

MISSOURI RIVER

Conservation Districts Council

Mission

To represent natural resources and environmental interests on the Missouri River.

Purpose

To provide leadership, assistance, and guidance to conservation districts along the Missouri River Corridor and present a unified front and collective voice when addressing natural resource issues, opportunities, and challenges. The Council strives to become a forum for Missouri River stakeholders to share perspectives, solve problems, and exchange information on Missouri River resource management.

Vision

The Council is devoted to a future where conservation of the Missouri River's natural resources is accomplished through grassroots collaboration, education, incentives, and voluntary action.



The Missouri River Corridor extends for 725 miles across Montana passing through the 14 counties and 15 conservation districts that form the Missouri River Conservation Districts Council. Each of the 15 conservation districts in the Missouri River Corridor has one supervisor as a voting member of the Council. Conservation districts, through public elections, represent local residents' views and concerns regarding natural resources - giving the Council a true grassroots perspective on Missouri River issues. The river corridor is divided into reaches that contain unique geographic, social, and economic features that create conservation priorities for the region.

Reaches of the Missouri River Conservation Districts Council:

Upper Reach

Broadwater Conservation District
Cascade Conservation District
Gallatin Conservation District
Lewis and Clark Conservation District

Middle Reach

Big Sandy Conservation District
Chouteau County Conservation District
Blaine County Conservation District
Fergus County Conservation District

Reservoir Reach

Garfield County Conservation District
Petroleum County Conservation District
Phillips County Conservation District
Valley County Conservation District

Lower Reach

McCone County Conservation District
Richland County Conservation District
Roosevelt County Conservation District



MISSOURI RIVER Conservation Districts COUNCIL

2014-2015 Annual Report



The Missouri River Conservation Districts Council is devoted to conservation of the Missouri River's natural resources through grassroots collaboration, education, incentives, and voluntary action.

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Conservation Districts

COUNCIL



Dear Reader,

We are pleased to bring you this summary of the Missouri River Conservation Districts Council (MRCDC) activities for the FY 2014-2015. It has been an active year for MRCDC with many projects taking shape and we look forward to continuing these efforts and promoting new projects in 2015 – 2016. From on-the-ground projects that result in direct treatment of invasive plants, to making sure the local voice is heard in National issues, we are always looking for ways to serve our member conservation districts.

For any conservation effort to be successful, it has to have local buy-in and support. That is what makes our local conservation districts so important. Even while the rich natural resources of Montana garner national attention, local conservation districts are working to ensure that the social and economic fabric of communities is not left out of natural resource protection and enhancement.

The Council works to bring relevant stakeholders to the table, help them understand the local issues, and develop a plan that considers everyone. Local initiative and support in project development greatly enhances participation from State and Federal agencies. Conservation Districts provide a voice for local residents to drive the natural resource management in their community and the Council strengthens that voice through the collective influence of 15 conservation districts joined by the Missouri River.

We look forward to working with you in 2015-2016 and always welcome your suggestions for projects.

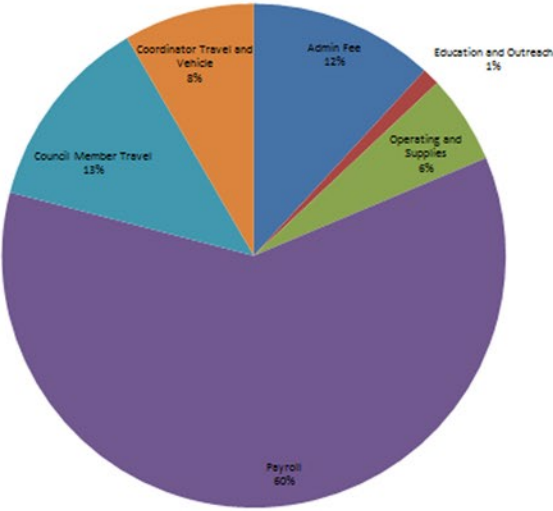
Sincerely,
Dean Rogge, Chairman
Rachel Frost, Coordinator

MISSOURI RIVER

Conservation Districts Council



FY 2014-2015 Expenses



“Montana is the only state that has an organization such as the Missouri River Conservation Districts Council to coordinate conservation efforts within the entire watershed. This unique approach leverages funds for important projects across land ownerships for maximum ecological benefit.”

The Council spent a total of \$106,017 in 2014-2015 on the expenses detailed above. The coordinator traveled extensively in Montana to member conservation district’s meetings, partner organization and quarterly meetings, as well as educational events. Education and outreach funds were used to produce the newsletter, a new brochure, business cards, and other promotional materials. Administration fees were paid to Petroleum County Conservation District, who serves as the fiscal agent for the Council.

The Council assisted the Petroleum County Conservation District in a successful application for a 223 Grant through DNRC for \$10,000 to fund Montana Saltcedar Activities and a Big Sky Watershed Corp (BSWC) Member. The Council also secured an additional \$5,000 toward the BSWC Member stipend through Montana Watershed Coordination Council. The Council has applied for over \$500,000 in additional grant funds for on-the-ground projects in Montana and is optimistic that a portion of these grants will be funded.

"MRCDC is devoted to conservation of the Missouri River's natural resources through grassroots collaboration, education, incentives, and voluntary action."



River Rendezvous Highlights Conservation Efforts

The Missouri River Conservation Districts Council (MRCDC) held their annual River Rendezvous in Broadwater County to explore what is necessary to create win-win outcomes for fish, crops, and people. Tour attendees learned that it takes a combination of sophisticated equipment, such as the Toston/Broadwater Dam, the Crow Creek Pump Station, and many miles of complex ditch structure to deliver water and power to the many users in the area. However, despite the awe of the state-of-the-art machinery, it was quickly became evident that without the dynamic people and their spirit of community, the infrastructure would be just so much steel, rock, rubber and pipe. The next stop was the Deep Creek area in Broadwater County, which is a shining example of a once degraded fishery that is in the process of being restored through improved grazing management, irrigation enhancements, and “passive restoration”, where nature is allowed the freedom to repair itself before more invasive restoration techniques are employed. The Deep Creek project is a true testament to how people working together with wildlife and economics in mind can create something remarkable.



Photo: Tour attendees prepare to leave the boat to view the Crow Creek Pump Station on Toston Reservoir.

Montana Saltcedar Team



The Montana Saltcedar Team continued to work together to combat saltcedar on the Missouri and Musselshell Rivers. The Team applied for over \$2M in treatment and education funds through the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP), from NRCS. Although, they were not awarded the grant, the proposal process strengthened the team and led to several major accomplishments in 2014-2015. First, the Team was awarded a Big Sky Watershed Corps Member to build capacity and handle education and outreach efforts of the Team. Matthew Schmidt worked out of Winnett and led efforts to combine all the existing saltcedar surveys into a single map that could be used as a decision tool for the team. The result is a database tied to a GIS system that tracks saltcedar by watershed. Additionally, efforts to treat the entire drainage of Seven Blackfoot Creek for saltcedar were initiated, and after coordinating 9 letters of support for the project to be sent to the Army Corps of Engineers, the first phase of treatment was applied in 2015. The Montana Saltcedar Team will continue to work for coordinated treatment of saltcedar along Montana’s streams, rivers, and lakes.



Saltcedar infestation on Seven Blackfoot Creek in Garfield County, the site of a coordinated effort to treat saltcedar.

Local leadership makes the project relevant, unity gives the project strength.

New Signs Showcase Conservation Districts, MRCDC, Floods, and Aquatic Invasive Species

In cooperation with the Cascade Conservation District (CCD), the Missouri River Conservation Districts Council (MRCDC), created and installed 3 new interpretive panels for the River’s Edge Trail system in Great Falls. Two panels highlight the work and mission of conservation districts and the MRCDC. Another panel describes the destruction of the 1908 and 1964 floods in the Great Falls area and reminds people of the power of the river system. Additional panels informing watercraft users how to prevent the spread of aquatic invaders were also created for several city boat ramps along the Missouri River in Great Falls.



Rachel Frost and John Chase stand beside the aquatic invasive species sign at one of the city boat docks in Great Falls.



Sign depicting the historic floods in 1908 and 1964 on the Missouri River in Great Falls.

Making Montana’s Voice Heard

“For any conservation effort to be successful, it has to have local buy-in and support”, Dean Rogge, Chairman of MRCDC advocates. Promoting that message was the reason that Dean Rogge (Chairman), Steve Wanderaas (Council Member) and Rachel Frost (Coordinator) traveled to Denver to visit directly with Mike Blenden, the Director of the Refuge System, and Mike Thabault, Director of Ecological Services. Council members were able to convey the positive relations that have been built between the US FWS and local landowners through MRCDC and the Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge Community Working Group (CMR CWG). They also briefed Blenden on current cooperative conservation efforts spearheaded by the CDs that involved the Refuge as a partner, such as the Montana Saltcedar Team and the Sage Grouse Committee.

Specific Accomplishments:

The Council continues to reach out to Federal, State, and local agencies and groups through letters, personal visits, and comments on public land policy. The strength of the Council is in its united voice for locally led conservation through the Montana Conservation Districts, landowners, and local communities.

Visit to Regional US Fish and Wildlife Services Offices - Denver, CO
Letters of support for research on saltcedar control methods
Letters of support for irrigation infrastructure projects

Local conservation efforts to benefit a national icon, the Missouri River.



Montana Rangelands Partnership

The Montana Rangelands Partnership is a new collaborative, public-private partnership comprised of local, state, and national organizations including the Soil and Water Conservation Districts of Montana (SWCDM), Montana State University Extension, Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), Missouri River Conservation Districts Council (MRCDC), and other local, state, and federal groups.

To help Montana landowners sustain and enhance their rangeland stewardship, the Montana Rangelands Partnership is working to place two full-time rangeland resource technicians in Montana. These technicians will work one-on-one with landowners to help them develop individual ranch management plans, initiate rangeland monitoring and support continued monitoring efforts, and aid ranchers in identifying appropriate voluntary conservation programs that could help sustain and enhance their rangeland management efforts. As employees of SWCDM, the technicians will be independent of any state or federal agency and will be able to provide technical assistance through MSU Extension that is not tied to any specific conservation program. However, the technicians will be qualified to help landowners prepare ranch plans that ranchers can use at their discretion to qualify for voluntary conservation programs such as Candidate Conservation Agreements with Assurances (CCAAs) and NRCS program funding such as EQIP, CSP, and ACEP. Along with the development of ranch plans, the Montana Rangelands Partnership technicians will help ranchers initiate and sustain effective rangeland monitoring programs that provide relevant information for economic and ecological decisions. Pending final funding negotiations, we hope to have these technicians in place in January 2016.



Monitoring rangeland vegetation for soil health, wildlife habitat, and vegetation production is vital to understand the implications of rangeland management efforts.

Ranching for Rivers

The Ranching for Rivers project promotes the use of “riparian pastures” as an alternative to complete exclusion of livestock in riparian areas. Rather than simply fencing off the creek, riparian pastures are designed to include most of the riparian area and are grazed by livestock for a portion of the year. Livestock are rotated through the pastures quickly to prevent overuse of vegetation and streambank trampling. More acceptable to private landowners than complete exclusion, this approach has been used successfully to improve fish habitat and in-stream flows. Additional benefits of riparian pastures include improved management flexibility, regeneration of cottonwoods and willows, ability to use livestock grazing to manage weeds and overgrown vegetation, improved stream access for wildlife, and reduced costs of fencing and off-stream water resources.

MRCDC is working with SWCDM and the Missouri Breaks Riparian Group to develop an educational campaign to inform landowners, recreationalists, and the conservation community about the conservation benefits of riparian pastures.



Cattle graze near the Missouri River in Choteau County

Combining science with local ecological knowledge to develop sound natural resource management strategies.

Charles M. Russell NWR Community Working Group

MRCDC is the leading stakeholder and coordinating entity in the Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge Community Working Group. This group is comprised of agencies, landowners, stakeholders and interested individuals that are concerned with the vitality of the 6-county region surrounding the CMR.

Sage Grouse Sub-Committee

The group formed a new sub-committee to focus on sage grouse habitat conservation and management. This committee is a smaller cross-section of the larger group and meets bi-monthly on alternate months as the full CMR CWG. The group met twice at the Matador Ranch near Malta on May 7th and July 16th. The group is currently developing a conservation menu for sagebrush grasslands in Montana that will help ranchers determine if any of the existing conservation programs can help them achieve their long-term goals for their operations.

Meeting Locations and Topics for 2014-2015:

August - Lewistown; Livestock Grazing as a Management Tool on Red Rock Lakes NWR

October - Rangeland Monitoring Roundup

December - Jordan; Develop Goals for Region

February - Glasgow; Sagegrouse and Introduction to New Refuge Manager

April - Winnett; Cont. Goals, Rank Threats to Sage Grouse

June - Malta; Sage grouse and Grazing, BLM RMPs



CMR CWG members learn about vegetation monitoring at the CMR CWG Rangeland Monitoring Roundup



Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge



Attendees of the Rangeland Monitoring Roundup lunch on burgers and all the trimmings.

Rangeland Monitoring Roundup

The brisk fall weather of early October did not hamper more than 50 people from gathering on the Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge north of the Fort Kipp Recreation Area to learn about rangeland monitoring. The Monitoring Roundup was organized and sponsored by members of the Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge Community Working Group (CMR CWG). The purpose of the event was to help diverse stakeholders come to a common understanding of how land is evaluated and how that information may be used in management decisions.

Conservation Districts are uniquely positioned to create cooperative working groups on any topic of interest or concern to Montana.