

THE MONTANA CONSERVATIONIST

News from Montana's Conservation Districts

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WE'RE
HIRING

SWCDM Seeks Director

SWCDM is seeking to hire a full-time Director position located in Helena, Montana. The successful applicant has a strong background in natural resources, proven experience working for or with non-profits, and is friendly, organized, hardworking, and motivated.

If this is you, come join our team!

[Visit swcdm.org/hiring to view the full job description.](http://swcdm.org/hiring)

To apply, send a resume, three references with contact information, and responses to the three supplemental questions to: hiring@macdnet.org by Friday, July 12 at 5 p.m. MDT for initial consideration. Position shall remain open until filled.



MONTANA ASSOCIATION of
CONSERVATION DISTRICTS
We're growing Montana's future.

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Ag Sustainability group tours RCPP projects around Yellowstone County

The Yellowstone Region Ag Sustainability (YRASAP) group of partners got together for a tour on a beautiful June day in Yellowstone county. This was a chance to showcase the successes of producers involved in the Regional Conservation Partnership Project (RCPP) and for other growers to learn from them in their experiences.

Around 28 attendees met at the Miller-Coors elevator, June 25th, 2019, for a presentation from Syngenta on the services they offer to customers in the arena of sustainability. Partners set up two stops on local farms that have been adapting sustainability practices and making irrigation improvements.

Cover crops in reduced till rotations

The first stop was east of Ballantine to Butch Ewen's barley field where the Natural Resources

Conservation Service (NRCS) shared about the pros and cons of cover crops in reduced tillage irrigated rotations and methods of irrigation water management.

Butch shared why he wanted to participate and what the pivot system allows him to do such as reduced tillage, more uniform water application, and improve soil health.

Pivot Conversion

Next, the group traveled back west to just outside of Billings on the Schroeder & Michael farm to see a flood to pivot conversion putting on its first irrigation of the season on sugar beets.

Ryan Gilbert shared why he and his grandfather, Bill Michael, were interested in participating. Reducing labor, managing inputs, reducing tillage and improving

soil health were big motivators for them.

Montana Bureau of Mines and Geology (MBMG) gave a presentation on irrigation water's influence on ground water. Some groundwater monitoring wells were set up at this site to measure ground water during flood irrigation and then during pivot irrigation. Preliminary results were shared with the group and a very interesting discussion took place, as the rain started to fall, about thoughtfully considering where efficient irrigation systems make the most sense ecologically.

The project was made possible by a partnership between Miller-Coors, Western Sugar, Beartooth RC&D, Syngenta, Montana Bureau of Mines and Geology, Yellowstone Conservation District, Big Horn Conservation District, Carbon Conservation District and USDA-NRCS.

Local Conservation District efforts support agriculture and the Missouri River

*Submitted by Casey Gallagher,
MRDCD Coordinator*

Dick Iverson and Buzz Mattelin attended the Missouri River Recovery Implementation Committee (MRRIC) plenary session May 21 – 23 in Sioux Falls, SD serving as representatives of Richland and Roosevelt Conservation Districts. Dick and Buzz had both previously served as stakeholder representatives on the Committee but were attending this meeting to represent the interests of irrigators and agriculture producers in the area below Fort Peck dam to the Yellowstone River Confluence.

The Missouri River Recovery Implementation Committee (MRRIC) serves as a national forum where people with diverse interests in the Missouri River basin can collaborate on recommendations for implementing the Missouri River Recovery Program. The plan, which was given final approval in 2018, is meant to provide a pathway for the recovery of three endangered species, which includes two bird species and the pallid sturgeon.

Mr. Iverson and Mr. Mattelin were appointed to serve on the Committee's Human Consideration Work Group where they are deeply involved with the Army Corps proposal to implement test flows out of Fort Peck meant to increase

recruitment of the endangered Pallid Sturgeon up the Missouri River to the Fort Peck dam. Their involvement with the work group and presentation to the full MRRIC group resulted in the Corps modifying their test flow proposal to best accommodate the interests of irrigators who use the more than 150 pump sites between the dam and Yellowstone River confluence.

Following Army Corps public outreach meetings at Fort Peck and Williston earlier this year, a concerted effort was made to involve local irrigators, Conservation Districts, landowners and Montana agency representatives from Montana FWP and DNRC, in the public comment process. As a result of those efforts and the involvement of Mr. Mattelin, Mr. Iverson and Taylor Twiest (all of whom serve on the MRRIC Human Considerations work group), the Corps increased their minimum low flow projections during those key irrigation months in July & August.

Conservation Districts and local irrigators will need to maintain their engagement during this process and work with their local Conservation Districts to ensure the viability of using water resources for farmland irrigation.

Missoula introduces clean suds car wash kits

Now that it is summer time, volunteer organizations around the garden city will be hosting car wash fundraisers to raise money for a variety of charities.

The Missoula Valley Water Quality District has developed a clean suds car wash kit which makes it easy for people to divert sudsy water to the right place to limit pollutants in water sources.

When people wash their hands or flush their toilet, that water flows to a wastewater treatment plant or a septic system. But dirty car wash water flows directly into storm drains known as sumps and it doesn't get treated or cleaned. That dirty water can then drain through the soil and into the aquifer which is Missoula's source of drinking water.

The Soil and Water Conservation Districts of Montana gave the Missoula Valley Water Quality District a grant of \$1,100 to develop a clean suds car wash kit, the first in Missoula.

"It's a good idea, it's a good way to do our part to reduce pollution and prevent contamination of our cherished shared resources," said Todd Seib, environmental health specialist.

The kit is available for free through the Missoula Valley Water Quality District. Volunteers can reserve the kit by calling 406-258-4890.



The West's worst fires aren't burning in forests

High Country News: Between the town of Elko, Nevada, and the Idaho border stretches some of the most remote land in the Lower 48, rolling hills and arid basins as far as the eye can see. Last July, this section of the Owyhee Desert was scorched by a fierce, fast-moving blaze with 40-foot flames, the largest wildfire in state history. In the end, the Martin Fire burned 435,000 acres, including some of the West's finest sagebrush habitat. Now, the raw range wind whips up the bare earth into enormous black clouds that roil on the horizon.

Once rare, fires that large, hot and destructive are now common in the Great Basin, a 200,000-square-mile region of mountains and valleys that includes all of Nevada and much of Utah, as well as parts of California, Idaho and Oregon. But despite the rising fire risk, a general lack of attention is putting the rangeland in growing danger.

The fire problem "risks permanent loss" of the ecosystem, according to Jolie Pollet, a fire ecologist and the Bureau of Land Management's division chief for fire planning and fuels management. This is a genuine crisis, she said, and it demands greater urgency and attention than it is currently getting.

"The general public, especially urban areas, doesn't seem to have an appreciation for the impacts on these landscapes, since the areas are so sparsely populated," she said.

The new ferocity of rangeland fires has an old culprit: cheatgrass, an annual originally from Eurasia that was brought to this country in cattle feed, packing material and ships' ballast in the late 1800s. It has since proliferated through overgrazing and development. The grass burns easily and often, and it thrives on fire. In intense blazes, when native shrubs perish,

cheatgrass simply drops its seeds and then expands into the burned areas. The areas of greatest fire risk in the Great Basin have a high correlation with the areas of highest cheatgrass incursion, and the increasingly dry and arid climate brought by climate change is encouraging its spread. The Great Basin now has the nation's highest wildfire risk.

Historically, sagebrush habitat burned about once every century or less, but now it happens around every five to 10 years. Over the past two decades, more than 15 million acres of sagebrush have been permanently lost to fire, according to the BLM, 9 million of them since 2014. Overall, since 2000, more acres of shrubland or grassland have burned than forest.

If sagebrush decline continues, the approximately 350 species that depend on it are in serious trouble. The Martin Fire burned some of the best sage grouse habitat in the country and destroyed more than 35 grouse mating grounds, or leks. The fires also harm watersheds, cause erosion and destroy wildlife corridors used by pronghorn antelope, mule deer and elk.

The impact on rural Americans is equally severe. Counties and ranchers must deal with infrastructure loss, including troughs, fencing, and damage to roads and powerlines. Many ranchers struggle with the additional costs, said Ron Cerri, a rancher and commissioner in agriculture-dependent Humboldt County, where the Martin Fire burned.

[READ MORE](#)

Here's what cheatgrass is and why it holds so much fire risk

Editor's note: The Reno Gazette Journal had this nice primer on cheatgrass - the seasons are for Nevada, but you get the drift!

There is a long list of threats to sagebrush ecosystem health in Nevada and beyond.

It includes global warming, drought, overgrazing, conifer encroachment, wildlife loss and misuse of water, among other problems.

Overshadowing all those others, at least when it comes to rangeland fire and the day-to-day lives of Westerners, is cheatgrass.

Here's what you should know and why you should care about this plant:

Invasive plant

It came to the U.S. in the 1800s and spread to all 50 states but is most problematic in the intermountain west.

What's the season for cheatgrass?

Cheatgrass is a winter annual, which means seeds germinate in winter and the plant sprouts, grows, produces new seed and dies within one season.

How to recognize it

Cheatgrass can be from two inches to two feet tall.

It's green during winter and early spring and turns rusty red to purple in spring and early summer before

it dies and turns light brown.

Its seeds spread quickly

Cheatgrass produces a huge seed bank. A single plant can produce enough seed to grow 1,000 plants per square foot.

The plant's early germination means it can beat native plants to early-season moisture, sun and soil nutrients.

The only advantage native plants have over cheatgrass is if they can establish themselves, their root systems will go deeper than shallow-rooted cheatgrass.

Cheatgrass brings fire risk

Cheatgrass is a fire risk because it can blanket entire swaths of the landscape which then become flammable as the thin blades dry out.

Lightning strikes can easily start cheatgrass fires and high winds can push those fires across vast distances at a high rate of speed.

Once an area burns it becomes more susceptible to cheatgrass invasion which perpetuates a vicious cycle that converts landscape to fire prone cheatgrass monoculture.

[Read the article online](#)

NACD testifies to Congress on Soil Health

NACD, June 25: Today, the National Association of Conservation Districts (NACD) Secretary-Treasurer Ian Cunningham testified before the U.S. House Committee on Agriculture Subcommittee on Conservation and Forestry about the importance of soil health practices.

Cunningham owns and operates a fifth-generation family farm with his son in southwest Minnesota, producing corn, soybeans and beef cattle.

"Soil health is a top priority across our 800-acre operation," Cunningham said in written testimony to the subcommittee. "We have come to realize that healthy soil is the key to addressing many natural resource concerns. It is clear that healthy soil is the bedrock and should be the priority of our conservation efforts."

In his testimony, Cunningham emphasized the role of conservation districts in leading the nation's producers to implement soil health conservation practices.

"For a more successful uptake of soil health practices, producers need to be informed of the latest data and research, and this must come from a trusted local source," he said.

[READ MORE](#)

Grants

Northern Grassland Restoration Incentives Program

The Northern Great Plains Joint Venture is making up to \$145,000 available for habitat projects in priority counties of the NGPJV geography, with a maximum grant of \$30,000 per project. Successful applicants will deliver habitat projects that contribute measurably to the protection, restoration or enhancement of grassland and/or shrub-steppe habitats. Proposals due **June 28**. [More Info](#)

Events, etc

Soil Health Workshop with Nicole Masters

WSE is hosting world renowned agroecologist Nicole Masters of New Zealand-based Integrity Soils to lead this day-long workshop on soil biology and carbon levels, nutrient cycling, grazing management, and the economic benefits of soil health. This workshop is open to ranchers, farmers, gardeners, chefs, teachers and anyone interested in regenerative agriculture. This workshop is **July 1st** at Namchak Retreat Ranch, 55819 Garcon Gulch Rd., Hot Springs, MT. [To Register](#)

Save the Date: River Rendezvous

Please Plan to Spend **July 26th** on the Missouri River. You are invited to the 2019 River Rendezvous hosted by Valley County Conservation District, MT Fish Wildlife and Parks,

the US Army Corps of Engineers, and the Missouri River Conservation Districts Council. All activities will take place on July 26th, and the tour will leave from the Fort Peck Interpretive Center. This year's Rendezvous will highlight key features of the Missouri / Milk River confluence including: Pallid sturgeon habitat, irrigation, proposed crossing sites for the Keystone XL pipeline, management efforts for aquatic and terrestrial invasive species, and more!

Save the Date: Montana Range Tour

The 2019 Montana Range Tour, will be held **September 4th & 5th** in Harlowton, MT.

Save the Date: MWCC Symposium

The bi-annual MWCC Symposium will be held **October 14-16th, 2020** in Butte, Montana.

Jobs

WLA Communications Director

Western Landowners Alliance (WLA) seeks an energetic and effective communications director to advance external relations for our rapidly growing West-wide non-profit organization. Preferred location is Santa Fe, New Mexico, though alternative arrangements may be considered. Closes **July 19**. [More Info](#)

MISC

Nominate Your Conservation Leaders Today

Do you have an outstanding conservation leader in your community? Take this opportunity to show your appreciation for their work and dedication by sending in a nomination for one of NACD's national conservation awards.

Reminder: time to think about Resolutions

MACD & SWCDM want to remind Conservation Districts that now is the time to be thinking about what (if any) resolutions your district would like to bring forward to Area Meetings and Convention.

The MACD Board of Directors voted to extend the deadline for draft resolutions to be submitted to MACD until August 1.

Please put Possible Resolutions on your next board meeting agenda so that your district can discuss if you'd like to bring any forward.

You can view the [Resolutions Procedures Policy on our website here](#).

Coming Up

July

- 1 Nicole Masters Soil Health Workshop, Hot Springs

- 8 **MACD Board Conference**
Call [View Agenda Here](#)

- 22 **MACD Executive Committee Conference Call**

- Governor's Drought and Water Supply Advisory Committee meeting

- 26 River Rendezvous, Fort Peck

Have a story, funding opportunity, or event to share?
Please email tmc@macdnet.org with details.



Scientists saving pallid sturgeon in Montana still face hurdles

Great Falls Tribune: A bevy of scientists has helped Montana's most threatened fish avoid blinking out.

Declared an endangered species in 1990, there are only about 100 wild adult pallid sturgeon living in the Missouri and Yellowstone rivers above Lake Sakakawea. About half as many are believed to inhabit the Missouri River above Fort Peck Reservoir.

But swimming in those same waters are roughly 19,000 of their off-spring, all brought to life thanks to human intervention via a hatchery program.

"I'm happy to announce that extinction has been diverted," said Bob Snyder, of the Upper Basin Pallid Sturgeon Workgroup.

The stocking program, fueled by eggs collected from wild fish, allowed the preservation of

the fishes' unique genetics and spread several generations of pallids across the river systems, buying scientists time.

Although worthy of a biology high-five, challenges for the fish continue to exist, the largest being a lack of natural reproduction and the continued presence of dams that have substantially altered their ecosystem.

Old fish

When it comes to fisheries biology, pallid sturgeon present one of the most difficult freshwater challenges. The fish are long-lived, capable of lengthy spawning migrations, yet wild reproduction in the Missouri and Yellowstone rivers in Montana has been rare due to dams.

[READ MORE](#)