

Pondera County



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Swift Dam reservoir marks the far western side of Pondera County, by Adriane Good.

Pondera County is located in the heart of the Golden Triangle, famous for quality wheat and barley production. The county contains 1,625 square miles and is very rural with approximately 6,400 residents in the communities of Conrad, Valier, Dupuyer, Brady, and Heart Butte. The elevation varies from 3300' on the eastern plains to 8500' at the Continental Divide. Major watersheds include the Marias and Teton River drainages. Lake Frances, near Valier, is fed from Swift Reservoir and is a major supplier for irrigation and household water. Also, the Tiber water system has approximately 450 miles of water lines to serve 270 households, utilizing water impounded at Lake Elwell on the Marias River.

There are approximately 950,000 acres in farms in Pondera County, comprised of pasture land, dry land, and irrigated land. Crops grown in the county include wheat, barley, pulses, oilseeds, and hay. Beef cattle and sheep are also important agricultural products raised in the county.

Health facilities and retirement homes also are important economic contributors in Pondera County. The Logan Health - Conrad Medical Center is very modern and serves a multi-county area with an economic impact of over \$12 million.

Soil Health for Ranchers

Two, one-day Soil Health workshops, featuring Nicole Masters of Integrity Soils, were hosted by MSU Extension Pondera County at A Land of Grass Ranch in cooperation with the Pondera County Conservation District. While soil health can apply to many types of agricultural production, this workshop was specifically for livestock producers or hobbyists. The majority of 'Soil Health for Ranchers' took place in a discussion format with Masters. She discussed many of the basic principles of soil health and how producers could improve soil health on their ranch. The workshop included examining soil health through a four-foot trench dug on the ranch. Masters discussed many of the concepts she had originally shared using the soil trench as an example. Discussion was encouraged to allow producers to develop new ideas and deepen their understanding of the concepts being taught.

Participants in each workshop took a pre- and post-test on the day of the workshop. When asked about their knowledge of soil health before the workshop, the average score was 3.2 on a five-point scale. After the workshop, this number increased to 3.9. The scores of some attendees went down in their knowledge of soil health, but they remarked that this was because they realized by the end of the workshop that they knew less than

they thought they did in the first place. After the workshops, attendees said they plan to implement intensive grazing, brix testing forages, use natural methods of fertilizer and weed control, soil testing, and planting more diverse forage stands.

Local participants came from Glacier, Liberty, Toole, Pondera, Teton, and Cascade counties and as far away as Yellowstone, Roosevelt, Jefferson, and Judith Basin counties, and Utah. The attendees had a wide variety of backgrounds including land managers for large, non-resident acreages, small acreage landowners, mid-size operations, and agency staff. The diversity in backgrounds led to growth in understanding the challenges each operation faced and what everyone can do to improve soil health. Each attendee left the workshop with a positive attitude towards the value of soil health and looked forward to making improvements on their ranches.

Following the workshops, there was plenty of discussion about what each rancher was planning on doing and how to get the products Masters suggested. Another positive, unintended outcome was the formation of an informal producer support group to continue discussions and figure out deliveries for agricultural products. This producer-only group is being facilitated by Lisa Schmidt, owner of A Land of Grass Ranch, to allow the group to discuss the concepts freely as they move into action.

Food Safety

Health and safety were major concerns in 2021. Making sure food served to the public and in care institutions is handled correctly falls to a partnership between the local Sanitarian and Extension Agent in Pondera County. This partnership expanded to Conrad High School when the Family and Consumer Science teacher requested Food Handler Safety training for three culinary classes. Over four class periods, students learned about proper personal hygiene, at risk people, principles of safe food handling, cleaning, and sanitizing. At the end of the class, participants completed a 40-question multiple choice exam and received a 3-year certification. The education and certificate improve their chances of getting hired in food management jobs.

In addition to the high school Food Handlers class, restaurant owners and managers were offered opportunities to become certified or re-certified in the Food Protection Manager Certification, which is required every five years in Montana. A recent rule change requires restaurants and other food service providers to have a certified manager on each shift in food establishments. This has increased the number of people needing certification over the last two years, and the number of people getting trained has increased.

Pondera 4-H Ambassadors Donation Pig

In April 2021, the Pondera County 4-H Ambassadors started a new community service project: raising a pig for charity. The ambassador group picked out their pig at Midway Colony and named him Jimmy Dean.

During the four-month project, each ambassador worked with the pig to prepare him for his debut at the Marias Fair. Jimmy Dean was on display for the entirety of the Marias Fair and sold during the 4-H livestock sale. The original purchase price of Jimmy Dean, his feed, and his housing were all donated so that 100% of the proceeds could be donated. Jimmy sold for \$15.50 per pound to Ben Taylor Inc. from Cut Bank. The \$4200 from Jimmy's sale was donated to Women Against Breast Cancer and a multi-year project to build sidewalks around the four-county Marias fairgrounds.

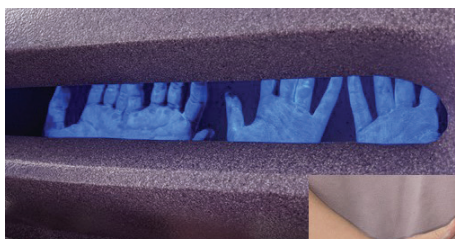
Pondera Extension Homemakers Help Community

Margaret Mead said, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed people can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has." The Pondera Extension Homemakers have a membership of six people who, through an evening of Turkey Bingo and a Christmas fund drive, raise money to benefit the Pondera Community in many ways. Turkey Bingo provides a night of fellowship and fun while raising money for the Pondera Food Pantry at a time of great need, an annual high school scholarship, for the Pondera 4-H program, CASA and other organizations in Pondera County.

The Christmas funds benefit all residents at Logan Health Extended Care, through Christmas gifts and an annual Christmas Party (currently suspended), three haircuts for each resident (birthday, Christmas, Mothers or Father's Day), ice cream outings to the Main Drive-In, birthday cakes, and a meal each month. A portion of the \$3,000 Farm Credit Services grant bought an electronic tablet for residents to have Zoom or FaceTime visits with family and two Christmas trees for the Extended Care residents. The Pondera Extension Homemakers commitment has a positive impact on 40-60 residents at the Extended Care every month and the 250+ people a month who need support through the Food Pantry.

Success with Succulents

Succulent plants are growing in popularity and MSU Extension Pondera County joined the trend in 2018. A Mother's Day workshop at the Marias Greenhouse taught gardeners the basics of succulent planting and care. After the workshop, participants could pick out and plant succulent arrangements with help from Lynne Knobel, owner of Marias Greenhouse, and Adriane Good, MSU Extension Pondera County Agriculture Agent.



Top Row: (left) Participants in the Soil Health for Ranchers workshop join Nicole Masters in the trench to talk soil health, by Adriane Good; **(right)** The Pondera County 4-H Ambassadors pose with Jimmy Dean and representatives from Ben Taylor Inc. after the Marias Fair 4-H Livestock Sale, by Adriane Good; **Center:** Using a blacklight reactive lotion to show better handwashing techniques, by Wendy Wedum; **Bottom Row: (left)** Turkey Bingo caller Linda VanTongerren keeps the games moving and entertains the crowd at their recent fundraiser, by Wendy Wedum; **(right)** Attendees at the Mother's Day succulent workshop gain hands-on experience with selection and planting at the Marias Greenhouse, by Adriane Good

This year, 16 people attended the workshop to learn more about succulents and create attractive arrangements with proper planting techniques. One participant had questions on why the succulents they owned were not growing well and was able to get answers. Another participant had subscribed to a monthly succulent service and said that she would stop the service and purchase her succulents locally. Additionally, Marias Greenhouse made an extra \$400 through succulent and planter sales outside of regular business hours.

The success of the annual succulent workshop showed a need for an MSU Extension MontGuide, or factsheet, about growing succulents in Montana. Good has been working with Abi Saeed, MSU Extension Horticulture specialist, with the goal to have it available for next year's workshop.

Pondera 4-H

The 4-H motto of "Learning by Doing" took on new methods in 2021. Shooting sports programs saw the highest enrollment in several years and extra time was added to accommodate the large number of participants and to meet health and safety guidelines. Many 4-H members took extra caution, and all youth were able to participate.

The graph shows the top eight projects 4-H members explored in 2021. Livestock, shooting sports and horse projects are the mainstays of Pondera County 4-H. While our enrollment dropped slightly, many youth partake in multiple projects.

Program support comes from 25 leaders who coach, teach and guide 4-H members throughout the year to help them learn new ideas, think critically, and make better decisions with their projects. These skills help youth who take on service projects, which helps their community and helps them become role models for younger 4-H members.

Pondera County Staff



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