

# Powder River County



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*Another tough year of drought and grasshoppers, by Kelda Page.*

**P**owder River County agriculture producers faced a second year of severe drought conditions. A devastating grasshopper infestation added injury to insult. Very little dryland hay was produced, and where grasshoppers weren't treated, the winter range was also decimated. These challenges have resulted in extreme culling of herds and in some cases, total herd liquidation. Hay purchased early in the summer cost \$200/ton and was hauled an average of 300 miles; in late Fall, if hay was available, the price had escalated to \$300/ton and the distance to haul even greater. The profit margin for many ranchers is in the red this year; the question is, "how long can I go like this?" and "when will it rain?"

## People in agriculture are struggling with drought and pest challenges

Morale has plummeted and the need for mental health resources has skyrocketed. In addition, spikes in COVID-19 cases have resulted in illness, loss of work and even lives of community members. MSU Extension has provided assistance through organizing suicide prevention programs; links to local resources through the Wellness Weekly, reaching a readership of 800 through the weekly newspaper, and social media resources

and the Powder River Extension Website. The Montana AgProducers Stress Resource Clearinghouse has been linked to our local website and on the MSU Extension State Website. <https://powderriver.msuextension.org/MentalHealthAwareness.html>

The annual Ag Winter Series event was held, where more than 60 people learned about nitrate in forage; alfalfa weevil resistance; grasshopper control and predictions; stress management resources; and cattle parasites. Mary Rumph presented the grasshopper update at the Custer County Ag Winter series, attended by 58 producers. Powder River MSU Extension also worked with Custer County and the Montana Department of Agriculture to provide the training virtually. The virtual attendance was 62. At each location, attendees were asked to share the economic impact of the 2020 grasshopper infestation, the results were grim.

### Widespread Grasshopper Program

As a result of the anticipated grasshopper infestation, MSU Extension assisted landowners working with the USDA Plant Protection Program (APHIS) to treat 354,584 acres in Powder River County and 70,260 in Carter County for grasshopper suppression. Landowners have shared mixed reviews, but most have indicated they wouldn't have any grass at all if rangeland had not been treated.

## Extension Provides Workshops to meet Producer Needs

Forty producers attended the “Invasive Grasses” workshop featuring MSU Extension Range Weed Specialist Jane Mangold. Attendees learned the identifying characteristics of Ventenata and other invasive grasses, along with control recommendations. The attendees also learned about resources on stress management and talked about the importance of connecting with each other.

This was the final year of the recertification cycle for private applicator certification. More than 90 license holders have received the six recertification credits needed to re-certify after January 1. Extension provided 36 hours of recertification over the last 5-year cycle.

Another consequence of drought was toxic water in reservoirs. Our office worked with five producers experiencing livestock illness and death to test water for total dissolved solids (TDS) levels. In addition, annual forages accumulated high levels of nitrate. By November 1, we had tested 104 samples of forage for 42 producers. Many forages contained high nitrate levels resulting in special management considerations.

## 4-H: A highlight of the Summer

The 4-H program is 80 members strong with 24 volunteer leaders. Summer events included 25 youth attending 4-H Camp Needmore with agents Mary and Julie, who conducted wildlife workshops for the participants to increase their knowledge of tracks and the relationship between predators and prey. They worked closely with other agents to provide a safe and fun camping experience, in spite of severe heat.

## Interview judging to learning at the County Fair

90 interviews were conducted to evaluate what youth learned in their 4-H projects. A full-fledged fair boasted 348 entries in open class; 375 entries in non-livestock projects; 185 livestock entries; and 94 donors contributed to awards and prizes. In total, \$8,310 was paid to participants in prizes and cash awards; \$3,910 was paid in premiums; \$1,501 was generated by the silent auction with 37 exhibitors; \$100,137 was generated by the Livestock Auction (featuring 14 market steers, 12 lambs, 21 hogs and one pen of fryers); \$1,611 from re-sales during the market livestock sale went to charitable organizations; and \$2,741 was generated for the Entertainment Fund.

## Healthy Living

### HEALTHY LIVING:

In 2018, Powder River County ranked 28th out of 47 Montana counties in health outcomes. Health challenges included lack of physical activity, alcohol use and access to health care. In 2015, a regional needs assessment identified the

top community health needs to be mental health and tobacco cessation and prevention. MSU Extension programming uses this data to build a healthier Powder River community.

### Increasing physical activity:

Tai Ji Quan Moving for Better Balance (TJQMBB) was offered four months last year for eight individuals, and Arthritis Exercise classes were offered for seven months for 18 participants. Results included:

- “I developed better balance and the fellowship with the others was fun and very enjoyable”
- “It’s good brain exercise, along with the balance and connection with others”
- “Better balance and the education of how to keep improving my balance”

Organized Fitness Testing was offered with Dr. Kate Copelan, PT, and provided results for 11 people. Testing provided participants a baseline for grip strength, balance and strength.

Powder River Trails, an MSU Extension affiliate, promotes walking and developing a built environment to promote physical exercise and improved nutrition. Accomplishments include:

- Installed two memorial benches along the trail for Ron and Twila Talcott and for the Class of 1976. Four additional benches were ordered for the Knudson, Mangen, Linville and Sullivan families.
- Organized Steps for Charity, an incentivized walking program with 25 teams or 100 people, who walked to raise \$1,000 for 13 charities. Participants reported:
  - Putting the pedometer on motivated me to walk;
  - Wearing a pedometer increased my awareness about my level of physical activity and motivated me to walk; and,
  - “I had to go shed hunting to increase my steps.”
- Organized the 4th of July Freedom Run for 46 participants
- Obtained \$3,000 in grant funds to create interpretive signs for the trail around the historic courthouse square;
- Obtained \$3,000 in grant funds to install a story walk of children’s books to promote inter-generational and family walking;
- Obtained \$3,000 to install solar LED lights along the walking trail to the river.
- Organized a banner design contest and created 10 “Welcome to Broadus” banners to hang along the trail;
- Worked with SEMDC, Town of Broadus and County Commission to develop MDT proposals to resurface the pedestrian trail that parallels the highway to the river and improve sidewalks in town. The MDT Transportation Alternatives proposal for resurfacing the trail for \$198,892 was submitted, and \$172,201 was funded.





**Top Row: (left)** Extension Agent Mary Rumph compares aerial application notes with APHIS coordinator Taelor Anderson at the Broadus Airport. A spray plane is fueling in the background, by Julie Riley; **(right)** An invasive grasses workshop focused on *Ventenata*, by Courtesy MSU Extension *Ventenata* MontGuide; **Center Row: (left)** Predator or prey? 4-H camper Addison Randall examines a skull for characteristics, by Julie Riley; **(right)** Woodworking judge Shilo Capp learns more about Ava Landa's project during interview judging at the County Fair, by Julie Riley; **Bottom Row: (left)** Participants, by Kelda Page; **(right)** Billy Stuver, editor, Powder River Examiner, displays the Wellness Weekly ad that reaches 400 paid subscribers each week, by Stacey Rabe

## Mental Health Access and Other MSU Extension Programs

Mental health access:

- Received a DPHHS \$5,000 grant to promote mental health wellness and educate the community about opioid misuse and treatment options for the year 2022.
- Created a Wellness Weekly advertising campaign to promote local mental health resources and education. Posts are shared weekly via newspaper, Facebook, and Instagram. Billy Stuver, Powder River Examiner editor, reported that Wellness Weekly:
  - Helped a woman deal with the ongoing stress from the pandemic, political turmoil and stress from a bad summer of drought;
  - Readers use the words of affirmation to center themselves; and,
  - a reader said “I take a moment to ground myself and it seems to help clear my thoughts and think more clearly.”
- Created a local mental health resources website for parents, accessed by 25 people.
- Created and manage a mental health resources page, reaching 529 people.
- Worked with the High School Counselor to distribute a survey to students on opioid and stimulant misuse and organized a focus group for 10 community members. Results will be used to develop curriculum for opioid and stimulant misuse education for rural youth across Montana.
- A ‘Still I Walk’ mental health awareness walk raised \$300 for local mental health programming. Twenty-eight people walked from one block up to seven miles to the golf course and back.

- Organized QPR (Question, Persuade, Refer), a suicide prevention program, for 34 members of our community. Participants included school administrators, teachers, coaches, medical professionals, behavioral health counselors, first responders, law enforcement, youth leaders and Farm Service Agency and Extension staff. “I thought suicide was inevitable, but after the training I realize there are steps people can take to prevent suicide.”

### OTHER MSU EXTENSION PROGRAMS

- Powder River Recyclers paid \$1,495 for the transportation of recycling material and received \$1,107 for recycling newspapers, plastic, tin cans, HDPE plastic, and PETE plastic.
- Increased access to nutritious foods:
- Seven garden plots were rented or reserved for summer gardening season. Broadus FFA volunteers built three new garden beds. A pie cherry tree was donated and planted at the Broadus Community Garden.

## Powder River County Staff



Montana State University Extension is an ADA/EO/AA Veteran's Preference Employer and provider of educational outreach.

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