

Montana STAC Minutes

March 5th, 2024, 9:30 am to 1:30 pm Missoula, MT



Attendance:

Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS): Tom Watson (State Conservationist), Kyle Tackett (Partnerships), Kelley Barkell (Financial Assistance Programs),

Kale Gullett (State Resource Conservationist), Nathan Parry (State Soil Scientist), Mindy Gauthier (Missoula Area Conservationist), Eric Larson (Snow), Kevin Derzapf (Rangeland Management Specialist), Justin Meissner (Easements), Rob Molacek (Engineering)

Farm Service Agency (FSA): Maureen Wicks (State Executive Director), Les Rispens (FSA Farm Program Director), Tami Hahn

Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC) Rangeland Resources: Stacey Barta

Northern Great Plains Joint Venture: Erin Fairbanks

Prairie Pothole Joint Venture: Jacquie Evans

Intermountain West Joint Venture: Andrew Olsen

Montana Association of Land Trusts: Marcus Strange, Brian Ohs

Five Valleys Land Trust: Ben Horan, Martin Oakland, Derek Goble, Kit Fischer

American Lands: Mark Sommer

Fort Belknap Indian Community: Kyle Stiffarm, Peggy Doney

Montana Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ): Mark Ockey, Hannah Reidl

Environmental Protect Agency: Eric Trum

Montana Association of Conservation Districts: Mike Hansen

DNRC: Matt Arno, Jamie Kirby

Ducks Unlimited: Bob Sanders

Intertribal Ag Council: Zane NotAfraid

Montana Land Reliance: Brad Hansen

Montana Salinity Control Association: Tera Ryan

Blackfeet Nation: Craig Iron Pipe

Senator Tester's Office: Jesse Anderson

The Nature Conservancy: Jim Berkey

Montana Audubon: Christian Meny

Opening Remarks

Tom Watson, NRCS State Conservationist

Tom welcomed everyone and thanked them for their participation.

Maureen Wicks, FSA State Executive Director

Maureen introduced herself and thanked attendees for showing up and looks forward to interacting with the group.

Les Rispens, FSA, discussed overlap of federally funded conservation easements and the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). CRP contracts that are in place prior to the conservation easement will finish out the contract, but then not be eligible again.

Rob Molacek, NRCS State Conservation Engineer

Rob presented a list of engineering practices to be updated in the near future and asked about the interest in getting a water subcommittee back up and running again. This subcommittee has been inactive for the last several years. DEQ agreed with Rob and their presentation after lunch is on the topic of the subcommittee.

Kelley Barkell, NRCS Assistant State Conservationist for Financial Assistance Programs

Kelley reviewed the Climate Smart Ag and Forestry list and asked for input from the group on proposed additions to the list. Kyle will email the list out and ask input following the meeting. Kelley also responded to a question about why Upland Wildlife Habitat Management was removed from the list.

Justin Meissner, NRCS Assistant State Conservationist for Easements

Justin reviewed ranking questions for Agricultural Land Easements (ALE) and provided proposed changes to several questions. These questions have already been sent out to the Wildlife Subcommittee for their consideration. Justin would like input back by April 12.

Kevin Derzapf, NRCS State Rangeland Management Specialist

Kevin presented information on NRCS's role in prescribed fire. One key aspect of the role NRCS plays in prescribed burning is that NRCS does not implement a prescribed fire for a producer. NRCS staff has strict training requirements for staff before they can even plan a burn. Prescribed fire is often a useful tool on the landscape but is not used often due to the landowner fears of liability, lack of contractors and public perception. There is currently a Prescribed Fire Council being formed in Montana.

Eric Larson, NRCS Water Supply Specialist

Eric provided an overview of the current mountain snowpack and the water supply outlook for Montana. The presentation included an explanation of the SNOTEL and Snow Course stations and how snow water equivalent is measured. Eric reviewed snowpack data in different watersheds that indicate we are behind on building snowpack. There is time left in the year to add to the snowpack but time is running short to make up the shortfall.

Lunch was provided by the Montana Association of Conservation Districts**Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ)**

Mark Ockey from DEQ gave a presentation on the new faces at DEQ and opportunities for DEQ to support NRCS Targeted Implementation Plan development. Mark also expressed a need to reinvigorate the water subcommittee that could focus on both water quality and quantity.

Upcoming Meetings:

Missoula, March 12th

Great Falls, July 16th

Location: To be determined

Adjourn: 1:30pm

Meeting handouts and presentations are available by emailing Kyle Tackett (kyle.tackett@usda.gov)