



Natural Resources
Conservation Service

Montana State Office

10 East Babcock
Street, Room 443
Bozeman
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Voice 406.587.6811
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September 2020

Hello Conservation Districts,

I truly wish we could all be together for the MACD Convention this year as it is a great opportunity to hear from CDs and discuss the opportunities for the upcoming year. Despite the challenges 2020 has brought, the partnership between CD's and NRCS collectively has continued to assist the agricultural producers of Montana. I believe this year especially, has highlighted the importance of partnerships and specifically the strength of the CD, NRCS, and DNRC partnership. This "3-Legged Stool" is vital to deliver the work we all do together, and I believe it is because of this we have been able to succeed in spite of the curveball we have all been thrown. Below are a few highlights from NRCS and I look forward to continuing our work together in the future.

Sincerely,
Tom Watson
State Conservationist

Montana Focused Conservation

As NRCS closed out last fiscal year, there are a number of highlights that are important to update you on with respect to outstanding work done by partners, landowners, and NRCS staff at all levels as we continue fostering the growth of Montana Focused Conservation. On top of the 40 FY19-20 Targeted Implementation Plans (TIPs), 24 new TIPs have been through multiple levels of review and deemed investment ready for FY21. These new opportunities continue to be posted to the Montana website almost weekly. Several of these FY21 TIPs took partnership engagement to a new level and were written by partners in collaboration with the local NRCS office. Thank you for this innovative approach to MFC! Overall, the TIPs did a good job of keeping a clear line of sight to the county long range plans and the Local Working Group process. Many thanks to the Conservation Districts for being a huge part of the Local Working Group process and the development of Long-Range Plans.

NRCS staff have been working tirelessly to complete the contracting phase of MFC FY20. I'm very pleased to report that through TIPs, 195 applications have been funded or 43% of all EQIP contracts in the state. More than \$13 million has been obligated, which amounts to 39% of NRCS Montana's total EQIP allocation. This is quite a feat and couldn't have been possible without partner support of these projects, which often take a community effort to tackle complex issues.

Covid-19

I recognize that 2020 has been challenging for both the NRCS and Conservation Districts as we have navigated our way through the impacts of Covid-19 and the



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ability to use office space to meet face to face. As you know, USDA is using a phased, data-driven approach to re-open USDA Service Centers for in-person appointments. In Montana, about 90% of our offices are operating at what we call Phase 3. The Phase 3 designation allows for producers to come into our offices by appointment. Regardless of the Phase we are in, masks are required in our USDA offices, including during all face to face interactions and in hallways, common areas and restrooms where the minimum 6' social distancing cannot be ensured. Unfortunately, we still cannot allow Conservation District meetings to be held in our USDA Offices. I want to assure you that we are committed to delivering USDA programs and services to Montana's farmers and ranchers while taking safety measures in response to the coronavirus outbreak.

Conservation Videos Available Online

[11 new videos](#) have been added to the Conservation for the Future video series that highlights Montana's farmers, ranchers, and forest landowners that are making a difference on the land. Related feature articles will also be coming out later this year. See past videos on the [NRCS Montana website](#).

Conservation Agricultural Mentoring Program (CAMP)

NRCS recently created a new field and partnership-based mentoring program called the Conservation Agricultural Mentoring Program (CAMP) to give new and recently relocated field employees the opportunity to gain field experience associated with local agricultural production. NRCS is looking for producers who are passionate about conservation and teaching, and who agree to provide a safe learning experience for program mentees.

The time commitment will be minimal, consisting of approximately 6 engagements per year at the producer's convenience. Producers will have the opportunity to mentor employees through "on-the-land," hands-on learning to help develop their knowledge of:

- Common agricultural practices, equipment, inputs and other topics
- The types of challenges and decisions producers face day to day
- Local resource problems and concerns
- How producers have used conservation practices to address resource problems

If you are interested in volunteering as a mentor, please contact Kyle Tackett at kyle.tackett@usda.gov to learn more about the program and express interest in participating.

Direct Hire Authority

The U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM) approved the Farm Production and Conservation Mission Area (NRCS, FSA, RMA) request for Direct Hire



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Authority, expiring September 30, 2021. This is a hiring authority OPM gives Federal agencies to fill vacancies fast and efficiently when a critical hiring need exists. NRCS specifically has been allotted in excess of 1500 positions. Montana has requested the use of Direct Hire Authority for entry level soil conservationist, soil conservation technician, range management specialist, and engineering positions and I am awaiting to see how many of the total will be allocated to Montana. These positions can be great opportunities to start a career with NRCS.

SWCDM Agreement Update

Montana NRCS continues to work collaboratively with SWCDM through a financial agreement to promote and sustain long-term conservation partnerships in Montana that focus on increasing capacity and leveraging existing resources to further deliver conservation services at the local level. Examples of partner positions include Pheasants Forever Farm Bill Biologists and SWCDM Range Conservationists in important sage grouse landscapes and support the Big Sky Watershed Corps program. In addition, we continue to build partnerships with MRCDC, YRCDC, and others to further the delivery of conservation in Montana.