

White River & Douglas Creek Conservation Districts Natural Resources Conservation Service & Farm Service Agency

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Douglas Creek Board:
Pres: Scott Robertson
V Pres: Bill Hume
Sec/Trea: Wade Cox
Supv: Bob McKune &
Anne Unie

White River Board:
Pres: Jim Amick
V Pres: Bill Lake
Sec/Trea: Leonard
Thompson
Supv: Gary Moyer &
Neil Brennan

Contact Information:
**Phone: 970.878.5628 ext
3**

Fax: 970.878.3730

Email:

**Stacey.Gould-
@co.nacdnet.net**

Callie.districts@gmail.com

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CACD Annual Meeting

The Douglas Creek and White River Conservation Districts met up with board member across the state in Vail for the 68th Annual Colorado Association of Conservation Districts Meeting November 12th-15th. The White River District was successful in getting two resolutions passed and adopted into policy for the State Association, and will be forwarding one of them onto the National Association of Conservation Districts annual meeting in January in San Antonio, Texas. Both resolutions dealt with public land management issues.

The first resolution concerning forest health calls for support by CACD and NACD for Representative Scott Tipton's *Healthy Forests Management Act* which would allow State and County officials to have authority in determining forest management decisions on federal lands within their respective boundaries. The Act would also allow for a streamlined environmental review processes where potential catastrophic wildfire conditions exist.

The second resolution brought forth by White River dealt with water rights and recently released directives from the U.S. Forest Service in which holders of land use permits through the Forest Service would be required to relinquish privately owned water rights to the Federal Government as a condition of obtaining, renewing, or modifying an existing permit. The resolution as passed by the CACD assembly states; CACD opposes any federal requirement that holders of land use permits assign their privately owned water rights to the United States or otherwise restrict the transfer of their water rights for the benefit of the United States in order for the permit holder to obtain, modify or renew federal permits.

Working Lands for Wildlife and Regulatory Predictability

Recently the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), announced an agreement to provide a level of regulatory predictability to landowners engaged in the improvement of habitat for at risk wildlife. This agreement has tremendous implications for those of us living and working in sage grouse country. Currently the sage grouse is not listed as either threatened or endangered under the Endangered Species Act, but is considered a species that warrants protection under the act. The final decision on awarding threatened or endangered status for sage grouse is still a couple of years away, but this agreement between the two agencies provides landowners the ability to be proactive.

According to NRCS Chief Dave White the agreement will, "provide landowners with a mechanism to keep working lands in production while complying with the Endangered Species Act (ESA), and will facilitate restoration of habitat for at-risk species. It also will help farmers, ranchers and forest landowners rest a little easier knowing their operations are protected for the long term and that they are contributing to conserving vital natural resources." What this means is the federal government will grant farmers, ranchers and forest landowners regulatory predictability in return for voluntarily making wildlife habitat improvements on their private agricultural and forest lands. Participating producers must adhere to the requirements of each conservation practice during the term of their contract, which can last from one to 15 years.

See "Working Lands" on Page 2



New Office Hours

The Rio Blanco County FSA Office has new hours! The office will be open Tuesday through Thursday, 8:00AM to 4:30PM. Kristi will be working in the Craig office on Mondays and Fridays. You can reach her in Craig by calling 970-824-3476 or stopping in the Craig office at 145 Commerce Street on these days.

Acresage Reports

All FSA program participants need to come into the County Office to review their maps and file a report of acresage, crops, and intended use for the 2013 crop year.

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If landowners would like to receive regulatory predictability for up to 30 years, they must maintain the conservation practices as outlined in the NRCS and FWS agreement. So, landowners who work with NRCS to develop a contract for financial assistance can be assured they can continue to implement those practices following the expiration of the contract without the fear of violations of the Endangered Species Act, as long as the practices are maintained according to the same NRCS standards and specifications they were installed under. One important thing to remember is only the practices that a landowner receives financial assistance for are covered under this agreement. In most cases, a conservation plan developed by the NRCS will contain many more practices than will actually go into a contract. Only those practices in the contract are covered.

Some may be asking why they should even be worried about becoming involved in Working Lands for Wildlife if the sage grouse is not even listed under the Endangered Species Act. The regulatory predictability offered by enrolling in Working Lands for Wildlife only applies as long as the sage grouse is a candidate for listing. If the sage grouse is listed, landowners who are participating in the program have the predictability that nothing will change with those previously contracted practices regardless of the status of the sage grouse. Anyone interested in finding out more about this program should contact their local NRCS office.

Wild Horse and Burro Advisory Board

On October 29th and 30th the National Wild Horse and Burro Advisory Board held a meeting in Salt Lake City to continue discussing the ever present issues with the BLM's Wild Horse & Burro program. There are currently 12,000 horses and burros in excess of the rangelands' capacity. There are an additional 47,000 animals in "holding" at the cost of \$44 million (59% of the Wild Horse and Burro Program budget). White River & Douglas Creek Interim District Manager, Matt Scott, and White River District Board Member, Gary Moyer, provided comments to the board about the need to remove the excess animals for sustainable rangelands and horse population. They noted the excessive cost of holding the horses is jeopardizing BLM's ability to truly manage the range as directed by law. They urged the Board to recommend a real solution to the unsustainable program.

Current wild/feral horse fertility control techniques involve the administration of a shot that must be supplemented with a booster every one or two years in order to be effective. Due to the associated costs with administering fertility control drugs and the mixed success that these drugs have shown, the advisory board discussed that spaying of some mares would provide the best long term population control and will ultimately reduce program related costs. Therefore, one of the recommendations the Advisory Board made to BLM calls for spaying mares that are currently on the range as one tool to reduce the population increase.

Districts Receive Recognition

The White River Conservation District received the Colorado Association of Conservation Districts "District of the Year" award in recognition for the work that they have been involved in for the last year.

In addition to the "District of the Year" award Executive Director Callie Hendrickson received the "Conservation District Employee of the Year" award for her work at both the State and National level concerning forest management and the wild horse and burro overpopulation/range health issues on public lands. Callie is very deserving of the award and the White River and Douglas Creek Conservation Districts consider ourselves lucky to have such an exceptional employee working for us.



2012 Natural Resource Tour a Huge Success

The Districts hosted a two day natural resource tour on August 29th & 30th with sixty participants throughout the two days. Multiple federal, state, and local agencies along with state and federal legislators and interested landowners joined us on the tour bus.

The first day focused on forest health concerns. It was a great follow up to the 2010 Forestry Tour hosted in the watershed. We traveled east of Meeker to Trappers Lake where the Big Fish Fire burned in 2002. The lesson learned is just how critical it is that we harvest today's beetle killed timber to prevent catastrophic hot, slow burning fires in the future. Our current Pine Beetle epidemic is tenfold the acres killed in previous insect infestations and therefore, we will see much of this type of devastation in our future without significant change in timber removal.

While the tour highlighted some of the challenges, it also focused on finding solutions to address these forest health concerns into the future. Dr. Kurt Mackes presented the White River Conservation District research project findings. Last year the District facilitated a research project to determine the processed cut stock recovery rate from standing dead beetle-killed lodgepole pine timber. Cut stock is the wood product in which items such as window and door molding are made and therefore it is a much higher value product than biomass.

The study indicated that the time a tree stands dead does not significantly affect the recovery rate of cut stock. The tree diameter is a more significant factor to consider when maximizing cut stock production. Therefore, the current beetle killed timber can be harvested for this higher end use of cut stock five or more years after it was killed allowing for much more opportunity to address the potential of catastrophic high intensive heat fires into the future such as the Big Fish Fire. It will also provide an opportunity to utilize the resource in our back yard rather than shipping it in from other states or countries.



The second day of the tour focused on invasive species and excess wild/feral horses. The Tamarisk Coalition discussed several tamarisk control treatments that have been implemented over the past few years to get a handle on the invasive plant. We viewed several locations where mechanical and biological control has been used.



The tour extended into the BLM range south of Rangely into the West Douglas Herd Area (WDHA). Tour participants received hands-on experience by participating in collecting range monitoring data through a transect. The monitoring revealed that there had been significant grazing use in many areas by the wild/feral horses. Livestock had not been in much of the area this year due to the drought. The tour continued throughout the WDHA to see the area as an example of the challenges facing BLM in managing the land for multiple uses including the Greater Sage Grouse while maintaining a thriving natural ecological balance.

We would like to thank those of you who attended our Land Owner Appreciation Barbeque and were able to listen to Harriet Hageman's "Regulation without Representation" presentation.

Thank you to our sponsors; Encana, Nichols Store, Hume Distributing, and CSU Extension for helping to make this tour so very successful.

