



# MISSOURI RIVER CONSERVATION DISTRICTS COUNCIL

## 2022-2023 Annual Report



*Devoted to conservation of the Missouri River's natural resources through grassroots collaboration, education, incentives, and voluntary action.*

# Introduction

We are happy to provide you this annual report of the Missouri River Conservation Districts Council's (MRCDC/Council) activities for fiscal year 2023. While the work over the year cannot be simplified to a few paragraphs or even a few pages, we hope you enjoy reading through this for a more detailed account of the Council's activities over the year.

Ongoing projects include the CMR Community Working Group, Woody Invasive Species Working Group, being involved in the Fort Peck Dam Test Flow discussions, hosting the yearly River Rendezvous tour, partnering with the Central and Eastern Montana Invasive Species Team, Ranching for Rivers, Living on the Bank website, comment and support letters, and being a member of the Missouri River Recovery Implementation Committee.

Montana was the first state to have an organization such as the Missouri River Conservation Districts Council to coordinate conservation efforts within an entire watershed. This unique approach leverages funds for important projects across the landscape with multiple land ownerships for maximum ecological benefit.

As you read through the report, please consider how we may better serve the region through future projects. We look forward to continuing work with partners and finding new, innovative ways to meet the needs of our member districts and people of Montana in fiscal year 2024.

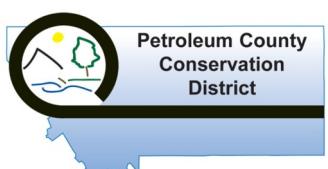
Sincerely,

Karl Christians, Chairman

Molly Masters, Coordinator

Cover Picture: Participants of the CMR Community Working Group field trip in Garfield County viewing one of the Conservation District's research plots for gathering data on plant productivity and ground cover on rangeland that is either grazed or non-grazed by livestock.

## Council Funding and Support:



## **Molly Masters, Coordinator** - mrcdc@macdnet.org (406) 454-0056

Molly grew up on a cow/calf ranch outside of Hardin, Montana. She attained an Animal Science degree and then a Land Resources and Environmental Sciences degree while employed with Montana State University Extension as an Agriculture and 4-H Extension Agent. Molly and her husband, Josh, have two kids, Lester and Elaine. They love helping out with their families' ranches whenever possible.

## **Trish Smith, Secretary** - petroleumcd@macdnet.org (406) 429-6646 x104

Trish (Rowton) Smith, husband Brent, and two daughters live in Winnett, MT. She grew up on her family's ranch in Mosby, MT, graduated from Winnett High School, obtained a MLT degree at the University of Montana and a Business Fundamentals certificate through MSU-GFs. Trish is the PCCD Administrator part-time and she also works part-time for MWC & CEMIST. Her past work includes over 10 years in various hospital laboratories, seasonal work with the Forest Service, and recently managing the Winchester Arms Collectors Association for eight years. She enjoys family time spent outdoors, painting, and photography.

## **Katie Lund, Fiscal Manager** - lundangus@hotmail.com (406) 951-0212

Katie and her husband, along with their five children, run a registered Black Angus operation east of Winnett. Being first generation Petroleum County ranchers, they have a deep appreciation of the land and the incredible value of raising their children in the dirt and showing them the value of hard work and constant perseverance. In her "spare" time, Katie is an avid walleye fisherwoman, loves the mountains, and all things family and animals.

## *Council Representatives*

Big Sandy CD - Dana Darlington and alternate Russ Allderdice

Blaine County CD - Greg Jergeson and alternate Bruce Anderson

Broadwater CD - Dallas Diehl and alternate Greg Fields

Cascade County CD - John Chase and alternate Gayla Wortman

Chouteau County CD - Rick Anderson

Fergus CD - Lorri Schafer

Gallatin CD - Tammy Swinney and alternate Mike Hansen

Garfield County CD - Dean Rogge and alternate Monte Billing

Lewis and Clark CD - **Karl Christians (Chair)** and alternate Jeff Ryan

McCone CD - Steve Wanderaas and alternate Jana Haynie

Petroleum County CD - Laura Kiehl and alternate Jay King

Phillips CD - Craig French and alternate Pat Anderson

Richland County CD - Dick Iverson and alternate Dan Young

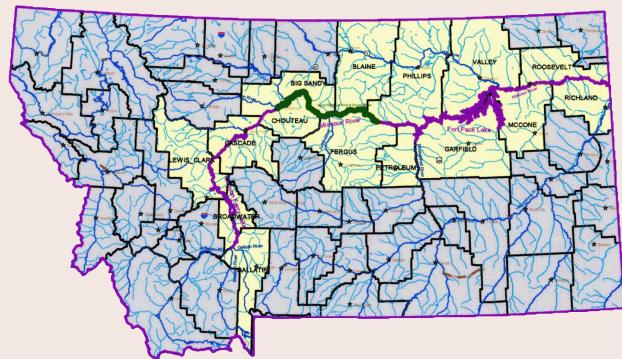
Roosevelt County CD - **Dana Berwick (Vice Chair)**

Valley County CD - Jeff Pattison and alternate Ron Garwood

# About MRCDC

## Mission

The mission of the Council is to represent natural resource and environmental interests on and along the Missouri River, the associated uplands, and its tributaries. The Council believes the conservation of the river and the sustainability of its various uses can best be accomplished through grassroots collaboration, education, incentives, and voluntary action.



## Purpose

The purpose is to provide leadership, assistance, and guidance to conservation districts along the Missouri River corridor in order to present a unified front and collective voice when addressing natural resource issues, opportunities, and challenges. “A forum for Missouri River stakeholders to share perspectives, solve problems, and exchange information on Missouri River resource management.”

## 15 Conservation Districts

Blaine | Big Sandy | Broadwater | Cascade | Chouteau | Fergus | Gallatin | Garfield | Lewis and Clark | McCone | Petroleum | Phillips | Richland | Roosevelt | Valley

## Goals

- 1: Encourage and promote sound conservation practices, such as “Best Management Practices” for multiple uses of the river and adjoining lands.
- 2: Facilitate conservation districts’ voice in partnerships that affect the river corridor.
- 3: Enhance community involvement in river stewardship.
- 4: Maintain and improve water quantity and quality at critical times.
- 5: Support bird, fish, and wildlife habitat and wildlife programs compatible with agriculture and multiple uses.

## Montana’s Missouri River

145,000 Square Mile Watershed | 790 River Miles | 10 Dams



## Missouri River’s National Importance

500,000 Square Mile Watershed | 2,341 River Miles | 10 States and 2 Canadian Provinces

## Missouri River Uses Listed by US Army Corps of Engineers

Flood Control | Navigation | Municipal and Industrial Water Supply | Hydropower | Fish and Wildlife | Recreation | Water Quality | Irrigation

# *Woody Invasives Working Group*

Coming into this year, there was a lot of interest in expanding the Montana Saltcedar Team efforts to include all of Montana, adding additional woody invasive species (Russian olive and common buckthorn), and increasing the number of on-the-ground projects and education efforts.

After a well attended interest meeting in December of 2022 with many partners, the Yellowstone River Conservation District Councils applied for and received a Montana Noxious Weed Trust Fund Planning Grant for \$65,000. This has enabled the Working Group to hire a Coordinator to organize the group and lead efforts on how to form a successful Working Group moving forward. Efforts this far have included researching best management practices for each woody invasive species and compiling past and present work being done to manage each of these.

In the coming year a science advisory panel will be held with the help of several partners, including the Montana Invasive Species Council. Information gained during this panel will help contribute to the best management practices to share across Montana, and help the Working Group be pertinent moving forward.

Continued funding for the project is another area the Working Group is focused on. With the many partners and the plan being created for woody invasive species control using the found best practices, the Group is hoping to apply for large grants to cover on-the-ground project costs and the educational efforts of the group.

## *Living on the Bank*

In helping protect peoples' investments along rivers and streams in Montana the website **LivingOnTheBank.com** was created. The goal of the website is to help current owners and potential buyers make responsible decisions when buying, building, and managing their dream properties along river banks.

Practical advice regarding *living on the bank* can be found on the site including information on erosion and flooding, improving and maintaining property, permit requirements, septic system design, boat ramps and docks, bank vegetation, proper agriculture and livestock use, and much more. Being educated about these actions will help preserve Montana's landscape and way of life.

The site has been given some updates over the last year and the committee is working on making additional content to the site. The committee is looking forward to furthering the usefulness and outreach of the website in the coming year.

# CMR Community Working Group

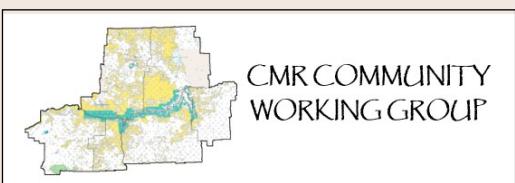
The Missouri River Conservation Districts Council (MRCDC) is the leading stakeholder and coordinating entity of the Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge (CMR) Community Working Group. This Working Group is comprised of local, state, and federal agencies, private landowners, ranchers, non-government organizations, and interested individuals that are concerned with the vitality of the CMR and the surrounding six county region. The group serves as a forum for discussion of important issues, stakeholder updates, and regional projects.

For the October 2022 meeting, the planning committee worked hard to organize and invite the current and potential stakeholders to the revitalization meeting. The committee reviewed the information gathered during the SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) analysis conducted during the meeting. There was a lot of great information shared to work from in the coming years. Trying to accomplish some of the lower hanging fruit, highpoints that arose were:

- 1. We need to have consistent representation of stakeholders.**
- 2. We need to be more clear on the mission of the CMR Community Working Group.**
- 3. We need to find funding to help cover travel and per diem costs.**

To cover the first point of having consistent representation of stakeholders, the committee believes having a designated and alternate representative for each stakeholder group to attend meetings and the planning committee to stay in contact with will help. At a training by Shannon Stob, she stated, “We can only move at the speed of TRUST.” This phrase stuck out for the Working Group as we are trying to build relationships and trust among stakeholders. We hope this stakeholder feature will help create more continuity within the Group and build stronger relationships, leading to better discussions and outputs from the Working Group.

The planning committee had a lot of discussion regarding the second point above of clarifying and sharing the mission of the CMR Community Working Group. This included discussion of the name of the Working Group, creating a logo/map to show the group is about more than the CMR itself but the region, and in our outreach documents to include this information and the tagline, “A forum for the vitality of the Northern Great Plains community surrounding the CMR region.” Much of the confusion regarding the Working Group is understanding **that it is designed as a forum, not an on-the-ground**



CMR Community Working Group's new logo to try and emphasize regional importance of multiple stakeholders.

**projects group** (although we hope projects come out of the discussions held during Working Group meetings as they have in the past). As part of clarifying this, we have updated the CMR Community Working Group sheet that has our three-part goals to also have our mission statement and who the group is and have updated this information on the website.

As for the third point above, the planning committee will continue to search for funding and grants to help cover travel and per diem costs for individuals whose costs are not covered by other means already. Having the meeting travel around the six counties leads to large distances that need traveled. We do not want travel costs to be a hinderance or a reason for not attending meetings.

We hope to continue making progress with the structure of the CMR Community Working Group and keep it going strong in the coming years. Part of the success for the Group is having topics that are relevant to stakeholders. Topics discussed over the last year included climate, grasslands health, Montana NRCS, the Farm Bill, and grasshoppers.

There was a great turnout for the summer meeting in June. We heard from the Garfield County Conservation District (GCCD) who presented information and data from their multi-year study looking at habitat changes when managed for livestock grazing verses not being grazed on and off the CMR Refuge. **Overall, their data shows a steady decline in non-grazed areas, compared to areas with managed grazing.** After the stakeholder reports and the study presentations in the morning, we took a tour to view a range plot to learn how GCCD set up their transects gather data from each spot yearly.



Meeting participants during the June CMR Community Working Group, listening to everyone's partner reports.

Any feedback regarding the CMR Community Working Group is appreciated. For the most up to date information regarding the CMR Community Working Group, please visit <http://www.cmrcwg.org/>. Presentation recordings and meeting agendas are posted on there.



Participants during the June tour learning about the plot transects the Garfield County Conservation District have set up.

# River Rendezvous

The Missouri River Conservation Districts Council, in partnership with the Garfield County Conservation District held another successful River Rendezvous learning about saltcedar control efforts and taking a tour to Hell Creek in Garfield County.

The two presenters where Dylan Brown and Steve Smith. Dylan Brown is a commercial herbicide sprayer who contracts with the US Army Corps of Engineers for the Fort Peck Reservoir. He has helped spray saltcedar along the reservoir in both the Seven Blackfoot Drainage and Hell Creek, where we ended up touring. Mr. Brown shared the herbicides they have used and which they have had the best results with under varying conditions. He also brought along his 'sherp'; an amphibious vehicle from Ukraine they use to get to additional sites for spraying saltcedar. It can travel about six miles per hour in water and 18 miles per hour on land, and access saltcedar locations where boat nor ATV can travel. Steve Smith, with the BLM in Lewistown, presented and gave a demonstration on using the EZ-Ject Lance. This lance can be used for controlling both saltcedar and Russian olive trees, among others. It is easily loaded with a sleeve of .22 shells filled with herbicide. Digging down to the root of the saltcedar, a shell is easily inserted directly into the tree. When the shell(s) get hot enough, the herbicide melts out of it into the tree. In the couple years of using this tool, the BLM has had great results controlling these invasive woody plants!



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- 1: The Sherp, an amphibious vehicle used to access saltcedar locations where boat nor ATV can travel.
- 2: The tour group at Hell Creek learning about saltcedar control around the Fort Peck Dam Reservoir.
- 3: The .22 shell from the EZ-Ject Lance in the root of a saltcedar plant.
- 4: The EZ-Ject Lance in use treating a small saltcedar plant.

# *Public Comment and Support Letters*

Part of MRCDC's stated purpose is to present a unified front and collective voice when addressing natural resource issues, opportunities, and challenges. Two ways Council accomplishes this are writing public comment letters regarding pertinent issues that may affect Conservation Districts, their areas, and/or their constituents, and writing letters of support when needed.

Conservation Districts are governmental groups of non-partisan people, publicly elected or appointed who volunteer their time to oversee local conservation efforts in their district. The specific Montana Code Annotated (MCA) 76-15-102 Declaration of Policy says, "It is hereby declared to be the policy of the legislature to provide for the conservation of soil and soil resources of this state, for the control and prevention of soil erosion, for the prevention of floodwater and sediment damages, and for furthering the conservation, development, utilization, and disposal of water and thereby to preserve natural resources, control floods, prevent impairment of dams and reservoirs, preserve wildlife, protect the tax base, protect public lands, and protect and promote the health, safety, and general welfare of the people of this state."

Because MRCDC is made up of the fifteen Conservation Districts in Montana along the Missouri River, our mission and purpose relate directly to Conservation Districts' granted authorities in MCA 76-15-102. Public comment letters and letters of support Council approves of all regard potential impacts to one or multiple items that are listed in the Montana Code Annotated.

Council has submitted letters regarding the following topics over the last year:

- ◆ Bureau of Land Management's proposed Public Lands Rule
- ◆ Emergency Conservation Program letter to Governor Gianforte
- ◆ Fort Belknap Indian Community Water Rights Settlement Act of 2023
- ◆ Ranching for Rivers grant application to Montana Department of Environmental Quality
- ◆ US Army Corps of Engineers Fort Peck Dam Test Flow Mitigation Measures and Alternative Options letter to Montana congressional representatives
- ◆ US Fish Wildlife Services proposed Missouri Headwaters Conservation Area
- ◆ Woody Invasive Species Working Group grant application to the Montana Noxious Weed Trust Fund

# USACE Fort Peck Dam Test Flows

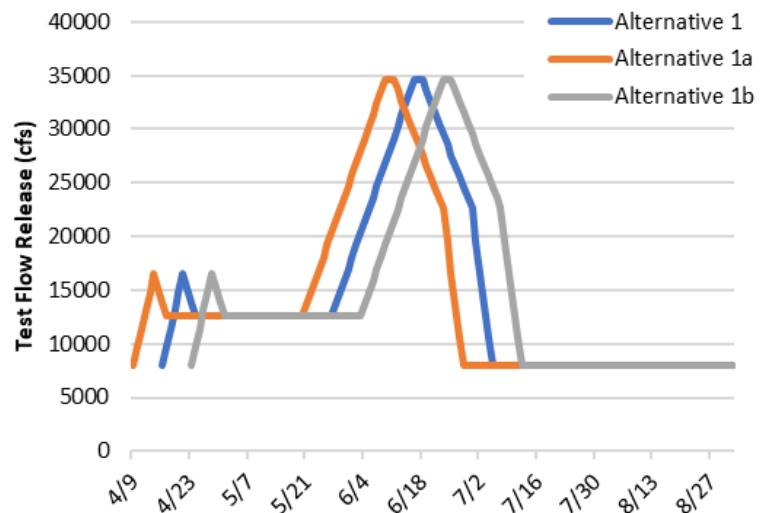
The United States Army Corps of Engineers (Corps) intends to change the flows coming from Fort Peck Dam in hopes it will benefit pallid sturgeon recruitment and fry survival above Lake Sakakawea, North Dakota. The proposal originates from required Endangered Species Act consultation with the United States Fish and Wildlife Service, who issued a “no jeopardy” biological opinion in April 2018 on the condition that the Corps pursues the test flows.

The Corps came out with a record of decision in November of 2021 on the final Environmental Impact Statement (EIS). As it stands, there are a series of issues that could be detrimental to irrigation operators and agriculture businesses with the highest proposed river test flows of approximately 35,000 cubic feet per second (cfs) in June followed by substantially lower flows of about 8,000 cfs by July 1 (Graph A).

The test flows are incredibly concerning for the approximately 160 pump sights located downstream of Fort Peck Dam, providing irrigation for 70,000 acres of cropland between Richland, Roosevelt, Valley and McCone counties as well as the Fort Peck Tribes. This would not only affect the farmers, but local communities and businesses. The EIS stated a loss of up to \$7,000,000 in farm income during a test flow year, but MRCDC believes this loss is greatly underestimated because it does not account for several other losses that may occur. The EIS assumes the ability to continue irrigating and no change in crop production for the mainstem intakes as well as no change in employment, sales or income in the region.

Discussions have been ongoing between Council representatives, the Corps, hydropower, and the Fort Peck Tribe regarding the test flows. Topics include conducting additional surveys along ten miles of the Missouri River to look closer at pump site flooding effects at specific cfs levels. The Corps has created a website that individuals can pinpoint specific locations where they are concerned about erosion, pump sites, and/or other damages.

The Corps has continued hosting stakeholder meetings virtually every couple of months. These have been very informative for all parties involved. Stakeholders share concerns and the Corps shares the most recent activity and knowledge regarding the Test Flows. **Currently, there is about a 50% chance Test Flows will occur in 2024** based on reservoir levels and other EIS triggers.



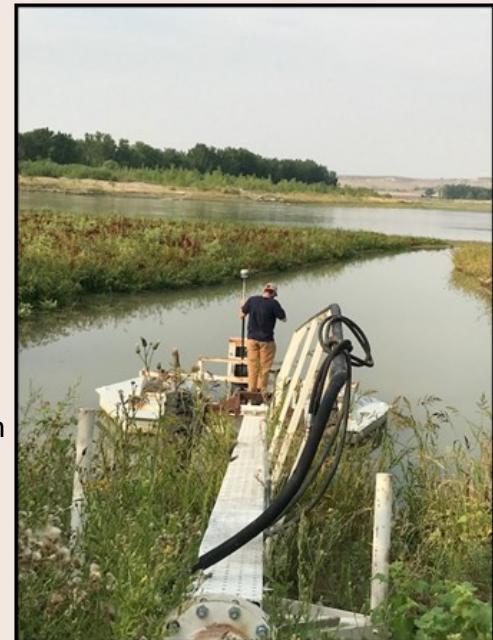
Graph A : This demonstrates the maximum and minimum cfs allowed following the EIS during a Test Flow year beginning in April and ending September 1.

Another big topic discussed during these meetings are the concerns of the high and low flow impacts. Based on observations of pallid sturgeon during the 2018 spring runoff, the Corps is planning to have a maximum of 25,000cfs for the first test flow. This is great news as it will minimize impacts at this level. The low flow number is around 7,500cfs, which is still a concern for irrigators. In the late fall this year, several irrigators had trouble getting their pump sites to water at this lower level.

Several crop insurance questions have risen during discussions. **Because Test Flows are a man-made event, crop insurance will not cover any losses due to them.** Continued discussions at the federal level need to happen. Mitigation measures including financial assistance, proper equipment to clear out channels, and a change to federal crop insurance need to occur. Alternate options to help the pallid sturgeon also need considered moving forward.

Having representation on the Missouri River Recovery Implementation Committee (MRRIC) allows for discussions through that route as well. Over the last year, the Test Flows have been one of the large topics discussed regularly.

In April, MRRIC members were invited to the Fort Peck Reservation by the Tribe for a two-day tour to see and hear their concerns regarding the Fort Peck Dam Test Flow effects along the Missouri River. Some of the tour sites included the Assiniboine Sioux Rural Water Supply System building, the Frazer and Wiota irrigation pump sites that serve nearly 20,000 acres combined, the Poplar Roll off site, and a few historic districts including an Assiniboine mass burial site, the South Poplar Battlefield location, and a Sundance location, all of which could be impacted by extreme high or low test flows. Overall, MRCDC aligns with the Tribe by wanting to have the Test Flow maximum of 25,000cfs and a minimum of 8,000cfs.



Intake pumps in the Missouri River supply the Assiniboine Sioux Rural Water Supply System with water. This System serves the Reservation and much of Northeastern Montana with necessary domestic, municipal, and stock water.

A side channel intake pump site. The intake will be laden with silt after an extreme high flow event. The silt will be difficult and dangerous to remove during the immediately following low flow.



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