



Natural Resources Conservation Service Montana Report, 2015



Our Purpose

Since 1935, the Natural Resources Conservation Service has helped America's private landowners and managers conserve their soil, water, and other natural resources. NRCS provides technical assistance based on sound science and offers financial assistance for many conservation activities.

NRCS is the leader in helping land managers make sound choices for healthy land and water. Through voluntary, incentive-based programs, NRCS works one-on-one with Montana farmers and ranchers to provide technical expertise and financial assistance to make conservation work on private lands.

USDA is an equal opportunity employer, provider, and lender.

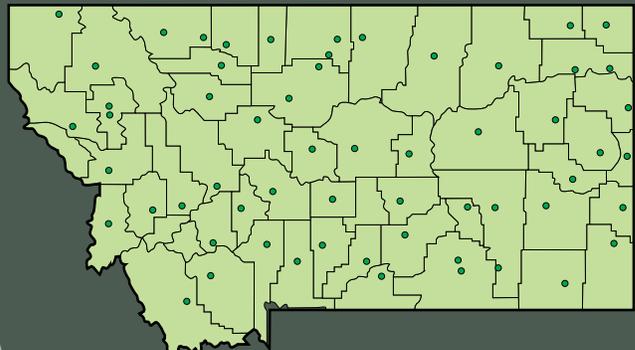
Our People

NRCS has soil conservationists, rangeland specialists, soil scientists, and other technical experts that work on Montana's 60 field office locations across the state providing technical assistance to private landowners.

Field offices – 60
Area offices – 4

Plant Materials Center - Bridger, Montana
State office – Bozeman, Montana

Montana NRCS Service Centers



Our Partners

Our partnerships expand the reach and depth of conservation on the land. Individually, the federal, state, and nonprofit groups that comprise our conservation partnerships have a diversity of expertise in discipline, location, and focus.

While our partners are diverse and many, our earliest partner was the local conservation district. Born of the Dust Bowl era like NRCS, conservation districts operate at the local level with NRCS getting

conservation on the ground. Administered by the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation, Conservation and Resource Development Division and represented by the Montana Association of Conservation Districts, conservation districts are local units of government responsible for the soil and water conservation work within their boundaries. They work hand-in-hand with NRCS to increase voluntary conservation practices among farmers, ranchers and other land users.

Our Projects

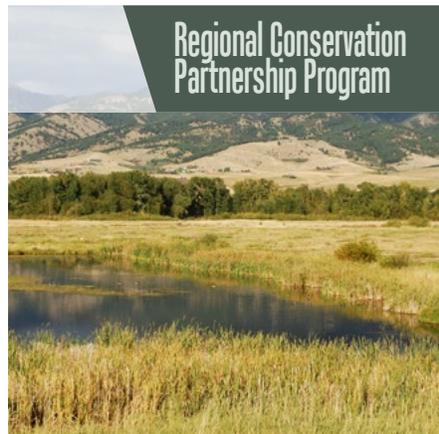


The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced in September 2015 that the Greater Sage-Grouse does not warrant protection under the Endangered Species Act due to landscape-scale conservation efforts across the western United States that have significantly reduced threats to the grouse.

The FWS reached this determination after evaluating the bird's population status, along with the collective efforts by NRCS and many other partners to conserve its habitat. Despite long-term population declines, sage-grouse remain relatively abundant and well-distributed across the species' 173-million acre range. After a thorough analysis of the best available scientific information and taking into account ongoing key conservation efforts and their projected benefits, the FWS has determined the bird does not face the risk of extinction now or in the foreseeable future and therefore does not need protection under the ESA.

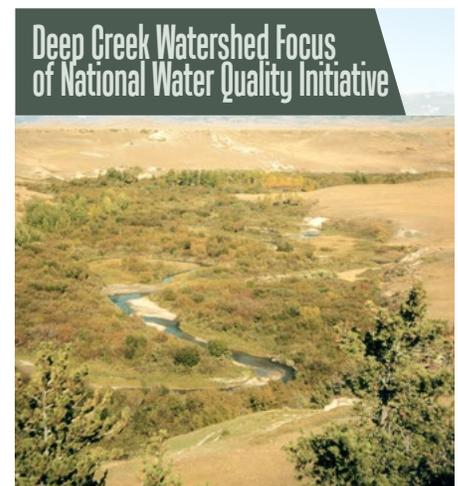
Through the NRCS-led Sage Grouse Initiative, more than 1,100 ranchers have restored or conserved approximately 4.4 million acres of key habitat. Through the recently-announced SGI 2.0 strategy, NRCS expects voluntary, private land conservation efforts to reach 8 million acres by 2018.

The greater sage-grouse is an umbrella species, emblematic of the health of sagebrush habitat it shares with more than 350 other kinds of wildlife, including populations of mule deer, elk, pronghorn antelope, and golden eagles. About 45 percent of the grouse's habitat is on state and private lands, which often include the wetter meadows and riparian habitat that are essential for young chicks. Efforts by private landowners in undertaking voluntary sage-grouse conservation have been an important element in sage-grouse recovery. NRCS will continue to work with Montana ranchers, landowners and other partners on long-term agreements to undertake proactive conservation measures that benefit sage-grouse.



Through RCPP, conservation partners seek funding for large-scale projects on a watershed basis or other defined scale. The partners request funds through other NRCS programs to implement the proposed projects. NRCS funded one project in Montana in 2015—a proposal submitted by the Gallatin Valley Land Trust. Producers and private landowners in Gallatin Valley are working with GVLT and partners to improve water

quality, water quantity and soil health. The project is expected to be completed within the next five years and will bring in more than \$3.7 million for on-the-ground conservation projects on private land in the Gallatin Valley. In 2015, NRCS obligated \$262,000 for one conservation easement.



NWQI work along Deep Creek is addressing problems with high sediment loading, elevated water temperatures, and low summer streamflow.

Through the National Water Quality Initiative, NRCS continues to work with farmers and ranchers in Montana's Deep Creek watershed to improve water quality. Eligible producers have received assistance under the Environmental Quality Incentives Program for implementing grazing management plans, making irrigation improvements, developing off-stream livestock water facilities, improving riparian area vegetation, and restoring stream channels. In 2015, NRCS Montana signed nine contracts on nearly 14,000 acres obligating \$513,000 through the NWQI Deep Creek Project.

Forest Health Project to Protect Helena Water Supply



Two Chiefs Partnership Project: DNRC, NRCS and the Forest Service are working together to restore the Tenmile Watershed-Red Mountain Flume/Chessman Reservoir, which contributes 80 percent of the water supply for Helena. Restoration will mitigate wildfire threats, protect water quality and water supply. NRCS allocated \$214,000 to the Tenmile Creek Project in 2015 in 22 contracts on 2,300 acres.

Soil Health = Agriculture Health



MACD and NRCS sponsor annual soil health workshops across the state each fall. In addition, many conservation districts hold local workshops to bring soil health information to their farmers and rancher. Since 2011, nearly 7,500 agricultural producers have attended a workshop where they hear from key leaders, researchers,

innovators, and other producers about the benefits, opportunities, and challenges associated with improving the health and function of soils through the adoption of soil health management systems.



Our Programs

Conservation Technical Assistance

is the core approach NRCS has used successfully for 80 years to reach out to American farmers and ranchers to provide technical assistance needed to care for the Nation's private lands. NRCS employees provide conservation options, recommendations, planning, and engineering assistance to individual farmers, ranchers, local governments, and urban landowners. This prepares the way for using Farm Bill and other conservation funding to implement conservation plans.



Farm Bill Programs

| Program | Number of Contracts/Easements | Acres | Obligations |
|--|-------------------------------|------------------|-----------------------|
| Agricultural Conservation Easement Program, Ag Land Easements | 6 | 9,595 | \$4.1 million |
| Agricultural Conservation Easement Program, Wetland Easements | 3 | 280 | \$901,800 |
| Conservation Stewardship Program (new contracts) | 130 | 442,000 | \$3 million |
| Conservation Stewardship Program (renewals) | 316 | 1,500,000 | \$9.9 million |
| Environmental Quality Incentives Program | 116 | 176,000 | \$8.7 million |
| - National Water Quality Initiative (Deep Creek) | 9 | 13,900 | \$513,000 |
| - On-Farm Energy | 20 | 22,000 | \$75,000 |
| - Organic | 8 | 677 | \$118,000 |
| - Prairie Pothole Wetlands and Grasslands Retention Project | 13 | 5,000 | \$1.7 million |
| - Sage Grouse Initiative | 5 | 89,500 | \$1.7 million |
| - Seasonal High Tunnel | 15 | 116 | \$93,000 |
| - Two Chief's Landscape Restoration Partnership (Tenmile) Water Well | 22 | 2,300 | \$204,000 |
| Regional Conservation Partnership Program | 1 | 500 | \$262,000 |
| TOTAL | 664 | 2,261,858 | \$31.3 million |

Data Sources: Protracts 10/7/15. NEST: 10/8/15.

Our Progress

Of the many conservation practices available to farmers and ranchers in Montana in 2015, six systems were used more than others:

1. Fences, pipelines, and prescribed grazing systems that distribute livestock to protect and promote plant health and vigor
2. Pest management for crop protection that is environmentally responsible and economically practical
3. Irrigation systems to improve energy efficiency and water savings
4. Windbreaks to protect livestock and reduce wind erosion
5. Wildlife habitat management to provide food, cover, and habitat connectivity for upland wildlife
6. Conservation tillage and crop rotations to protect soil from erosion and build soil health



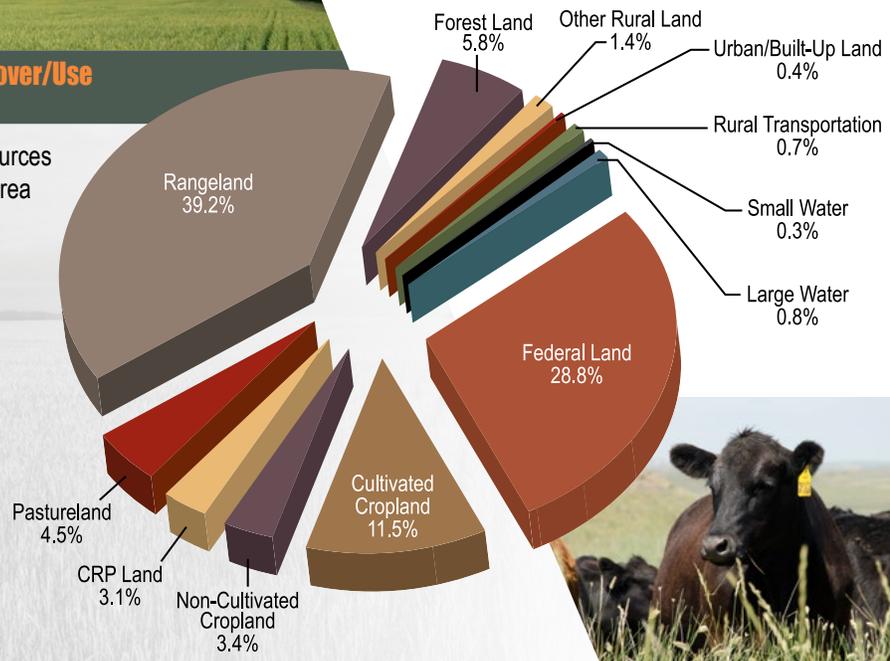
Our Land

Montana Land Use

Total Surface Area by Broad Land Cover/Use (percent of total)

Estimates from the 2010 National Resources Inventory show Montana total surface area in 2010 was comprised of

- 39.2 percent rangeland,
- 28.8 percent Federal Land,
- 11.5 percent cultivated cropland,
- 5.8 percent forest land,
- 4.5 percent pastureland,
- 3.4 percent non-cultivated cropland,
- 3.1 percent CRP land,
- 1.4 percent other rural land,
- 0.8 percent large water,
- 0.7 percent transportation,
- 0.4 percent urban/built-up land, and
- 0.3 percent small water.



Source: 2010 National Resources Inventory.

For more information about the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service in Montana: www.mt.nrcs.usda.gov.