

THE MONTANA CONSERVATIONIST

News from Montana's Conservation Districts

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How I discovered my ranchette dream is actually nature's nightmare

By Louis Wertz, Western Landowners Alliance

Salt Lake Tribune: New data released by American Farmland Trust (AFT) in "Farms Under Threat: The State of the States" is troubling me. AFT found that 11 million acres of agricultural land were paved over, fragmented or converted to uses that compromise agriculture from 2001-2016. The greatest threat to these vital acres, especially out west, is low-density residential development in rural regions; aka ranchette subdivisions.

What's most troubling about ranchettes is that I want one.

I work as the communications director of the Western Landowners Alliance, an organization dedicated to protecting and restoring whole and healthy working lands in the American West. *Continued on page 2*

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Nature's ranchette nightmare

Continued from page 1:

I love to think that if I could just get my hands on some of that land, I could put my fancy words straight into practice. My family could go to bed each night and wake up each morning surrounded by the beating heart of nature, without having to hike a mile.

I am not alone. Utah, and all its remarkable growth, is quickly becoming ground zero for this type of development. Collectively, across the West, tens of thousands of people every year buy into this convenient myth of the real estate market — intending to become masters, even saviors, of a slice of paradise.

Or a former slice of paradise, I should say. Because the truth is, these mega-subdivisions are especially damaging to all of the values, accounted and unaccounted for, that farm and ranch lands provide, and that draw people to them in the first place.

As AFT writes, “This form of land use fragments the agricultural land base, limits management and marketing options, weakens farm and ranch economies, and paves the way for urbanization.”

Ranchettes also cause water and air quality problems, add to light pollution, increase greenhouse gas emissions and strain ever more taxed firefighting and public safety resources. And they reduce viable wildlife habitat.

[READ MORE](#)



Katie Grady tends to tomato plants in a greenhouse at Lower Valley Farm south of Kalispell on May 14, 2020. Hunter D'Antuono | Flathead Beacon

Shortening the Food Chain

How COVID-19 has caused a nationwide food supply system disruption while creating an opportunity for local agriculture

Flathead Beacon: Just south of Kalispell on Lower Valley Farm beneath the snowy peaks of the Swan Mountain Range, Mandy Gerth finds herself spending a lot of time in front of a computer rather than out in the field with the rest of her staff, who are working hard cultivating certified organic vegetables in Montana's short growing season.

Gerth typically sells the majority of the vegetables from her 4-acre farm at farmers markets while selling most of the rest directly to consumers through Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) sales and about 10% going to restaurants during a normal season.

But amid a global pandemic, her usual business model has been disrupted with social distancing and fewer farmers market

attendees. She's also had to change her CSA pickup system to accommodate social distancing by setting up five pickup locations.

Gerth and Lower Valley's manager, Kari Hammer, have also built an online store to accommodate buyers who don't attend farmers markets and to set up more organized CSA pickups, which is taking up most of their time these days.

Amid the shifting business strategies, Gerth has noticed a heightened consumer interest in buying food locally.

"It's really cool right now that there is some more interest in local food," Gerth said. "This is how it always should be. It should always be that our CSA cards are sold out, and I'm so happy there's a piqued interest in thinking about where our food comes from."

[READ MORE](#)

Beyond the Banks: Collaborative conservation in the Big Hole Valley

Intermountain West Joint Venture: Ranchers don't really raise cattle, according to John Richardson. They raise grass.

Richardson, who owns the Hat Creek Ranch in Montana's Big Hole Valley, said he knows that healthy grass means healthy cattle, and healthy grass, of course, comes from healthy soil and water. Richardson said he keeps soil and water health at the forefront of his ranch practices, from installing solar wells to building wildlife-safe fencing to preventing overgrazing by raising a smaller herd once every few years. Protecting and restoring riparian areas improves soil and water quality, and can also make a huge difference when it comes to livestock and wildlife health.

But while these measures may seem costly and unattainable in the short term, they can actually help a ranch's profits in the long run. If anything, Richardson said, those measures have helped his bottom line by making a healthier environment in which to run his cattle.

"A working ranch can coexist with conservation," he said. "It costs the same or maybe less to build a fence that will meet your needs and provide for wildlife, and the same with your water resources. With a little thought, not only are these measures economic to operate but they also provide wildlife with water. There's a way to make a ranch profitable and good for wildlife."

Hat Creek Ranch is also one of many working ranches in the Big Hole that participate in the Candidate Conservation Agreement with Assurances (CCAA) program. The CCAA program was established in the early 2000s to help local landowners manage their operations to keep the local population of Arctic grayling from being listed under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). The program prioritizes the needs of landowners to provide them with the tools and support they need to make conservation-minded decisions on their own property.

When Gail and John Dooling put

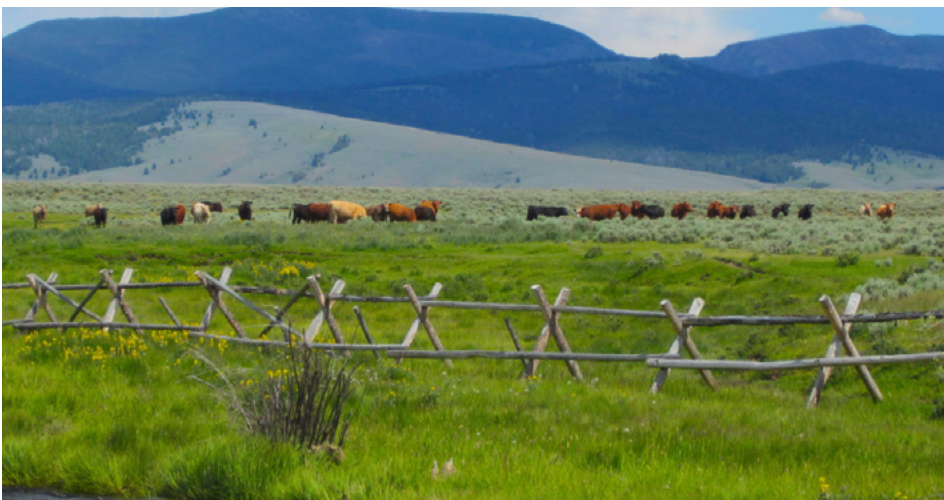
in two stock water tanks on their land, for instance, they were thinking more about getting their cattle water than they were of conserving fish. Mike Roberts, the then-hydrologist for Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC), had recently knocked on their door and told them about the budding CCAA program.

Gail said it was a no-brainer. Their cows needed water, and getting help installing the tanks made it easier than continuing to draw water from the Big Hole River when it slowed to a trickle during the drier months of the summer. Plus, she said, they knew that keeping water in the river would keep the grayling healthy, and potentially prevent the species from getting listed.

"We don't want to see the fish get listed," she said. "It was something we could do."

Both the Hat Creek and the Dooling Ranch are two of many examples of the combined power of individual conservation efforts on the Big Hole. The CCAA program, now in its 14th year, has helped many such ranchers in the Big Hole make site-specific plans for their properties to improve the way they use water. For the landowners, participating in the program means a task list for riparian management plans, riparian and vegetation recovery, weed treatment, irrigation improvement, fish passage, and flow maintenance plans.

[READ MORE](#)



Montana Senators make case for CSKT Water Compact in Washington

Char-Koosta News:

From Senator Tester: U.S. Senator Jon Tester continued his years-long push to ratify the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes' (CSKT) Water Compact today at a historic Senate Committee on Indian Affairs hearing on the bill, calling it a moment decades in the making and urging Congress to support the legislation.

Tester first introduced his Salish and Kootenai Water Rights Settlement Act in 2016, and welcomed newfound support for the Compact from his colleagues across the aisle last fall. Today Tester questioned witnesses from the Trump Administration on the President's support for the bill, and said the Compact would provide certainty for water users and boost economic development in Northwest Montana.

"This moment has been decades in the making," Tester said in his opening remarks. "It does great things for building infrastructure both inside the reservation and outside, and it does great things for providing surety to towns and water owners across Montana... we need this water settlement for Montana. We need it for predictability, we need it for certainty, we need it to be able to grow our economy. Water is life – that's how important it is."

From Senator Daines: At a U.S. Senate Hearing today (June 24), the Trump administration expressed support for U.S. Senator Steve Daines' bipartisan bill, the "Montana Water Rights Protection

Act," which permanently settles the century-long Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes (CSKT) water dispute. At the hearing, Department of the Interior Assistant Secretary Tim Petty discussed the benefits of the bill which will create more than 6,000 jobs, modernize critical NW Montana infrastructure, avoid costly litigation, protect the water rights of all Montanans and provide certainty for Montana's farmers and ranchers.

Daines kicked off the hearing by emphasizing why the bill is necessary, how it complies with the both the Constitution of the State of Montana and the U.S. Constitution, and how it's the right thing to do for all of Montana.

Daines stressed that without his bipartisan legislation, Montana's agriculture economy could face a \$1.3 billion hit, a significant loss of jobs, and would leave Montana's farmers and ranchers with uncertainty. Petty agreed with Daines that his bill will protect Montana's ag economy and highlighted its economic benefits.

Daines also highlighted that the bill will rehabilitate the Flathead Indian Irrigation Project (FIIP) in NW Montana, stressing that without rehabilitation, FIIP could be decommissioned due to Endangered Species Act and other water quality violations, which could cost taxpayers more than a billion dollars.

[READ MORE](#)

Structural damage on Montana canal could spell water conservation efforts in Alberta

Medicine Hat News: A structure on the St. Mary's Canal in Montana failed in May and is being repaired, and it will require some focus on water usage in parts of southern Alberta.

"With no canal in place, water licence holders in Alberta should be prepared for only natural flows on the Milk River throughout the summer and should proactively explore options for water conservation," read an Alberta Environment and Parks press release.

Jason Penner, communications for Alberta Environment, says water licence holders in the Milk River basin affected by the damaged infrastructure in Montana are mostly agricultural producers.

St. Mary's River Irrigation District in Lethbridge and Bow Island did not provide comment Tuesday to clarify whether its customers are impacted.

Penner, however, says farmers connected to the St. Mary's River Irrigation District canal system are not affected by the infrastructure failure. The St. Mary's canal in Montana (the infrastructure that is damaged) diverts water from the St. Mary River to the Milk River.

The infrastructure that failed in Montana is referred to as a "concrete drop structure" in the government's press release. [READ MORE](#)

New findings share how prescribed fire, no-till impact soil microbes

The Crop Site.com: In some ways, farming is like cooking. Cooking would be much easier if we could leave the kitchen after eating and not come back until we make the next meal. But someone needs to put away the leftovers, do the dishes, and clean up the table.

Similarly, there's work to do in farm fields after harvest and before planting the next spring.

After harvest in the fall, farmers take the harvested crops to market or store them on their farm. They don't take the whole plant from the field, though.

The leftover parts of the plant, like the stalk and leaves from corn, remain in the field. This debris is called crop residue.

Using no-till and prescribed fire management are two potential ways to manage crop residue. Both practices help keep organic matter and nitrogen in the soil. However, research was needed to understand how these two practices can affect long-term soil health.

Lisa Fultz and her team want to help farmers determine the best way to manage their residue between growing seasons. To do this, her team decided to learn more about how no-till and prescribed fire management affect nutrients and microbes in the soil. Fultz is a researcher at Louisiana State University AgCenter.

[READ MORE](#)

The connection between soil organic matter and soil water

No Till Farmer: One benefit of increasing soil organic matter is to store more water in your soil. Why does this happen? Because soil organic matter creates pores in a range of sizes. Exactly how much more water is stored due to soil organic matter will depend on soil texture, though.

Soil organic matter is a busy mix of materials — fragments of last year's stalks and roots, earthworm casts, and living microbes and invertebrates, to name just a few. These materials are broken down by physical and biological processes. For example, freezing and thawing causes plant residue to lose its structure. Tiny

dissolved molecules flow deep into the soil with rainwater. Hungry invertebrates, fungi, and bacteria consume complex living and dead organic material and excrete nutrients they don't need in a smaller, simpler form. These small organic molecules can stick to clay surfaces. Clay surfaces covered with organic material grow like snowballs, and soil aggregates are formed.

Soil aggregates are critical for holding water in the soil for two reasons. First, a well-aggregated soil has large pores between aggregates to let water enter the soil profile. [READ MORE](#)

When planting trees threatens the forest

Phys.org: Campaigns to plant huge numbers of trees could backfire, according to a new study that is the first to rigorously analyze the potential effects of subsidies in such schemes.

The analysis, published on June 22 in *Nature Sustainability*, reveals how efforts such as the global Trillion Trees campaign and a related initiative (H. R. 5859) under consideration by the U.S. Congress could lead to more biodiversity loss and little, if any, climate change upside. The researchers emphasize, however, that these efforts could have significant benefits if they include strong subsidy restrictions, such as prohibitions against replacing native forests with tree plantations.

"If policies to incentivize tree plantations are poorly designed or poorly enforced, there is a high risk of not only wasting public money but also releasing more carbon and losing biodiversity," said study co-author Eric Lambin, the George and Setsuko Ishiyama Provostial Professor in Stanford's School of Earth, Energy & Environmental Sciences. "That's the exact opposite of what these policies are aiming for."

There is no question that forests have an outsized role to play in efforts to slow global biodiversity loss and combat climate change by sequestering carbon as biomass.

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Grants

MT Grazing Lands Mini-Grants

The Montana Grazing Lands Conservation Initiative (GLCI) is accepting applications for mini-grants and demonstration projects. The purpose of the mini-grant is 1) to provide funding for educational workshops or event that may come about throughout the year and 2) to support partners and organizations with an interest in the conservation, education and awareness of grazing lands and natural resources in Montana. Requests for funding are limited to a minimum of \$50 and a maximum of \$1,000. There is no application deadline. Submissions will be considered year-round by the Montana GLCI steering committee. [More Info](#)

Ranching for Rivers

The Ranching for Rivers program is accepting applicants on a rolling basis for 2020. Conservation Districts and watershed groups with identified projects, or individual landowners working with a local CD or watershed group may apply. The program offers 50% cost-share for project implementation and/or the development of a Grazing Management Plan. [More Info](#)

Montana Grazing Lands Education Mini-Grants

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2021 BSWC Host Site Cost Share Support

Need help paying for a BSWC member in 2021? Will your member be working to reduce nonpoint source pollution? The MWCC Watershed Fund has funding to help MWCC Partners implement DEQ-approved Watershed Restoration Plans (WRPs) by hosting a Big Sky Watershed Corps (BSWC) member in 2021. A total of \$35,000 is available, and up to \$6,000 may be awarded to each qualifying organization. Due **July 31**. [More Info](#)

Missoula RAC Accepting Project Proposals

The Missoula Resource Advisory Committee (RAC) is now accepting new project proposals. The application deadline is **Aug. 1**, and the committee has approximately \$151,500 in project funding to award. At least 50% of all funds must be used for projects primarily dedicated to restoring streams and watersheds, or road maintenance, decommissioning or removal. [More Info](#)

CD Water Projects Grant Funds

The Sweet Grass Conservation District is offering up to \$20,000 for conservation district sponsored irrigation related projects, stream restoration, and other activities that result in improvements to water quality and quantity and to

aquatic habitat. Projects require a 50/50 match. Due **August 5**. Contact Guelda Halverson, Guelda.Halverson@mt.nacdn.net for more info.

Events, etc

Innovative Cropping Systems Field Seminar

Liberty County Conservation District is hosting a seminar on innovative cropping systems at the Cory & Adrian Hawks Ranch in Galata, **July 17**. Social distancing will be practiced. Call Gail Cicon, 406-759-5778 x102 for more info.

Sun Watershed Rain Barrel Workshop & Fundraiser

The Sun River Watershed Group (SRWG) and Cascade Conservation District will host a Rain Barrel Workshop and Fundraiser on **July 25th 2020** at the Beacon Icehouse, Great Falls. [More Info](#)

Ranching Systems Fall Symposium

Hosted by MSU Department of Animal & Range Sciences, "Calving Season and Ranch Workforce - Managing Both Successfully" featuring Burke Teichert & Bob Milligan will be held **September 22 & 23** at the GranTree Inn in Bozeman. [More Info](#)

2020 Watershed Symposium Goes Virtual

The Montana Watershed Coordination Council and the Montana Forest Collaborative Network are co-hosting the 2020 Watershed Symposium titled

"Summit to Stream: Connecting People, Water, and Forests." Due to health and safety concerns from the COVID-19 outbreak, the Montana Watershed Coordination Council (MWCC) and the Montana Forest Collaboration Network (MFCN) have decided to restructure our combined conference scheduled for this coming fall, and we are no longer gathering in Butte, MT October 14th-16th. Instead, we will be working to develop new and innovative strategies to engage and serve our conservation partners across the state. [More Info](#)

Save the Date!

The Montana Soil Health Symposium will be hosted **February 9-10, 2021**, in Billings, MT. This event is co-hosted by SWCDM and NRCS, and brings together soil health experts and producers on the leading edge of the movement. Visit www.mtsoilhealth.org for more info.

Jobs

Resource Conservationist, Missoula Conservation District

The Missoula Conservation District is hiring a resource conservationist to lead the district's efforts to promote sustainable resource management for all the natural resources within its boundaries. Open until filled; application review begins **July 13**. [More Info](#)

Director of Youth Education

The Biomimicry Institute is seeking a director of Youth Education, to oversee the Biomimicry Youth Design Challenge (YDC), the

Institute's flagship youth education program, as well as other aligned youth education initiatives. **Closes July 17**. [More Info](#)

MCC Central Divide Program Manager - Helena

The Regional Program Manager (PM) staff position is responsible for the internal operations and day-to-day management of Montana Conservation Corps (MCC) field programs and participants within a region, including the supervision of regional Field Coordinators, and field program participants. [More Info](#)

COVID-19 Resources

COVID-19 Rapid Response Infrastructure RFP

Mosaic is launching an open RFP in May 2020 to make \$1 million of rapid response grants to individual nonprofit grassroots organizations, and networks of them, focused primarily on environmental protection and/or environmental justice to fund tools & technology, training, and related resources needed as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. [More Info](#)

Visit <https://commerce.mt.gov/Coronavirus-Relief> for details on the following opportunities:

Montana Business Adaptation Program

The Montana Business Adaptation Program will provide reimbursement for COVID-19

expenses related to keeping staff and customers safe – from the purchase of personal protective equipment to resources needed for staff to work remotely. **Nonprofit entities are eligible.** Eligible expenses include costs related to communication, remote work equipment, cleaning supplies, tools to enhance social distancing and sanitation, travel and hotel costs related to quarantining workers. Total funding available is \$20 million, the maximum reimbursement amount per business is \$5,000.

Local Government Reimbursement Program

Reimbursement is available to local governments as part of the CAREs Act and the Federal Emergency Management (FEMA) Public Assistance (PA) grant program for direct costs associated with COVID-19. Requests for reimbursement must be submitted to LGS by June 12, July 17, September 4, and/or December 1, 2020, and will be reimbursed within 30 days of these deadlines.

Montana Department of Commerce, Montana Business Stabilization Program

The Montana Business Stabilization Grant program will provide working capital for small businesses to support payroll, rent, accounts payable, debt service and expenses related to shifts in operations in order to retain existing businesses, retain current employees or retain business viability for future re-employment. **Nonprofit entities are not eligible.** Total funding available is \$75 million, the maximum award amount per business is \$10,000.

Coming Up

July

- 15 MACD Education Committee Meeting
- 27 MACD Executive Committee Conference Call

Do you use streamgages?

We need to hear from you!

Help us understand how people and organizations use streamgage data

Take the Montana Streamgage User's Survey

Scan the QR code on your smartphone or visit the URL to take the survey now!

www.surveymonkey.com/r/95JZPPC

Government, Watershed Group, Irrigator, Guide, Yes you!, Tribal, Recreationist, Fisherman, Farmer/Rancher

Take the Streamgage User's Survey

Do you check stream gage data in Montana for flooding information, stream flow data, or water rights? Montana is home to 264 gages funded and maintained by state, federal and local governments; companies, and nonprofits. Each organization has its own goals and needs for the gage data. The data for most of the gages is publicly available through apps, and websites for people to use. We know that gage data sites are being visited much more over the last 5 years, but we don't know who is checking on the data and for what reasons. Public funding for the gage's maintenance has decreased or remained flat over the last decade.

The Stream Gage Data Users survey was created by representatives from local nonprofits, and state and federal agencies to help us understand how people and organization are using and accessing data. Whether you are a ranch, farmer, water commissioner, tribal representative, watershed group, an irrigator, or water rights holder, please complete the Montana Stream Gage Data Users Survey, it is a short survey that takes about 5 minutes to complete and can be found here: <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/95JZPPC>.

Your help needed! The Stream Gage Working Group is hoping to get more irrigators to fill out the survey. Please spread the word with your constituents!

Have a story, funding opportunity, or event to share? Please email tmc@macdnet.org with details.