

THE MONTANA CONSERVATIONIST

News from Montana's Conservation Districts

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Lower section of Phase 1

Lincoln Conservation District begins restoration of Tobacco River

From Becky Lihme, Lincoln CD: The Lincoln Conservation District and landowners Karl Kassler and Jim Bushfield have begun construction of a one-mile reach of the Tobacco River, near Eureka. The project began in 2013 by the Kassler family commissioning a conceptual design to address the health and condition of the river as it flows through their property, the Tobacco Valley Ranch.

Over the past four years, the project has gained momentum and funding support from DNRC grant programs, the MTDEQ NPS-319 grant program, Sweet Grass County Conservation District grant and local stakeholders. On this past July 15th, construction began on Phase I of the project through funding of the MTDEQ 319 grant program. Phase II is currently under consideration for funding from the 2018 DNRC Reclamation and Development grant program. Once completed the project will have restored approximately 4,425 feet of the Tobacco River. *Continued on page 2*



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CONSERVATION DISTRICTS
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Middle section of Phase 1

Tobacco River Project

Continued: The Tobacco River is listed as "impaired" in the MDEQ 2011 TMDL and water quality restoration plan in 2011 and in 2015, the Kootenai River Network identified the Tobacco River as a high priority for restoration in its Kootenai River Basin Watershed Restoration Plan. The Tobacco River serves as a migratory corridor to spawning and rearing tributaries for bull trout and westlope cutthroat trout.

Over the years, the Tobacco River has seen many factors impacting its natural flow. In the early 1900's the coming of the railroad straightened many of the natural meanders upstream of the project site causing an increase in water velocity, which accelerated streambank erosion. The timber industry in the early to mid-1900's also impacted this section of the river through a "downstream effect" of erosion caused by splash dams and timber floating the river. Millions of board feet of timber floated downstream from upper tributaries into the Tobacco River and continued on to the Eureka Mill.

In the 1980's the project area was extensively modified by a gravel mining operation. The extraction of gravel and sand, bulldozing along

the river corridor and the removal of natural riparian vegetation degraded the river. In addition to the gravel mining operation, past improper land management practices negatively affected the streambanks causing streambank and terrace erosion overtime.

The restoration project will bring natural meanders and create approximately five acres of riparian floodplain. It is the intent of the floodplain restoration to create a floodplain that is hydrologically connected to the stream channel. A variety of streambed, streambank and floodplain plants will be established to support the river and wetland plant communities. These plants will stabilize the banks and filter nutrients and sediment. Funding for the revegetation and fencing is supported through a grant from the Sweet Grass County Conservation District.

Construction of Phase I is anticipated to be completed by mid-September with the vegetation planted in October/ November. Phase II construction will be coordinated based on the availability of funding.

Visit the Lincoln CD website (lincolncd.org) for project updates!

Among farmers, support rises for expanding CRP program

Star Tribune: One sticking point in the haggling over the Farm Bill is the Conservation Reserve Program, a federal payout to farmers for converting cropland into grassland.

U.S. farmers pulled millions of acres out of the program when corn and soybean prices were soaring in the late 2000s and early 2010s. Congress responded by lowering the national cap on acres in the program by 36 percent over the past 10 years.

But now, facing dismal commodity prices ahead of the fall harvest, farmers are looking to put more land back into conservation.

"There's a lot of support for raising the cap," said Thom Petersen, head of government relations for the Minnesota Farmers Union. "It takes some corn and beans off the market and it's also good conservation."

Raising the cap may be difficult. Since 2007, Congress has lowered the nationwide cap on acres from 40 million to 24 million. Over that same period the number of acres in the program in Minnesota fell by nearly half, to just over 1 million.

"What I've been trying to do is figure out how to get more acres," said U.S. Rep. Collin Peterson, the ranking Democrat on the House Agriculture Committee.

[READ MORE](#)

Analysis: no increase of mining contaminants in Koocanusa fish tissue samples

Flathead Beacon: Researchers tracking the influx of mining contaminants in Lake Koocanusa say their recent analysis of fish muscle-tissue samples shows no significant increase in the concentrations of a pollutant called selenium, which is leaching from Canadian coalmines downstream and into the trans-boundary reservoir.

According to Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks, muscle-tissue samples from 10 species of fish in Lake Koocanusa collected in May of this year are consistent with sampling done in 2013, showing no increase during that five-year period.

The data is a departure from the results of fish-tissue samples collected in 2008 and again in 2013, which showed increasing trends in elevated selenium levels. During that five-year period, Trevor Selch, a water pollution biologist for FWP, tracked increases of selenium in muscle-tissue concentrations at rates of between 21 and 70 percent, a trend he described as "alarming."

While the recent data is welcome news for the threatened watershed and its scores of stakeholders, ongoing monitoring efforts are critical and will continue as changes to a Canadian coal company's water treatment plant could influence future fish-tissue selenium concentrations, according to FWP. [READ MORE](#)



Oil on the ranch changes things

Williston Herald: ROOSEVELT COUNTY, Mont.— The big sign that greets visitors to the Pat and Mike Wilson ranch says it all.

Warning, the sign says, in all capital letters and exclamation points. The owner is an asshole. It then advises visitors to never, ever leave the scoria road.

Mike Wilson's farm is located near the border of Montana and North Dakota. He runs about 300 head of cattle, which graze the land alongside the "idyllic" oil wells that dot his landscape.

Wilson was among farms on the annual Montana range tour, co-hosted by the Roosevelt and Richland County Conservation Districts to share the latest and greatest of challenges that face ranchers today, along with that rancher's ideas for solutions.

Mike Wilson talked about the impact the oil industry is having on his ranch, and answered questions from other landowners who may be facing oil well and pipeline leases.

"They drilled the first well here in 1973," he told the range tour. "They

didn't know what they were doing, so there are five dry wells."

In 1986, another well was born.

"They got one cup of oil out of that, and decided it wasn't economical to keep going, so that one is plugged," Wilson said.

He himself was born in 1982, so has only a vague memory of that particular well.

"This farm has been in my family since 1899, 1897," he added.

The first of the Bakken boom wells was drilled in the fall of 2009. It's not pumping, and hasn't been for about three months.

"That was a \$10.5 million hole in the ground," Wilson said. "Since then, I think they have drilled around 17 wells."

"They" being the three principal energy companies on his land, Oasis, Slawson and Scout Energy.

"If oil hadn't busted, they had easements for 33 more," Wilson added. [READ MORE](#)

Can cover crops and rotational grazing extend your grazing season?

From On Pasture: Jared Namken is an Angus man. Red Angus, specifically. A fourth-generation farmer-rancher in Lake Norden, South Dakota, he hopes to pass on his operation to generation five with the soil in even better shape than when he started. He's worked with USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service to manage Namken Red Angus with that goal in mind.

"It all started with the planting of trees with our local conservation district," Namken says. "After the trees went in, we saw right away a big increase in the numbers and diversity of birds, insects, deer, and other wildlife species. Then came all these other management practices," he says.

"We try to include turnips, radishes, and a cool-season grass in the mix," says Namken. "We once tried straight turnips, but we've found that the diversity of species is better for the cattle."

A fourth-generation farmer-rancher, Jared Namken hopes to pass on his operation to generation five, with the soil in even better shape than when he started

To expand his grazeable acres, Namken introduced rotational grazing across his cropland in 2004. More recently through USDA's Environmental Quality Incentives Program, he was able to install above-ground water lines on his operation, bringing fresh water to cattle, and improving the distribution of his cattle across the landscape. This water has resulted in a better rotational grazing system that has changed the plant

species growing in his pastures, complementing Namken's goal of bringing back native grasses and forbs for improved forage.

Now, the entire farm is grazed for at least part of the year.

"We can graze this ground with these cover crops most of the winter some years," Namken says. "Depending on snow cover, temperature, wind, or cow pregnancy trimester, we might not have to supplement feed until late winter. These cattle will dig through a lot of snow to graze on our concoctions of cover crops, even in harsh winter conditions."

Once the cows are out, Namken's cropland is planted in no-till corn, soybeans, wheat, oats, or alfalfa. When asked about the collective benefits of conservation practices used across his operation – specifically no-till, cover crops, and rotational grazing – Namken has a list.

"By grazing our cover crops, we're able to lower our feed costs while adding diversity and improving the health of our land. No-till reduces our fuel usage, which is another big benefit. Our ground is absorbing more water with less lost in runoff, and it's more drought hardy. Rotational grazing spreads manure and nutrients evenly across our fields, which is also an economic benefit. And, moving the cows into our cropland gives our pastures a longer resting period than they had before. We ultimately see greater diversity in our summer pastures and improved soil health across our cropland fields." [READ MORE](#)

Largest Montana oilseed crush plant, refinery center almost complete

Prairie Star: The largest oilseed processing plant, storage and refinery facilities in Montana will be completed soon, but won't begin full-scale operations until 2019.

"We are putting in the last of the equipment and finishing some plumbing and wiring in the new facilities," said Andrew Long, merchandiser at Montana Specialty Mills (MSM).

After the plant and facilities are ready, the company will conduct a "commissioning process that will test all the equipment and make sure everything is working properly."

"It is a fine-tuning process we go through before crushing operations start in early 2019," Long said.

MSM partnered with Columbia Grain (CG), on the venture that will process organic and non-genetically modified (non-GMO) canola and flax in its new facilities located on 20 acres in the Great Falls Development Authority's AgriTech Park.

The new center will retain the name of Montana Specialty Mills, and be a huge expansion of the current facility.

"Our new plant will be able to crush some 66-99,000 tons of seed per year or 200-300 tons a day, for 330 days per year," said Justin Hager, also a merchandiser at MSM. The plant will run 24 hours a day.

Nebraska's Shell Creek Watershed makes history for successful water clean up efforts

Editor's Note: *this article describes how a Watershed Restoration Plan helped guide restoration efforts on a watershed in Nebraska. SWCDM's WRP Program helped fund local conservation district and watershed group efforts to write WRPs for Montana watersheds. Beaverhead CD, Lower Clark Fork Watershed Group, Missoula Water Quality District, Flathead CD, and Trout Unlimited were beneficiaries of this program and are now working on similar efforts.*

By Erika Hill, public relations director, Nebraska's Natural Resources Districts and Desirae TePoel, information and education specialist, Lower Platte North Natural Resources District

Shell Creek in Nebraska covers almost 110 miles, running through five different counties, and drains approximately 304,873 acres of surrounding farmland.

Over the years, Atrazine, a common carcinogenic herbicide used to kill weeds, polluted the stream, impairing the aquatic life and overall health of the watershed. In 2006, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) designated the waters as impaired due to its high concentration. Thanks to a comprehensive watershed management plan, Shell Creek's water, fish, frogs and other aquatic life are now the healthiest they've been in decades. In June of 2018, the watershed made history as the first stream to be delisted from the EPA's 'Impaired Waters' list.

This accomplishment took more than 12 years to complete. The Shell Creek Watershed Improvement Group (SCWIG), founded in 1999, is a group of landowners and farmers who led the grassroots efforts

in conservation. They worked collaboratively with a variety of partners on the local, state and federal level including the Lower Platte North Natural Resources District (LPNNRD), the Nebraska Department of Environmental Quality (NDEQ), USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), EPA and other project partners. More than 240 landowners have participated in the program so far, putting more than 340 conservation practices on the land, including no-till farming, filter and buffer strips and cover crops. As a result of these practices, the Atrazine level has significantly declined and is now supporting aquatic life in the creek.

"I grew up a quarter mile away from Shell Creek and my siblings and I spent a lot of time there," said SCWIG co-chairman Matt Bailey. "It's a great feeling to think that my kids will be able to see the shells I didn't see in the creek. The stewardship of this water is the responsibility of all of us as producers and landowners. Getting it delisted is a testimony to all our efforts within SCWIG and especially those who put management practices on their own farms. They're the reason this is becoming a reality."

[READ MORE](#)

Judge rejects elk feedground permit on CWD worry

WYO File: Citing worries about Chronic Wasting Disease, U.S. District Judge Nancy Freudenthal overruled a Forest Service decision to let Wyoming use a federal site to continue feeding elk in Jackson Hole.

Freudenthal on Friday vacated a Forest Service special use permit that allows Wyoming Game and Fish Department to feed elk at Alkali Creek, just east of Kelly in the Gros Ventre River drainage. Among other things, the Forest Service didn't follow legal procedure in deciding to allow the feeding to continue on federal property, Freudenthal wrote, and must now do so (see her memorandum decision and order below.)

The Forest Service failed to take a "hard look" at the issue and analyze a range of alternatives — such as phasing out elk feeding — as required, the judge wrote in a 28-page ruling. The Forest Service failed in its 2015 analysis to properly investigate the consequences of elk contracting and spreading the always-fatal CWD at the feedground, the judge wrote.

"There is no question that Alkali Creek Feedground could become a reservoir for CWD infection if it becomes established in elk populations in northwest Wyoming," Freudenthal wrote. "That potential is increased with the concentration of elk at feedgrounds."

[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](#)

Special Flood Damage Irrigation Development Grant

Grant Applications for irrigation projects that address flood damage during 2018 will be awarded on a first-come, first-served basis until Friday **October 5**. Projects must address impacts from recently flooding and benefit irrigated agriculture. Contact Ann L Kulczyk. [More info](#)

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](#)

Aquatic Invasive Species Grants

The Montana DNRC offers state-funded grants for the prevention and control of aquatic invasive species. The project must be critical and urgent and contribute to the protection of Montana's environment from severe and unacceptable damage to natural resources. Up to \$15,000 for most projects, deadline December 3. [More Info](#)

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.

Submit questions or completed applications to Jessica Makus, jessica@macdnet.org.

Events, etc

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](#)

Electric Fencing Workshop

Lake County CD is hosting a workshop on electric fencing with Larry Feight. This workshop will focus on permanent electric fencing and will highlight design and construction tips while featuring some of the newest materials on the market. **October 4**, Ronan. Contact lakecountycd@ronan.net.

MWCC Watershed Symposium

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

New Supervisor Training

Mineral CD is hosting a training for supervisors with Karl Christians. Topics will include 310 Law, and Roles and Responsibilities of Conservation Districts. Superior, **October 16**. Please contact administrator Charlee Thompson at mccd54@icloud.com for more info.

Exempt Water Rights Workshop

MSU Extension is hosting a workshop on filing exempt water rights with Jim Beck. Townsend, **October 17**. Contact 406.266.9242 for more information and to reserve a spot.

Coming Up

September

- 25 **Area 5 Meeting, Helmville**
- 24-26 WLA Conference, Billings
- 26 **Area 6 Meeting, Livingston**

October

- 2-4 Women Stepping Forward for Agriculture, Billings
- 4 Electric Fencing Workshop, Ronan
- 8 **MACD Board Conference Call**
- 10-12 Montana Watershed Symposium
- 16 New Supervisor Training, Superior
- 17 Exempt Water Right Workshop, Townsend
- 22 **MACD Executive Committee Conference Call**
- 31 **Deadline for MACD 2018 Convention Early Bird Registrations**

Have an event to share?

Visit macdnet.org/calendar to add your event to our list!

Jobs

NACD Northern Plains Region Representative

NACD is seeking a Northern Plains Region Representative responsible for providing assistance to member conservation districts and NACD Board of Directors to advance conservation and resource development and assist in the implementation of the association's policies related to the Northern Plains Region (KS, MT, ND, NE, SD). **Closes Sept. 26.** [More Info](#)



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

Visit convention.macdnet.org for more information!