

# Fort Belknap Reservation



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*Neewah's (Grandma's) Medicinal Garden in Hays, Montana, by Hillary Maxwell.*

**T**he Fort Belknap Indian Reservation is home to the Gros Ventre (Aaniiih) and the Assiniboiné (Nakoda) Tribes. Fort Belknap Indian Reservation encompasses 675,147 acres, including the communities of Fort Belknap Agency, Hays, Lodge Pole, and Dodson. Fort Belknap has a tribal membership of 7,000 enrolled members. The main industry is agriculture, consisting of small cattle ranches, raising alfalfa hay for feed, and larger dryland farms.

Each year, our priorities reflect the dynamic nature of the community's needs. In 2022, efforts were directed at drought management strategies, the development of home-based food forests, and new directions in nutrition education. Additionally, faculty and staff provided leadership and resources to implement programs such as the 2022 Fort Belknap 4-H Fair, school-based nutrition education, and expanded collaborations with new partnerships.

Within the framework of MSU Extension's directives, we are working to bring trusted resources to families, businesses, ranchers, and communities, as we have seen the power of education, diversity and community. Our outreach and program efforts have largely developed into a hybridized model of virtual,

in-person and one-on-one approaches. We have been able to return to in-person activities such as gardening, rancher/farmer consultation, and 4-H programming.

## Food Sustainability

Fort Belknap MSU Extension received an Innovation Mini Grant to advance food sustainability efforts on the Reservation. The project, entitled "Sustainable Food Forests: Local Development, Maintenance and Mentorship" is focused on advancing the impacts of Fort Belknap's community and home gardens, building our capacity for food security, and leveraging partnerships, funding, and knowledge. Food forests exist around the world and are one of the oldest ways of food production, mimicking natural ecosystems by using multiple layers including trees, bushes and groundcovers. They offer a promising solution to produce healthy food, including fruits, vegetables, and herbs using environmentally sound, economically viable, and culturally acceptable methods.

Through this project, 30 food forests were planned, maintained, and harvested in home gardens. Local mentors were

trained to create internal capacity for a sustainable future of food production, by learning and teaching plant propagation methods. Mentors will work with interested community members in forwarding knowledge, techniques and skills in climate-sensitive plant care and propagation, thereby creating resource teams with advanced abilities to enhance the success of the project. Collaboration with and support by partnerships was strongly emphasized in this project. The project provided detailed strategies for implementation and replicability. Mentors and agents will continue to document all phases of the project to enhance application and utilization across other program areas and across Montana.

## Growing Together Montana

Growing Together Montana (GTMT) is a collaboration between the MSU Extension Nutrition Education Program and the Master Gardener program that provides grants to active Master Gardener volunteers with a focus on growing and donating produce to local food banks and other emergency food resources. Master Gardeners also can work with SNAP-Ed instructors in their communities to provide nutrition education to the individuals and families that utilize the food banks.

At Fort Belknap, SNAP-Ed Nutrition Educator Ramona King has partnered with Master Gardener Colette Werk for a second year of grant-funded growth in the Old Hays Community Garden. Partners and resources included Montana DNRC forester Josh Stoychoff, fruit trees; Montana Indigenous Food Sovereignty Initiative, seeds; Aaniiih Nakoda College USDA Extension, plants; and community members who donated irrigation water and mulch. A total of 204 volunteer hours were recorded, and 103 pounds of produce was donated to the local senior center for elders' lunches.

## Tribal Producer Outreach

Drought and livestock feed management continued to challenge Fort Belknap producers during 2022. Fort Belknap MSU Extension responded to emergency needs with one-on-one consultations, community and tribal meetings, and local workshops. As a result of the 2021 weekly drought meetings, the need for a drought mitigation management plan became an important agenda item. The Fort Belknap Tribal Land department took the lead in producing a Drought Mitigation Management Plan. Local producers, tribal programs, the Bureau of Indian Affairs, and MSU Extension are providing important input in creating a progressive plan for future drought management.

Along with the Drought Mitigation Management Plan, Fort Belknap MSU Extension has assisted local producers, landowners, and tribal natural resource programs in starting a Fort Belknap Conservation District. Board members have been elected and 3-year goals have been created.

Local producers also participated in the week-long USDA Producer Education Conference, "Farming and Ranching: What does the future hold" in Billings in June. USDA and

FSA assistance programs, small business assistance, grazing management, cattle market projections, drought assistance and preparedness, and local meat processing were some of the topics covered. This conference is part of a two-year USDA program grant, with a partnership with Fort Peck Community College and four Montana Indian Reservations.

One-on-one consultations and virtual workshops occurred throughout the year, consisting of drought responses and resources, and application training and support for agriculture loans and assistance. Fort Belknap MSU Extension assisted youth producers and new producers with the Montana Department of Agriculture Rural Assistance Loans and Junior Agricultural Loans. Producers who continued to seek additional information related to their current needs were provided with unbiased information that aided in a solution.

## Newah's Garden

The Newah's Garden located in the middle of the Hays Community Garden took another step forward in meeting its caretaker's long-term goal. The garden recently had five new cement benches placed around the garden inside the arbor to make it a gathering spot.

Newah's Garden is under the care of dedicated volunteers. "Liz and Hillary, the MSU Extension agents, asked us three grandmothers if we would adopt it," said Joanie Racine. Racine, Tammy Werk and Lorraine Brockie are the grandmothers. "We got started late last summer so we were kind of at the end of the planting season. We basically watered what plants had survived the summer. Going into this year we were way more organized and had a plan."

Culture and heritage were an integral part of the grandmother's plan. "We as native people have always been in touch with nature and mother earth. One thing we depended on for our survival and livelihood was the plants. Our ancestors didn't just go pick any plant, they knew what to pick, where to find it," said Racine. "We were all in total agreement, all three of us grandmas, because we know some things about the plants, especially the native plants, we have had knowledge passed down to us by our ancestors for thousands of years. We know when to harvest and when to plant all of it and how to preserve it after it's picked."

Racine is very passionate about the garden and explains the reason for its design, "The garden is in the shape of a medicine wheel, circular, it has four colors, four directions and also is represented by four animals. We are working on including something to represent the animals, we know what needs to be put there, we are just not there yet. For example, the color for north is white and the animal is buffalo. We may choose to use a painting or something different, we just haven't decided." Racine added, "Basically the medicine wheel represents the cycle of life, everything flows in a circle. My husband Don Racine Jr. made the arbor that encompasses the garden."

When they began in the spring, the grandmothers knew exactly what was going in the ground, "The plants we have in the garden now have been transplanted from the local area,





**Top Row: (left)** Grapes growing in the food forest, by Hillary Maxwell; **(right)** Old Hays raised bed gardens, by Hillary Maxwell; **Center:** Newah's Garden Hays, MT Fort Belknap Reservation, by Joan Racine; **Bottom Row: (left)** Fort Belknap Cattle, by Liz Werk; **(right)** Mason Lone Bear, Fort Belknap 4-H Fair Grand Champion, by Randy Perez

they are used for medicines, foods and ceremonies and we also included herbs that aren't native," said Racine.

Their mission is clear and simple, "Our goal is that it's 'Newah's Garden' and when it was being built, we included our grandchildren, they were a big part of the construction and maintenance of the garden. Our grandchildren were always included, in watering planting, and weeding. The garden is within the Hays Community Garden and so there has always been a place where people come together, we want our garden to be a gathering place a spot where people can visit, and we can educate the people about the plants, their history and their importance to our culture."

## Homegrown 4-H

Even with the uncertainty of the last two years, the communities of Fort Belknap were able to interact with the MSU-Extension Fort Belknap 4-H program. The Lucky Charms Club's 22 members of Fort Belknap Reservation 4-H met virtually from December through April, then in person from May to August. The 4-H members learned important 4-H and life skills: 4-H book and journal training, gardening, sewing, Livestock Quality Assurance Training, club building activities, and 4-H showmanship. They also prepared for the 4-H Fair, which was held in August at the Wasay Wakpa Rodeo Arena in Lodge Pole, presenting 11 steer projects and Agriculture in my Family Poster Sessions. Averaging 1185 lbs, the steers sold at an average of \$4.86/lb. All the 4-H beef projects and the fair were supplied, organized, and judged by community volunteers, parents, and families with the purchase support of local tribes, businesses, and families.

The top priority of 4-H programs at Fort Belknap is the health and safety of our youth, families, volunteers, faculty, staff and supporters throughout our communities. Through this year and in the future, we encourage our future 4-H leaders to learn resiliency and to continue to develop community support.

## Fort Belknap Reservation Staff



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

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