



MISSOURI RIVER CONSERVATION DISTRICTS COUNCIL

2023–2024 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 2024. 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 having Council members be representatives on 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 2025.

Sincerely,

Karl Christians

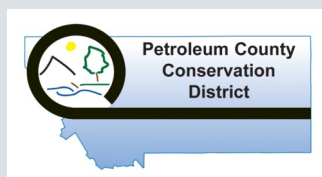
Karl Christians, Chairman

Molly Masters

Molly Masters, Coordinator

Cover picture: The Wolf Point Bridge crossing the Missouri River southeast of Wolf Point, Montana. This bridge was completed in 1930 and is the longest (1,074 feet long) and most massive (1,150 tons of steel) through truss in Montana.

Council Funding and Support:



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

Molly grew up on her family's cow/calf operation outside of Hardin, Montana. After college, she was employed as an Agriculture and 4-H Extension Agent for about seven years with Montana State University Extension. She then became the Coordinator for MRCDC. Molly and her husband are enjoying raising their two kiddos on their family ranches. There is no better way!

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

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

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

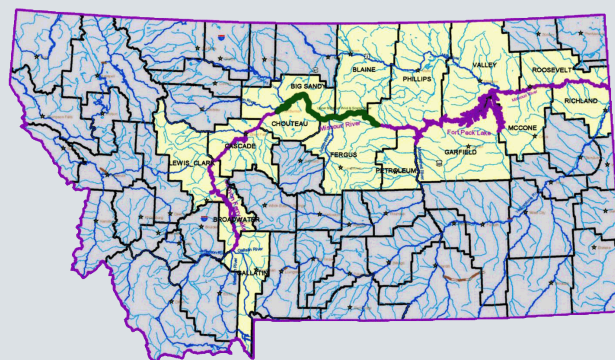
Big Sandy CD - Dana Darlington and alternate Cory Danreuther
Blaine County CD - Greg Jergeson and alternate Bruce Anderson
Broadwater CD - Dallas Diehl and alternate Greg Fields
Cascade County CD - John Chase* and alternate Gayla Wortman
Choteau County CD - Rick Anderson
Fergus CD - Lorri Schafer*
Gallatin CD - Tammy Swinney and alternate Mike Hansen
Garfield County CD - Monte Billing* and alternate Dean Rogge
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 - Hal DeBoer and alternate Craig French
Richland County CD - Dick Iverson* and alternate Dan Young
Roosevelt County CD - **Dana Berwick* (Vice Chair)**
Valley County CD - Jeff Pattison and alternate Ron Stoneberg

*Denotes Executive Committee members

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

Living On The Bank



When we think of Montana, we think of snow-capped mountains, open prairies, and wild rivers. People are drawn to our state by the image of a pristine stream in the backyard. Montana's rivers are spectacular, but with that beauty comes certain risks. Protecting the future of your investment and the rivers and streams that give it unique value means making responsible decisions in buying, building, and managing your dream property.

The Living On The Bank website, **www.LivingOnTheBank.com**, offers practical guidelines for those looking to, and those that already do, live alongside Montana's rivers and streams. It is jam packed with information on erosion and flooding, developing land, 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 website was given updates over the last couple years and the committee is now beginning work on greater outreach efforts. If your conservation district or organization would like to help with outreach, we have materials to send you for doing so. Flathead Conservation District attended the MT Graduate Realtor Institute in Kalispell. The booth they set up for it is pictured to the right.



Combining the art and science of natural resource management with the desire of people to be good stewards of the land produces the best results.

CMR Community Working Group

The Missouri River Conservation Districts Council (MRCDC) is the leading stakeholder and coordinating entity of the Charles M. Russell (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.



CMR COMMUNITY
WORKING GROUP

Continuing on the work the planning committee has done to try and increase producer attendance at the Working Group meetings, we set forth to hold a three-part meeting series focused on Rangeland Monitoring. The first of these was in April held in Fort Peck, Montana with presentations from several folks regarding how they monitor rangeland for their ranch and how a couple programs monitor for soil health and birds.

The second meeting was held in June and was based out of Winnett. There was a great line-up of experts who guided participants in hands-on demonstrations on how to do several different parts of a greater monitoring plan on their own land they management. Specifically, there were five stations that were covered that included showing and doing a line transect with photo points and assessing ground cover, soil infiltration test, bird monitoring, forage clipping and weighing, and soil monitoring.

We are grateful for a grant received through the MT DNRC Conservation Districts Bureau that allowed for the purchase of equipment for a basic monitoring kit for folks to get started on their own place (pictured to the left). The monitoring kits that were handed out to participants included:



- ◇ Duffle bag
- ◇ Clip board
- ◇ Forage clipping hoop
- ◇ Location markers
- ◇ Nail stakes
- ◇ Carpenter's ruler
- ◇ Clipping shears
- ◇ Tape measure stakes
- ◇ 100 N spring scale
- ◇ Soil temperature probe
- ◇ 100 feet tape measure

Part three of the series was held October 29 in Jordan. We learned how ranches have used their monitoring plans to make decisions on their ranches, and a few resources to help someone to get started on their place. There was great presenters and participation from the group.

In the background over the last part of the year, the Planning Committee has started to discuss the future of the CMR Community Working Group. At the October 29 meeting, discussion, which will continue yet, is to modify the Group by meeting less often per year, and making the meeting more special to help increase attendance, particularly producers. For the most up to date information visit the CMR Community Working Group website at <http://www.CMRCWG.org>.



Pictured to the left are participants working through a collaboration network activity at the start of the June meeting.

One of five stations during the June training was all about bird monitoring and its relevance to rangeland health. To the right, participants are learning about this.



A person can learn a lot about their soil by doing a soil infiltration test. Pictured to the left is a close up of a metal ring holding water. The amount of time it takes for that water to infiltrate the ground is what is measured.

River Rendezvous

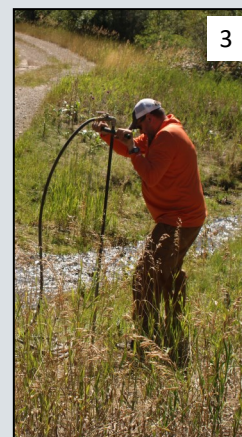
Over 30 participants gathered in Townsend, Montana for this year's Missouri River Conservation Districts Council's (MRCDC) River Rendezvous. It was a beautiful day, needing a jacket at first and then warming up to sunshine and blue skies. There were three stops, with multiple presenters throughout the day. We started at Six-O-Six Holdings mining site located up Confederate Gulch. We learned about their mining operation and the large reclamation project they did three years ago, reclaiming a perennial flowing stream. This is also the location of a big, 310 Law dispute that set precedent for future conservation district jurisdiction.

We moved onto visiting Hidden Hallow Hideaway Cattle and Guest Ranch. Here, we learned about the history of Diamond City and the gold rush and learned how to pan for gold in their creek flowing through the headquarters. Unfortunately, we struck out!

Our last stops were further to the north, going up into White Gulch. It was cool to see a 20-year-old reclamation site. There was bountiful forage and vegetation along the creek that was reclaimed, and as we learned and got to see, an abundant population of the Westslope Cutthroat Trout, Montana's state fish, due to the reclamation work and conservation work that has been done by Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks and their partners to save this trout species population.

While in White Gulch, participants saw demonstrations of a solar water pump and waterjet stinger that Lewis and Clark Conservation District have put together for their willow reclamation projects. The waterjet stinger is used to plant willows along streams, while the solar pump can be used to help the new plantings get well rooted in their first year, increasing survival rates.

MRCDC thanks everyone who helped with this year's River Rendezvous, particularly Broadwater Conservation District. Hope you can join us next year!



- 1: Confederate Gulch reclamation walk.
- 2: White Gulch reclamation project from about 20 years ago.
- 3: Lewis and Clark CD's waterjet stinger demonstration.
- 4: Lewis and Clark CD's solar pump demonstration.
- 5: Montana FWP's presentation on Westslope cutthroat trout.

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 regard potential impacts to one or multiple items that are listed in the MCA.

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

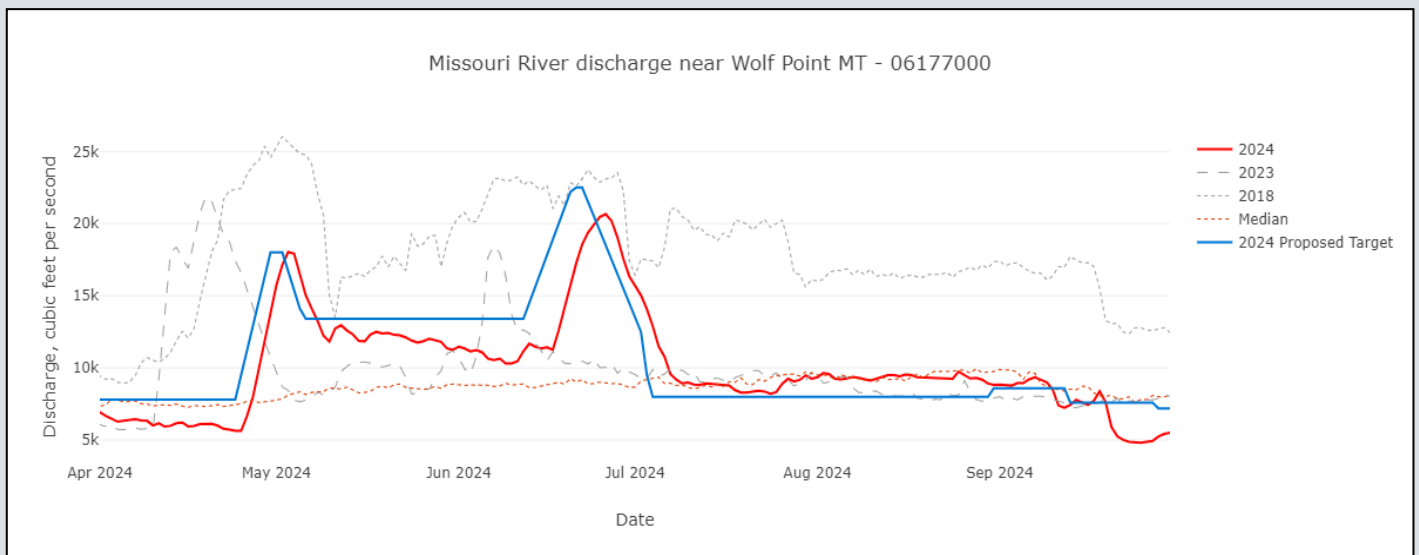
- ◆ Bureau of Land Management's Draft Resource Management Plan Amendment and EIS for Greater Sage-Grouse Range Wide Planning
- ◆ Fresno Dam Infrastructure support letters
- ◆ Ranching for Rivers grant application to Montana Department of Environmental Quality
- ◆ Saint Mary's Project support letters
- ◆ US Army Corps of Engineers Fort Peck Dam Test Flow update letters
- ◆ US Department of Agriculture's request for public input about implementation of the Sustainability Targets in Agriculture to Incentivize Natural Solutions Act
- ◆ US Fish Wildlife Services proposed Missouri Headwaters Conservation Area
- ◆ US Fish Wildlife Services proposed Rule on Biological Integrity, Diversity, and Environmental Health
- ◆ US Fish Wildlife Services proposed Wildlife Refuges Rule Changes

USACE Fort Peck Dam Test Flows

The United States Army Corps of Engineers (USACE/Corps) intends to change the flows coming from Fort Peck Dam in hopes it will benefit pallid sturgeon recruitment and fry survival between the Dam and Lake Sakakawea in 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).

The test flows are incredibly concerning for the approximately 160 pump sights located downstream of Fort Peck Dam that provide irrigation water for 70,000 acres of cropland between Richland, Roosevelt, Valley and McCone counties as well as the Fort Peck Tribes. Test flows would not only affect irrigators, 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.

This year, 2024, conditions were met to conduct the first USACE test flow coming out of the Fort Peck Dam. The graph below shows the discharge at the Wolf Point gauging station. The solid red line is what the flows actually were this year. Beginning on April 26, the ‘attraction flow’ began with the first peak of about 18,000cfs being met on May 3. The Milk River flows were very low, so most water came from the Fort Peck Reservoir. Starting on May 4 the flows were decreased to 12,000cfs and held in a ‘retention flow’ discharge amount until June 17. At that time, flows began to be increased for the second, higher peak of 20,600cfs for the ‘spawning flow’. This flow was reached on June 26. The flows were then decreased to about 9,000cfs by July 9. For the ‘drift flow’, the discharge at the Wolf Point station swayed between 8,500cfs to 9,500cfs. On July 26, the flow was decreased some more to about 8,200cfs. After contacting the Corps, they did increase it back up to 9,000cfs and due to the lack of response, so we thought, the test flows were concluded and normal flows resumed.



The graph above shows the 2024 proposed and the 2024 actual compared to other years and the median flows from April 1 to September 30. The website to view this is <https://www.hydroviz.ca/missouri-river-daily-update>.



Large debris often built up on pump sites located downstream of the Fort Peck Dam during the second high peak in June. Picture provided by Dana Berwick.



One of Dick Iverson's pump sites having a difficult time receiving water during the low flows in September.

In the fall of 2023, the Corps started hosting stakeholder meetings for irrigators, hydropower representatives, municipalities, and anyone else who would like to stay up to date on the Test Flow happenings. These meetings are ongoing as we begin learning about results from this first year of Test Flows and for helping give input to the next Test Flow. There will not be a Test Flow in 2025 because of the time needed for the turn-around of results and sufficient time planning the second test flow design.

When the Test Flow began on April 26, 2024 the Corps started holding weekly updates for anyone to participate in. The update would include hydrograph information, pallid sturgeon movement information, and reporting, if any, from the stakeholders present. This was a great way to stay informed through out the Test Flow and it was appreciated.

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.

Lastly, we have the go ahead to hire an Irrigator Outreach Specialist! Once hired, this person will be reaching out and collecting data from irrigators on impacts the Test Flow had on them this year.

There are still concerns regarding crop insurance coverage, low flows, and high flows that may occur during future USACE Fort Peck Test Flows.



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