

THE MONTANA CONSERVATIONIST

News from Montana's Conservation Districts

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In Central Montana, can grass banking keep young farmers on the land?

By Laura Nowlin

Prairie Populist: To help young ranchers establish themselves, and to give current ranchers a bit more security, a group of central Montanans are looking into creating a grassbank — a piece of land where livestock from several producers, who commit to conservation practices, could graze.

“There are several younger couples in Petroleum County or Fergus County that are trying to do both – trying to find grass to lease and work day jobs,” one Winnett-area rancher said in a recent survey by ACES, the Winnett community group investigating the idea. “They want to expand but don’t have the opportunity because there’s no grass available or it’s priced too high out of their price range to make it work.” *Continued on page 3*

SOIL & WATER
CONSERVATION DISTRICTS
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EPA: Impact of high water on Smurfit berms reveal no imminent threat

Missoula Current: The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency dispatched a member of its emergency response team to Missoula this week to analyze a berm at the shuttered Smurfit-Stone Container Corp. pulp and paper mill west of the city.

Marty McComb, the federal on-scene coordinator with EPA, said his arrival was a precautionary move and an initial review of the earthen berm revealed no sign of failure or leakage.

"There is no imminent threat that we can see," McComb said Friday. "But I think we can all agree that we just want to be prepared if something does happen."

The stability of the berm separating the Clark Fork River from the industrial site and its lingering contaminants has been a concern for years. As recently as March, Missoula County commissioners raised concerns that floodwaters could erode more than 50 years of sludge, ash and industrial waste if the river penetrated the dike.

Commissioners also accused the EPA of failing to address the human and ecological health concerns associated with the site's contaminants in an ongoing risk assessment being conducted by the federal agency.

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Committee to request study of Montana stream gauges

Bozeman Daily Chronicle: Lawmakers want to look for new ways to pay for stream gauges across Montana following a year in which state agencies nixed funding for some of the measuring devices to save money.

The Water Policy Interim Committee voted unanimously Tuesday to draft a resolution calling for a study of stream gauges and the complex funding mechanisms behind them. The resolution would be considered by the 2019 Montana Legislature.

The vote came after lawmakers heard from government officials and a leader of a watershed group about the importance of gauges and the volatility of their funding sources. Several gauges were shut off at least temporarily in the past year because of budget crunches at the state level, and government officials and water users alike want more stability.

Paul Azevedo, the water management bureau chief for the

Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation, said the agency has been talking about new funding models. He said a new mechanism should focus on "diversifying the funding pie rather than trying to figure out how to rearrange the slices in the current pie."

Gauges measure streamflow and temperature, data used by water managers, irrigators and river users. The devices are operated by the U.S. Geological Survey. There are 227 gauges in Montana and running one for a year is roughly \$18,000, according to the USGS.

USGS pays for some gauges, but much of the funding for the instruments comes from other sources, including state agencies, utility companies and non-government organizations. Money struggles are so common that USGS maintains a webpage dedicated to endangered gauges.

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Daines: Water Act funds Blackfoot water rights settlement, boat inspection stations

Missoula Current: Legislation introduced in Congress this week would expand the capacity for water storage and include funding for the Blackfoot Tribe water rights settlement, along with other issues identified as Western state priorities, including floodwater protection.

Sens. Steve Daines, chairman of the Western Caucus, and John Barrasso, chairman of the Environment and Public Works Committee, said the measures are included in America's Water Infrastructure Act of 2018.

"This is an important first step for Montana families, farmers, ranchers, the Blackfoot Tribe and Western states," Daines said. "Inclusion of funding for the Blackfoot Tribe water rights settlement and for watercraft inspection stations will create water access stability and control the spread of invasive species that threaten Montana ecosystems."

Daines said America's Water Infrastructure Act of 2018 supports the West's economic competitiveness by increasing water storage and by providing floodwater protection.

It also deepens coastal ports and maintains the navigability of inland waterways across the country. The legislation also repairs aging drinking water, wastewater and irrigation systems. [READ MORE](#)



Governor oks plan for trails, recreation on Yellowstone after 2011 oil spill

Montana Gov. Steve Bullock is approving a plan to build new trails, fishing access sites and other recreational features along the Yellowstone River to make up for damage from a 2011 ExxonMobil Corp. pipeline spill.

The 63,000 gallon oil spill near Laurel damaged thousands of acres along an 85-mile stretch of the famous waterway.

Exxon in 2016 agreed to pay \$12 million for environmental damages, including about \$2.3 million for lost

recreational opportunities. The spill required a months-long cleanup.

Bullock announced the recreation plan during a Wednesday event in Billings also attended by Attorney General Tim Fox.

Bullock says the projects due to receive money will improve public access to a river that plays a major role in Montana's \$7 billion outdoor recreation economy.

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Grassbanks

Continued From Page 1: The issues most prevalent here mirror those of the rest of the Northern Great Plains: aging population of ranchers, successful ranch transition, and high land prices. Prices for grazing land increase unpredictably as area ranches are purchased by investors or as recreational retreats.

up for sale, out-of-staters buy it and ... they use it for recreational purposes mostly, like hunting," another rancher said in the survey. "Those people don't volunteer in the community. ... They don't buy groceries in the store year-round or use the post office year-round and don't have kids in school. It's a loss of population that [could have helped] keep the community going."

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"Mostly when the ranches come

A range of solutions to better manage rangelands

Prairie Populist: Over 70 percent of Montana is rangeland — 68 million acres of forests and grassland are suitable for grazing.

Rangeland is a complicated landscape. There are a lot of stakeholders (and steak-holders, as it goes) that take interest in the health, well-being, and management of the land. Most of Montana's rangeland is privately owned, but what isn't is public and leased out to ranchers. It makes for some good eatin' for livestock and wildlife. Some folks want to recreate and hunt on it, some want it preserved for wildlife, and some folks use it to feed us all.

With so many different users, it takes a lot of work to keep the land healthy. This doesn't happen on its own. Just imagine what it would be like if folks weren't putting in the time and effort to protect and manage our rangelands.

These lands collect and filter water and air. They support our \$2.2 billion livestock industry and hundreds of thousands of wild game. The native grasses and plants prevent soil erosion and put nutrients into the ground. They provide us spaces to hunt and fish, and they create the big wild views that make our state so special.

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Honey Bee colony losses increase

Beeinformed.org: The Bee Informed Partnership (<http://beeinformed.org>) recently conducted the twelfth annual survey of managed honey bee colony losses in the United States. This year, 4,794 beekeepers collectively managing 175,923 colonies in October 2017 provided validated survey responses. This represents 6.6% of the estimated 2.67 million managed honey-producing colonies in the nation (USDA, 2018).

During the 2017-2018 winter (1 October 2017 – 1 April 2018), an estimated 30.7% of managed colonies in the United States were lost (Fig. 1). This represents an increase of 9.5 percentage points over that of the previous year, and an increase of 2.8 percentage points over that of the 10-year average total winter colony loss rate of 27.9%.

Similar to previous years, backyard beekeepers lost more colonies in winter (46.3%) compared to those lost by sideline (38.0%) and commercial (26.4%) beekeepers. Backyard, sideline, and commercial beekeepers are defined as those managing 50 or fewer colonies, 51 – 500 colonies, and 501 or more colonies, respectively.

Interestingly, the self-reported 'level of acceptable winter colony loss' increased from 18.7% last year to 20.6% this year. Sixty-nine percent of responding beekeepers lost more of their colonies than deemed to be acceptable.

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Farm Bill timeline may stretch into 2019

Successful Farming: In the last farm bill, conservative Republicans demanded the biggest cuts in food stamps in a generation, leading the House to defeat the bill in June 2013. It then took Congress more than six months to put the pieces together. The same outcome is possible now after a revolt by Republican conservatives defeated a new farm bill calling for stricter work requirements for food stamp recipients and looser payment limit rules for farmers. Once again, the delay may stretch into the new year.

House Speaker Paul Ryan preserved a last chance to revive the farm bill this week by requesting a new vote on the legislation. To succeed, and to get the farm bill back on track, he will need the support of the conservatives who voted against the bill on Friday. Under House rules, Ryan's motion to reconsider the 213-198 rejection of the farm bill expires on Tuesday. The debate schedule for this week does not mention a revote on the farm bill but "additional legislative items are possible."

"What we'll end up with is an extension" of the 2014 law, said Minnesota Representative Collin Peterson, the senior Democrat on the House Agriculture Committee. "Our side is not going to live with this work requirement stuff ... We're willing to go back to the drawing board and fix it (the farm bill)." But House Agriculture chairman Michael Conaway says SNAP work requirements "absolutely" must be part of the new farm law. [READ MORE](#)

Grants

Ranching For Rivers Program Applications

SWCDM is seeking applications for Ranching for Rivers – a cost-share program to help rancher with riparian pasture fencing projects. In partnership with the MRCD, SWCDM will offer up to 50% cost-share to landowners to voluntarily construct fences and/or other infrastructure that enable them to better manage the riparian resources on their land. Applications accepted on rolling basis, closes **June 15**. [More Info](#)

RDG Planning Grants

The DNRC Reclamation and Development Grants Program (RDGP) is accepting grant applications to fund planning and assessment for natural resource projects. Planning activities may include, but are not limited to: problem analysis, site assessment, feasibility studies, environmental monitoring, remedial action plans, technology demonstration, research, grant writing or other related actions that lead to a full-scale project. Due **June 15**. [More Info](#)

Community Forest & Open Space Grant

This is a competitive grant program whereby local governments, qualified nonprofit organizations, and Indian tribes are eligible to apply for grants to establish community forests through fee simple acquisition of private forest land from a willing seller. **June 29** [More Info](#)

CD Water Projects Grants

The Sweet Grass Conservation District is announcing a second round of funding for water-related projects. The maximum grant is \$21,000 and a new deadline of **August 6th** has been set. If you have any questions, contact Guelda at 932-5160 x 101.

Events, etc

Connecting Soil Health with Productivity

Dr. Christine Jones will cover the basics of soil function; including the links between soil elements, structure and water at this workshop hosted by Little Beaver CD. **June 15**, Baker. Email littlebeavercd@macdnet.org for more info.

Wetland Rendezvous

The purpose of this gathering is to spend some quality time in the field exploring springs and wetlands with other wetland scientists and learn about new and innovative ways to inventory, monitor, and assess these ecosystems. Hosted by Montana Wetland Council. Lincoln, MT, **June 26-28**. [More Info](#)

Montana Natural Resources Youth Camp

The 32nd annual Montana Natural Resources Youth Camp will be held July 15-20. Students will spend a week at Lubrecht Experimental Forest, learning about our natural resources & their management, and make lasting friendships. Camp cost is \$300. Application & deposit of \$150 due **June 15**. www.mnryc.com for more info.

Soil Acidity Management Field Day

MSU Central Agricultural Research Center (CARC) and MSU Extension will be hosting a field day on the Highwood Bench on Wednesday, **June 20**. The field day will begin with a tour of the CARC cereal, pea and canola plots, which have been seeded in low pH soil to determine tolerance to soil acidity. [More Info](#)

Ranching for Profit with Dave Pratt

The Ranchers Stewardship Alliance is hosting three standalone seminars on ranching for profit with Dave Pratt. Attend one or all, **June 23** in Malta. [More Info](#)

Gallatin Ventenata Field Tour

Gallatin County is hosting a ventenata tour on Tuesday, **June 26**, starting at 3:00 p.m. We will visit numerous sites in Gallatin County that have been invaded by the winter annual grass Ventenata dubia. Topics will include ventenata identification, biology and ecology, and management. [More Info](#)

2018 River Rendezvous

Please join us on **July 11th and 12th** for the 2018 River Rendezvous hosted by the Cascade Conservation District and the Missouri River Conservation Districts Council. Contact Rachel Frost 406-454-0056, or Tenlee Atchison 406.727.3603 x125 for more information.

Continued on next page.

Coming Up

June

- 3-6 NACD Northern Plains Regional Meeting, Charlo
- 6 Montana Association of State Grazing Districts Annual Meeting

Granite County Noxious Weed Clinic
- 11-13 **MACD Spring Board Meeting, Helena**
- 14 Digital Atlas & GIS Training for CD Employees, Helena
- 15 Connecting Soil Health with Productivity, Plevna
- 16 RC Mudder's Mud Run for Conservation, Hamilton
- 18-20 Montana Range Days, Red Lodge
- 20 Highwood Bench Soil Acidity Field Day
- 23 Ranching for Profit with Dave Pratt, Malta
- 25 MACD Executive Committee Conference Call
- 26 CMR Working Group Mtg

Have an event to share?
Visit macdnet.org/calendar to add your event to our list!

ETC

Montana AWRA Call for Sponsors / Exhibitors

The 35th Annual MT AWRA Conference will be October 17 - 19 in West Yellowstone, Montana. We invite you to support a community of nearly 200 scientists, natural resource managers, students, and guests at the Annual Montana AWRA conference.
[More Info](#)

Jobs

MARS Project Manager

Montana Aquatic Resource Services is currently seeking a project manager that strongly believes in and shares our vision to raise the bar in protecting and conserving Montana's precious stream, river and wetland resources. The position of Project Manager (PM) has the primary responsibility for managing and executing existing stream and wetland mitigation projects as well as developing new projects, through networking with private landowners, agencies, NGOs, and land trusts. Closes **June 15**. [More Info](#)

RIPARIAN GRAZING WORKSHOPS

FEATURING SANDY WYMAN

Sandy is a retired BLM Riparian & Rangeland Management Specialist, National Riparian Service Team 2002-2018 and NRCS for 15 years. She has worked throughout the west providing coaching and training in conflict management, facilitation, riparian assessment, restoration, monitoring, and adaptive grazing management.

Learn how to effectively manage riparian grazing areas. Workshops will include a morning session with speakers, catered lunch, and a field tour in the afternoon.

JUNE 26 THOMPSON FALLS

JUNE 27 HELENA

JUNE 28 DEER LODGE

\$15 pre-registration / \$20 at the door

Hosted by SWCDM, MRCDC, and DNRC Rangeland Resources Committee

➡ Visit www.swcdm.org for more information and to register. ⬅