



RAVALLI COUNTY LOCAL WORKING GROUP
(RCLWG)
Minutes
Thursday, February 20, 2025
1709 North First Street
Hamilton, Montana 59840
(406) 361-6181



Ravalli County Local Work Group (RCLWG) meeting located at 1709 North First Street, Hamilton, MT, Thursday the 20th of February 2025, called to order at 1:33 pm, by Kent Myers, Bitterroot Conservation Supervisor.

Introductions and Attendance:

Kellieann Fillingham, Ravalli County Weed District; Ashly Jurcak, Big Sky Watershed Corps Member-BWP; Gary Long-Zito, Resource Conservation and Development (RC&D); Coral Maxwell, Executive Director USDA Farm Service Agency (FSA); Dan McConnel, State Forester Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC); David Mott, Soil Conservationist Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS); Kent Myers, Urban Supervisor Bitterroot Conservation District (BCD); Alex Ocañas, Community Engagement Coordinator Bitterroot Water Partnership (BWP); Melissa Odell, Project Manager Bitter Root Land Trust (BRLT); Gary Oram, Forester Ravalli County; Julie Ralston, BCD Admin; Kimberly Richardson, Ravalli County MSU Extension; Kierstin Schmitt, Admin Assoc. Western Agricultural Research Center (WARC); Kendol Siler, Bitterroot Project Coordinator Pheasants Forever; Josh Smith, RC&D Forester; Damon Tucker, Restoration Project Manager BWP; Stacy Welling, District Conservationist NRCS; Jed Whiteley, Stream Restoration Director Clark Fork Coalition.

Minutes

Myers moved to approve the 29th of May 2024, meeting minutes with corrections in the spelling of Tolan Creek and the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA). Welling seconded, motion carried.

Update RCLWG resource spreadsheet

1. Discussed updating the resource spreadsheet and posting on websites. Ocañas suggested developing one community resource website.

Partner Updates:

Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS)

Stacy Welling, District Conservationist NRCS reported:

1. Funding for all IRA projects has currently been frozen. Therefore, the local NRCS will not be able to reimburse those producers who have IRA contracted natural resource projects. Welling is hoping that once the new Secretary of Agriculture has reviewed the IRA program, she will be able to move funding forward for those contracted agreements.
2. The freeze will impact all the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) funded agreements. This will have a big impact on BRLT, which currently has ten proposed forestry project applications with a total funding amount of 1.5 million dollars.
3. Ravalli County NRCS did not define a 2025 Targeted Implementation Project (TIP), as there are no other funding pools available at this time.
4. The local Ravalli County NRCS office currently has three Community AG Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) applications, two Cover Crop, three Ventenata control (Invasive Grass), and six irrigation applications.

Bitterroot Land Trust (BRLT)

Melissa Odell, Project Manager, reported:

1. BRLT is not sure what the government funding freeze impact will be on its RCPP forest funded landowner contracts and the forest riparian conservation easements. The BRLT does not have any current riparian conservation easement applications. However, there are six potential applications they were hoping to have in place this Fall. The RCPP funding for landowners in Ravalli County was approximately eight million dollars. Losing this funding will be a significant hit to Bitterroot landowners.
2. The BRLT currently has a total of 25 active conservation easement projects.
3. Development of Groff Park in Victor is progressing. An educational outreach and funding campaign is planned for February 23rd from 2:00-4:00 pm at the park
4. The original RCPP grant funding is still intact. This funding has been completely allocated and was used for two completed projects, three obligated projects, and six pending applications. There is concern that possible federal review of this funding delay applications that are set to close this Spring.
5. The BRLT has moved its offices to the Creamery Building on Hamilton Main Street, which will provide a more room for its staff of nine. The BRLT will hold an open house on the 14th of March.
6. At this time, it appears that the traditional Farm Bill-funded Conservation Easement program will not be impacted by the funding freeze. Loss of this funding would impact around half of BRLT's projects.

Bitterroot Water Partnership (BWP)

Alex Ocañas, Community Engagement Coordinator, reported:

1. The BWP has two new team members: Damon Tucker, Restoration Project Manager, and Ashly Jurcak, Big Sky Watershed Corps Member.
2. The governmental freeze is expected to have a negative impact on BWP operations.
3. The BWP has initiated a stewardship program to assist landowners who want to do riparian restoration projects on their property. This program will provide information on funding resources, assistance in developing the necessary skills, locating contractors, etc.
4. The BWP has developed a watershed resource flyer that will be mailed to new landowners within the county. Alex provided a copy of the flyer.
5. The BWP is developing a natural resource informational site where organizations can post updated funding opportunities, natural resource assistance, and educational outreach programs, with the goal to have the site developed and implemented within the next three years. The site will work much like the newly developed Bitterroot River Conditions Tool and will be accessed using a QR code. [Living in Flathead](#) is an example of what a stewardship guide could look like for the Bitterroot.

Damon Tucker, Restoration Project Manager, reported:

1. The BWP is working on a riparian restoration project in the North Burnt Fork area. Restoration involves work on approximately 350'-400' of stream bank and re-vegetation of half an acre. He is hoping to expand this project along a couple of conservation easement properties within this same corridor.
2. The other large project the BWP has scheduled for this year is in partnership with the US Forest Service on the restoration and wetland re-establishment of Tolan Creek headwaters. This project may be placed on hold due to the funding freeze. An excellent video on this project was created by Ocañas and can be viewed on the BWP [website](#), and there will be a presentation on the project during Fish Week (March 10-14).
3. Damon is hoping to expand the BWP restoration outreach over the next three years with a goal of scheduling at least 3-5 restoration projects per year.

Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC)

Dan McConnel, State Forester DNRC reported:

1. He is working on a timber sale that was recently awarded in the French Basin area.
2. DNRC had a fuels reduction project scheduled in the Soft Rock Recreation area. However, that project is on hold because it was being funded with federal dollars that were recently rescinded and/or frozen.

Resource Conservation & Development (RC&D)

Gary Long-Zito reported:

1. RC&D is in the process of developing Memorandum of Understandings (MOUs) with several non-profit organizations that would like to operate under RC&D's umbrella (e.g., Cultivating Connections).

Josh Smith, Forester RC&D reported:

1. RC&D has several federally funded fuels reduction grants that he hopes will not be impacted by the federal freeze on funds.
2. In fiscal year 2024 the RC&D treated approximately 540 acres of privately owned forested land, and it currently has hazard fuels contracts with 58 landowners.
3. RC&D applied for a Community Wildfire Defense Grant (CWDG) but it is uncertain if those grants will move forward.

Western Agricultural Research Center (WARC)

Kierstin Schmitt, Admin. Assoc., reported:

1. WARC was awarded 3.7 million dollars to upgrade its building facilities (which are over 100 years old) and \$650,000 for the construction of a tractor barn and maintenance shops.
2. WARC is hoping to hire one staff member in the Spring and one faculty member in the Fall, which will bring the WARC headcount up to six.
3. There are currently 17 projects in progress, including both internal projects and outside collaborations.
4. The 2025 Field Day is scheduled for August 14 from 4:30-8:30 PM.
5. Schmitt also reported that the Bitterroot Chamber of Commerce, on which she serves, has formed the Agriculture and Local Foods Committee (see their [website](#)). The committee, which meets on the last Tuesday of the month at 4:00 PM in the Chamber's Hamilton office, has developed maps of all the growers and producers in the valley for those who are interested in buying locally produced food and other goods.

Ravalli County Extension

Kimberly Richardson reported:

1. Ravalli Extension is also concerned about the impacts from the federal funding freeze and federal executive orders.
2. The Extension office will continue to host its annual winter AG News & Brews outreach program, with the theme for this year being "What is Available in the Bitterroot." The events are usually held on the second or last week of the month. Dates, times, and locations will be posted soon. A presentation on "Legacy Planning," which traditionally fell under Family Consumer Sciences, will also be part of the program.
3. Ravalli County Extension has hired a new Forage person but plans to hire a person for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) are on hold. It is hoped that Ravalli County may be able to offer SNAP through its public health program.
4. Ravalli Extension will continue to focus on 4H, agriculture, and educational outreach programs.
5. Ravalli County Extension utilizes "Constant Contact" as its social media hub, Richardson and would like to include contact information for the organizations that are involved with the RCLWG. She will reach out to the participating organization to get written permission.
6. Ravalli County Extension has been working with "Fire in the Root," which is a group comprising local fire protection agencies, state and local government, and residents who are all committed to promoting innovative cross-boundary solutions to reduce wildfire risk throughout the county. The group is filing as a non-profit organization to increase its funding opportunities to support activities such as educational outreach and updating the Ravalli County Fire Plan.

Ravalli County Weed District (RCWD)

Kellieann Fillingham reported:

1. Fillingham provided a detailed overview of the RCWD's operation and activities. She said that the RCWD currently has three employees who are managing 22 weed control projects in Ravalli County, twelve of which are in partnership with the US Forest Service. The RCWD has secured \$2.5 million in grants for county weed control.

2. RCWD's top two priorities are treatment of weeds on county and state road right-of ways and helping county landowners control noxious weeds on their property. The RCWD also works with municipalities in Ravalli County to develop a weed management plan for city parks and is responsible for enforcing Montana's noxious weed laws.
3. Some of the highest priority targeted weeds for treatment are Rush Skeletonweed, Blueweed, and Bugloss. Hoary Alyssum, and Whitetop are also on the rise throughout the county. RCWD is also working with landowners to address noxious invasive grass species like ventenata.
4. RCWD offers a wide variety of services related to weed control:
 - a. A native plant garden, including beneficial pollinator plants, is available to landowners for re-seeding and/or planting weed treated areas.
 - b. Free on-site visits for noxious weed identification and developing a treatment plan, and free treatment of new invading species.
 - c. A 50/50 cost-share program available to landowners to address weed management/native plant restoration on private land.
 - d. Weed seed certified forage inspections for producers. Unfortunately, there has been a drastic decline in local producers who sell weed-free forage.
 - e. Biocontrol program for knapweed using knapweed root weevils (*Cyphoclenous achates*). RCWD has several plots where landowners can come collect the weevils for use on their property. (The cost is \$1.65 per week if they ordered from a supplier.) The level of knapweed infestation in the county has fallen by 80% because of this program.
 - f. An inspection program for those selling gravel to inspect gravel to ensure it is weed-free is planned.
5. Fillingham stressed that education and outreach is important for successful control of noxious weeds. Landowners must learn to treat early and treat often, and not to mow weeds.
6. Fillingham said that the Montana Noxious Weed Trust Council has over \$10 million available each year for weed control, education, research, and revegetation. This year it has approximately 47 grant applications requesting approximately \$2 million in funding. Funding is only available for entities, not individuals.
7. The RCWD has applied for two grants through the Trust Fund, for billboards to be placed on 93 to inform about Blueweed, Rush Skeletonweed, and Common Bugloss; and for a knapweed biocontrol program involving education and community collection of weevils.
8. RCWD relies on its grant funds for its seasonal jobs. Fillingham invited anyone who is looking for a seasonal job to contact her.

Bitterroot Conservation District (BCD)

Myers reported:

1. The BCD has increased the 70/30 cost-share program from \$10,000.00 to \$15,000.00 per contract (landowner share is \$10,500). The application deadline for this year's program is April 30th.
2. The BCD is developing an appendix to its Administrative Rules to provide greater clarity for 310 permitting regarding instream woody debris, riparian vegetation, fish passage at road crossings, irrigation and headgate maintenance, buried utility line crossings, and off-stream revetments.
3. The BCD, in partnership Trout Unlimited and Fish Wildlife & Parks has developed an app called the "Bitterroot River Hazard Tracker" that will allow floaters to be check for hazards before they launch. The app will be accessible via a QR code that will be posted at fishing access sites and fly shops around the county. The group is hoping to roll out this tool later this year.
4. In partnership with Bitterroot River water users, the BCD secured a grant to identify the top 15 irrigation diversion on the Bitterroot River in need of infrastructure upgrades. At this time, one of the ditch companies has submitted a legislative grant for the upgrades needed on its diversion. The upgrades will assist in water savings and will implement best management practices. The BCD should know within the next month if this grant application has been approved.
5. The BCD is currently in the process of hiring a full-time administrative assistant.

Pheasants Forever (PF)

Kendol Siler, Bitterroot Project Coordinator, reported:

1. Through a DNRC grant PF was able to treat 168 acres of the proposed 600 acres for treatment in the Calf Creek area. Approximately 90 acres were treated for fuel loads and beetle reduction, and the remainder confer encroachment. The grant does not include treatment of weeds, but Siler hopes to get a grant for this. Burning is scheduled for Fall. PF plans to work in this area over the next couple of years.
2. PF has also completed treatment of 300 acres up the West Fork.
3. With funds becoming tighter, PF realizes the importance of developing stronger partnerships so that treatments can continue in areas in need of treatment.
4. The PF proposed Mud Creek project is still under litigation. The funds are available for this project but will not be released until issues have been resolved in court.

Ravalli County Forestry (RCF)

Gary Oram, Forester, reported:

1. The RCF is in the process of overseeing 647 acres of fuel reduction throughout the county. Project areas are located near Lake Como, across from Lake Como turn-off on the east side of highway 93, and in the Chaffin Creek area south of Darby.
2. Oram is currently working on a FEMA funding opportunity through the Montana Department of Emergency Services that would be a 25/75 cost-share program for landowners who want to replace decks, siding, roofs, etc., with ignition resistant materials. Ravalli County would be the subrecipient of the funds and would apply on behalf of landowners. The goal is to enroll at least 25 landowners in this program.

Clark Fork Coalition (CFC)

Jed Whiteley, Stream Restoration Director Clark Fork Coalition, reported:

1. CFC was able to secure and protect a 90-year instream water lease out of Tin Cup Lake.
2. CFC is planning to submit a request for proposal (RFP) bid for the installation of a million-dollar fish screen project at the Bitter Root Irrigation District (BRID) diversion on Lost Horse Creek. However, the funds may no longer be available as the project was funded through the IRA. CFC is hoping to get the go-ahead for this project by April, but if it doesn't this project may go away forever.
3. CFC has over three million dollars in contracted working projects that are on hold due to the federal administrative order. There are several million dollars of other proposed projects that cannot move forward. These projects include doubling the water storage capacity of Twin Lakes; rebuilding the road to Twin Lakes; addressing the Ten-Mile Creek crossing; upgrades and replacement of two irrigation head gates with fish screens on Lost Horse Creek.
5. Regardless of what happens at the Federal level, funding from Bonneville Power will help to continue CFC's in-stream programs.

USDA Farm Service Agency (FSA)

Coral Maxwell, Executive Director, reported:

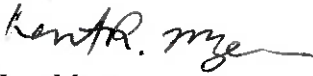
1. FSA programs are administrated through the Farm Bill.
2. FSA works with producers throughout the county to establish farm records, keep records up to date, and payment eligibility forms filled out, so they can participate in the FSA programs.
3. Most of the local FSA programs are disaster related. The type of disaster programs available are: the Livestock Forage Program, which assists in the loss of forage due to drought or fire; the Noninsured Assistance Program (NAP), for producers who do not qualify for crop insurance, including producers of organic crops, specialty crops, etc. who have experienced a yield loss due to a natural disaster, and; the Livestock Indemnity Program, which helps livestock producers recover from losses caused by adverse weather or other eligible events.
4. FSA conservation programs have mostly been turned over to NRCS. However, both entities work closely together to assist the local producers.

Reviewed [Living in Flathead](#)

Actions and dates for the next meeting

1. RCLWG will come up with ideas on where to host an informational site for new landowners.
2. RCLWG will update its contact information on the RCLWG spreadsheet.
3. The next RCLWG meeting will be scheduled for some time in June.

Meeting adjourned at 3:12 p.m.



Kent Myers
Chairman



Julie Ralston
BCD Administrator

4/30/26

Date: