feet can be developed in these scenarios where demand is not met.

The program not only helps ensure the water is not overused, but also provides data that informs management of wildlife habitat on the US Fish and Wildlife Service Medicine Lake Refuge. Thus, this program helps accomplish a good balance between community need for water resources and conservation of the water for wildlife habitat.





2022 Soil Health Symposium

Stephanie Adams

Montana Association of Conservation Districts

MACD is hosting the second annual Soil Health Symposium Feb. 9-10, 2022.

The Soil Health Symposium is a two-day event centered around peer-to-peer conversations and experience-based presentations from many aspects of agriculture. We dive into the biological components of soil, managing productive land, tools and techniques that can enhance the nutrient value of your crop, and how to keep a healthy bottom line, too!

Participants in the 2022 Symposium will hear Bill Milton, a rancher from Roundup and the 2019 Leopold Conservation Award recipient, discuss how his grazing management practices benefit his land and operation. The Mannix brothers of Helmville, Montana, will describe how they've managed their agricultural enterprises through diversification. These are just two examples of Montana ag producers speaking at the symposium.

At a pre-conference workshop on Feb. 8, Jolene Brown will lead an interactive workshop about the nitty gritty work of running a successful family agricultural business and ensuring that measures are in place for transitioning the business to the next generation.

Keynote speakers Dr. Allen Williams, Understanding Ag., LLC, and Dan Kittredge, Bionutrient Food Associa-

tion, will lead discussions on the future of soil health and its relationship to the future of food production. Dr. Williams will focus on the principles of regenerative agriculture. Kittredge will delve into nutrient density of food and the connections made between soil, plant, and human health.

The Montana Soil Health Symposium welcomes farmers, ranchers, gardeners, and technical specialists from different landscapes and levels of experience to join us for three days of networking and discussing how we can keep our soils fertile and productive while keeping the family business strong and effective.

Registration is open now, including special pricing for students and interns enrolled in agricultural programs. Registration closes January 26th! Get more information and see the full agenda at www.MTSoil-Health.org.

[Register](#)

Upcoming Events

Funding Opportunities

January

Jan 10 **The Fish & the Flame: Virtual Film Debut and Q&A**

5 PM

Join Chama Peak Land Alliance and Western Landowners Alliance for a virtual film screening and Q&A of the new film, The Fish & the Flame. The short film features the story of Tim Haarmann, ranch manager at Banded Peak Ranch and his collaboration with Jim White, a biologist with Colorado Parks and Wildlife to save one of the few small holdout populations of nearly-extinct San Juan cutthroat trout, just as a wildfire threatens to decimate the fish.

[Learn More](#)

Jan 12

9-11 AM

DEQ Nutrient Work Group Meeting

The Nutrient Work Group is an advisory work group, convened by the Department of Environmental Quality.

[Learn More](#)

Jan 26

9-11 AM

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[Learn More](#)

Jan 26 - Feb 3 Billings

Soil Corps Discussion Forums

The Discussion Forums invite Conservation Districts and other partner organizations to have a conversation around building soil health capacity in our respective regions. Specifically, is there a need for a Soil Corps program in Montana and what might that look like? Please join us for an in-person discussion at the following Conservation Districts. Partner organizations outside of districts are welcome to attend.

[Learn More](#)

Jan 6

Montana Noxious Weed Trust Fund Grant Program

The Montana Noxious Weed Trust Fund (NWTF) Grant Program was established by the 1985 Montana Legislature to provide funding for the noxious weed research projects, state and community education/development projects, and local cooperative – landowner cost share. Applicants may apply for funding up to \$75,000 per project.

[Learn More](#)

Jan 14

ARPA Irrigation Grants

The American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) Infrastructure Advisory Commission is pleased to announce the opening of the ARPA Irrigation Grants. There is a total of \$10 million available for eligible projects, with a maximum award amount of \$500,000 per project.

For more information, please visit the [DNRC Irrigation Grant Program](#) page.

Jan 31

NACD 20221 Urban Agriculture Conservation Grants

NACD is accepting applications for their Urban Agriculture Conservation (UAC) Grants, and CDs from states in the Northern Plains region (which includes Montana!) are especially encouraged to apply. NACD wants CDs/communities from all regions to benefit from this funding, and so far CDs located in these regions have received the smallest percentage of UAC grants.

More info and the application are available on the [NACD website](#) or contact: [Ariel Rivers](#), the NACD Pacific Region Rep

View the [Request for proposals](#)

February

In Detail: Soil Corps Discussion Forums

Jan 26

2-4 PM

Area 6

Madison CD is hosting the meeting in Ennis, MT.

Jan 27

1-3 PM

Area 5

Missoula CD is hosting at Missoula Public Library.

Jan 31

1-3 PM

Area 3

Cascade CD is hosting meeting.

Feb 2

9-11 AM

Area 4

Rosebud CD is hosting the meeting.

Feb 3

10-12 PM

Area 1

Valley County CD is hosting Thurs Feb 3 10AM-Noon

Feb 12 - Feb 16

Orlando, FL

NACD Annual Meeting

NACD's annual meeting will be held at the Hilton Orlando Lake Buena Vista at Disney Springs Resort from Feb. 12-16, 2022. Hosted in partnership with the Association of Florida Conservation Districts, this year's meeting will focus on the theme, "Conservation Defined for All."

[Learn More](#)

Feb 24

Zoom, 9-12 PM

MWCC Annual Meeting

This online event will provide an opportunity for MWCC and our partners to provide information about federal funding initiatives aimed at supporting watershed health efforts in Montana. Additionally, we will present on MWCC's accomplishments from the previous year and report on our upcoming activities that will support watershed communities in 2022.

[Learn More](#)

Feb 18

RRGL Planning Grants

The DNRC Renewable Resource Grant and Loan Program (RRGL) is accepting planning grant applications. Planning grants are available to government entities for planning activities which lead to an RRGL program project application to conserve, manage, develop or protect a renewable resource in Montana.

[Program Guidance PDF](#)

[Learn More](#)

Looking Forward

Feb 9-10

Billings

Soil Health Symposium

Join us for an engaging pre-conference workshop plus two days of inspiring and informative discussions on the latest in soil health.

Registration opens October, 2021!

[Learn More](#)

May 24-26

Bozeman

Interdisciplinary Regional Workshop, Toward Convergent Solutions to Water Security

The Montana Water Center is hosting a workshop on solutions to Water Security and they're offering to pay for travel for those who participate and apply by Jan 24.

[Learn More](#)

Aug 15, 2022

Farm and Ranch Stress Assistance Network Mini-Grant Opportunity

The application for the Farm and Ranch Stress Assistance Network Mini-Grant program is now open! This program was created to address mental health needs in rural communities

and the agriculture industry through the use of mental health speakers, workshops and new or expanding trainings that support emotional, psychological, and social well-being.

[Learn More](#)

Rolling

Conservation District Professional Development Funding

The MWCC Watershed Fund has funding from the Montana DNRC to assist Conservation Districts with expenses for professional development opportunities related to natural resource conservation and watershed health. CDs that receive funding must demonstrate how the opportunity will help them achieve their conservation goals. Funding is available on a rolling basis, depending on availability.

[Learn More](#)

Rolling

through 2023

Minimum Allocation Grants

A Minimum Allocation Grant Program that's funding available to all Montana communities on a non-competitive basis. Districts can access the [Minimum Allocation Grant Program](#) by working through towns, cities, and counties. Contact [Autumn Coleman](#) with questions.

Rolling

NRCS MT: Applications for the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program

To learn more, call your [local USDA Service Center](#) or visit www.mt.nrcs.usda.gov. You can also contact: [Allen Persinger](#) for more information.

Rolling

Training Grants through ARPA

Available through the Montana Grants Application Portal. Nonprofits are eligible: <https://www.covidreliefmt.org/submit>

Rolling

NRCS MT: Applications for the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program

To learn more, call your local USDA Service Center or visit www.mt.nrcs.usda.gov.

MACD Communications Update

Eric Rannestad

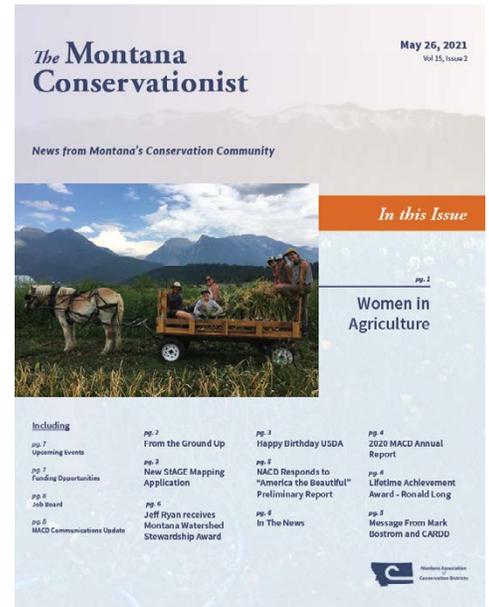
MACD Communications Specialist

In the last TMC issue of 2021, I have been reflecting on the many great stories conservation districts and our partners have shared in this publication. In the spring of 2020, the Milk River Watershed Alliance wrote a [story](#) about the state of the Saint Mary's Diversion and funding gap needed to repair that infrastructure. Since that first issue, we've featured stories about [Women in Agriculture](#), [Rain Gardens in the Flathead Basin](#), [CEMIST](#), the [2021 River Rendezvous](#), and so much more.

You can view all the issues of TMC from the past year on the [TMC archive page](#) on MACD's website.



TMC Submissions



To submit your proposal, please email MACD Communications Specialist, Eric Rannestad.

eric@macdnet.org

If interested in submitting a story to *The Montana Conservationist*, please send your proposals to Eric Rannestad (eric@macdnet.org).

Eric Rannestad

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