

# THE MONTANA CONSERVATIONIST

News from Montana's Conservation Districts

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### Tom Watson to lead NRCS in Montana

Tom Watson recently assumed the position of state conservationist for USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) in Montana. In that job, Watson will be responsible for NRCS operations within the state, including the administration of conservation technical assistance to private landowners, conservation financial assistance programs, conservation easement programs, the Natural Resources Inventory, water supply forecasting, soil survey mapping, and the Plant Materials Center in Bridger.



Most recently, Watson has worked as an assistant state conservationist in Oregon, supervising the administrative and operational functions for the state. His NRCS career began at a local field office in Wyoming after graduating from the University of Wyoming with a range management degree. Watson grew up on a farm in western Nebraska and has spent his whole life connected to agriculture.

"I pride myself with being from the West and with that, an understanding of issues that often impact private land and producers," Watson said. "I look forward to working with producers and the many conservation groups who have a stake in Montana's future."

Watson may be reached at the NRCS state office in Bozeman at 406-587-6811.



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

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## Running the Ranch

*Farmers.gov:* Pickup trucks, working dogs, cowboy hats, and running shoes. These were the diverse sights I registered as my eyes scanned the 100-plus crowd gathered under Montana's Big Sky this past Saturday.

You could tell right away this wasn't a typical ranching operation, and it certainly wasn't going to be your normal run. It was a mixture of both, aptly named the Montana Ranch Run, now in its fourth year.

Organized by Kari Berg Marks and the Montana CattleWomen, the race serves as a bridge that links urbanites with rural America. The primary goal is to introduce a new audience, the running community, to the beauty of Montana's farms and ranches as well as educate them about the importance of agriculture and private land stewardship.

Additionally, I believe the unpublished secondary goal is to have as much fun as possible in the process. As to accomplishing both, I can now personally attest.

The course runs approximately 25 miles through three multi-generation ranches and transects the Lewis and Clark National Forest in Meagher County, Montana. It's organized into five legs that can be run solo or as a team of two to five members.

The landscape is as varied as the participants, and seamlessly links public and private lands that blend low elevation winter range with high mountain elk and moose calving grounds. [READ MORE](#)



## High School Students help restore Montana sagebrush

This summer, high school students helped improve sagebrush country near Dillon, Montana. A Montana Conservation Corps crew funded by the USFWS Partners Program spent two weeks in the field: the first week the students cut down conifers encroaching onto native sagebrush rangelands, and the second week they repaired degraded wet meadows.

In beautiful southwest Montana, sagebrush country is home to grizzly bears, elk, moose, antelope — and one of the most stable populations of sage grouse in the western U.S. Here, local land managers and conservation partners are working to ensure southwest Montana's intact sagebrush ecosystem, called the "High Divide Headwaters" region, stays healthy and whole.

Sage grouse thrive here because they don't face many of the pressures that fragment their habitat elsewhere, such as housing developments or invasive annual grasses that lead to hotter, more frequent wildfires.

However, an important priority in the High Divide Headwaters region is restoring mesic habitat: the precious wet, green places that sustain wildlife and livestock on working lands.

The crew of high school students built 24 simple dirt-and-rock structures in a small stream that crosses public and private rangelands. The goal is to slow down and spread out water on the landscape, which prevents erosion and creates nutritious summer vegetation sought out by sagebrush-dependent wildlife once the uplands dry out.

The mesic restoration structures were designed by Bill Zeedyk who presented this training workshop last summer in Montana. The Natural Resources Conservation Service and The Nature Conservancy provided instruction and oversight for the youth's projects.

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## Salting the Earth: North Dakota farmers struggle with toxic byproduct of oil boom

NBC News: Daryl Peterson's farm has been in his family for as long as he's been alive. His father passed down the 2,500-acre spread, just a few miles from the Canadian border in Antler, North Dakota, nearly 50 years ago. He and his brother Larry have been farming it ever since. But now, in his 70s, Peterson finds himself forced to protect his family's legacy.

For the past two decades, Peterson and his wife Christine have been dealing with the spillage of saltwater — a byproduct of oil production — on their land, which grows peas, soybeans and various types of grain. Almost 40 years ago, they signed a contract with an oil company "land man" who came to their house and said there might be oil on their land.

In 1997, two spills covered dozens of acres with more than 50,000 gallons of saltwater. A decade later, another 21,000 gallons of saltwater spilled. And since then, though their land never produced much oil or oil revenue, the Petersons say they have seen another 10 spills.

They claim these spills were never properly cleaned up. Peterson says it's become his "life's mission" to get some justice for his land, so he and his wife are suing the oil company, Petro Harvester.

"It's incumbent on me to protect my property to the best of my ability for myself and my family," Peterson said. "Enough is enough."

[READ MORE](#)



## Birds a Barometer of Clark Fork River Cleanup

MTPR: Scientists have long used fish and aquatic insects as ecological indicators to measure the success of the Superfund cleanup from Butte to Missoula. But as cleanup on the main stem of the Clark Fork River gets more complicated, the birders are getting involved.

On a late July morning, I'm ducking under willow branches and marching through mud along an unremediated stretch of the Clark Fork River in the Deer Lodge Valley. I'm trailing a few dozen khaki-clad birders who are venturing out on the first ever Superfund Birding Tour, organized by a handful of local bird and ecology groups.

"Here's our nice little willow flycatcher," says Boo Curry.

We've stopped short in front of a barely visible "mist net" draped across dense shrubs. Boo Curry, with the UM Bird Ecology Lab, reaches for a petite greyish bird swaddled in its web, and gently untucks it.

"We catch a lot of these guys at most of our riparian sites," says Curry.

That's a good sign, ecologically speaking. Willow flycatchers make their nests in mature willows, so they're considered an indicator species, a strong signal that the riparian area is lush and healthy.

This one is already wearing a tiny ankle band with a unique number, telling Curry it was caught here earlier this morning.

"Does anyone want to let the bird go?" says Curry. "Yeah? Let's step away from the net so it doesn't go back in. Oh! And he was ready to go!"

The Bird Ecology Lab bands birds routinely throughout the greater Missoula area. It helps them build demographic profiles of the population. But it's the first time researchers are out at this particular site.

[READ MORE](#)

### Anacostia River Cleanup Benefits from some mussels

**Editor's Note:** *Although this is an east coast project, it demonstrates that there are some varieties of Mussels that are actually beneficial. In July, a mini-grant from SWCDM helped sponsor an event hosted by Wildlife Conservation Society and the Big Hole Watershed Committee that highlighted Montana's native Pearlshell Mussels.*

WAMU: If you had 5,600 freshwater mussels, you could serve about 280 steaming plates of moules marinières. Or, you could deposit the bivalves in the Anacostia River.

The Anacostia Watershed Society has opted for the latter as part of a larger effort to clean the river and renew the mussel population. Last week, staffers and volunteers with the nonprofit placed the creatures in 28 floating baskets at seven sites along the Anacostia River — six in D.C., and one in Maryland — with varying microhabitat conditions.

Jorge Bogantes Montero, the organization's natural resources specialist, has already checked on one of the baskets, all of which have swimming pool noodles to keep them afloat and covered tops to protect the mussels from predators.

"They look great," he says of the mussels in the baskets by the Anacostia Watershed Society's floating office on Water Street Southeast.

How does he know? He peeked into the baskets and saw mussels with two little holes, which he calls an innie and an outie. One filters water and the other secretes waste.

"I could see pairs of holes all over the bottom, so I know they are working," says Montero. "If you see slits open, that'd be a bad sign."

The next checkup will happen in late September, about a month after their deployment.

Much like oysters, mussels can filter large quantities of water (between 10-20 gallons daily) and they eat bacteria like E. coli. But that's just one of their benefits to the ecosystem, says Montero.

"They are providing a lot of ecosystem services even beyond filtration," he says, like depositing sediment at the bottom of the river. Other critters also use their shells as places for shelter or nesting.

They're also bio-indicators, who act as the canary in a coal mine for aquatic ecosystems.

"If they die, that's a pretty bad sign," says Montero. "If they don't reproduce, that's bad, too. The fact that we see young mussels in the Anacostia is a great sign. Mussels are out there, reproducing, and that's what we want these [deployed] mussels to do."

This is the second use of mussels in the Anacostia to improve water quality in the river, following a Fish and Wildlife Service study that began in June and wraps up this week. That study found that, during the first three weeks in the river, the mussels doubled in size, says Montero.

[READ MORE](#)

### Plan Bee: The Rise of Alternative Pollinators

NY Times: OMAK, Wash. — Jim Freese grows apples, pears and cherries on 45 acres in the north-central part of this state, on sagebrush-studded land his grandfather bought in 1910.

Walking among trees laden with shiny red cherries, Mr. Freese recalled that four years ago his trees were not producing well and his farm was financially struggling. Like many growers, he had been relying on rented honeybees to pollinate his cherry trees every spring, along with wild bees and other insects.

But that year, spring was expected to be cool. "Honeybees will just sit in the hive in cooler weather," Mr. Freese said. He needed a way to ensure more flowers would develop into fruit than in the past.

Mr. Freese bought 12,000 cocoons and set them in his orchard to emerge when the trees bloomed. His investment paid off. "We doubled our cherry production from any previous record year," he said.

His wife, Sandee Freese, said: "The little bees have been a godsend."

The Freese orchard is one of many commercial agricultural operations around the United States considering pollination with alternative bee species now that the honeybee is beset by problems.

[READ MORE](#)

## YRCDC seeks input on potential irrigation projects

The Yellowstone River Conservation District Council (Council) continues to work on river-wide irrigation water management and is seeking input on irrigation issues and project opportunities from irrigation districts, conservation districts, irrigators, agencies, businesses, recreationists and other interested stakeholders. (Please forward to any interested parties).

Last year, the Council completed the Yellowstone River Cumulative Effects Analysis, formed two working groups (irrigation water management and invasive woody species) and began to identify issues and related project opportunities to improve the health

of the Yellowstone River and the vitality of the communities it sustains. To continue that work and encourage local input, the Council will host four regional open houses this fall in Huntley (Sept. 18), Forsyth (Sept. 19), Glendive (Sept. 20) and Big Timber (Oct. 16).

Based on your input, the Council will develop an irrigation water management project priority plan that will guide its work on irrigation issues in the Yellowstone River Basin (including select tributaries) over the next decade.

Please join the Council this fall and lend your voice to the conversation.

## Montana State names new Extension director

*Bozeman Daily Chronicle:* Montana State University announced recently that it has selected Cody Stone to become its next Extension executive director.

Stone has been serving as interim executive director of MSU Extension since June 2017. He'll start work under his new title immediately.

As Extension executive director, Stone will oversee an educational network that stretches into all 56 of Montana's counties and all seven Indian reservations in the state. Extension applies unbiased, research-based university resources to meet practical needs identified by Montanans in their own communities.

"Extension and its many activities exemplify the land-grant mission, bringing MSU into the homes and hearts of Montanans across the state," said MSU President Waded Cruzado.

"I am pleased that, in Dr. Stone, we have found someone eminently qualified to guide those activities. His leadership and long experience in Extension will be invaluable to ensuring that MSU Extension continues to benefit all Montanans."

Stone said he was honored to continue the work that has made MSU Extension such a vital part of Montana.

[READ MORE](#)

## Study finds climate change reducing forest regrowth after fires

In the forests of the Rocky Mountains, fewer trees are growing back after recent wildfires because of climate change. That's what a team of researchers discovered after studying seedling regeneration at 1,500 sites in five different states.

University of Montana fire ecology Professor Philip Higuera is a co-author of the study. He joins us now.

Philip Higuera: The reason the study is important is because we're starting to see a lack of tree regeneration, in particular at lower treeline.

Think about the fires that occurred last summer, the summer of 2017. We might expect at some of the lower elevations in those fires, that we're not going to have trees return. At the mid and high elevations, we should expect to see trees return.

Nora Saks: How did you and your colleagues go about analyzing tree regeneration? Tell me a little about your field and your lab methods.

PH: One of the cool things about this study is that it combines previous data from literally a half-dozen studies. In general, what we were doing with each of these studies was going out to plots on the landscape that had burned in large wildfires in between 1988, so all the way back to the '88 Yellowstone fires. [READ MORE](#)

### Grants

#### 223, Mini Education, and District Development Grants

The Fiscal Year 2019 deadlines for the 223, Mini-Education, and District Development grants are: **October 25, 2018, January 17, 2019, April 25, 2019** [Grant Application](#)

#### Water Quality Mini Grants

SWCDM is seeking to fund local education and outreach efforts in Montana to address water quality issues resulting from nonpoint source pollution. Funding for this mini-grant program is provided by the Montana DEQ via a grant with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency under Section 319(h) of the Clean Water Act.

Please visit the [SWCDM website](#) for the Application, Call for Applications, and more program information.

Mini-grants of up to \$3,000 are available and SWCDM has approximately \$12,000 to award for this cycle. The deadline to apply is October 12, 2018 by 5 p.m.

Any conservation district, watershed group, NGO, school district, local or county agency, etc., able to manage federal funding is encouraged to apply. Submit questions or completed applications to Jessica Makus, [jessica@macdnet.org](mailto:jessica@macdnet.org).

#### 2019 Healthy Watersheds Consortium Grants - Webinar

Up to \$1.2 million is available. Don't worry, you can finish your vacation. Proposals are due February 1, 2019. Join us for an information webinar on Wednesday, **October 24**, at 2 p.m. EST. The webinar will be recorded and posted to view at your convenience. [Webinar Info](#)

### Events, etc

#### MPDES SWPPP Administrator and SWPPP Preparer Course

Meet the requirements of the MPDES General Permit for Stormwater Discharges Associated with Construction Activity. Learn the permit requirements, New techniques and BMPs, Get hands on experience with BMPs in the field. **September 10 & 11**, Kalispell. [More Info](#)

#### Level 1 Noxious Weed Management Certification

This is the first workshop in a 3-part series that provides information on weed identification, biology, ecology, and integrated management. Bozeman, **September 11-13**. [More Info](#)

#### YRCDC Input Meetings

YRCDC continues to work on river-wide irrigation water management and is seeking input on irrigation issues and project opportunities from interested stakeholders. The Council will host four regional open houses this fall in Huntley (Sept. 18), Forsyth (Sept. 19), Glendive (Sept. 20) and Big Timber (Oct. 16).

#### WLA Conference: Land & Livelihoods

Western working lands feed, water and fuel the nation while sustaining up to 80 percent of the region's wildlife species. These lands, their wildlife and those who make their living from them face increasing pressures. Join the Western Landowners Alliance, landowners and thought leaders in exploring the future of working lands and conservation in the West. **September 24-26**, Billings. [More Info](#)

#### Women stepping forward for Agriculture Conference

Join women in agriculture from across the state to talk about business, conservation, and more at the DoubleTree Hilton in Billings, **October 2-4**. [More Info](#)

#### Montana Watershed Symposium

The 2018 MWCC Watershed Symposium will focus on advancing conservation through effective communication. **October 10-12**, Whitefish. [More Info](#)

### Jobs

#### Natural Resource Specialist, Gallatin CD

The GCD is interested in expanding its outreach through programs with a focus on natural resources topics in Gallatin County. The Natural Resource Specialist will implement district education programs in water quality, range management, wildlife habitat, water development and land use planning. Closes **September 14**. [More Info](#)



## Coming Up

### September

- 11-13 Level 1 Noxious Weed Management Certification, Bozeman
- 17 **Area 4 Meeting, Roundup**
- 18 **Area 2 Meeting, Terry**
- YRCDC Open House, Huntley
- 19 **Area 1 Meeting, Plentywood**
- YRCDC Open House, Forsyth
- 20 **Area 3 Meeting, Havre**
- YRCDC Open House, Glendive
- 25 **Area 5 Meeting, Helmville**
- 24-26 WLA Conference, Billings
- 26 **Area 6 Meeting, Livingston**

### October

- 2-4 Women Stepping Forward for Agriculture, Billings

#### Have an event to share?

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

## Area Meetings

**Notice:** MACD's annual Area Meetings will be held on the following dates: 9/17 Area 4, Roundup; 9/18 Area 2, Terry; 9/19 Area 1, Plentywood; 9/20 Area 3, Havre; 9/25 Area 5, Helmville; 9/26 Area 6, Livingston. Visit <https://macdnet.org/programsevents/area-meetings/> for registration information.



## Join us for MACD 77th Annual Convention!

**November 13-15, 2018**

This year's convention will be hosted at the Billings Hotel and Convention Center by the Conservation Districts of Area 1.

### Sponsors sought

We are currently seeking sponsors for this year's convention. If your business or organization would like to connect with over 200 local conservation district supervisors, agency representatives, and conservation professionals, this is a great opportunity! We are offering a variety of sponsorship packages tailored to maximize your exposure at this fun and engaging annual event.

### Draft Agenda Ready

Interested in attending, but wondering what will be presented at the convention? We have posted a draft agenda to the convention website. We welcome you to peruse the many interesting topics we'll be covering! Please visit [convention.macdnet.org/agenda](http://convention.macdnet.org/agenda)

Visit [convention.macdnet.org](http://convention.macdnet.org) for more information!