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Natural Resources Conservation Service Montana Conservation Update

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In This Issue

- ❑ *Season's Greetings*
- ❑ *Nearly 600 Attend Soil Health Workshops across Montana*
- ❑ *Greg Judy Comes to Lake County*
- ❑ *Montana Noxious Weed Education Project Provides Additional Teaching Resources*
- ❑ *Plant Materials Today*
- ❑ *Applications for Conservation Stewardship Program Due Jan. 17*
- ❑ *Human Resources Report*
- ❑ *Upcoming Events*

Greetings from Bozeman

Joyce Swartzendruber, State Conservationist

We are in the dead of winter here, but soon the earth's rotation around the sun will start bringing us longer days, and with more sunshine we can stand the cold a little better!

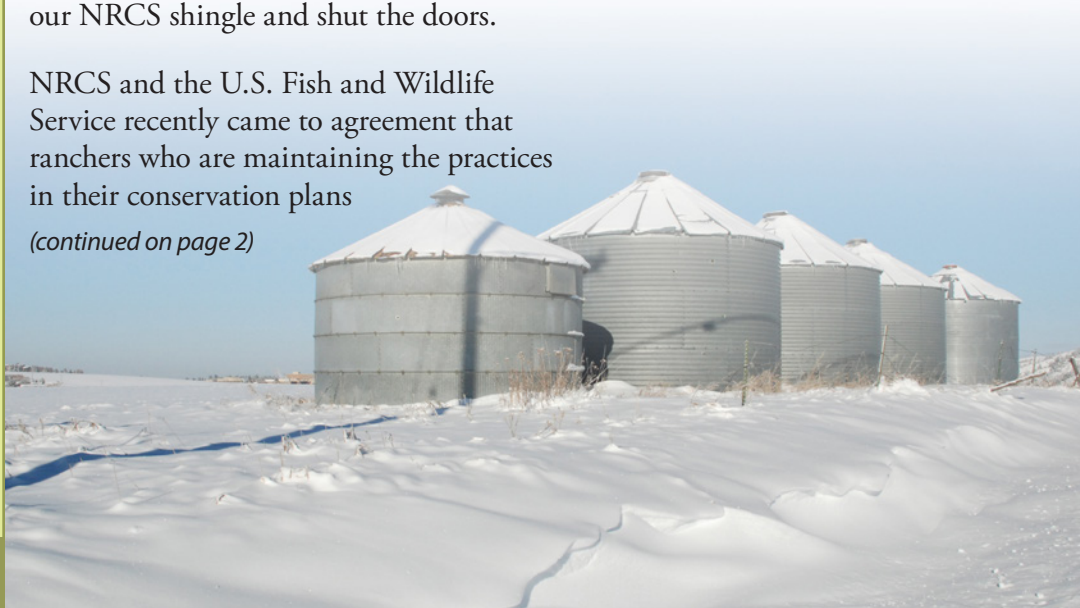
Conservation in Montana is seeing huge successes in two very important areas: Greater sage-grouse habitat and soil health. Let me bring you up to speed on these, and what they bring to farmers and ranchers in the Treasure State.

The Greater sage-grouse has made its home in sagebrush country because that is simply where it can thrive. It needs broad, open landscapes that don't infringe on its mating, nesting, and wintering habitats. As these landscapes are broken out for cropland, subdivided for houses, drilled for oil, or overgrazed, the habitat and the bird populations dwindle. This has put the bird on the Candidate list under the Endangered Species Act (ESA).

NRCS embarked on the Sage-Grouse Initiative in 2010, and we have put extra funds and staff into core sage-grouse areas to provide ranchers with technical assistance (upland wildlife habitat and prescribed grazing plans) and financial assistance (Environmental Quality Incentives Program, Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program, Grasslands Reserve Program, Farm and Ranchland Protection Program). To date, we have a half million acres of ranches in conservation plans that are protecting sage-grouse habitat and maintaining and improving grazing systems. If we don't marry those two concepts up – wildlife habitat in conjunction with productive working ranches – we should take down our NRCS shingle and shut the doors.

NRCS and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service recently came to agreement that ranchers who are maintaining the practices in their conservation plans

(continued on page 2)



Greetings from Bozeman

(continued from page 1)

addressing sage-grouse threats will be protected from legal action for 30 years if the sage-grouse is listed as “Threatened” or “Endangered” under the ESA. This doesn’t tie the protection—also referred to as predictability or certainty—to a financial contract with NRCS. It ties the protection to a good old-fashioned resource management system conservation plan. That is our bread and butter planning process, and it is feeding the long-range protection of the iconic Greater sage-grouse species.

On the farming side of the house, soil health is taking center stage. Producers filled the rooms in our six soil health workshops we held across the state in November. They are savvy growers who understand the microbiology, mineralization, and magic of managing for living things under the soil surface. When farmers put together their costs and returns on using cover crops, no-till and rotations, they are finding the improvements are helping their bottom line, not just the water-holding capacity and nutrient benefits of their healthier soil.

If you haven’t seen a soil health demonstration or rainfall simulator at work, check out some You Tube videos on the national [NRCS website](http://www.nrcs.usda.gov).

Season’s Greetings, and I wish you all the best in 2014.



Nearly 600 Attend Soil Health Workshops across Montana

Local agricultural producers and soil health experts shared tips and tricks to improving soil health during six workshops across Montana the week of Nov. 18, 2013. The workshops were sponsored by NRCS and the Montana Chapter of the Soil and Water Conservation Society.

While workshop speakers varied at each location, the theme remained the same—improving soil health on Montana’s farms and ranches.

The Great Falls workshop had the largest crowd, with 160 on hand. The workshop began with the soil health basics presented by Jon Stika, NRCS soil scientist from North Dakota. Ray Ward, Ward Laboratories in Nebraska, followed with the importance of carbon to soil health. Next, Rick Bieber shared his personal story of improving soil health on his own farm in South Dakota. The workshop concluded with a three-producer panel.

Other workshops were held in Billings, Bozeman, Glasgow, Miles City, and Missoula.

Approximately 160 participants listen to speakers discuss soil health information at a Soil Health Workshop in Great Falls.



Jon Stika, NRCS resource soil scientist, Dickinson, ND, covered soil health basics at a Soil Health Workshop in Great Falls.





The crowd gathers to watch Jake Yoder rotate his livestock between paddocks.



David Sturman shows workshop participants how easy it is to move sheep.

Greg Judy Comes to Lake County

In September, Lake County welcomed Greg Judy for a two-day grazing workshop. Judy is well known for his MOB grazing (a form of high stock density grazing) expertise. The workshop was a large success with more than 80 people in attendance each day. Producers came from as far away as Idaho to hear Judy speak.



Greg Judy discusses MOB grazing in the field.

He and his wife, Jan, operate a diverse livestock operation in Clark, Missouri, where they focus on using animal impacts to build healthy soils and improve forage quality and biomass.

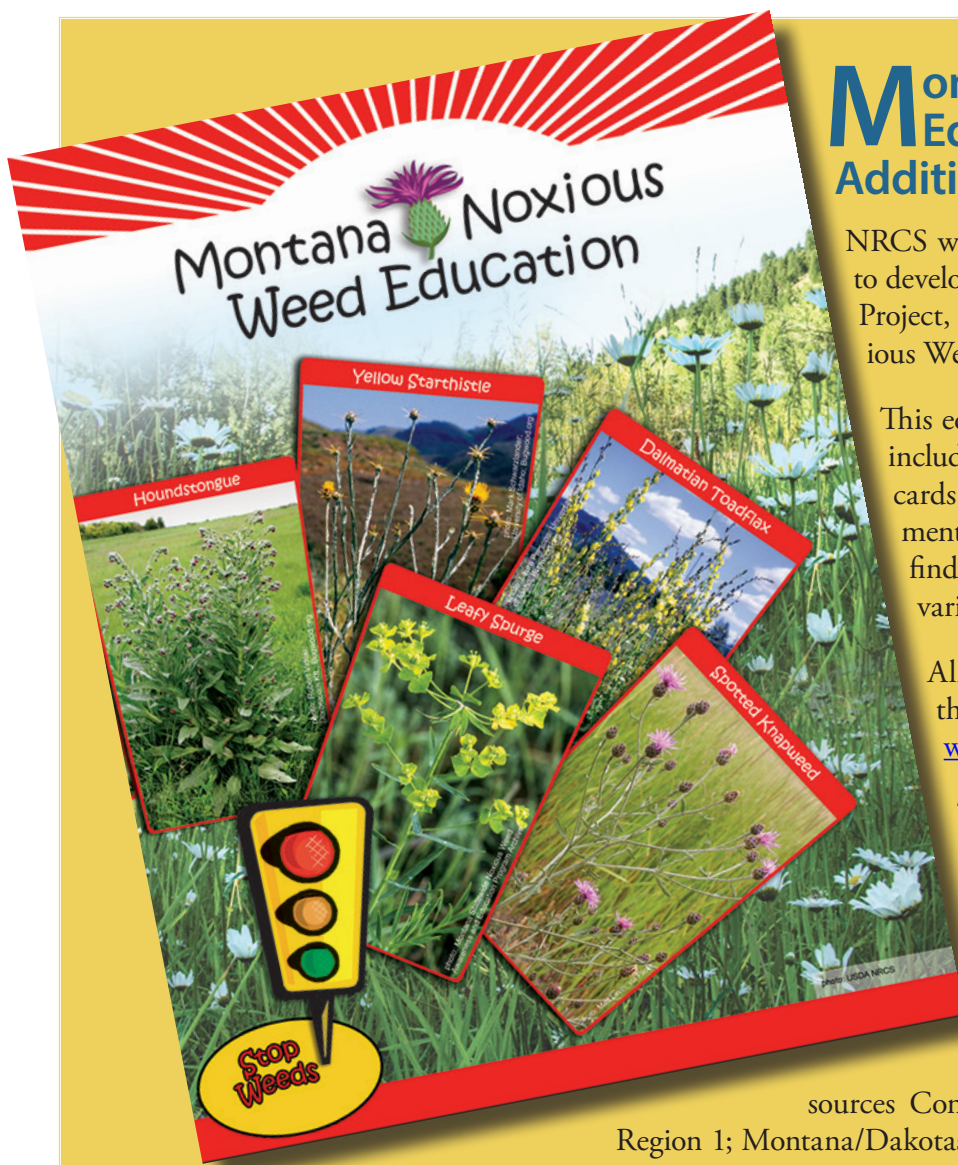
The workshop was a mix of indoor discussion and outdoor learning. While in the classroom, Judy explained the principles behind MOB grazing and how he has employed the practices on his farm with tremendous results. In the field, participants watched cows and sheep being rotated between paddocks and examined pastures that utilized both high stock density grazing as well as more conventional grazing strategies.



Greg Judy instructs participants at the Amish Community Center.

“Participants were floored when they saw the transformation that high stock density grazing provides; when analyzing pastures under different management regimes, there was literally a night and day difference,” said Ben Montgomery, NRCS district conservationist in Ronan. “In addition, we discussed animal performance, which should be the cornerstone of any grazing operation, and how to quickly determine animal performance in the field both by viewing the animal as well as its manure.”

During the workshop, David Sturman explained his operation to the crowd. “At first I managed my operation by focusing on my sheep, then after a time, I realized that I was actually a grass farmer and started paying more attention to my forage,” Sturman said. “Now, years later, I’ve realized that it all starts with the soil and now, everything I do, I focus on building soil, which in return allows me to better manage all aspects of my operation.”



Montana Noxious Weed Education Project Provides Additional Teaching Resources

NRCS was a key member of a collaborative effort to develop the Montana Noxious Weed Education Project, a project funded through a Montana Noxious Weed Trust Fund grant.

This educational project has many components, including posters, weed species identification cards, lesson plans, illustrations, resource documents, and information about where you can find more curriculum ideas, lesson plans and various other technical materials.

All of the project materials are located on the [Montana Department of Agriculture website](http://plant-materials.nrcs.usda.gov/mtpmc/).

The following agencies and groups also collaborated on the project:

Montana Noxious Weed Education Campaign; Montana Department of Agriculture; Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation; USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service; USDA Forest Service

Region 1; Montana/Dakotas Bureau of Land Management; Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks; Montana Department of Transportation; USDA Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service; Montana State University; and the Montana Weed Control Association.

Plant Materials Today

The NRCS Bridger Plant Materials Center has released another issue of [Plant Materials Today](http://plant-materials.nrcs.usda.gov/mtpmc/). This issue covers tree and shrub tolerance of salt-affected sites, introduces a new project leader for the development of acid and heavy metal tolerant releases project, discusses a simple tool for reducing soil erosion in furrow irrigation, and shows mysterious clues to avian flight patterns. Please contact Joe Scianna, Bridger Plant Materials Center manager, if you have questions.



Applications for Conservation Stewardship Program Due Jan. 17

NRCS has opened the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) for new enrollments for 2014 and interested producers must submit applications to NRCS by Jan. 17, 2014.

The CSP is a Farm Bill conservation program that helps established conservation stewards with taking their level of natural resource management to the next level. This helps to improve both their agricultural production and provide valuable conservation benefits such as cleaner and more abundant water, healthier soils and better wildlife habitat.

CSP is now in its fifth year and so far, NRCS has partnered with producers to enroll more than 59 million acres across the nation. The program emphasizes conservation performance — producers earn higher payments for higher performance. In CSP, producers install conservation enhancements to make positive changes in soil qual-

ity, soil erosion, water quality, water quantity, air quality, plant resources, animal resources and energy.

Eligible landowners and operators in all states and territories can enroll in CSP through January 17 to be eligible for 2014 funding. While local NRCS offices accept CSP applications year round, NRCS evaluates applications during announced ranking periods. To be eligible for this year's enrollment, producers must have their applications submitted to NRCS by the closing date.

A CSP self-screening checklist is available to help producers determine if the program is suitable for their operation. The checklist highlights basic information about CSP eligibility requirements, stewardship threshold requirements and payment types.

Learn more about CSP by visiting the [NRCS website](http://www.mt.nrcs.usda.gov).

Human Resources Report

New Permanent Employees

- *Bob Fisher, Biological Science Technician, Bridger*

Promotions

- *Stacy Denny-Eneboe, District Conservationist, Conrad*
- *Rena Ruffin, Agricultural Economist, Bozeman*
- *Cedar Magone, Soil Conservation Technician, White Sulphur Springs*
- *Terry Heck, Rangeland Management Specialist, Pierre, SD to Area Resource Conservationist, Miles City*

Reassignments

- *Tyler Martindale, Agricultural Engineer, North Vernon, IN to Civil Engineer, Bozeman*
- *Kathy Stringer, Office Assistant to Program Assistant, Culbertson*
- *Shyla Jones, Office Assistant to Program Assistant, Malta*

Losses

- *Nikki Romero, Office Assistant, Bozeman*
- *Daniel Ostrem, Civil Engineer, Great Falls*
- *Lance Lindbloom, Soil Conservationist, Rocky Boy*

Upcoming Events

For up-to-date conservation and agriculture-related events and activities in Montana, visit

<http://www.mt.nrcs.usda.gov>.

January 2014

- ❑ **Montana Weed Control Association, January 15-16, 2014, Great Falls**
- ❑ **Montana Winter Grazing Seminar, January 29-30, 2014, Miles City**

February 2014

- ❑ **Soil Health Forums, February 18, 2014, six Montana locations:**
Baker
Billings
Great Falls
Manhattan
Miles City
Missoula



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