

# THE MONTANA CONSERVATIONIST

News from Montana's Conservation Districts

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## Trump issues Executive Order on WOTUS

*From Northern Ag, Tuesday Feb. 28:* Today President Donald Trump issued an executive action ordering the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the Army Corps of Engineers to reconsider their controversial Waters of the United States Rule.

The WOTUS rule, which was issued by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and Army Corps of Engineers under the Obama Administration, was challenged in courts by more than 30 states, environmental organizations, and numerous industry groups including the National Corn Growers Association, American Farm Bureau Federation, and the National Cattlemen's Beef Association. . In October 2015, a federal appeals court issued a stay preventing the rule's implementation.

The National Corn Growers Association said, "We appreciate the Trump Administration's commitment to reducing regulatory burdens for America's farmers and ranchers," said NCGA President Wesley Spurlock. "We fully support the repeal of the WOTUS rule. Farmers and ranchers care deeply about clean water, but this rule had significant flaws. It was arbitrarily written, legally indefensible, and extremely difficult to implement."

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1101 Eleventh Avenue  
Helena, MT 59601  
406-443-5711  
[www.swcdmi.org](http://www.swcdmi.org)

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## MT Legislature at Midpoint: 50 bills signed into law, 500 await

*From Last Best News / UM Legislative News Service: HELENA* – There's a break on the horizon for lawmakers in Helena, with about 50 bills signed into law so far, and over 500 still in the process.

Former lawmaker and now lobbyist Bob Gilbert of Sidney says after the transmittal break, which happens halfway through every 90-day session, he expects a good bit of concentration on money.

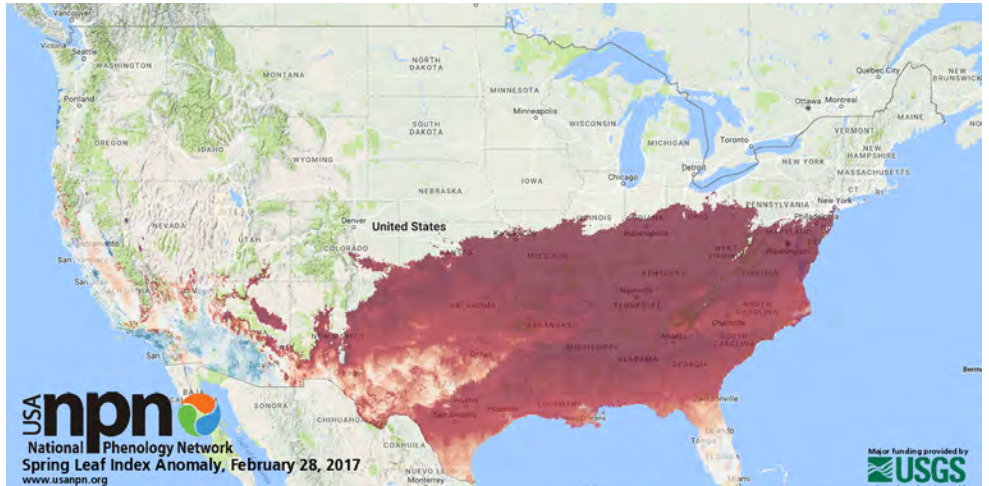
"Taxation bills, appropriations bills, anything that raises revenue. Or costs revenue," he said.

At this point, all general bills that don't deal with revenue must have passed either the House or Senate, or they automatically fail. Revenue bills have until March 30th.

The state budget, infrastructure, and healthcare have all been big topics this legislative session. The budget, which is facing a shortfall, has lawmakers divided, often on party lines, on how to balance it.

Last Friday, the Senate adjourned for transmittal break. Sen. Fred Thomas, R-Stevensville, addressed the Senate at the end of a nearly nine-hour session.

"We will not be on vacation, many of us go back to work, and trudge back into our lives that we were at and continue on," he said.



## Is Spring ever going to come? Ask a Phenologist. (hint: it's 3 weeks early in the south this year)

*From On Pasture:* Phenology is the study of recurring plant and animal life cycles. It helps us understand the temperatures and climate conditions plants need to begin growing each Spring. In fact, the [National Phenology Network](#) has a set of "spring indices" based on information about the accumulated warmth required for native and cultivated plants to leave dormancy and begin to grow. Using this information they've developed a set of algorithms (think fancy math like what Google uses to figure out what you're looking for) that can use the data from any weather station to tell us when spring, or plant growth begins.

We started gathering this information in the 1950s when Bozeman, Montana Professor Joseph Caprio created the "Lilac Network." Lilacs bloom in early spring, so they're a good indicator of when spring has sprung. Caprio enlisted citizens across Montana to send in their observations of lilac bloom dates and temperatures. By the 1980s the network had spread nationwide, and ultimately it became the

National Phenology Network.

Based in part on decades of lilac data, as well as lots of other information gathered by citizens who signed up to monitor temperatures and provide observations on plants and animals, we now know that spring is coming 6.8 days earlier than it did in the midwest in the 1950s when Caprio began his observations. We also know that spring is showing up later every year in the south.

Thanks to satellites we can monitor vegetation and its response to temperature and precipitation changes at intervals of only a few days. With that information and all the data available from the National Phenology Network, scientists are working on ways to predict spring for the benefit of farmers and ranchers everywhere. You can be part of this by participating as a citizen scientist. Just [check out their website here](#) for instructions on how to sign up as an observer. You can also follow what's happening with spring on their [facebook page](#).

## Montana recognizes Invasive Species Awareness week

From ABC Fox Montana: National Invasive Species Awareness Week comes at a unique time for Montana, as Fish, Wildlife and Parks and the Department of Natural Resources and Conservation continue their joint efforts to implement a plan to fight aquatic invasive mussels.

"We take the fight against invasive species in Montana very seriously and continue to be vigilant in addressing threats to Montana's critical infrastructure, economy and recreational way of life," said Montana Gov. Steve Bullock.

NISAW runs from Feb. 27 through March 3 to raise awareness and identify solutions for invasive species at the local level. The Montana Invasive Species Advisory Council encourages Montanans to participate in local events and offers ways you can help observe.

"Invasive species cost the U.S. economy an estimated \$137 billion a year and are a leading cause in the loss of biodiversity," said Bryce Christiaens, chair of the Montana Invasive Species Advisory Council. "But you can help. Just by simply cleaning your recreational equipment before going out for the weekend, you can help prevent the spread of these species in Montana."

Invasive species include plants, animals and insects that cause economic or ecological harm to a new environment in which they have been introduced.

[READ MORE](#)



## WMGAC boasts attendance of 170

By Karli Becher, LCCD: Despite winter roads, 170 people gathered in Missoula for the first ever annual Western Montana Grazing & Agriculture Conference early February.

The conference, hosted by Lake County Conservation District, was held in Missoula at the DoubleTree Conference Center, February 9-10.

Topics discussed at the event were diverse, ranging from keynote talks on grazing management and soil health to producer panels on alternative forage crops and the hurdles of transitioning agricultural operations. [You can see a full lineup here.](#)

Although that week had questionable weather and a few closed highways, 170 producers, natural resources professionals, and educators from over 35 Montana communities were able to attend.

The conference was hosted by the Lake County Conservation District and sponsored by 13 local businesses and organizations as well as Area V Conservation Districts, the Soil and Water

Conservation Districts of Montana (SWCDM), and a grant from the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC).

Attendees noted their favorite part of the conference was the opportunity to meet and collaborate with other members of the agriculture community facing the same challenges on their farms and ranches.

Hosts noted that everyone in attendance was attentive and engaged. Special thanks to the keynote speaker Jay Fuhrer for coming all the way from Burleigh County, North Dakota to entertain us with his North Dakotan humor, it will not soon be forgotten.

Mark your calendars now to join us for next year's conference, which will have new presenters and topics. The 2nd Annual Western Montana Grazing and Agriculture Conference will be on January 25th and 26th, 2018 at the DoubleTree in Missoula. We also look forward to seeing you at Lake County Conservation District field events this summer, we'll keep you posted!

## As bee populations dwindle, robot bees may pick up some of their pollination slack

*From the LA Times:* One day, gardeners might not just hear the buzz of bees among their flowers, but the whirr of robots, too. Scientists in Japan say they've managed to turn an unassuming drone into a remote-controlled pollinator by attaching horsehairs coated with a special, sticky gel to its underbelly.

The system, described in the journal *Chem*, is nowhere near ready to be sent to agricultural fields, but it could help pave the way to developing automated pollination techniques at a time when bee colonies are suffering precipitous declines.

In flowering plants, sex often involves a threesome. Flowers looking to get the pollen from their male parts into another bloom's female parts need an envoy to carry it from one to the other. Those third players are animals known as pollinators — a diverse group of critters that includes bees, butterflies, birds and bats, among others.

Animal pollinators are needed for the reproduction of 90% of flowering plants and one third of human food crops, [according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture's](#) Natural Resources Conservation Service.

Chief among those are bees — but many bee populations in the United States have been [in steep decline](#) in recent decades, likely due to a combination of [factors](#), including agricultural chemicals, invasive species and climate change. Just last month, the rusty patched bumblebee became the first wild bee in the United States to be listed as an endangered species (although the Trump administration just [put a halt](#) on that designation).

[READ MORE](#)

## Congress introduces bill to cut red tape for conservationists

*From NACD:* WASHINGTON, Feb. 16, 2017 – The National Association of Conservation Districts is pleased to support legislation introduced this week in both the Senate and House to exempt America's conservationists from unnecessary and burdensome reporting requirements.

"Farm bill and Natural Resources Conservation Service programs help American producers provide our nation with clean water and healthy soils; and yet they are made to jump through hoops to use them," NACD President Brent Van Dyke said. "Farmers have enough to worry about taking care of their operations without having to complete arbitrary

requirements that were never meant for them in the first place."

Current law requires all incorporated business entities – including many farms, ranches, and forest operations – to register with the federal government's System for Award Management (SAM) and obtain a Data Universal Numbering System (DUNS) number to receive financial assistance from federal agencies like NRCS. Mandating that farmers and ranchers comply with these time-consuming requirements complicates conservation delivery and can discourage landowners from participating in NRCS cost-share programs.

"These are the producers trying to do the right thing by seeking out assistance to put conservation practices on the ground," NACD CEO Jeremy Peters said. "We should be making it easier for them to do so, not piling on regulations."

Senate Agriculture Committee members Amy Klobuchar, D-Minn., and John Boozman, R-Ark., introduced their [Improving Access to Farm Conservation Act](#) (S. 364) on Monday, Feb 13. House Agriculture Committee members Ann Kuster, D-N.H., and Rick Crawford, R-Ark., introduced the House companion bill (H.R. 1163) today. [Press Release](#)

## Legislative Roundup: Wildlife and Natural Resources bills

From the Helena IR: With Montana's abundant wildlife and natural resources, Montana's lawmakers have been steadily working through their usual slew of bills covering hunting, fishing, recreation, access and management.

As the Legislature reaches its halfway point, here is an update on some of the session's most talked-about legislation.

### Hunting and wildlife

#### **HB367 'Predator Checkoff Program'**

Brought by Rep. Becky Beard, R-Elliston, [the bill creates a new checkoff that hunters](#) can opt into when purchasing licenses. Hunters can donate \$1 or more to "help reduce the impact of wolves on landowners and livestock producers," with funding going to lethal management programs.

HB367 passed out of committee and passed with solid support in House floor votes. It has been referred to the Senate Fish and Game Committee.

#### **SB111 'Prohibit Feed of Wild Turkeys'**

Introduced by Sen. Keith Regier, R-Kalispell, [the bill would add wild turkeys to the list of animals that it is illegal to feed.](#)

Regier brought the bill out of concerns about congregations of fed turkeys causing public nuisances and wildlife groups added concerns about disease spread and domestication.

With an amendment that would lift restrictions on feeding turkeys where it does not cause a conflict, SB111 has sailed through the Senate virtually unopposed.

#### **HB286 'Include Mountain Lions for Livestock Loss Compensation'**

[Rep. Ray Shaw, R-Sheridan, brought the bill in response to ranchers who lost livestock to mountain lion predation.](#)

Montana's Livestock Loss Board was created to compensate livestock predation from wolves and grizzly bears. Although limited funding has been cited as a concern, adding mountain lion predation to the program passed the House with wide majorities.

### Land/agency management

#### **HB324 'Attaching Montana State Parks to FWP Administratively'**

Rep. Bradley Hamlett, D-Cascade, said concerns about the treatment of Montana State Parks within FWP led him to bring HB324.

[The bill puts the hiring of the executive director of State Parks under control of the Montana State Parks and Recreation Board, rather than the FWP director.](#)

HB324 comes amid major questions about the parks budget and why certain funding went unspent for years. As the bill moved through the House, the appropriations committee has put a "zero-based budget" on State Parks, meaning all expenses will be scrutinized.

HB454 brought by Rep. Kerry White, R-Bozeman, would move

State Parks to the Montana Department of Commerce. The committee has not yet taken action on that bill.

While HB324 has not yet passed the House, it has enjoyed roughly two-thirds support ahead of a final vote.

#### **HB434 'Montana Wildlife Habitat Improvement Act'**

Rep. Kelly Flynn, R-Townsend, has perhaps been the most outspoken legislator in recent sessions about the need to fight noxious weeds. HB434 would do just that.

[The bill would put up to \\$2 million in federal excise taxes](#) from firearms and ammunition toward grants to fight weeds in wildlife habitat. The bill drew unanimous support from weed and wildlife managers and the full support of the committee as it heads to the House floor.

#### **HJ9 'Resolution requesting federal government to release wilderness study areas'**

Rep. Kerry White, R-Bozeman, carried one of the session's most controversial measures with [a resolution requesting release more than 660,000 acres managed as wilderness into multiple use.](#)

"After 40 years, I would like to see them released back to multiple use," White said of seven wilderness study areas originally mapped in the Montana Wilderness Study Act of 1977. "I'm a strong proponent of active forest management."

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## Grants

### 223, etc. Grant Deadlines

Deadlines for 223, mini-education, and district development grants from DNRC for FY 2017 are as follows: **July 29**, 2016; **October 14**, 2016; **January 14**, 2017; and **April 26**, 2017. [Grant Info](#)

### Watershed Planning Grants

Montana DNRC is seeking applications for watershed related planning and management activities that conserve, manage, develop or protect the state renewable resources and/or support the implementation and development of the state water plan. Due March 15, 2017. [More Info](#)

### Regional Conservation Partnership Program

NRCS is asking potential conservation partners to submit project applications for federal funding through the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP). Up to \$252 million is available to locally driven, public-private partnerships that improve the nation's water quality, combat drought, enhance soil health, support wildlife habitat, and protect agricultural viability. Pre-proposals: April 21. [More Info](#)

## Events

### Grant Writing Workshop, Billings

MSU Billings is hosting a grant writing workshop, March 28 & 29. [More Info](#)

### Forestry at the Public/Private Interface Webinar

The Western Landowners Alliance will host a panel of forestry experts representing private, public, and industry perspectives. Designed specifically for landowners and managers, the panel discussion will focus on the barriers to and opportunities in private land forest management in the West. March 9, 10am. [More Info](#)

### Grant Writing Seminar, Missoula

The University of Montana is hosting a grant writing seminar, by the Institute for Strategic Funding Development, April 4-5. [More Info](#)

## Jobs

### Seasonal Jobs Open for Mussel Response Inspection & Decontamination Stations

MT FWP is recruiting additional aquatic invasive species inspection and laboratory technicians for the upcoming season. The job opportunities are part of the state's on-going effort to battle the risk of spreading invasive mussels to other areas in the state.

The seasonal jobs, which offer competitive pay and benefits, will generally run from April through October.

[More Info](#)

**Have something you'd like to see in TMC? Submissions are due every other Friday at 5:00 (visit our website for a calendar), and should be sent to [tmc@macdnet.org](mailto:tmc@macdnet.org).**

### NRCS Seeking Applications for Upper Clark Fork Conservation Program

Agricultural producers in Montana's Upper Clark Fork Watershed area have until March 17, 2017, to apply for financial assistance for conservation practices funded through the Natural Resources Conservation Service's Regional Conservation Partnership Program.

In February 2016, a proposal submitted by the Watershed Restoration Coalition was accepted by NRCS to be funded through the Regional Conservation Partnership Program. The program will provide funding for partnership projects between public (Federal and State) and private entities and nongovernmental organizations.

The Upper Clark Fork project makes available a special five-year funding pool that NRCS will use to fund projects in the Upper Clark Fork watershed area. This is the first year funding is being made available. NRCS anticipates funding projects each year for the duration of the project.

The RCPP project will promote grazing lands health, forestland health, water quality and quantity, and habitat improvements for at-risk fish species. Conservation practices may include stockwater developments, fencing, brush management, forest pre-commercial thinning and irrigation system improvements.

[READ MORE](#)

## Coming Up:

### March

2 Expiring CRP Workshop,  
Shelby

8 Expiring CRP Workshop,  
Havre

9 Expiring CRP Workshop,  
Billings

13 MACD Board Conference  
Call

14 State Technical Advisory  
Committee Meeting

15 National Ag Day  
Proper Pesticide  
Application Workshop,  
Ennis

20 Watershed Day & Awards,  
MT Capitol

27 MACD Executive  
Committee Conference  
Call

Have an event to share?  
Visit [macdnet.org/calendar](http://macdnet.org/calendar) to  
add your event to our list!

## NACD makes recommendations for better district communications

As part of a six-month series on district operations, the Did You Know? monthly feature in NACD's eResource will highlight chapters of the NACD District Outlook Task Force report: "Blueprint for Locally-Led Conservation – A Strategy for District Success and Sustainability" (available here on our website). This month's chapter tackles communications.

For most conservation districts, many of their residents, landowners, and local and state government officials, have little or no knowledge of what a district is, much less what a district can or is currently doing to conserve their community's valuable natural resources.

### **Conservation districts can't afford to be a 'best kept secret' any longer.**

Each district's survival depends on having a good communications plan that reaches out to all the constituents in their district. This plan should be comprehensive but also feasible given the resources available (e.g. personnel, training, finances, etc.).

In implementing this plan, districts can draw on resources provided by their traditional partners – state/territory associations, state/territory agencies, NACD, and NRCS – and illicit help from other partners in accomplishing their outreach goals. Conservation districts are where the work ultimately gets done, but districts need to work with and through partners to accomplish their missions.

The survival of conservation districts depends on having a clear identity as a local entity as well as being part of a state and national conservation network and partnership. Conservation districts need to ensure that public officials and community groups recognize them as the "go to" organization leader for working with natural resource conservation issues. Together, we are stronger as part of a local/state/federal partnership network than as individual conservation districts.

The manner in which the public receives information has evolved and requires timely and concise communications. No longer is a quarterly newsletter or occasional article in the newspaper adequate. Successful conservation districts have harnessed the power of email, the internet, and social media to spread the word about their activities and create dialogue with customers. This requires a coordinated effort and planning by the district board and staff.

Every effort should be part of an overall communications plan which links to community needs, values, and concerns. Districts need to be aware of state and federal laws governing the public's right to access government data, their obligation to produce such data and data privacy laws. [READ MORE](#)