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# **THE STATE OF THE ASSOCIATION**

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**Montana Association of Conservation Districts**  
Livingston, Montana  
June 2010



**DOING OUR SMALL PART FOR CONSERVATION**

**Welcome** to the 2010 Montana Association of Conservation Districts and the Soil and Water Conservation Districts of Montana Spring Board meetings. First of all, I want to thank all of you for taking time out of your schedules to attend the meeting and participate in the deliberations. Conservation of natural resources is obviously important to you. Conservation makes life better for all of us, and, most importantly, it makes life sustainable for all of us. Our jobs are to leave things better than we found them.

I'd like to start by offering 75<sup>th</sup> birthday greetings and best wishes to our partners at NRCS. We are proud to be associated with this group of professional and dedicated women and men across Montana. President Pete Woll and Past President Steve Hedstrom continually comment to me about the leadership we see from our State Conservationist Joyce Swartzendruber. I echo their comments, and hope that Joyce stays in Montana for many years.

Last year I started what I hope will always be an annual activity at the Spring Board meeting – the State of the Association. As your executive, I think it is important to try and step back, take a deep breath, clear away the piffle, and look where we are. Taking this look once each year is simply good management for any enterprise.

In general, and as I stated in 2009 at this very meeting, I think that our future is bright. Most days I think it is very bright.

As I prepared for this meeting, I reviewed and updated our list of services and products provided for the Districts. I added a couple of items to the list, and started a new category called Building Bridges. While this category does not mean per se that I have to apply for a 310 permit to build a bridge, in a sense I have. We gather input from the Districts whenever we can. We have tried to keep the Districts informed of the Association's activities. We have looked to our Board of Directors for advice and guidance and direction to navigate the politics of Montana and use the accumulation of hundreds of years of experience and knowledge. We try to keep Joyce and Ray in the loop and ask for their thoughts and concerns as the Association moves forward.

Just like building bridges in the material world, building bridges of communication has a maintenance cost. Bridges need to be inspected periodically. Some need painted. Some need work on their foundations. Some need signs replaced. Every contact I make, with the irrigators, with a county commissioner, with the Montana Bureau of Mines and Geology, means that MACD takes on a maintenance cost.

I hope that you will take the time to review our list of products and services. The products and services we provide to the Districts, in conjunction and close cooperation with our partners at DNRC (who fund some services), help to build and maintain a foundation for each District as it carries out its responsibilities. The 2010 list may be seen at the end of this report.

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It is hard to know what was in the minds of farmers and ranchers when this conservation district seed germinated 70 years ago in Montana. Did they think this was a short term idea to get them

up to a certain standard, a certain way of doing things, then it would go away? Some of them probably wished so. Did any of them think it would be around when the next millennium began? I doubt it. Did any of them think that it would have such an impact on America, to all the corners of our great nation, to put in place practices and ideas that are used throughout the world? I think not. Would anyone have had a notion that Tom Pick, a member of our family in NRCS, would travel to the very cradle of human civilization, the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, to apply the lessons we have learned, to use the 70 years of our experiences, to teach them about conservation? No way!

We started with soil. That word was in the original title – Soil Conservation District. The founders must have attended many meetings where this other word – water - was constantly used. I was not there, obviously. However, I suspect that at every meeting, just like our monthly conference calls, they discussed who had rain or snow, and who had the coldest or hottest temperature since the last meeting. It is part of our human nature to discuss weather and, consequently, water. Our founders eventually figured out that the word “water” needed to be in that title. If soil is the tractor, water is the gasoline that powers the engine and makes the tractor productive. That tractor does not move unless there is gas in it. That soil does not work unless there is water in it.

And so, I want to center this report on water issues, and focus on the word water. I will update you about our activities in this most important and most talked about natural resource.

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At a recent planning team meeting for the 2010 MACD Convention, one of our administrators, Barbara Berry, pushed the idea of making the convention center around water. She reeled off a list of about a dozen topics that she asked to be considered. These include the state water plan, the status of water adjudication, our 310 permitting system, water marketing, groundwater recharge, exempt wells, water rights, water and politics, water as property, coal bed methane, drought, and TMDL. We all know that you could add to that list.

Six out of ten resolutions approved last November at the 2009 MACD Convention deal directly with water. It can be said that all ten resolutions include water in some manner. If one was to look back at the long list of resolutions approved over the years, many or most would address water issues. I have that resolution list in electronic form if anyone is interested in seeing it.

Montana is a headwaters state. Montana and the other headwaters states originate lots of water. Our mountains almost literally reach up into the sky and grab the water passing by. “Our” water is used by 3 countries, 19 states, and more than 60 million people. Many of our rivers and streams cross boundaries into sovereign Tribal lands, into Canada (Saskatchewan, Alberta, and British Columbia), and neighboring states. We receive 35% of our water from Wyoming. Some of the trans-boundary issues end up in the court system, such as the Tongue River basin that connects Montana and Wyoming. Our water planning efforts, and our understanding of the ecology of river basins, places our activities into a bigger context of their significance to the North American continent.

Water is so important that we formed two “super conservation districts” to address regional water issues. The Yellowstone River Council and the Missouri River Council address issues by looking at the ecology of river basins. They cover a lot of territory and lots of issues. The Yellowstone River Council works with the US Army Corps of Engineers on planning issues for the 600 mile+ river basin. One of their most important projects was defining Channel Migration Zones, a tool for planners and landowners that indicates the historic lateral movements of the Yellowstone River. The executive for the Missouri River Council represents us on the Missouri River Recovery Implementation Committee (MRRIC), a national group that is addressing flood control, navigation, hydropower, irrigation, recreation, water supply, water quality, fish and wildlife, and endangered species for the basin. The Council tries to make sure that local issues are addressed by MRRIC, and monitors their direction and progress. The MACD Board is concerned about the politics of downstream appropriation of water to serve larger populations, and what that would do to our supplies, especially concerning irrigated farms, non-point source pollution, wildlife and fisheries, and recreation. With our low population numbers, and resultant low numbers of Congressional delegates (three), we can be politically outmaneuvered.

MACD attends the Coal Bed Methane Committee meetings. This group could also be considered a super conservation district, as it covers a large region of Montana. Coal bed methane development produces a by- product – water. How that water is used and who owns it and where it goes and how it is measured are questions that surround this issue. Mitigating problems with water and coal bed methane is part of this group’s responsibilities. Water is a focus of this group.

MACD represents the Districts at the Water Policy Interim Committee meetings. This group has a broad responsibility to look at all the water issues in the State of Montana. You would not be surprised to hear those familiar words “conservation district” often at the Committee hearings. This is a new committee, having recently been given permanent status by the Legislature. As the months and years go by, we will see more and more of their influence regarding the direction that water policy will travel in the future. We need to stay close to that Committee and keep them aware of our efforts in the water world. I might add that all of their meetings are broadcast over the web and the agendas are posted in advance for you to find pertinent topics.

MACD has tried to provide a forum for discussions about the state water plan. We recognize that Conservation Districts have a role to play in planning for future uses of water in Montana. DNRC has been receptive to our thoughts, comments, and ideas.

MACD is the fiscal sponsor for the Montana Watershed Coordination Council. I serve on the Steering Committee for the Council. The Steering Committee and the Council serve 53 individual watershed groups. The Council has been the leader in pushing the concept of a watershed approach to managing natural resources in Montana. In general, the 58 Conservation Districts work closely with the 53 watershed groups. We try to model behavior at the state level to encourage joint projects and cooperation at the local level. The Council is sponsoring a Watershed Symposium in September, with a stellar line up of speakers. IBM is even sending a speaker to let us know what they are doing to use water in a smart manner. I hope that many of you will be able to attend. Travel scholarships will be available for Conservation Districts.

MACD is represented on the planning team for the St. Mary Diversion, a 100+ year old water project that includes an international agreement with Canada. The diversion includes a number of large siphons that are used to transport water from Blackfoot Tribal lands in the Rocky Mountains to the Great Plains, via the Milk River. Water, initiating in Glacier National Park, passes through Alberta, Canada, where a certain number of acres are used for irrigation before the water returns to Montana. My role is to help establish a new regional government that has the ability to raise funds to match federal dollars to repair the system. The federal government has authorized \$153 million for the repairs, and a local match of \$37 million is needed.

I represent MACD on the Montana Wetlands Council, participate in their periodic meetings, and undertake cooperative projects.

Our Best Management Practices listening sessions project has yielded interesting results to date. We will have hosted more than a dozen listening sessions across the state of Montana to determine real-life best management practices for landowners along rivers and streams. The report will be available this fall. Please see <http://montanabmp.pbworks.com/> for details.

In recent months MACD helped to chase down additional dollars for the watershed support position that works out of Liberty County Conservation District. Thank you again to NRCS for stepping forward to help.

I represent the Districts on the Governor's Task Force for Riparian Protection. They have produced a slide show that helps landowners identify the values associated with riparian areas.

I represent Districts on the Nutrient Work Group, a team of scientists and policy makers from both the public and private sectors. The group is trying to set numeric standards for nutrients in our rivers and streams. This has far reaching implications for Conservation Districts, in many ways.

MACD works with irrigation districts across the state regarding policy issues and legislative directions. As you know, Conservation Districts regularly review and approve permits for head gate repairs and upgrades. Conservation Districts also work with irrigation districts to find funding for ditch lining projects. The issues are complicated in that leaking irrigation ditches have in places created wetlands. Lining ditches has the potential to eliminate or at least cut back the amount of water available to maintain the wetland.

Conservation Districts review and approve applications for individuals who want to mine for gold in mountain streams. We have seen an increase in the number of individuals interested in prospecting as gold prices increase. MACD has helped to assure suction dredge operations policy information is available to all interested Districts.

Our friends at the Montana Salinity Control Association got their start with Conservation Districts. We suggested to Jane that she contact Fidelity Explorations to inquire if they needed help given the recent Montana Supreme Court ruling that water from CBM needed to be treated before release. Although we have not had the opportunity to have a joint project with Jane

recently, we are always looking for ways to cooperate and get things done. I know that Jane's group had a good birthday party last year.

MACD is entering into an agreement with the Montana Department of Environmental Quality to hire a technical service provider who will work with smaller livestock operations regarding animal feeding operations and non-point source pollution. The program will include grant dollars for livestock owners.

MACD is negotiating with the Montana Department of Transportation to develop a mitigation program whereby Conservation Districts could identify land and waters that could be used to mitigate negative environmental consequences of road construction and maintenance near rivers and streams. I have the first draft of that program and hope to make progress moving it forward.

At the federal level, MACD tries to stay on top of and influence issues such as the Clean Water Act, watershed legislation, the Farm Bill, program funding for our many federal partners, the America's Great Outdoors Initiative, and other directions and initiatives from Congress and the Administration. Thomas "Tip" O'Neill—a longtime Speaker of the House in the U.S. Congress—once declared, "All politics is local." We have influence, and will continue to do so if we maintain our credibility.

MACD appoints a member of STAG, the Statewide Technical Advisory Group that works on TMDL issues.

Finally, MACD represents the Districts on the Governor's Drought Task Force.

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There are many pots of water on the stovetop. Some are just starting to warm up, others may be said to be boiling. Keeping track of the variety of issues has not been easy, and I see the office falling behind. This observation has also been made and commented on by DNRC. They suggested that we consider asking for funds from the 223 grant program to assist. The MACD Water Resources Committee will review this issue. Hopefully they will consider hiring a part time person whose duties would be to take on some of the water policy issues. I know that there is concern out there about MACD harvesting 223 grant dollars. One can make the argument either way on this, as anyone hired by MACD would benefit all the Districts. However, I see your point about the size of the pie. Another approach that could be considered is to ask the Districts that do not currently pay all their dues, to pay their dues in full. This would provide us with enough dollars to hire a part time water policy person to start staffing some of these issues more intensely.

Some of you may ask "What is the difference between the watershed support position that DNRC currently funds via Liberty County Conservation District, and the water policy person in my mind?" I will have to make that clear if this idea is going to grow feet. I will be working on this in the weeks ahead. The main point will be the number of water issues and items that Districts have on their plates.

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I'd like to leave water and spend a few moments on a new term that we are hearing, and suggest a conservationist's response or way of looking at it. Some days, we hear the words "carbon footprint" throughout the day. It has become a buzz term in common vernacular.

According to Wikipedia, a carbon footprint is "the total set of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions caused by an organization, event or product." For simplicity of reporting, it is often expressed in terms of the amount of carbon dioxide, or its equivalent of other GHGs, emitted.

The concept name of the carbon footprint originates from the coined term "ecological footprint."

An individual, nation, or organization's carbon footprint can be measured by undertaking a GHG emissions assessment. Once the size of a carbon footprint is known, a strategy can be devised to reduce it, e.g. by technological developments, better process and product management, changed Green Public or Private Procurement (GPP), carbon capture, consumption strategies, and others.

What I propose, and would like you to consider, is a new term – carbon handprint. We use our hands to get work done, to make an impact on the land. Our carbon handprint is all of our farmers and ranchers, all of their activities to grow crops, manage the range, and carry out conservation projects, that help to "eat" carbon dioxide. When someone speaks of a carbon footprint, we can think of our carbon handprint.

There are many people living in cities around the world who rely on us for many things. The list includes food, open spaces, clean water, clean air, wildlife, and fisheries. The list should also include our carbon handprints that help to make up for their carbon footprints.

We have a new task – or a repackaging of an existing task - balance the carbon footprints of the masses.

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Another year has passed. I am still honored to be serving as your Executive Director. I see all the Montanans interested in agriculture and natural resource conservation and think that there cannot possibly be more than there already are. But the number continues to grow. We need to use our 70 year old handprint to make a bigger imprint on conservation in Montana. It is old enough and wise enough that it does carry weight.

Someone told me when I first started this job that the whole world is a garden and it needs to be managed. I think that it true, although I would add that we need to manage with natural systems and cycles in mind. Our fingers, and our handprints, need to shape the direction we will travel.

The natural resource conservation issues that lie before us will continue to gain more and more complexity. There will be more and more eyes looking at what we do and how we do it. There will be more and more lips espousing their ideas about conservation. There will be more and more value set upon our temporary visitors –water and air – that pass through and over our lands.

There will be more and more interest in our agricultural lands, the food and conservation values they provide to our society. Conservation Districts are positioned to be leaders in this future. We need to be thoughtful, considerate, and competent as we seize this future and manage what we will leave to our children.

And that, ladies and gentlemen, is the 2010 State of the Association as I see it.

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