

# THE MONTANA CONSERVATIONIST

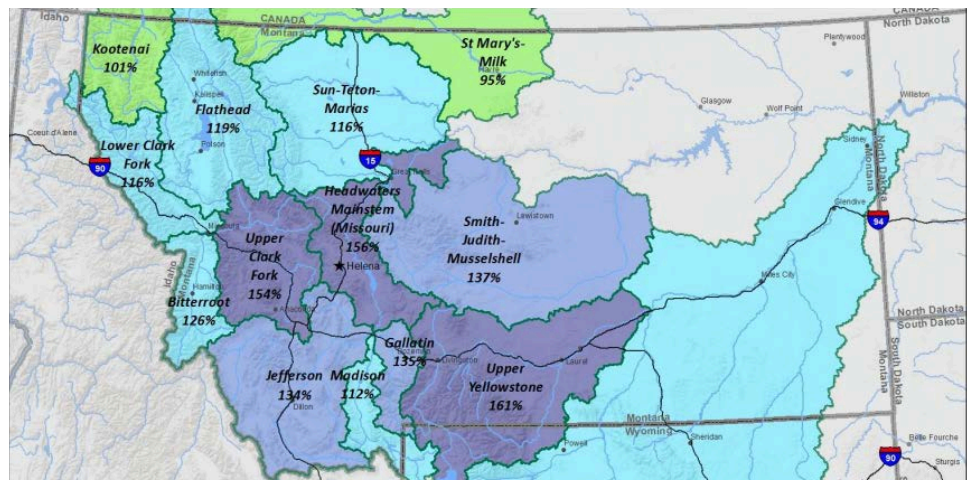
News from Montana's Conservation Districts

## January 9, 2017

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## Off to a good start: Montana snowpack currently best in Western U.S.

From USDA NRCS: The snowpack across most of the western U.S. isn't looking good in most states, but it's a different story in the state of Montana, according to snowpack data collected by the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS).

After a hot and dry summer, snowfall began at the end of September in the Treasure State, helping to alleviate fire concerns and beginning the seasonal snowpack at high elevations. Many basins began the new 2018 water year (starting Oct. 1) with at least some snow on the ground at the higher elevations, and most basins had snow at all elevations by the beginning of November. Consistent snowfall statewide during November increased snowpack totals through the third week of the month, before a warm and dry period near the holiday melted some low elevation snow and slowed mountain accumulation. The early December lull in snowfall lasted through the middle of the month before the pattern made a major change.

The latter half of December brought substantial snowfall across the state, and helped many basins improve from below normal in mid-December to near to well above normal on Jan. 1. [READ MORE](#)

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## Grazing on burned rangeland could happen earlier

*From Northern Ag:* Grazing immediately following a wildfire has long been thought to be damaging to grasslands, and delaying grazing is often recommended. This recommendation may be needlessly causing livestock producers extra work and loss of income.

Now there is some good news for ranchers in the west affected by wildfires. They might not have to wait 2 to 3 years after a fire to graze their cattle on federal rangelands.

Lance Vermeire, an Agricultural Research Service (ARS) ecologist in Miles City, Montana, found grazing within a year after a wildfire doesn't harm grass and can provide just as much forage as sites that haven't burned. At stake is access to the mixed prairie grasses covering federal rangelands in western states.

About 4 million acres of U.S. rangelands burn every year. Not all of that acreage is suitable for grazing, but millions of suitable

acres do burn in wildfires in any given year.

In the past, the Bureau of Land Management and the USDA Forest Service both generally recommended up to 3 years of rest from grazing after a fire, based on a theory that the grasses native to the dry climate of the northern prairies need that much time to recover. However, both agencies are shifting away from that position—in large part because of findings by Vermeire and his colleagues.

Vermeire has found in a series of studies that native grasses usually survive wildfires. When a fire sweeps through, it takes the dead plant material from the surface, but grass grows back quickly because most of the plant is below ground and escapes long-term damage. The key to grass growth is the amount of rainfall, not whether there's been a wildfire, he says. Moreover, a fire can actually improve the quality of the forage by increasing growth of grass types with more protein, his studies show.

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## East Rosebud Wild and Scenic Rivers Act passes Senate

*From the Billings Gazette:*

Legislation to protect a portion of the East Rosebud Creek passed in the U.S. Senate on Wednesday.

The bill, sponsored by Sen. Jon Tester and co-sponsored by Sen. Steve Daines, seeks for 20 miles of the waterway to be designated part of the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System.

That classification would protect the affected portions of the creek from development and dams to ensure that they remain free-flowing.

Tester called Wednesday "a historic day for the next generation of Montana" and "a giant first step in protecting this area for our kids and our grandkids," but said nothing is guaranteed at this point.

"It's in Congressman (Greg) Gianforte's bailiwick now, and hopefully he can get it through the House to get it to the President's desk," Tester said. Groundwork and support from Montanans helped the bill reach this point, Tester said.

Under the legislation, stewardship of the affected parts of Rosebud Creek would fall to the U.S. Forest Service. It would cost less than \$500,000, according to a Congressional Budget Office estimate from April 2017.

[READ MORE](#)

## Sage Grouse populations to decline in decadal cycle

*Casper Star Tribune:* Sage grouse numbers are likely to decline next year, part of a downswing in the bird's population that happens about every decade, according to the Wyoming Game and Fish Department.

The health of the finicky bird with the comical mating call has been the subject of heated debate in recent years as state and federal agencies worked to stall a rapid decline over the last century. The push to stave off an endangered species listing is reflective of some of the diverse interests in the state, and brought Wyoming agencies, federal agents, industries, ranchers and environmentalists into the same room to build a plan.

But within the larger, and often political, discussion of saving the grouse population, is the natural ebb and flow of its numbers, with about 10 years passing between peak population counts.

According to a collection of wings from male and female birds, young and old from the last hunt season, the bird's numbers are likely headed down.

[READ MORE](#)

## Should we fight invasive species with genetic engineering?

**Why one scientist changed his mind on using gene drives for conservation.**

*PS Magazine:* Three years ago, biological engineer Kevin Esvelt proposed a new way to genetically modify entire populations of organisms in the wild. Esvelt and his colleagues at Harvard University's Wyss Institute for Biologically Inspired Engineering [suggested](#) that some major ecological problems could be solved with self-propagating genetic devices called [gene drives](#), which carry human-designed genetic modifications into wild populations.

Gene drives, which have the potential to suppress the growth of wild populations, could be used against a variety of harmful species, ranging from malaria-bearing mosquitoes and agricultural pests to invasive species that threaten endangered native animals and plants in many areas around the world.

Esvelt has since changed his mind. As serious efforts to [develop gene drives](#) get underway, Esvelt, now a professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Media Lab, is warning that if we use this technology to solve ecological problems, the cure may end up being worse than the disease.

Writing with New Zealand biologist Neil Gemmill, Esvelt [worries that](#) "a standard, self-propagating ... gene drive system is likely equivalent to creating a new, highly invasive

species: both will likely spread to any ecosystem in which they are viable, possibly causing ecological damage." He now believes that his earlier recommendation to develop gene drives for conservation projects "was a mistake."

There was one conservation project in particular that prompted the warning by Esvelt and Gemmill: New Zealand's [Predator Free 2050 project](#), an ambitious public and private effort to eradicate the rats, possums, and stoats that have pushed many native New Zealand species to the brink of extinction.

The New Zealand government spends \$70 million annually in its efforts to control these invasive species, which didn't exist on the country's islands before the arrival of humans, about 700 years ago. After nearly half a century of effort, New Zealand has managed to remove the invasive mammals from only about 10 percent of its offshore island area. For the Predator Free project to even come close to meeting its goals by 2050, New Zealand is going to need more effective tools—which is why some scientists think New Zealand should consider gene drives.

[READ MORE](#)

## Wildfire repayment delayed in disaster bill deferral

*Missoulian*, Dec. 22: California's Thomas fire may have triggered the effort, but scorched forests in Montana also played a part in the latest round of federal disaster funding.

Unfortunately, all those local firefighting accounts must wait until 2018 after Congress failed to pass a supplemental \$81 billion for the Federal Emergency Management Administration and related disaster managers. The bill would have provided relief for damage from hurricanes, floods and other calamities, including wildfires.

The House approved the bill 251-169 on Wednesday.

## Wyoming considers Montana elk feeding opposition

*Jackson Hole News & Guide*: Deadly chronic wasting disease has been hitching rides westward across Wyoming in elk and deer brains for decades, but wildlife officials bracing for its arrival have yet to make any changes to how they feed elk.

That's a statement affirmed by Wyoming Game and Fish Department Chief Game Warden Brian Nesvik, and a reality that underlies the state of Montana's request that its southerly neighbor stop feeding.

It's a long-term proposition to phase out the feedgrounds, Nesvik said.

"It's so complex that even a

Montana Republican Rep. Greg Gianforte voted for the measure.

But it needed 60 votes in the Senate on Thursday. Several Republicans opposed it for increasing spending too much, while Democrats said it didn't provide enough relief. Republican Majority Leader Mitch McConnell decided not to bring it forward for a vote on Thursday.

So far through 2017, Congress has approved about \$49 billion for various disaster recovery efforts. In October, Congress approved a \$36.5 billion package aimed at hurricane damage to Puerto Rico, Texas, Louisiana, the Virgin Islands and Florida. That included about \$500 million for wildfires.

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decade, I think, is too short of a scale," he said. "I think the scale is several decades.

"At the end of the day it's not as simple as flipping a switch off so that feedgrounds no longer exist today," he said.

Discussion about the role northwest Wyoming's 23 elk feedgrounds play in spreading wildlife diseases has re-emerged because of a letter the Montana Fish and Wildlife Commission mailed to its Wyoming counterpart in early December. The Montana agency, dealing with its first confirmed cases of CWD, argues that the feedgrounds will someday accelerate the spread of the disorder. [READ MORE](#)

## Popularity of grass-fed beef may run into roadblock: less nutritious grass

### Study says CO<sup>2</sup> from climate change may be culprit

*Harvest Public Media*: One hundred and twenty miles west of Kansas City, researcher Joe Craine kneels in the Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve to grab a handful of grasses.

From the road, this looks like an unbroken wave of green. A close look at Craine's hand shows a variety of grasses, a small sample of the preserve's hundreds of different species.

The prairie is so diverse, in fact, that to study it, Craine and researchers from Texas A&M University don't actually study the plants themselves. They study poop, collected between 1994 and 2016 everywhere from Texas to Kansas to Montana.

"Somewhere on the order of 50,000 cow pies got shipped to Texas for this study," says Craine, who co-owns Boulder, Colorado-based Jonah Ventures.

What he's found is a trend in the nutritional quality of grasses that grass-fed cattle (and young cattle destined for grain-heavy feedlots) eating. Since the mid-90s, levels of crude protein in the plants, which cattle need to grow, have dropped by nearly 20 percent.

"If we were still back at the forage quality that we would've had 25 years ago, no less 100 years ago, our animals would be gaining a lot more weight," Craine says.

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## Grants

### 223, etc. Grant Deadlines

Deadlines for 223, mini-education, and district development grants from DNRC for FY 2018 are as follows: **October 18, 2017, January 16, 2018, April 25, 2018.** [Grant Info](#)

### Three-County Yellowstone Conservation Project

Agricultural producers in Big Horn, Carbon, and Yellowstone counties have until January 19, 2018, to apply for financial assistance for conservation practices funded through the Natural Resources Conservation Service's (NRCS) Regional Conservation Partnership Program. [More Info](#)

### MEEA "Get Em Outside" grants

Formal and informal educators—Grants of up to \$500 are available for programs connecting students to the outdoor world around them. Montana Environmental Education Association's 2018 'Get 'Em Outside' Mini-Grant applications are **due January 15, 2018.** [More Info](#)

### National Forest Foundation Matching Awards Program

The National Forest Foundation (NFF) Matching Awards Program (MAP) provides funding for results-oriented on-the-ground projects that enhance forest health and outdoor experiences on National Forests and Grasslands. Due January 23. [More Info](#)

### Healthy Watersheds Consortium Grants

The goal of this program is to accelerate strategic protection of healthy, freshwater ecosystems and their watersheds. Up to \$3

million is available and applications are due February 1, 2018. [More Info](#)

### Grazing Lands Education & Demonstration Project Funds

GLCI is accepting applications for mini-grants and demonstration projects. Mini grant funds are for education projects to support awareness of grazing lands and natural resources; up to \$1000 per award. The current focus for demonstration projects is on innovative projects addressing grazing management, soil and rangeland health, concentrated animal feeding operations/animal feeding operations, or noxious weeds on private Montana grazing lands. Due February 16. [More Info](#)

## Events, etc

### Western Montana Grazing & Agriculture Conference

This two day event in Missoula features 30 speakers in 15 different talks and panel discussions, with industry leaders, researchers, farmers and ranchers. Internationally recognized keynote speaker Dr. Fred Provenza, Ph.D. will highlight the event. January 25 & 26. Register now! [More Info](#)

### REGISTER NOW FOR SOIL HEALTH WORKSHOPS

SWCDM, NRCS and MT SWCS are hosting a series of soil health workshops this January, which will feature speakers Brendon Rockey, Steve Kenyon, Wendy Taheri, and Derek Axton (2 of the above at each event).

**1/16:** Three Forks  
**1/17:** Great Falls

**1/18:** Billings

**1/19:** Miles City & Sidney

[Register at swcdm.org/soil-health](http://swcdm.org/soil-health)

### Save the Date: Montana Water Summit

Join a diverse group of water users, community members, policy-makers, scientists, and natural resource managers for thought provoking sessions on managing and adapting to changing pressure's on Montana's water supply. March 6-7, 2018. [More Info](#)

\*\*\*DNRC has announced that they have some money available to sponsor Conservation District representatives to attend. Contact Ann Schwend [aschwend@mt.gov](mailto:aschwend@mt.gov) for more info.

### Winter Grazing Seminar

This year's seminar will be hosted by Lewis & Clark CD in Helena. Early registration ends January 22. **February 6-7.** [More Info](#)

## Jobs

### Flathead CD Assistant Conservationist

This position is responsible for a variety of programmatic and educational activities, including, but not limited to, public outreach, landowner workshops, and school/vocational programs. Additional duties include drafting communications materials for advertising, marketing, and website content. Applications due January 19. [More Info](#)

## Coming Up:

### January

16 223 Grant Deadline

17-19 Soil Health Workshop Series

22 MACD Exec. Committee Call

25-26 Western Montana Grazing & Agriculture Conference

29-31 NACD Annual Meeting

### February

6-7 Winter Grazing Seminar

12 MACD Board Committee Call

13-15 Transboundary Grasslands Workshop, Glasgow

13 Attaining & Maintaining Soil Health Workshop, Wibaux

#### Have an event to share?

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

## 2017 NACD Congressional Update

By Coleman Garrison | 12/22/2017

As Congress wraps up its work for 2017 and NACD looks ahead to the new year, we wanted to let you know where things stand on a few topics.

This week, Congress narrowly avoided a shutdown of the federal government by passing another short-term Continuing Resolution (CR) which will fund the federal government at the prior year's levels through January 19, 2018. It is unfortunate that Congress cannot come to an agreement on a long-term funding bill, because we all know that these 2-3 week bills make it very difficult for NRCS to plan ahead and leave our conservation districts who operate out of federal-owned buildings in the lurch.

When Congress returns from recess after the new year, they will once again face the challenge of funding the federal government.

Due to the natural disasters that wreaked havoc across the country over the last several months, the House of Representatives also passed a supplemental disaster funding bill alongside the CR this week. The disaster bill provided some much-needed funding to emergency programs which help conservation.

\$541 million was included for the Emergency Watershed Program (EWP), and another \$400 million was included for the Emergency Conservation Program (ECP). These programs help farmers and ranchers recover after floods, fires, or other natural disasters by helping landowners and project sponsors – such as conservation districts – remove debris; restore fences, conservation structures, and levees; and protect eroded streambanks, among other practices. Although this nearly \$1 billion infusion would help address backlogs in these programs, the Senate did not vote on the disaster bill this week, and we must now wait until January, when it is expected the Senate will take up consideration of the bill.

One legislative package that Congress did pass was tax reform.

While the majority of the policy changes included within the tax reform package do not affect conservation districts or conservation in general, there were two areas to which NACD was paying attention.

The first provision is the part of the tax code that allows for the tax deductibility of conservation easement donations. Although there is some criticism about this provision's accessibility, this tax reform package does nothing to repeal or alter this part of the tax code.

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