

Yellowstone County



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Hay field in Yellowstone County.

Yellowstone County, the most populous in Montana, is home to a blend of urban and rural communities that work together to make it a thriving industry hub. As the population steadily grows, the agriculture, energy, and healthcare industries continue to lead the economic forces and provide thousands of jobs. The agriculture sector primarily comprises receipts from wheat, barley, sugar beet, alfalfa, corn, and beef production, while the energy market is led by oil, natural gas, and coal. Billings serves as the regional healthcare destination for many individuals across Montana and Wyoming. Yellowstone County has three full-time county commissioners and one of the largest MSU Extension staff, with four agents, one program assistant, and two administrative assistants. The commissioners, MSU Extension staff, and Montana State University work together to meet the community's diverse needs.

Community Project Connection

In Fall 2021, with leadership from Yellowstone County MSU Extension Agents, including longtime 4-H/Youth Development Agent Roni Baker, the Worden/Ballantine Communities gathered for Reimagining Rural, an MSU Extension statewide virtual community gathering, to start the

conversation to reimagine a bright future for rural towns. The program brings together people passionate about expanding local capacity and eager to learn, connect and lead change.

After informational gathering sessions, the core group developed and distributed a community questionnaire to prioritize potential projects in Worden and Ballantine. The group now known as Community Project Connection selected leadership and began to work on main street revitalization, community connection through special events, local business development, and honoring the agricultural heritage of the area.

Events included:

- Spring Block party on the main street with the school band.
- “Where’s Dinner?” which featured monthly food trucks and activities on the main street through the summer.
- The Beef, Beets, and Barley Harvest Fest brought together community members for an event on the main street including a child educational area, vendors, food, beer, and a street dance.

Plans in addition to continuing the ones from the past year are a community garden, paving Main Street, Christmas Stroll, a mural on Main Street, and a swimming pool.

The Ballantine/Worden community members' new motto is, "We are the they! We need to make it happen."

New Family & Consumer Sciences Agent

Sara Fluer began her role in Yellowstone County as the new Family and Consumer Sciences Agent in June 2022. Originally from Wyoming, Fluer most recently lived in Idaho, where her career in Extension began as the 4-H Youth Development Educator based in Latah County, Idaho. She holds two Bachelor of Science degrees – Animal Science and Family and Consumer Science from the University of Wyoming; and a Master of Science degree from the University of Idaho in Adult Education.

Since June, Fluer has been meeting community stakeholders, interacting with clientele, and assessing county needs. Most of her clientele interactions have centered around food and nutrition (70%), such as food safety and preservation, followed by family and human development topics (15%) related to aging, caregiving, and mental health.

Fluer is actively involved in the efforts of multiple coalitions that address local issues regarding suicide, behavioral health, and community/public health. As she lays the groundwork for a robust Family and Consumer Sciences program, she has also taken this time to invest in her professional development, gathering additional training and certifications in demonstrated areas of need within the county.

Looking ahead to 2023, Fluer will be rolling out programs on food safety, suicide prevention, and physical activity. Also find her teaching cooking classes for the local Diabetes Prevention Program, continuing her coalition work alongside community stakeholders, offering food preservation content, and more.

EFNEP: Yellowstone County

In the 2022 federal grant cycle, the Yellowstone County Expanded Food and Nutrition Program (EFNEP) received \$161,948 to support a total of 2.25 positions, programs including supplies, class food samples, employee salaries, and travel expenses to reach communities throughout the county. There are currently three nutrition educators – Lynn Olson, Debbie Holman, and Melody Harris.

Positive behavioral changes for in-person and online adult classes resulted in:

- 98% improved diets by eating more fruits, red, orange, and dark green vegetables, drinking fewer sugary drinks, and cooking more dinners at home.
- 81% improved food safety practices: washing hands before preparing food, washing all items and surfaces after cutting raw meat or seafood, not thawing frozen food at room temperature, and using a meat thermometer.

- 71% increased physical activity behaviors by exercising for at least 30 minutes, doing workouts to build and strengthen muscles, or making small changes to be more active.
- 49% learned to budget food purchases to avoid not eating less than they wanted so there was more food for their family, or not having enough money to get food for the family.

Through youth programs in schools and summer programs, positive behavioral changes in youth include 83% of kids improving their ability to choose foods according to Federal Dietary Recommendations, 53% using safe food handling practices more often, and 48% being more physically active.

New Horticulture Agent

Heidi Schueler is the Horticulture Agent at Yellowstone County MSU Extension. She graduated from the University of Wyoming with a Bachelor of Science degree in Agroecology, while minoring in Horticulture. Throughout college, she worked at the Sheridan Research & Extension Center (ShREC) where she researched cold-hardy grape varieties and rangeland ecology projects.

Schueler works with the Master Gardener Association and the Billings Library to bring horticultural information and classes to the county. Partnering with the Billings Library, she hopes to encourage participation from individuals not involved with the Master Gardener Program. The group will attend presentations from The Yellowstone Arboretum and MSU Extension Horticulture Specialists in the coming months.

One of the county benefits of the Extension Horticulture position is consultation. More than 90 calls were answered within two and a half months to discuss horticultural issues affecting county residents. Yellowstone County's leading consultation needs for 2022 were plant disease identification (30%), entomology and insect identification (19%), overall gardening questions (13%), and plant identification (10%).

In 2023, Schueler plans to work alongside fruit producers in Yellowstone County to impact eastern Montana's fruit production and prevalence. With the help of F Bar 3 Vineyard in Laurel, Yellowstone County MSU Extension gained insight from current producers on future goals for the industry. Schueler is also working on an updated Master Gardener program with other agents and specialists.

Yellowstone County MSU Extension's New Agriculture Agent

Trestin Feagler is the agriculture agent in Yellowstone County MSU Extension. Feagler attended Montana State University-Bozeman where she earned her Bachelor of Science degree in Natural Resources and Rangeland Ecology and her Master of Science degree in Animal and Range sciences. As a master's student, she was involved with research in cover crop grazing, integrated pest management, and soil science.



Top: Beef, Beets and Barley Festival Logo; **Bottom: (left)** MSU Extension Agent Sara Fluer at the South Park Gardeners' Market with food preservation resources. An initiative of the Healthy By Design coalition, the market brings fresh and affordable local produce to Yellowstone County from June to October; **(right)** Bird netting removal in preparation for the September harvest at F Bar 3 Vineyard in Laurel

Before joining Yellowstone County, she was an agent for Dawson County MSU Extension, gaining experience in developing programs for agriculture production systems in Eastern Montana.

In October 2022, the Northern International Livestock Exposition (NILE) was held in Billings. Yellowstone County MSU Extension agents partnered with the NILE, Yellowstone Conservation District, Montana Cattlewomen, Yellowstone County Weed District, MSU Extension specialists, and Sunshine Apiary to educate 1,670 fourth-grade students over two-and-a-half days through a program called Ag in the Classroom. The program focuses on hands-on learning about crops, livestock, range science, and weed science. Through this opportunity, students and teachers gain a better understanding of the importance of agriculture in Montana.

In addition to continuing programs such as Ag in the Classroom, pesticide applicator licensing, and forage testing, Feagler plans to get into the community to understand better how to address the needs of Yellowstone County agriculture, which will shape her upcoming programs.



Trestin Feagler standing by a field of sheep grazing a cover crop.

Yellowstone County Staff



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

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