



The Montana Department of Natural Resources & Conservation

CONSERVATION DISTRICTS BUREAU

DNRC's Conservation and Resource Development Division (CARDD) helps manage natural resources and finance conservation, resource management, and reclamation activities. CARDD's Conservation Districts Bureau (CDB) provides direct services and support to Montana's 58 conservation districts (CDs). The purpose of this report is to provide an overview of conservation district programs and highlight successes.

The CDB provides financial, legal, and technical assistance and training to Montana's 58 Conservation Districts under state law ([MCA 76-15-105](#)).

CD PRIORITIES ARE CDB PRIORITIES

In 2021, the CDB solicited feedback from CDs and partners regarding how the bureau could better serve districts. Participants expressed their appreciation of CDB's continued support of conservation and district operations through technical and financial support. Additional themes emerged from that effort, and CDB has developed strategies to address the issues CDs deem as high priority:

- empower CDs
- manage employee attrition
- support district capacity building
- streamline grant programs
- provide professional development for staff and supervisors

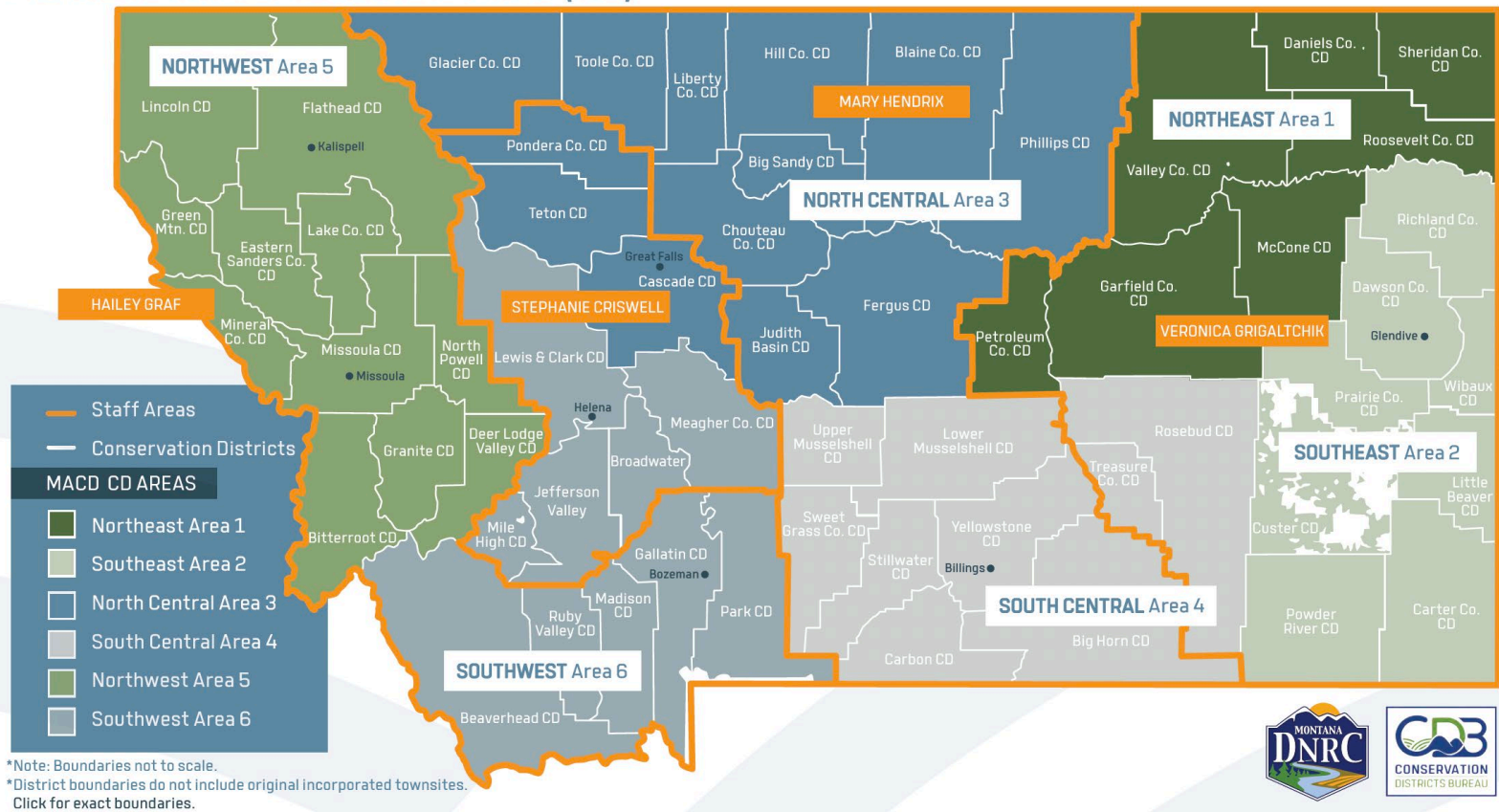
WHAT ARE CONSERVATION DISTRICTS?

CDs are leaders in locally lead commonsense conservation. Organized in the 1930s, conservation districts are units of local government designed to help citizens conserve their soil, water, and other renewable natural resources through sound conservation practices.

STAFF RESPONSIBILITIES:

- Aid conservation district supervisors in the execution of their powers and programs
- Inform district supervisors of the activities and programs of other districts, facilitate an interchange of advice, experiences between the districts, and promote district cooperation
- Coordinate conservation district programs through advice and consultation
- Disseminate district activity and program information throughout the state
- Administer the Conservation District Account, established by [MCA 76-15-106](#) to provide funding for CDs
- Procure and conduct trainings for CDs regarding operations, program management, and professional development
- Train and oversee Stream Permitting (310 Law) activities across the state and provide legal and technical services to CDs in administering the law
- Coordinate with state and federal agencies to benefit the mission of the CDs
- Work with the Montana Association of Conservation Districts (MACD) and the National Association

Montana Conservation Districts (CD)



CD BUREAU STAFF

Bureau Chief, Stephanie Criswell | 406-444-6669, steph.criswell@mt.gov

Serves CDs in parts of Area 3 (Pondera, Teton, Cascade) and parts of Area 6 (Lewis & Clark, Jefferson Valley, Mile High, Broadwater, Meagher) Conservation Districts.

CD Specialist, Mary Hendrix | 406-444-4253, mary.hendrix@mt.gov

Serves CDs on the Hi-Line and Central Montana. Coverage includes most of Area 3 (Glacier, Toole, Liberty, Hill, Blaine, Phillips, Chouteau, Big Sandy, Judith Basin, Fergus), and most of Area 4 (Big Horn, Carbon, Stillwater, Sweet Grass, Lower Musselshell, Upper Musselshell, Yellowstone).

Stream Permitting Coordinator, Jason Garber | 406-444-4340, jason.garber@mt.gov

Serves all CDs in Montana.

Water Reservations Specialist, Randell Hopkins | 406-232-6359, randell.hopkins@mt.gov

Serves CDs with their water reservations for the Yellowstone River Basin, part of the Upper Missouri River basin (Lower Musselshell CD), and the Lower Missouri basin (Richland County CD), and the Little Missouri River basin. Those are Park, Sweetgrass, Stillwater, Carbon, Lower Musselshell, Yellowstone, Treasure County, Rosebud, Big Horn, Custer County, Prairie County, Power River, Richland County, Dawson County, Wibaux, Little Beaver, and Carter County Conservation Districts.

CD Specialist, Hailey Graf | 406-437-4435, hailey.graf@mt.gov

Serves CDs on the western side of the divide. Coverage includes all of Area 5 and parts of Area 6 (Beaverhead, Ruby Valley, Madison, Gallatin, and Park).

CD Specialist, Veronica Grigaltchik | 406-437-4501, veronica.grigaltchik@mt.gov

Serves CDs in the eastern part of the state. Coverage includes all of Area 1 and Area 2, and part of Area 4 (Rosebud and Treasure).

CDB Coordinator, Kasydi Lucas | 406-444-6619, kasydi.lucas2@mt.gov



The Conservation District Advisory Council is committed to providing a bridge between the Conservation Districts in the field and the DNRC Conservation District Bureau. We are dedicated to serving Conservation Districts while giving insight and recommendations to CDB as we navigate the sometimes-challenging pathways to good land stewardship.

-Gayla Wortman, CDAC Chair and Cascade Conservation District Supervisor

CONSERVATION DISTRICT ADVISORY COUNCIL

The former Resource Conservation Advisory Council was reestablished in 2022 as the Conservation District Advisory Council (CDAC). The Council meets quarterly to provide advice and assistance on conservation matters and programs.

Council's Purpose

1. Advise and assist the Conservation Districts Bureau on district operations and conservation-related issues including impending conservation matters
2. Facilitate communication between the Conservation Districts Bureau and districts
3. Advocate about the importance of the work and value of the districts to the public, partners, and stakeholders
4. Actively participate in recruiting, training, and engaging district supervisors

Council Members

Eastern Montana

- Richard Iversen, Culbertson, Richland Co. CD
- Judi Knapp, Hysham, Treasure County CD

Central Montana

- Greg Jergeson, Chinook, Blaine County CD
- Gayla Wortman, Cascade, Cascade CD
- Steve Tyrrel, Lavina, Lower Musselshell CD

Western Montana

- Kathleen Johnson, Fortine, Lincoln CD
- Robert Schroeder, Florence, Missoula CD



WATER RESERVATIONS

In 1978, the Board of Natural Resources and Conservation granted water reservations to fourteen CDs in the Yellowstone River basin. CDs administer reservations for use by individuals within the district's boundary. DNRC staff work with CDs to process applications for reserved water right use to ensure compliance with state regulations.

CUTTING RED TAPE

In 2022, the application and approval process for a CD water reservation was converted from a paper application and wet signatures to an electronic process. The approval process **was expedited from weeks to days**.

STREAM PERMITTING

The Natural Streambed and Land Preservation Act, also known as "The 310 Law," is administered by conservation districts. The purpose of the 310 Law is to keep rivers and streams in as natural or existing condition as possible, minimize sedimentation, and recognize beneficial uses. Any individual or corporation proposing construction in a perennial stream must apply for a 310 permit through the local conservation district.

PERMIT ACTIONS

Conservation Districts acted on **1,125 permit applications in 2021**. This reflects the annual average of permit actions since the inception of the Natural Streambed and Land Preservation Act in 1975.

MONTANA SALINITY CONTROL ASSOCIATION

Conservation district supervisors in 33 counties make up the members of the Montana Salinity Control Association (MSCA). MSCA's work is important because saline seeps are damaging nonpoint source pollution that result in groundwater and surface water issues, as well as soil contamination.

RECLAIMING SALINE SEEP

MSCA staff worked with state and federal partners to obtain funding for producers to develop and implement the reclamation plans that were completed by MSCA. **Approximately 1 million federal dollars** have been secured for and distributed to producers across MT over the past 4 years through the Regional Conservation Partnership Program.

GROUNDWATER MANAGEMENT PROGRAMS

Aquifers are a very significant water resource in eastern Montana. Districts have developed effective water management and monitoring programs that provide data, interpretations, and recommendations to allocate water. Long-term continuous records provide data necessary to evaluate irrigation pumping and recharge event.

CLEAR LAKE AQUIFER

Sheridan CD manages groundwater monitoring in the Clear Lake Aquifer. In FY 22, the total number of new water user permit was approved, bringing the districts **total permitted water rights to 29, totaling 7,992 acre-feet of water**. These wells, in addition to **140 observation wells**, are monitored monthly throughout the irrigation season.

WEST CRANE BURIED VALLEY AQUIFER

The West Crane aquifer is part of the Lower Yellowstone buried valley in Richland County. In partnership with The Montana Bureau of Mines and Geology, the Richland CD has been actively mapping the West Crane Aquifer. Currently, **the aquifer irrigates 3,100 acres of converted dryland to irrigation or 6,229 acre-feet of water**.



MISSOURI RIVER CONSERVATION DISTRICTS COUNCIL

The Missouri River Conservation Districts Council (MRCDC) works to conserve the Missouri River's natural resources through grassroots collaboration, education, inventive, and voluntary action. MRCDC represents local residents' views and concerns regarding natural resources, provides leadership, assistance, and a forum for Missouri River stakeholders to share perspectives, solve problems, and exchange information on Missouri River resource management.

ADVOCATING FOR PRIVATE LANDOWNERS

MRCDC is representing local residents and CDs along the Missouri River corridor regarding the US Army Corps of Engineers concerning the Fort Peck Dam Test Flows aimed to benefit the pallid sturgeon. The EIS for the test flows **estimate a crop loss of \$7.5 million and 80 lost jobs equaling \$4 million**, but the actual economic impacts are predicted to be much higher. For example, the **closure of the Sidney Sugars is estimated to be an \$80 million loss**.

YELLOWSTONE RIVER CONSERVATION DISTRICTS COUNCIL

The Yellowstone River Conservation Districts Council (YRCDC) provides leadership & guidance for the wise use of the Yellowstone River's natural resources through the promotion, implementation, and updates of the Yellowstone River Recommended Practices (YRRPs) and Position Statements. Its primary purpose is to work on multi-county issues that have a cumulative impact on the Yellowstone River.

IMPROVING THE EFFICIENCY OF IRRIGATION WATER USE

YRCDC has worked with four major irrigation districts in the lower Missouri to complete four comprehensive assessment and strategic planning documents. **The Council's efforts have resulted in leveraging nearly \$2 Million in on-the-ground project funding** to improve irrigation infrastructure and improve drought resiliency.

MILK RIVER WATERSHED ALLIANCE

The MRWA is a locally led organization of conservation districts working together to preserve, protect, and enhance the natural resources within the Milk River watershed, while maintaining quality of life. MRWA advocates for improving natural resource conditions of the Milk River Basin through outreach, planning, and project initiatives.

ADDRESSING AGING INFRASTRUCTURE

One of the most important and time sensitive issues in the Milk River watershed is the aging St. Mary's diversion and associated downstream infrastructure. The diversion is a complex water distribution system with myriad partners and stakeholders. MRWA was established to coordinate funding resources, stakeholders, and water users who rely on the Milk River. **The larger Milk River project furnishes water for the irrigation of about 121,000 acres of land.**



In 2022, Hamilton High School wins the state Envirothon and in nationals takes 9th place overall and 1st place in oral presentations.

ENVIROTHON

Envirothon educates students about conservation of natural resources through hands-on outdoor experiences, academic study, and collaborative competitions. Participation in the Envirothon is open to all students enrolled in grades 9-12 in public, private, vocational, technical, or home-school programs. The state competition occurs in the spring. The winning team from the Montana competition goes on to compete at the national Envirothon.



EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS AND RESPONSE

Conservation districts are on the front lines, helping landowners respond to and recover from emergencies and natural disasters. CDs, partner agencies, and landowners all work together to protect Montana's natural resources through emergency preparedness and mitigation. CDs also sponsor state and federal grants to assist landowners with recovery from fires, floods, and droughts.

CENTRAL EASTERN MONTANA INVASIVE SPECIES TEAM (CEMIST)

CEMIST is a coalition of volunteer partners. It was established in 2016 in response to the invasive mussel detections. **Members have invested countless hours of volunteer time and travel expenses** to assist with the statewide effort to prevent and protect Montana from invasive species through education, outreach, and training.

FUEL MITIGATION

Wildfires are increasingly affecting communities throughout the state and fuel mitigation efforts are critical in preparing for these events. **The Lower Musselshell Conservation District (LMCD) has been helping landowners protect** their homes from these catastrophic wildfires through a **50/50 cost-share program** for private landowners.

FLOOD RECOVERY

The mid-June flooding is a prime example of how conservation districts are a critical partner in emergency response and have stepped up to help affected landowners and protect water resources. **Carbon, Stillwater, and Park CDs have received several hundred emergency notifications and 310 applications.**

MONTANA REGIONAL WATER SYSTEMS

Conservation districts have been the driving force behind two of the four regional water systems—the Fort Peck Dry Prairie and Dry-Redwater regional systems. These systems deliver water to water districts, public entities, and thousands of rural customers. The other two systems have progressed through planning, development, and some construction stages. When these systems are all complete, tens of thousands of Montana households will receive clean and plentiful drinking water.

DELIVERING WATER TO RURAL COMMUNITIES

The Dry Prairie Water Authority (DPRWA) is locally owned by Daniels, Roosevelt, Sheridan, and Valley conservation districts who partnered with the Assiniboine and Sioux Tribes of the Fort Peck Reservation. The system is on track to be completed in 2025. DPRWA **delivers water to approximately 3,500 service connections in ten communities and to 1,500 more rural households.**



AQUATIC INVASIVE SPECIES WATERCRAFT INSPECTION OPERATIONS

Beginning spring 2017, on the heels of the invasive mussel detections, three conservation districts partnered with Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) to assume operations of watercraft inspection stations in rural areas. Given district's local knowledge, this arrangement has been a big success. Attracting and retaining employees has improved greatly, as well as QA/QC. This initiative has expanded and districts operated seven stations in 2022. Lincoln and Mineral conservation districts are planning to operate stations in 2023.

RESTORING RIVERBANKS

The Lewis & Clark Conservation District has been working with landowners for over a decade using soft techniques (willow lifts) to stabilize and restore eroded banks on Spokane Creek and Lake Helena. LCCD has also provided technical assistance and labor to other CDs to restore other rivers and tributaries in the state. **To date, more than 4,000 feet of bank have been restored.**

IMPROVING SOIL HEALTH

After polling **nearly 250 ranchers and farmers**, survey results indicated that producers are motivated to adopt and maintain soil management practices. In response, **CDs launched the Soil Health Grazing Management (SHGM) Initiative and the Soil Corps in 2022.** Both programs will continue into the future and will have widespread impacts across the state.

CREATING POLLINATOR HABITAT

Montana's Conservation Districts are motivated to protect pollinator species of all kinds by increasing the amount of pollinator habitat available via pollinator gardens. To date, **Montana CDs have helped over 1,000 landowners plant approximately 56 acres of native pollinator habitat with another 50+ acres planned** in the coming years.

CONSERVATION DISTRICT GRANT PROGRAM

The Montana State Legislature (MCA 76-15-106) provides funding for the conservation districts of Montana. DNRC distributes funds, based on need, through the CDB to conservation districts for any purpose that they are authorized to perform pursuant to MCA 76-15-4. Since 1981, conservation districts have used these funds for conservation projects and district operations.

Semi-annually, the Conservation Districts Advisory Council along with staff and technical experts review applications. The grant limit for “on the ground” conservation projects is \$20,000; more may be available with a 50:50 match. The grant limit for education projects is \$10,000. Mini Education Grants are capped at \$2,000.

In 2022, CDB grant managers evaluated the program. Based on input from districts, partners, and the former Resource Conservation Advisory Council, the CDB updated the program guidelines, transitioned to an electronic grant management system, and revised the applications. These changes were intended to streamline the application process and to comply with new processes and policies in the division. These changes were implemented for the FY23 grant cycle.

2019 SESSION STATE SPECIAL REVENUE FOR LAKE ELMO AISAN CLAM ERADICATION

In the 2019 session, \$100,000 was appropriated to Yellowstone Conservation District (YCD) to assist in the eradication of aquatic invasive clams at Lake Elmo State Park. YCD worked with FWP and DNRC to eradicate Asian clams—an aquatic invasive species (AIS). Funding was used to replace an aging headgate used by the Billings Bench Water Users Association (BBWA). The headgate replacement was necessary to drain the lake to eradicate the clams. YCD also purchased a portable CLEAN.DRAIN.DRY station for the public to use in an effort to prevent future introductions of AIS. The cleaning station serves both functional and educational purposes to protect Lake Elmo from new AIS introductions.

2021 SESSION HB 374 FUNDING FOR CD GRANTS

HB 374 was passed in the 67th Legislature to backfill a deficit in DNRC's budget for CDs do to diminished coal tax receipts. Through this bill, the legislature provided an additional \$200,000 in funding for CD grants.

Eight projects were funded ranging from a soil health grazing management in eastern Montana to expanding the Living on the Bank program to improve conditions along our waterways by encouraging landowners with riparian areas in poor condition to implement measures to improve riparian health. These funds were awarded based on applications Request for Proposal process. Criteria for evaluating proposals included:

- Project results in on-the-ground conservation
- The degree to which project benefits multiple districts
- Project builds district capacity
- Project addresses landscape-scale resource concerns by including multiple CDs across an area, watershed, etc.