Volume 29
Issue 3

Fort Belknap Environmental Protection Department

Circle Speaker

APRIL—JUNE, 2025

Aaniiih & Nakoda Environmental Newsletter

FEATURED IN THIS ISSUE:

Earth Day 2025:

Our Home Our Planet Our Future

By Kermit Snow Jr, BTRP Compliance Officer

Wahey Neetine, hello my relatives. It's that time of the year, where we celebrate Mother Earth and bring in the children of the local elementary schools to see not only what we do in our jobs to help Mother Earth & our communities, but to also engage our youth in how they can help her. We also hope that they will remember what they learned and participated in, that it will in some way steer them towards an education in a career from one of the 15 stations they stopped at. To me, this is one of the best parts of our job, interacting with grade school students. As I mentioned in the past, we zero in on grades 4th thru the 6th, as the upper grades are pretty much past this stage of learning, even though there is still a lot to learn. We like the fact, that kids in these grades will take what they learn at this event, right to the home and their parents & siblings. We look at these kids, as the next stewards of our home lands. As we gathered in Lodge Pole to set up, the weather was not cooperating, as it began to snow a little, with a slight wind. We had originally hoped to set up at the Wasay Wakpa pow wow grounds, but had to move it indoors to the Chief Nosey Gymnasium. So, you can imagine how packed that little gym was, with around 200 kids, the 15 stations w/presenters, chaperones,

(Continued on page 2)

Earth Day 2025: Our Home Our Planet Our Future

(Continued from page 1)

bus drivers, and occasional visitors from the community, but we made it work. Thank you to Hannah and crew for making sure gym was clean and helping set up tables for the different stations. I would like to thank the 15 stations who set up and we did have one more program come in a little late, but there were no more tables, so they kind of threw in with a program that he is associated with. These are the programs the children got to learn about: Brownfields, AG Corp (MT Dept. of AG), Child Support, Central & Eastern MT Invasive Species Team (CEMIST), Water Quality, TIWAHE, Tobacco Prevention, CHR's, Nutrition, ANC Buffalo Center, Native Connections, MSU Extension, ANC Buffalo Research Center, NIC?-MNI Water Center, and MT Fish & Wildlife. The Relocation, Managed Retreat or Protect in Place (RMP) Project ended up helping out CEMIST. It is really fun to watch the kids interact with the people at the different stations, eager to learn, handle the equipment at some stations and see how they work, getting their hands dirty either working with soils or making a delicious treat at another station. They got to see how one station works with contaminated properties to make them reusable to how another samples water to make sure it's clean & healthy. They got to see two different aspects of the Buffalo, through the ANC Buffalo Center and the ANC Buffalo Research Center. They got to learn about Nutrition at one station and make a yummy treat at another. They learned about

agriculture at one station and seen how invasive species can affect lands at another. They learned about how one station helps the people and how one helps with children & families. They learned about Culture at one station and how another shows how tobacco affects the body and the dangers of vaping & smokeless tobacco. They got to see how a program helps communities in building gardens and how to grow food and then learn about the wildlife & regulations in Montana. We were really fascinated by a young student at our station. After telling the kids what we do and how it helps our community, he started with a question and when we answered, he fired right back with another, then another, then another. I believe he asked around 5-6 questions before the session ended. This made us feel good, as he showed great interest in what we are doing and wanted to learn more about what our program cleaned up, what all is involved in our cleanup, and what the end results are. This is why we do this, to get our kids engaged, not only in what we do, but what all the presenters are doing in their field. We hope that, through their curiosity and questions, it could lead them on a path to their future endeavors and/or a field of study in college. That is one of our ultimate goals in this Earth Day event. Another great goal of this event, is to see and watch these kids have fun, interact not only with

(Continued on page 3)

Earth Day 2025: Our Home Our Planet Our Future

(Continued from page 2)

presenters, but other students from other schools. I get a great joy when I'm walking around and taking pictures of the kids and presenters at each station. I always run into students that like to pose, as I take their pictures and some that shy away or cover up, lol. You can see that interaction, as I post all the pictures later in the day, after the event is over. It's always good when I run into my young relatives at this event, like my granddaughter, who came up to me and gave me a hug. I don't think they realize what that means to me or how great it makes me feel. That is always a great big plus when that happens. That is what I'm saying about this event, other than learning, it's one big joyful gathering for young & old. It's a time to let loose while learning, spread fun & laughter to all while learning to help Mother Earth. We can't say enough about these schools, giving us a chance to teach their students about Earth Day & Mother Earth and how they can be a part of her future and where they can play a part of getting her healthy. I also would like to give a shout out to all those that made a donation to this event, as they show their support for Earth Day and in return, donate prizes to all the kids who participate. We can't have a great event without your support, THANK YOU. Although snow showed up and forced us to move indoors, we pulled off another great Earth Day for all the kids and presenters. We invite you all to next year's event, which will be held at the Fort Belknap Agency. A'HO

Thank You Vendors!

Your contributions and support to our kids on Earth Day was greatly appreciated!

Havre
R-New
Dyllan's Pizza
Frankie's
Norman's Ranchwear
Wolfer's Diner
Pizza Hut
North Star Athletics
Dairy Queen
Stan's Pawn
Fleet's Supply
Taco John's
Gram's
Cottonwood Cinema
Dicker's
Ben Franklin's
Rod's Drive-In
Canton's

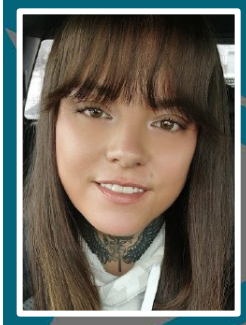
Harlem
EZ Mart
Albertson's
The Clothing Co.

Fort Belknap
Child Support Program
NADC
PHN's
TERO
Brownfield's

Individual
Liz McClain
Margaret Werk
Katrese Hammond

Meet the newest member of the Fort Belknap Environmental Protection Department

By Megan Martin, Brownfields Environmental Technician



Please let me introduce myself, I am Megan Kirkaldie Martin, an enrolled Assiniboine and the new Brownfields Environmental Technician for Fort Belknap Environmental Protection Department/ Brownfields Program. The Brownfields Program provides technical assistance to communities, tribes and others to assess, safely clean up and sustainably reuse contaminated properties. Brownfields collaborates, oversees and assists contactors in these "clean ups".

I grew up in Landusky, Montana. The mountains were my playground and disappearing until dark almost daily was not uncommon. There was always a strong connection with animals, nature and wildlife from childhood. Conservation is something I cared a lot about then and still do now. My Grandma taught me that keeping things clean is a part of daily life and I'm slightly obsessed with it. We were raised to work hard, never quit and to always keep faith. I'm a single mother of two amazing children daughter Jaymiee 19 and son Joseph 15 whom I'm very proud of in every way!

Remediating old, damaged, or contaminated properties and refurbishing them to be used again for our community is awe-inspiring. I'm grateful for the opportunity to be a part of this program servicing my home community and its members in such a rejuvenating way!

Currently I have little experience directly with FBEPD or Brownfields Program. However, I am confident that working for BNSF for 7 years as a Trackmen, Welder/Truck driver completing multiple welding qualifications, college classes, CPR trainings, along with monthly/daily safety briefings have molded me into a skilled professional. Ready to tackle any challenges that arise with hard work and due diligence. Working together with a team towards a common goal in a safe and productive manner is a familiar working environment. I'm looking forward to future trainings and becoming an asset to this team and the Fort Belknap Indian Community.

My hobbies are lake days, camping with family, traveling to watch Indian Relay, pow-wows and rodeos, decorate cakes/cupcakes, working on cars, spending time with my dog Rjay.

My vast skills include cleaning/organizing, adaptability, problem solving, researching, teamwork, safety awareness, decision making.

Two (2) Years completed successfully at Montana State University-Northern studying Diesel Technology earning multiple certificates during that time.

National Management Measures to Control Nonpoint Source Pollution from Forestry

Submitted by Shelby Main, Nonpoint Source Pollution Coordinator

Streamside Management Areas, is a key means to minimize ecological and water quality effects due to organic debris.

Research on the effectiveness of different harvesting methods (e.g., clear-cutting or selective cutting) or logging practices to reduce landslide occurrence does not exist (Mills and Hinkle, 2001).

The effectiveness of Best Management Practices (BMPs) for minimizing the hazard of landslides from timber harvest sites is also not known.

The top priority is to provide road systems that are safe for the public, responsive to public needs, environmentally sound, affordable, and efficient to manage. A roads analysis provides scientific information

(Continued on page 5)

(Continued from page 4)

used to inform decision makers about effects, consequences, options, priorities, and other factors.

Providing youth the opportunity to participate in a planning process for our own forest operations and learning about 'Ki Uta Ki Tai' which translates to "From the mountains to the sea" which refers to the journey of water.

The phrase is part of the Te Reo Māori language, which is the indigenous language of New Zealand. This expression is often used in the context of sustainable land and resource management, emphasizing the need to protect and care for the environment as a whole.

Procedure for conducting the roads analysis consists of four steps aimed at producing needed information and maps (USDA Forest Service, 1999):

1. Road & Trail Analysis- Designed to produce an overview of the road system.
2. Describe the existing road system in relation to current forest management plans- This step includes a map of the existing road system, descriptions of access needs, and information about physical, biological, social, cultural, economic, and political conditions associated with the road set up.
3. Identify Issues- this step includes a summary of key road-related issues, a list of screening questions to evaluate them, a description of the status of relevant available data, and a list of additional data needed to conduct the analysis.
4. Assess benefits, problems & risks After identifying the important issues in the major uses and effects of the road system- output from this step is a synthesis of the benefits, problems, and risks of the current road system and the risks and benefits of building roads into unroaded areas.

Participants in a program similar to this would be able to build, learn, and assist the Nonpoint Source program in collaboration with the Roads Maintenance, BIA Forestry and other programs in documenting the current state of the mountains. Explore road conditions, learn to identify NPS polluted runoff areas, waste water runoff, debris from wildland fire. Experiencing the process of land management and gaining an understanding of the reason for enforcement of laws regarding the protection of tribal land and water bodies. Planning and gaining understanding of an entire ecosystem due to pollution, soil health and ultimately the water that we consume. Tribal leaders will be able to review and utilize the participant studies. The Environmental Protection Department along with the NPS program will be able to utilize the mapping and data developed during the work period and review program collaboration between the programs along with the resulting data observations created by the participants.

Participants would gain firsthand experience on an entire process in decision making, also getting to mix multiple different areas of interest and begin to think about career choices for their future.

Community participants could help plan the management of existing and future roads and road systems to minimize environmental problems arising from them.

Fort Belknap Nonpoint Source Program will also begin identifying native plants needed to prepare a mass order for planting in Spring of 2026, and will work on the following tasks:

1. Define the concept of native plant nurseries and their significance in environmental conservation.
2. Research the role of native plants in promoting biodiversity and their ecological importance.
3. Explore the methods used by native plant nurseries to cultivate and propagate local flora.
4. Investigate how native plant nurseries contribute to preventing wastewater runoff.
5. Analyze the impact of native plant nurseries on protecting local waterways and enhancing water quality.
6. Examine how native plant nurseries provide habitat for local wildlife and support ecosystem health.
7. Review case studies or examples of successful native plant nurseries and their contributions to conservation efforts.

(Continued on page 6)

(Continued from page 5)

8. Assess the challenges faced by native plant nurseries in terms of funding, public awareness, and environmental policies.
9. Discuss the role of youth & community involvement and education in supporting native plant nurseries.
10. Compile findings and organize them into a structured outline and create a report presentable for further project planning.

Greetings from Prairie Mountain Utilities!

By Kasey Ramone, PMU Director

Over the past few months, we have been working on an Integrated Solid Waste Management Plan (ISWMP) in collaboration with the Fort Belknap Indian Community Environmental Protection Department and Region 8 EPA. Extensive data collection has been necessary to collect and establish base line numbers. Information compiled such as can inventory, tipping fee, collections, transportation fees and possible recycling ventures is required to understand what Prairie Mountain Utilities' (PMU's) current trends are and to create a road map for future improvements.

Examples of data:

- Tipping fees- on average PMU has to pay $7,500 per month per 125 tons to dispose of Fort Belknap's solid waste at the landfill in Havre, MT. We also consider which months the community disposes of more solid waste than other months.
- Transportation cost- our solid waste drivers drive around 400 miles a day picking up different canisters and commuting to Havre. Factors to consider, what time of day is their less wait time, road construction, and 3-yard canister rake up and ground trash removal.
- What are the collection trends for past years, what can PMU do to increase annual collections?

We are confident that this new ISWMP will be a great tool for our solid waste program and will increase productivity, cut costs, identify waste reduction strategies, and decrease transportation cost with continuous improvement.

For the month of June, PMU has been focusing on improving each transfer sites by replacing/repairing fences, separating large tree trunks from branch remnants, construction and demolition debris, and picking up trash around each site. Staff has also planted 65 caragana trees, lilac bushes, and oak trees at the Agency transfer site in partnership with MSU Extension program. PMU staff is excited to collaborate on ISWMP and implement for future growth.

Water Conservation & Tips

By Mitchell Healy, Water Quality Coordinator | July 8, 2025

Water is essential to everything. We need it to survive, we need it for our everyday uses in our homes, animals need it, etc. So, if there's things we can do to help with water conservation, then we should all be doing it. No matter the time of year, we can contribute to the cause, but if we prepare beforehand, we can minimize the risks, and if we make some minor adjustments on our water use, we would be doing our part in water conservation. The following is some information that might be helpful, or at least, for your awareness. Good reading.

Request an Inspection:

- Whether you rent or own a home, it might be worthwhile to call a professional to inspect your

(Continued on page 7)

(Continued from page 6)

water lines and water heater in the fall time for leaks and/or damage, maintenance, insulation, etc. This way, you can be sure the water lines are good to go for winter.

Prevent Frozen Pipes:

- Keep garage doors closed if there are water supply pipes in the garage. If it seems too cold or pipes still freeze in garage, maybe try using a space heater during extreme cold temperatures, but place in a safe area as to not cause any damage to anything.
- Open kitchen and bathroom cabinet doors to allow warmer air to circulate around the plumbing.
- During really cold days and nights, let the cold water drip from the faucets. This keeps the water flowing through the pipes and helps prevent freezing. In perspective, a reservoir with standing water or water not moving will freeze faster than a river where the water is continuously flowing or moving. Same concept with water pipes, if you don't let the faucets drip, the water is not moving and stagnant, with faucets dripping, the water is pressurized and moving continuously.
- Keep the thermostat at a reasonable temperature to keep your house warm. Maybe leave it at 70-72 all day during winter months, turn up the heat if the temperatures are extreme like well below zero.

How to Thaw Frozen Pipes:

- If there's no choice other than you doing it, be careful, and apply heat sources to the frozen pipe. Heat sources could be electric heating pad wrapped around the pipe, electric hair dryer, and you can wrap pipes with towels soaked in hot water. But if the pipes are froze and no water is coming out of faucets, then the alternative source is hopefully having a few 5 gallon jugs of water on hand, and boil a pot of water then soak the towels. Absolutely no open flame devices are to be used, you can cause more damage to pipes and other things, its high risk, not recommended.
- If anything, the best bet would be to contact a professional to take care of this issue.
- If you notice a faucet has no water coming out of it, then check all other inside faucets to see if other water lines are frozen as well. This information should be shared with the professional so he/she knows what lines are frozen, and get your water running faster.

Check Water Meter:

- If you have a water meter or on a metering bill system, schedule a time to check the water meter and record the reading, then wait 2 hours, but do not use the water at all during this time, this includes bathroom, then check the meter again, if it changed, it's possible there's a leak. Call a professional.

Toilet Checks

- Squeeze a few drops of food coloring in the toilet tank, NOT BOWL, wait about 10 minutes and if there's color in the toilet bowl, there's a leak.
- Replace the toilet flapper in the tank. This is the rubber plug at bottom of tank that keep water in the tank at a certain level, after the toilet is flushed.
- Check the water line connected to the toilet for leaks at the shutoff valve and where it connects to the toilet. If no leaks, the water line is connected well.

Laundry Room Tips

- Set washing machine to use cold water and not hot water. This saves money since hot water comes from the hot water heater, which is powered by electricity or gas.
- Wash only full loads, and not small loads. This saves a lot of water and money each month.
- If you decide to continue washing different loads rather than wait until you have a full load, then set the load size to the load you are washing. Don't leave it on large load when you only put in a small load, this is wasting water and costing you more money each month, if you are on a metered water system. If you are paying a fixed monthly rate and connected to public water supply, as is the case on the reservation, then it's likely you're over using the water and not really paying for the amount of water you are actually using if it were metered. Just something to consider.

Kitchen Tips

- If you have a dishwasher, scrape your plates and do not rinse them off. If you have invested in a

(Continued on page 8)

Water Conservation & Tips

(Continued from page 7)

good dishwasher, it will do its job and clean your plates.

- Just like the washer, make it a habit to wash only a full load of dishes rather than a small load.
- If you do not have a dishwasher, wash all of your plates first, set in adjacent sink, and rinse off all together, rather than washing and rinsing individually.

Bathroom Tips

- In the military, it was not possible to have a 5 minute shower, more like 3 minutes each. So, when you take a shower, limit it to 5 minutes. I know the hot water is comfortable and all, but even 5 minutes of showering is a lot of water going down the drain, and sufficient time to get cleaned up. Try it out and see how fast you can shower, it's definitely possible, we just choose not to do it. If everybody in a household did this, it would be a lot of savings and a lot of water conservation going on.
- Take showers instead of baths. Again, probably highly unlikely that anybody is going to stop taking 30 minute showers or bathing, but if you were on a water meter, then a lot of these tips would make a big difference in the water bill.
- When brushing your teeth, turn off the water. Brush your teeth first, then turn on the water to rinse off toothbrush.

Water is very critical and any little bit that we can do in our households, will greatly make a difference. Much of the water conservation tips mentioned are more for people that are billed through a water meter system, and confident to say that these folks likely pay good attention to how much water they are using, as in many cases, it can be very expensive. But on the other hand, if you consider water essential, not just for drinking, but for all the other uses, then why not begin to implement some water conservation in your homes, it's a great thing to do knowing your contributing to a great cause, and it's quite possible that someday all of us may experience water shortage issues in our areas. It's already happening in other parts of the world, rivers drying up, huge water reserve dams going low, and with huge populations that depend on these water sources for survival. It's actually pretty scary thinking about it. Thanks for reading. Good health to all.

ANC Nursing Students... always busy!

By Brigit Hemmer

The ANC Sophomore Nursing Students applied their sunscreen, put on their hats, and headed to the garden to spend the afternoon learning about Indigenous gardening techniques and the "three sisters" from Hillary Maxwell, Lee Blackcrow, Sage Lone Bear, Liz Werk and their team. Together, they planted corn, squash, beans, and pumpkin while exploring the cultural and nutritional significance of traditional planting practices. This hands-on experience highlighted the vital role of nutrition and food sovereignty in Maternal Child Health and newborn development. The students were fully engaged and did a wonderful job both learning and planting. This activity is a great example of how our "Grow Your Own" program supports students in giving back to the community through culturally rooted, community-based learning.

Trump Administration Appoints Mike Foster to Serve as State Executive Director for USDA's Farm Service Agency in Montana

https://www.fsa.usda.gov/news-events/news/05-22-2025/trump-administration-appoints-mike-foster-serve-state-executive?

WASHINGTON, May 22, 2025— The Trump Administration recently appointed Mike Foster as the new State Executive Director (SED) for the USDA Farm Service Agency (FSA) in Montana. Foster joined the Montana FSA team on May 5, 2025.

"When America's farming communities prosper, the entire nation thrives. This new group of USDA appointees will ensure President Trump's America First agenda is a reality in rural areas across the country. I am grateful for the leadership of these new state directors and look forward to their work reorienting the agency to put Farmers First again," said Agriculture Secretary Brooke Rollins.

"FSA State Executive Directors serve in a critical role carrying out USDA's mission at the state level — ensuring that our focus is on meeting the needs of local agricultural producers by putting farmers and ranchers first," said FSA Administrator Bill Beam. "Rural communities need our support now more than ever. Our newly appointed state leaders bring a wealth of knowledge and expertise to their position as SED and they will play an integral role in shaping the future of agriculture in their state."

Foster returns to FSA where he previously served as the FSA State Executive Director for Montana during President Trump's first term. He was born and raised in Townsend, Montana, and currently lives in Bozeman. He and his wife, Mary, a retired elementary teacher, have been married for nearly 46 years and have three grown children and three grandchildren.
As SED, Foster is responsible for overseeing the delivery of FSA programs to agricultural producers in Montana. These commodity, conservation, credit, and disaster assistance programs ensure a safe, affordable, abundant and nutritious food, fiber, and fuel supply for all Americans. See USDA news release for full list of recent FSA and Rural Development appointees.

FSA helps America's farmers, ranchers and forest landowners invest in, improve, protect and expand their agricultural operations through the delivery of agricultural programs for all Americans. FSA implements agricultural policy, administers credit and loan programs, and manages conservation, commodity, disaster recovery and marketing programs through a national network of state and county offices and locally elected county committees. For more information, visit https://www.fsa.usda.gov/.

BIA launches Operation Spirit Return to help solve Indian Country missing and unidentified person cases

Press Release | For Immediate Release: February 20, 2025
https://www.bia.gov/news/bia-launches-operation-spirit-return-help-solve-indian-country-missing-and-unidentified-person

WASHINGTON – The Bureau of Indian Affairs announced today that the Office of Justice Services has launched Operation Spirit Return, an initiative to help solve missing and unidentified person cases involving American Indians and Alaska Natives in the United States.

The initiative is being conducted by the BIA's Missing and Murdered Unit to identify unknown human remains located within or close to Indian Country and are believed to belong to either American Indian or Alaska Native persons. The operation will focus on reuniting remains with family members and returning them to their tribal communities. The unit is actively investigating 15 unidentified persons cases from its regions, including Alaska.

(Continued on page 10)

BIA launches Operation Spirit Return to help solve Indian Country missing and unidentified person cases

(Continued from page 9)

"The crisis of American Indians and Alaska Natives gone missing or who have been murdered, but whose cases remained unsolved, has been decades in the making, and we are committed to ending it," said Bryan Mercier, director of the BIA exercising the delegated authority of the Assistant Secretary for Indian Affairs. "Thanks to the BIA Missing and Murdered Unit and its partners, our Operation Spirit Return initiative will help return missing relatives to their families, so that they can be comforted knowing their loved ones have come home."

"Each member of the Missing and Murdered Unit is dedicated to combatting the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Persons crisis," said BIA Deputy Bureau Director for Justice Services Richard "Glen" Melville. "With our partners in federal law enforcement and the genetic research community, we are striving to make a meaningful impact for the tribal families and communities who have been left for years with unanswered questions about those who went missing. Operation Spirit Return's focus is on identifying these victims and sending them home, and we are actively engaged in achieving that result."

The Missing and Murdered Unit is collaborating with the federal database NamUs, the National Missing and Unidentified Persons System, and the Texas-based company Othram, which utilizes forensic genetic genealogy to identify human remains.

The Missing and Murdered Unit began as the Cold Case task force, part of Operation Lady Justice, a multi-agency effort established by President Trump's administration in 2019 to enhance the operation of the criminal justice system and address the staggering number of missing and murdered American Indian and Alaska Natives in tribal communities.

For more information about the Missing and Murdered Unit or to learn about how you can get involved visit www.bia.gov/mmu.

Success Story

Fort Belknap Indian Reservation in north-central Montana is the homeland of the Assiniboine and Gros Ventre Tribes. The fourth largest reservation in the state, Fort Belknap spans 675,147 acres with a beautiful landscape of rolling plains.

Fort Belknap Indian Reservation in north-central Montana is the homeland of the Assiniboine and Gros Ventre Tribes. The fourth largest reservation in the state, Fort Belknap spans 675,147 acres with a beautiful landscape of rolling plains. The land is home to livestock and a variety of wildlife, such as bison, deer, antelope, waterfowl, eagles, and many upland birds. The property is different because the range is tribally owned, with Bureau of Land Management (BLM) land incorporated.

Trying to find an effective land management system can be challenging on such a unique property. When concerns arose about the declining state of the rangeland, USDA Agricultural Ambassador Kyle Stiffarm approached the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) looking for technical assistance on how best to improve grazing management.

(Continued on page 11)

(Continued from page 10)

A major problem on rangeland across the west is lack of rest and recovery for plants that have been grazed. "Having a good grazing system is very important and we have to understand what it is we are managing and what we are managing for, so getting out to inventory the species of plants, forage production, and overall health of the rangeland is key," says NRCS State Rangeland Specialist Kevin Derzapf who has worked with Stiffarm for nearly three years both on prescribed grazing and range inventory.

Over many years, grasslands at Fort Belknap had become degraded due to a variety of factors from overgrazing to increasing drought. To change this trajectory, Stiffarm not only hoped to identify resource concerns and better grazing management, but also to create opportunities for tribal members to participate in NRCS conservation programs with future generations in mind.

With a long history of working in cooperation with NRCS to establish best management practices for grazing bison and cattle, Stiffarm brought the agency on to get some good on-the-ground information about the condition of the rangeland and the plants growing there. Noticeable resource concerns included lack of water, under-grazed areas too far from water sources, and overgrazed areas, particularly near those few water sources.

A Holistic Approach Range Management

Seventy percent of Montana is rangelands, according to Derzapf. "Range inventory is an important measurement. We can look at where we came from, where we're at, and in the future, we can monitor if the rangeland management we're imparting is improving the land or degrading it."

Derzapf describes this data as being critical to rangeland management success. "We try to key in on specific plants or groups of plants in specific areas and focus on what we want on the rangeland, not necessarily on what we don't want. We want to increase the palatable and productive forages and to increase the plant diversity."

At Fort Belknap, this work has included NRCS helping with range inventory on 30,000 acres. Add in the work done through their BLM partnership and that number reaches more than 50,000 acres of rangeland management.

Range and Forage Inventory

In addition to NRCS involvement, the range and forage inventory project involved a partnership with BLM, the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), and the Fort Belknap Indian Community to collect inventory data needed to assess the identified critical resource concerns.

Under Derzapf's leadership, the team revisited areas that had been inventoried years earlier to conduct range inventories gathering data on production, plant species, bare ground, and other metrics. During the

(Continued on page 12)

(Continued from page 11)

inventory, Derzapf provided hands-on training to field crews in preparation for the weeklong project. The NRCS team showed participants how to identify ecological sites and how to evaluate each site using indicators of rangeland health. They also instructed the team on using the line-point intercept method for foliar cover and the total harvest by species method for production.

"What we've seen from this inventory, and the inventory conducted 10 years ago, are similar species composition," Derzapf says. "We saw greater productivity but that is a result of the tribes management of the land. They removed the cattle from the pasture for two years and let the range recover. And then we had an excellent spring with abundant rainfall, so the range was in excellent condition when we conducted this inventory 10 years later."

Field data gathered was then used by NRCS, who worked with tribal managers, to develop a Targeted Implementation Plan (TIP) to address critical resource concerns.

NRCS Tribal Conservationist, Michael Kinsey, was not involved in the range inventory, but came on shortly afterwards and is supporting Fort Belknap's TIP on its submarginal lands.

Kinsey plans to address concerns noted last year by conducting additional inventory of livestock water quality, quantity, and how it's distributed within the TIP. The goal is to improve water availability for livestock. His efforts will also continue to address grazing challenges, with a focus on improving infrastructure, like adding cross fencing.
"It's been good working with the different partners," Kinsey says. "Going through the BIA and the tribe itself, it's been bringing everyone to the table, so everyone is in the know."

A Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) will begin after the TIP. Under this agreement, the community will enroll land located within the reservation's boundaries or owned by individual tribe members to conserve resources, improve environmental quality, and enhance wildlife habitats. For this effort, NRCS is developing tribal-specific grazing plans to help implement these conservation practices on tribal lands.

Extending Opportunities to Tribal Communities

"We've completed one large water development and are in the process of completing a second. We have a conservation reserve enhancement program that's probably going to be the driver to how we approach some of these larger projects," Stiffarm says. He adds the enhancement program has sparked community wide interest in not just the work they're doing, but the work that they'll be able to do in the future.

"Fort Belknap is kind of a blank canvas at the moment. A lot of programs are available inside NRCS. Some of the projects we've completed are becoming a catalyst for others to take advantage of some of the EQIP programs," Stiffarm says.

The hope is that the work they've accomplished so far will not only create more opportunities for tribal members to apply for financial assistance programs, but to benefit from educational opportunities as well.
"We're also hoping to create more educational opportunities like field days and group training and one-on-one training opportunities," Derzapf says, explaining they are partnering with organizations like Montana Grazing Lands Coalition and Western Landowners Alliance.

So far, people have been receptive. It's not just tribal members who are on the learning end, but agency representatives as well. "It was a huge opportunity for us to train new employees through the forage inventory process, plant identification, how to conduct a forage inventory, how to come up with stocking

(Continued on page 13)

(Continued from page 12)

rates—all the things that move towards generating interest in grazing management," says Derzapf.

The Role of Partnerships in Overcoming Challenges

Stiffarm says what they've accomplished so far is the result of a team effort. He's enjoyed working with and creating good relationships over the past few years with NRCS staff, who are trying to do everything they can to help tribal producers move forward.

"I was fortunate to be able to work with former NRCS employees Blake Stiffarm and Leon Lasalle. They nudged me in the right direction. But at some point, I had to step up to the plate, take the bull by the horns, and get us headed in the right direction the best I could," Stiffarm states.

Working with Derzapf has proven to be equally as helpful. "Kevin's been amazing. He's very knowledgeable and he's been helpful in organizing the range inventory and doing some really solid evaluation and giving us that science-based analysis we were looking for," Stiffarm says.

Having a tribal conservationist on hand also has been a plus. "Michael—he's a community member and his knowledge and educational background is contributing to our success in exploring new programs through NRCS," Stiffarm says.

Beyond NRCS, BLM has been a heavy hitter in making progress with range management across the expanse of Fort Belknap.

"We were very fortunate we had Tracy Stone Manning from BLM. BLM listened to us last summer. We gave an idea of what we were trying to accomplish and how we were going to need to find partnerships within the BLM, considering the tribal land within the submarginals that is owned and managed by the tribe also borders about 30,000 acres of BLM land," Stiffarm says. "Finding a way for the two to coexist under a conservation plan is a very unique challenge. It's also a very opportunistic challenge at the same time."

Submarginal lands are lands that lie to the west of the reservation boundaries. This area is bordered by BLM and state lands and has a distinctive management strategy. Nestled between the Bears Paw and Rocky Mountains, it features expansive, open views, wide grassy prairies, and abundant wildlife. For this reason, according to Stiffarm, "It's important to create a management plan to sustain the land far into the future."

**"The earth has everything you need.
If you ever lose your way,
she is there for you,
if you are there for her."**

RMP UPDATE

By Dennis Longknife, Jr., RMP Project Coordinator

Hello Environmental Warriors, another busy field season, becoming handicapped is one of the hardest things to accept, I often get so excited and want to do what I used to, explore the environment around me and enjoy our beautiful natural resources, of the riverine, prairies and mountains here in Fort Belknap and elsewhere, but my body can't anymore, so I have to adapt and do what I can to still get outside.

I manage the Relocation, Managed Retreat or Protect in Place (RMP) Program grant, and is funded by a BIA Tribal Climate Resilience Program. Project work includes attending monthly and quarterly RMP Cohort Trainings, to assist in the development of plans on how to make our tribal communities more Resilient to extreme weather events. Just look at what happened in Texas with the flooding, and the wildfires in California, and drought plaguing the southwest and other arid parts of the country, including Fort Belknap. I am proud to say that our reservation is ahead of most tribes when it comes to planning how to keep our community's health safe.

I have participated in the development in some of our tribes plans, the Multi-hazard Mitigation Plan, Drought Management Plan, Agricultural Resource Management Plan, Fish and Game Conservation Plan, Noxious Weed Strategic plan, and the Climate Change Adaptation Plan.

Plans for the RMP Program is to host community meetings, to gather input of how we can protect our infrastructure, and to plan how we will relocate, or possibly retreat to another location, and to protect what we have.

CASC PROJECT

Our RMP office is also a project partner on a Climate Adaptation Science Center (CASC) project called, "Co-creating an Integrated Climate Impact Assessment of First Foods and Medicine in the Little Rocky Mountains for the Aaniiih Nakoda Nations".

Our Tribal Historic Preservation Office (THPO) Manager Micheal Black Wolf, and the THPO Administrative Officer, Emma Filesteel, are the recipient of this grant, thru an agreement with the University of Montana and Jennifer Thompson/Forestry Studies Professor and PI of this project. My RMP Assistant Austin After Buffalo is also part of this project and is the main one in the field collecting data. Also participating in this event was Shelby Main, EPA Non-Point Source Coordinator, who accompanied us in the field. David Sauchyn, Prairie Adaptation Research Center Director, Regina, Canada, and Mary Vetter, Plant Ecologist, University of Regina, Canada, also are a valuable resource on inventorying habitats. David has done climate change adaptation work in our surrounding Island Mountains in Canada and the states of Montana and North Dakota.

We also had help from Lorraine Brockie on Traditional uses of native plants, and Ed "Buster" Moore, on his knowledge of Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) and Native plants. This spring our project partners all got together and completed a Native Plant/ First Foods Health Study in the Little Rocky Mountains June 24-26. The CASC First Foods Project is a three-year grant to do plant transects and collect data. Group photo right to left, Lorraine Brockie, Dawn Bishop, Buster, Dennis, David Sauchyn, Shelby Main, Austin After Buffalo, and Jenn Thompson. It was a beautiful day to be in the mountains!

(Continued on page 15)

RMP UPDATE

(Continued from page 14)

TRADITIONAL PLANT USES AND TEK FIELD TRIP

On June 16, I took our Tribal Historic Preservation Office, Cultural Monitors, out in the field to identify our native plants. It was a great day to be outside and most plants were blooming. We visited two sites, Wild Horse Butte and Snake Butte. Native plants included, Turnip, Horsemint, Skunkbrush Sumac, Broom Snake Weed, Yarrow, Sage and Buffalo Berry.

The following is exerted from the **National Tribal Water Council newsletter**, June 2025, Volume 7, Issue 6—Page 5
https://www7.nau.edu/itep/main/docs/newsletters/NTWC/2025/NTWC-Newsletter-June-2025.pdf

Milk River: A Hidden Web of Life

By Wease Bollman

Aquatic invertebrates are usually out of sight, out of mind. Some of these organisms spend their entire lives in the river, while others live in 2 worlds –growing up in the water and then emerging into the air.

What are these creatures? What roles do they play in the web of life in the Milk River?

From 2011 to 2015, students and faculty at Aaniiih Nakoda College (ANC) sampled and studied the aquatic invertebrates of the Milk River close to home. What did they discover?

Sampling, discovering, and studying aquatic invertebrates

To find out what invertebrate creatures live in the Milk River, the ANC researchers collected over 30,000 aquatic invertebrates. These included insects, such as mayflies, midges, dragonflies, beetles, gnats, and mosquitoes.

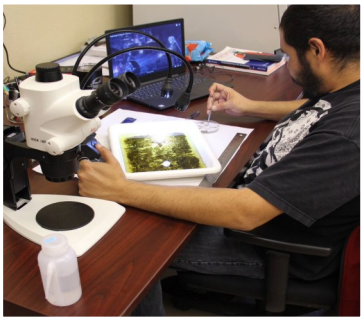
(Continued on page 16)

Milk River: A Hidden Web of Life

(Continued from page 15)

Crayfish, snails, and worms were also collected. More than 77 miles of the river were included in the sampling effort.

Of the total number of organisms sampled, the researchers identified over 9700 aquatic invertebrates in the laboratory. To make the identifications, they used microscopes and other equipment, as well as a library of references, both printed and on the internet.



The researchers collected and identified over 150 species of aquatic invertebrates!

Researchers sample and study aquatic invertebrates because they are a crucial part of the web of life supported by the river. The Milk River's web of life includes bacteria and other microscopic organisms, aquatic plants, invertebrates, fish, birds, as well as terrestrial organisms, including humans.

A food web is a community of organisms competing with and eating one another and being eaten in turn. Energy and nutrients are passed along within a food web community. Aquatic food webs include plants and animals on the land, too. The riparian areas, oxbows and floodplains are home to many species that participate in an aquatic food web. Healthy, functional food webs are what support fish populations, keep the river biologically stable and healthy and the water clean. Functional food webs need good water quality and good habitat conditions. Natural food webs are free of introduced or invasive species, which often disrupt the web of life, and may lead to the local extinction of native plants and animals.

It's impossible to know what the food web and the aquatic invertebrate communities of the Milk River were like before European people began settling within the river's watershed. The agricultural culture that these people brought with them began putting a lot of pressure on the river. Today, many human influences affect the river, changing it from the natural system it once was to a highly engineered waterway. In addition, introduced species, such as the northern pike and the yellow perch, have surely influenced the web of life of the Milk River.

In the next pages, we look at some of the aquatic invertebrates that the ANC researchers sampled, and we describe their biology and how they fit in to the Milk River's web of life today. We also look at some of the other plants and animals that make up the food web. Then, we look more closely at the complex connections among these and other organisms that participate in the Milk River aquatic food web.

Midges: they're NOT mosquitoes!

Midge larvae accounted for over 8600 (28%) of the organisms collected by the ANC researchers. The collection included more than 46 species of midges!

Chironomid midge larvae

In most Montana streams and rivers, Chironomids (midges) are the most abundant group of aquatic insects. They are a very important food source for fish, amphibians, other aquatic insects, and waterfowl.

All animals, whether aquatic or terrestrial, need oxygen to live. Obtaining enough oxygen to power metabolism is a major challenge for aquatic insects. Many of the midge larvae collected from the Milk River are pink or red, because they contain the red pigment hemoglobin within their bodies. Hemoglobin enables them to pick up and hang onto oxygen molecules dissolved in the water, even in low-oxygen environments. Midges without hemoglobin need well-oxygenated water to survive.

(Continued on page 17)

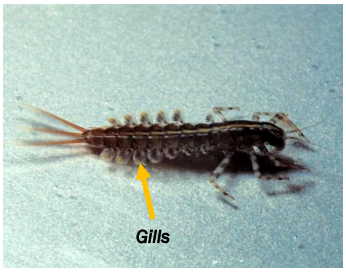
(Continued from page 16)

How big are they?
Don't be fooled by these photos! Midges are tiny: larvae are about 2/5 inch, and adults are not much bigger.

Adult midges are often mistaken for mosquitoes, but Chironomid midges don't bite! In addition, midges swarm, but mosquitoes don't. When you are "followed" by a cloud of little flying insects, these are most likely male midges, swarming to attract females.

Mayflies: brief adult life

Nearly 5200 (17%) of the organisms collected by the ANC research team were larval mayflies. At least 8 species were collected.



Mayfly larvae, or nymphs, live for several months in the water, before emerging as adults. Most adult mayflies live for 24 hours or less.

Mayflies spend most of their lives underwater, as larvae or nymphs. They are best known because of their brief adult lives... some mayfly adults live only for minutes; most live for only a day.

Mayfly larvae have delicate gills on their abdomen. As the mayfly beats the gills to create a current around it's body, the gills absorb oxygen that is dissolved in the water.

Adult mayflies are beautiful insects, with their lacy wings held upright.

The food that mayfly larvae eat becomes energy and nutrients for other organisms that eat mayflies. Mayflies are food for fish, dragonflies, reptiles, amphibians, spiders, bats, birds, and other animals.

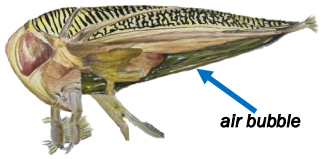
How big are they?
Photos make them look huge, but mayfly larvae are about one-third of an inch long, and mayfly adults are about ½ inch long.

Water Boatmen: a great solution to the problem of breathing underwater!

Almost 1900 (6%) of the organisms collected by the ANC teams were Water Boatmen, or Corixids. At least 4 species of water boatmen were collected.

Unlike the midges and mayflies, Corixids do not emerge into the air as adults. Instead, they spend most of their lives as aquatic insects, occasionally flying when it's time to find a mate. However, corixids cannot breathe underwater! Instead, they gather a bubble of air from the surface and dive down, with the bubble held tightly against the underside of the bug. This way, the water boatman carries its own air supply while it swims underwater, much like a scuba diver!

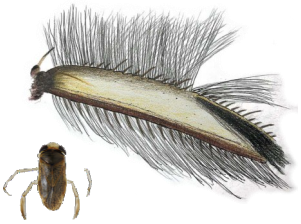
Corixids have remarkable legs! Just like all adult insects, the water boatman has 6 jointed legs. For water boatmen, each pair of legs has a very specialized function!



The front pair of legs are very short, and they are used for feeding. The end of the leg is shaped like a scoop. The water boatman scoops up diatoms, algae, protozoa, and small insects to eat.

Middle legs are used to grasp vegetation: with its breathing bubble, the corixid is so buoyant, that it would float to the surface if it didn't hang on!

The long hind legs are shaped like oars and are used for swimming. The legs have special hairs to help the water boatman "row" through the water.



Adult corixids are about 1/2 inch long.

Other common aquatic invertebrates collected from the Milk River

ANC researchers identified at least 8 species of aquatic worms in the Milk River samples. Some species of aquatic worms burrow in the soft sediments,

(Continued on page 18)

(Continued from page 17)

while others live among filaments of algae. They are detritus-eaters, consuming decaying plant and animal bodies, fecal material, bacteria, diatoms, and protozoa. Because of their soft bodies, they are easy and nutritious prey for fish and other organisms.

Net-spinning caddisflies were frequently found in the Milk River samples. Each of these caddisfly larvae build themselves a rough, tent-like shelter attached to a stable substrate, such as a rock, a woody snag, or among a cluster of leaves. They spin a fine, silken net at the door of the tent, positioned so that the net will capture food particles that drift in the river current. These particles may include bacteria, diatoms, tiny crustaceans, tiny aquatic insects, and nutrient-rich detritus, like fecal material. Fish, dragonflies, or other predators may feed on caddisfly larvae.

Aquatic snails are abundant in the Milk River. Snails have a special scraping organ called a radula. The radula is made of many tiny hard blades that the snail uses to scrape food from aquatic plants, snags, or rocks. Snails feed on organic films, called biofilms, which are composed of microbes, including bacteria, diatoms, and fungi. Due to their tough shells, snails are difficult for many predators to eat. In the Milk River, yellow perch and common carp are 2 fish that can consume snails. Other creatures that eat snails include crayfish, ducks, and turtles.

Amphipods, or "scuds", live among tangled vegetation or decaying leaves. The powerful enzymes in their gut enable them to get nutrients and energy by shredding and eating the vegetation and leaves. While doing this, scuds perform an important task that benefits other members of the aquatic food web: they break down the plants and leaves into finer pieces of organic material that can be eaten by other aquatic organisms. Scuds are prey for several species of fish.

It almost goes without saying that there are a lot of mosquito larvae in the Milk River! Mosquito larvae, called "wrigglers", hang head-downward at the water surface. They breathe through a tube at the end of the abdomen. The larvae use brushes around their mouths to filter algae and diatoms from the water. Pupae don't eat, but both larvae and pupae are important food for fish and other invertebrates

Damselfly and dragonfly larvae were both very common in Milk River samples. These carnivorous larvae are stealth predators, with powerful jaws that extend in an instant to grab an unwary invertebrate or even a small fish. Like many other aquatic invertebrates, these larvae are prey for insectivorous fish.

Microscopic organisms are the foundation of the aquatic web of life

In the river, microbes occur in 2 forms:

- **Plankton** are tiny plants, algae, bacteria, and animals that drift or swim in the water
- **Biofilms** are complex communities of tiny animals, algae, bacteria, and fungi that are attached to surfaces

Together the plankton and biofilms make up the base of the aquatic food web.

Plankton

Algae and bacteria that drift in the water are called

(Continued on page 19)

(Continued from page 18)

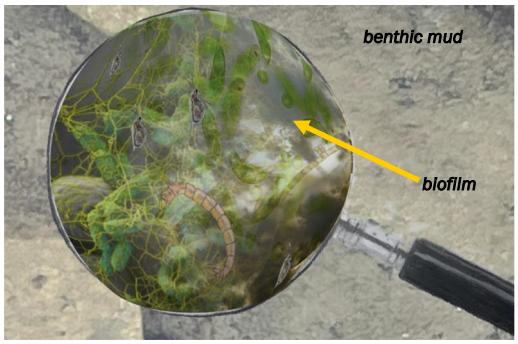
phytoplankton. These organisms convert sunlight and dissolved nutrients into oxygen and nutrition for other organisms in the aquatic food web. Without phytoplankton, there would be no life in the river.

Tiny animals that swim in the water are called zooplankton. They eat millions of drifting algae and bacterial cells. By also feeding on detritus, zooplankton help to recycle the nutrients released when other organisms die. Zooplankton are a crucial food source for aquatic invertebrates and fish.

<u>Biofilms</u>

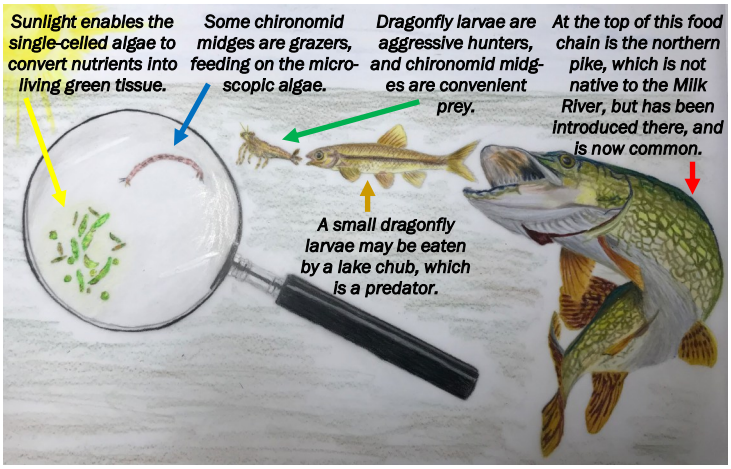
Microscopic communities of organisms attached to submerged surfaces can include algae and diatoms, bacteria, fungi, and tiny animals such as insect larvae, crustaceans, nematodes, and others. Biofilms are hotspots of biological activity in the river, and they are jungles of biodiversity. If you've ever slipped on a rock in a stream, then you're acquainted with aquatic biofilms! In the Milk River, biofilms are everywhere… on the surface of the mud and detritus, on snags and woody debris, and on the surface of vegetation. Biofilms play huge roles in the decomposition of organic material, in nutrient cycling, in formation of oxygen, and in reducing pollutants.

Aaniiih Nakoda College researchers studied Milk River diatoms, part of the river's biofilms. Diatoms are a type of algae… each diatom absorbs silica from the water and creates a cell wall out of sculptured glass!



Putting it together… Milk River food chains and food webs

When one organism eats another, a food chain begins. This diagram illustrates a simple Milk River food chain. As each organism feeds on another, energy in the form of calories and nutrients are passed along the chain. Each feeding organism converts these nutrients and energy into living tissue.



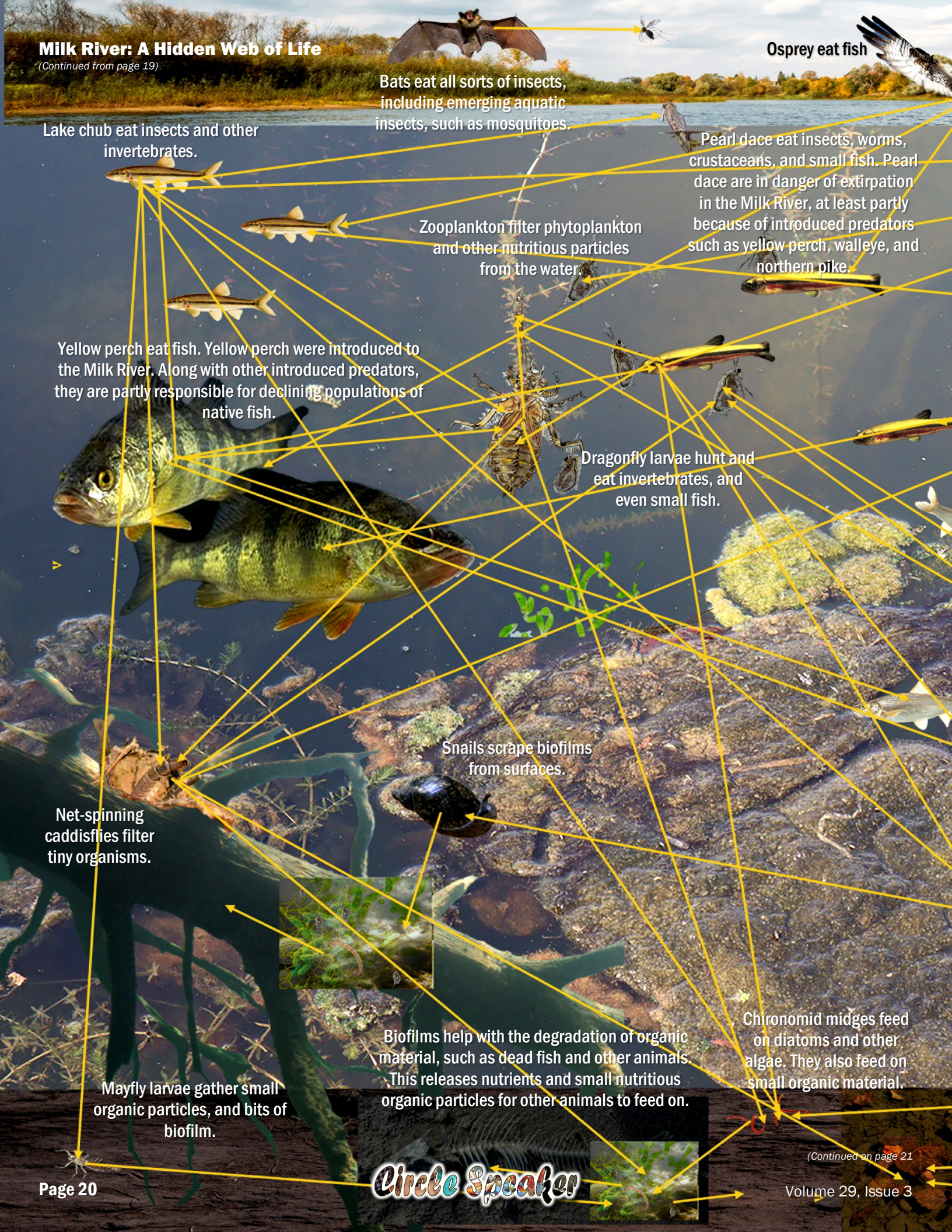
A food chain is a model of a single pathway of energy and nutrient flow in an ecosystem, while a food web, which combines many food chains, illustrates many energy/nutrient pathways. For example, in the diagram above, the lake chub eats a dragonfly larva and is itself eaten by the northern pike. However, a lake chub will eat zooplankton as well as a variety of aquatic insects. And it may be eaten by a number of predators besides the northern pike. These include yellow perch and walleye, as well as birds such as osprey and herons, and other predators. In addition, the lake chub may escape predation and die of other causes. Its carcass, along with other animal and plant remains, decomposes on the river bottom, with the aid of biofilms. Decomposition results in the release of organic nutrients. All of these interactions, along with hundreds or even thousands more, make up an aquatic food web.

A diagram of a Milk River food web follows, on the next two pages. Such a diagram is a model, and like every model of nature, it is not completely accurate. It would be impossible to show ALL of the complex interactions in an actual Milk River food web!

(Continued on page 20)

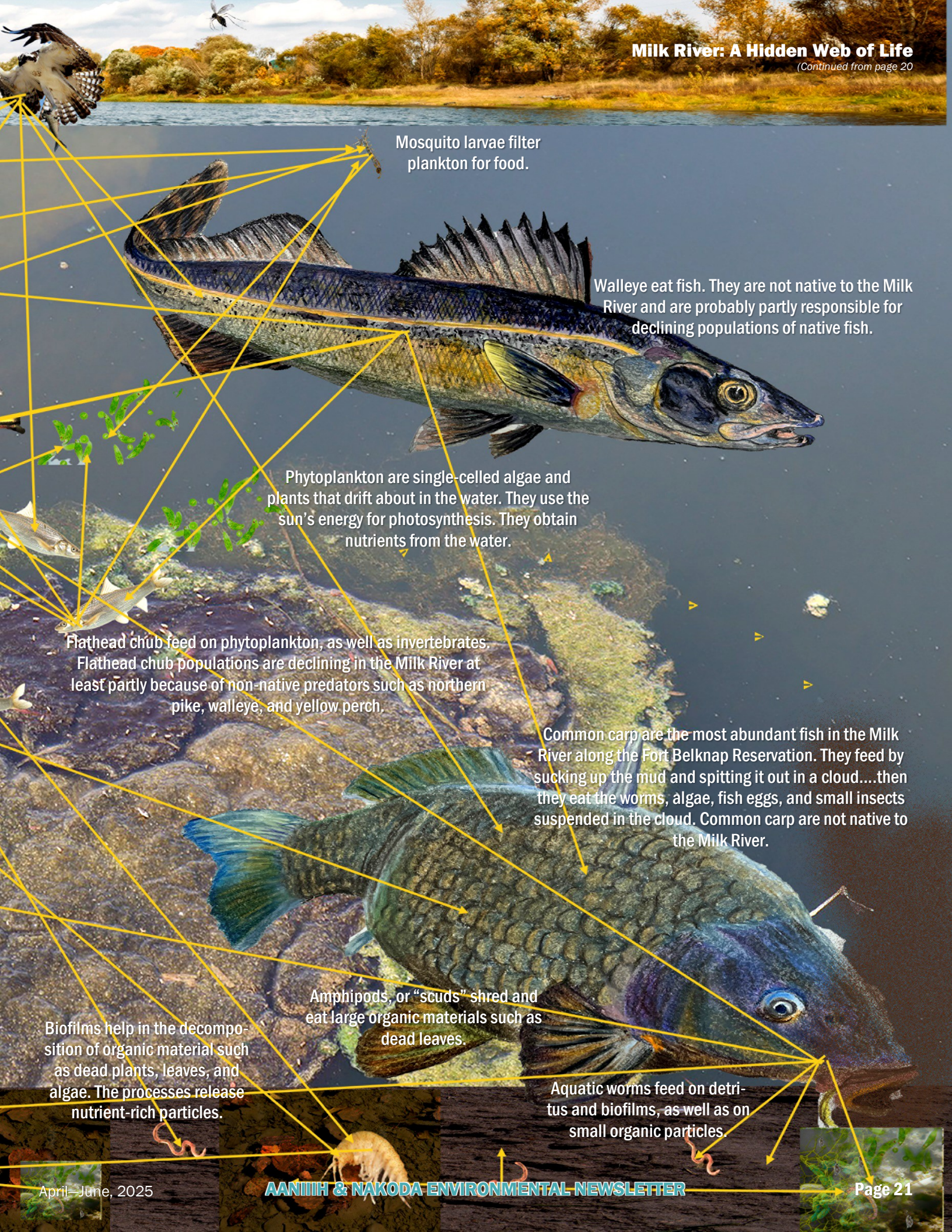
Milk River: A Hidden Web of Life

(Continued from page 19)



(Continued on page 21

(Continued from page 20



Aaniiih Nakoda College Featured on The College Tour

By Sarah Mosquera ♦ March 24, 2025
https://tribalcollegejournal.org/aaniiih-nakoda-college-featured-on-the-college-tour/

Aaniiih Nakoda College (ANC) is proud to announce that the college will be featured in the latest season of The College Tour, a groundbreaking series that showcases colleges and universities across the country. The episode is now available for streaming on ANC's website and on The College Tour website. The episode will also make its highly anticipated debut on Amazon Prime on May 27, 2025.

Filmed on the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation, the episode highlights the transformative impact of ANC's unique approach to education, blending Indigenous knowledge with Western academics. Through the voices of 10 students and alumni, viewers will gain firsthand insight into the college's deep sense of community, hands-on learning experiences, and the support systems that help students succeed.

"As Indian people, we experienced substandard education which is deeply tied to our historical trauma. ANC is a tool to rectify hundreds of years of that, rebuild our communities and ensure a brighter future for our next generations by providing quality, post-secondary education and community rooted in cultural revitalization," said sophomore Tylanna Adams during her segment.

Founded in 1983 to serve the Aaniinen and Nakoda Nations, ANC welcomes all students who seek a meaningful and culturally rich education. With small class sizes, dedicated faculty, and a commitment to student success, ANC prepares graduates for careers that strengthen their communities and beyond.

Don't miss the chance to experience ANC's story—watch the episode today and mark your calendars for the Amazon Prime premiere on May 27!

Governor appoints council members to MISC

MISC Newsletter <MISC@announcements.mt.gov> | Jun 30, 2025 | MISC June 2025 Bulletin

On June 17th Governor Gianforte announced the appointment of members to the Montana Invasive Species Council. These council members' terms run through May 1, 2029.

- Dylan Brown - Agriculture representative
- Martin Charlo - Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes representative
- Karen Laitala - County Weed Districts representative
- **Dennis Longknife Jr. - Fort Belknap Indian Community representative**
- Paul Rossignol - Wildlife Organization representative
- Pamela Schwend - Private Landowner representative
- Andy Welch - Hydropower Utility Industry representative

The directors of these State of Montana Departments named their designees to serve on the Montana Invasive Species Council.

- Taylor Tidwell - MT Department of Commerce
- Jake Chadwell - MT Department of Natural Resources & Conservation
- Tom Woolf - MT Fish, Wildlife & Parks

St. Mary diversion project restores water flow to Milk River

By: Tim McGonigal | Jun 25, 2025
https://www.krtv.com/neighborhood-news/hi-line/st-mary-diversion-project-restores-water-flow-to-milk-river

NEAR BABB — A $70 million project has successfully restored water flow to the Milk River along Montana's Hi-Line, providing relief to thousands who depend on it for drinking water and irrigation.

The century-old St. Mary siphon failed about a year ago, an event many had predicted. Since then, stakeholders including federal government agencies, tribal entities, and contractors have worked together to complete repairs ahead of schedule.

The Milk River Project posted on social media on Wednesday morning:

> *This morning Clayton started up the St. Mary Diversion Dam in Babb, MT—and by this afternoon, water should be flowing through the newly replaced St. Mary Siphons! What a journey it's been to get to this point. From emergency response to full rebuild, we've had an incredible team of partners, contractors, and supporters pushing every step of the way. THANK YOU to everyone who helped make this happen.*

"Every single agency stepped up and we all had one mission; there wasn't 100 different political reasons.

Milk River Project. Photo by: MTN News

We needed water back in this project, back to the Milk River. And that is everyone's goal. That's what's happening here today," said Jennifer Patrick of the Milk River Joint Board of Control.

(Continued on page 24)

St. Mary diversion project restores water flow to Milk River

(Continued from page 23)

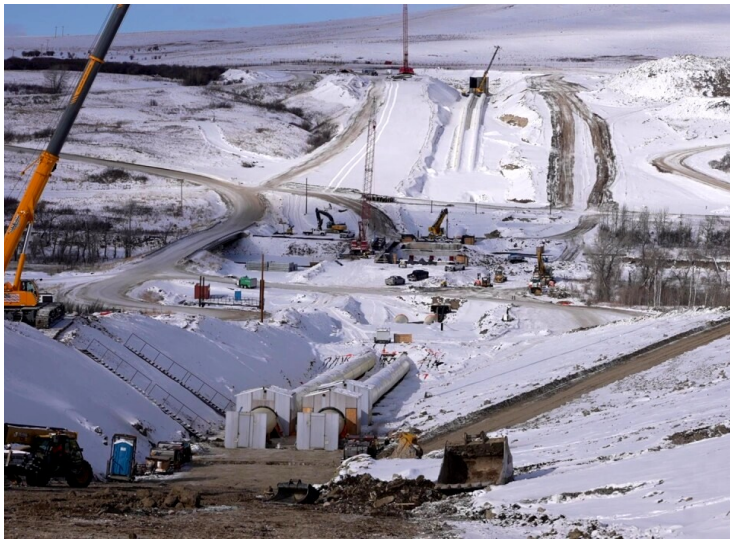
The Bureau of Reclamation's Steve Darlington highlighted the efficiency of the collaborative effort: "Due to the incredible work of the crews and all of our partnerships, we are, you know, almost three months ahead of schedule."

While this marks a significant milestone for the St. Mary siphon project, organizers say there is still substantial work ahead, though they remain confident in the progress made so far.

(FEBRUARY 7, 2025) On June 17, 2024, the St. Mary River Canal siphon suffered a catastrophic failure, causing the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation to take action.

Subzero temperatures and brutal winter conditions might slow down most projects, but not this one. Here at the Saint Mary's Siphon Repair project, crews are pushing forward with critical repairs despite the freezing cold.

Ian McIntosh, the Sletten project manager, said, "We're fighting through it, and keeping guys as warm as we can with heaters and everything, throughout the day. But it's challenging working in the winter in Montana. That's why we generally don't do it."



St. Mary Siphon repair project. MTN News

And it's not just cold fingers and toes that workers have to deal with. There are numerous construction challenges and accommodations.

Frozen ground and rock have made digging and backfill difficult, and they've had to use modified concrete mix.

Gary Lundberg, project inspector, said, "Frozen concrete just doesn't work. We've got to heat the concrete and make sure it doesn't freeze, and keeping that temperature up until you've got full strength is what we're doing."

Montana winter is not the only obstacle facing the project, which is funded by a mix of federal and state funds, with 52% of the project covered federally and 48% of the project covered by Montana stakeholders.

However, federal funds remain frozen due to the "Unleashing American Energy" Executive Order issued by President Donald Trump.

The Milk River Project Joint Board of Control told MTN News: "Despite this setback, the project team remains confident that the St. Mary Siphon Repair Project aligns with the order's objectives and continues to work diligently with federal agencies and congressional leaders to expedite the release of funds as soon as possible."

For now the project is moving forward without delays and funding interruptions, with state funds secured through a loan agreement under House Bill 6, passed during the 2023 Montana legislative session.

And on the ground in Babb, crews are working with a sense of urgency, knowing that thousands of people across north-central Montana rely on water from the Milk River Project for their livelihood.

Milk River St Mary Canal map. MTN News

(Continued on page 25)

St. Mary diversion project restores water flow to Milk River

(Continued from page 24)

Lundberg noted, "Yeah, everybody feels it, you know, and most of our employees live here on the reservation. And yeah, they want to get it get it going again."

McIntosh added, "It's pretty close to home, being from Chinook, so you got a lot of friends. And obviously my family still lives there. It's vital for people who live on the Hi-Line. I mean, there's not much water in Fresno right now, so getting the canal back going and getting the water there is vital to everybody who's irrigating, everybody who's living on the Hi-Line."

The timeline to restore water to the Milk River is late summer 2025.

From the Bureau of Reclamation website:

> *The St. Mary Diversion Dam and Canal were completed in 1915 as part of the Milk River Project (Project) in north-central Montana. The dam is located near Babb, MT and approximately 0.75 miles downstream from Lower St. Mary Lake. The existing dam consists of a 198-foot long and 6-foot-high concrete weir and sluiceway. It diverts water from the St. Mary River into the St. Mary Canal through the gated headworks structure for use by the Milk River Project.*

Here is a news release from the Milk River Project Joint Board of Control:

> *St. Mary Siphon Repair Moves Forward Despite Harsh Winter*
>
> *Despite the biting cold of Montana's northern tundra, work on the St. Mary Siphon Repair Project is pushing ahead. While progress has slowed slightly due to winter conditions, construction crews remain dedicated to the critical infrastructure project, ensuring that the Milk River Project continues to serve the region's communities.*
>
> *Steady Progress in Tough Conditions*
>
> *Construction teams have been making significant headway in recent months, with all contractors on site hailing from Montana. NW Construction, based in Bozeman, is leading the siphon replacement, working alongside Pro-Pipe Construction from Frenchtown, which is handling the intricate welding of the massive 90-inch steel siphons. So far, 3,900 feet of the planned 6,444 feet have been installed, with steady progress continuing despite the challenges of frozen ground and unpredictable weather. NW Construction crews are also tackling the rocky terrain, installing a vital drainage system around the pipes to ensure long-term durability.*
>
> *Meanwhile, work on the bridge has resumed, with Sletten Construction, out of Great Falls, assembling the crucial structure that will support the siphon as it spans the St. Mary River. The arrival of girders, steel plates, and cradles has allowed construction to move forward, with True North Steel in Billings fabricating the steel components and accelerating production to keep the project on track. With all materials now onsite, Sletten's crew is making swift progress, and the bridge is expected to be completed by early spring, marking another critical milestone in the broader siphon rehabilitation effort.*
>
> *Another critical component the NW Construction and Sletten Construction have teamed up on is the inlet and outlet structures, re-designed by HDR Engineering to handle the extreme hydraulic pressures at varying flow rates. These structures are substantial, with 40-foot walls at the inlet, making them a significant focus of current construction efforts. Given the freezing temperatures, special measures—including blanketing, heating, and modified concrete mix designs—are being used to maintain the integrity of the pours. So far, test results indicate that these techniques are working as planned.*
>
> *While the original timeline remains set for late summer, crews are working diligently to accelerate progress wherever possible, with the goal of restoring water to the Milk River as quickly as possible. Every effort is being made to keep construction moving efficiently, and the team remains hopeful that they will be able to bring good news to the Milk River Valley in the coming*

(Continued on page 26)

(Continued from page 25)

months regarding the schedules.

Local Workforce and Tribal Participation

The labor force on the St. Mary Siphon Repair Project has been nothing short of exceptional, demonstrating both skill and unwavering commitment despite the harsh winter conditions. With normal construction activity slowing in the region for winter, the Tribal Employment Resource Office (TERO) has stepped up to provide a highly skilled workforce from the Blackfeet Tribe, ensuring that momentum on this critical project remains strong. Currently, around 30 tribal members are working across multiple companies and compliance offices, contributing their expertise to various aspects of construction. Their dedication has not only bolstered productivity but also reinforced the collaborative spirit that is driving this project forward. As integral members of the team, these workers both tribal and non-tribal are playing a crucial role in keeping progress steady—even in the face of frozen ground, biting winds, and the many challenges of building in Montana in the middle of winter.

Securing Funding for the Project's Future

When construction began, funding uncertainty was one of the most pressing challenges for completing the St. Mary Siphon Repair Project. Ensuring that the necessary resources were in place quickly became a top priority for the Milk River Joint Board of Control (MRJBOC) and the Bureau of Reclamation, preventing potential delays that could jeopardize the project's progress and further delays for water delivers.

One of the first key steps was transferring project management to the MRJBOC, which allowed the project to qualify for a 35% cost reduction under Qualified Emergency Extraordinary Maintenance (EXM) funding. This restructured the cost breakdown, with 52% of the funding covered federally and 48% shouldered by project stakeholders.

To secure the federal portion, the Bureau of Reclamation applied for funding through the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law – Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, while project beneficiaries worked with the State of Montana – Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC) to fund the remaining share of the $70 million siphon project.

In an effort to further reduce costs for project beneficiaries, Montana's Congressional Delegation—led by Senator Jon Tester, Senator Steve Daines, and Congressman Ryan Zinke—collaborated with appropriations staff to secure additional funding through the Continuing Budget Resolution (CR) Disaster Supplemental Funding. This critical funding assistance was intended to ease the financial burden on local stakeholders. This funding effort successfully secured an additional $46.5 million, with $10 million specifically allocated to support the St. Mary Diversion Dam replacement project. This critical investment will help advance the long-term sustainability of the Milk River Project, ensuring that both the siphon rehabilitation and St. Mary Diversion Dam replacement move forward as efficiently as possible.

However, while the funding has been secured, accessing it has proven to be more complicated. A significant hurdle has emerged, as federal funds from the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, which were expected to fully cover the project, remain frozen due to the Executive Order "Unleashing American Energy," issued by President Donald Trump. This directive mandates a review of all federal funding before disbursement, resulting in a temporary delay in releasing the necessary funds.

Despite this setback, the project team remains confident that the St. Mary Siphon Repair Project aligns with the order's objectives and continues to work diligently with federal agencies and congressional leaders to expedite the release of funds as soon as possible.

Keeping the Project Moving Forward

To keep construction on track and prevent delays, work on critical components of the Milk

(Continued on page 27)

(Continued from page 26)

River Project continues without funding interruption, made possible by funding secured through the State of Montana's loan agreement under House Bill 6. Senator Mike Lang and Representative Paul Tuss played a pivotal role in advocating for this funding in 2023, ensuring these essential upgrades could move forward.

Under this loan agreement, all Milk River Project irrigation districts agree to contribute $3 per acre over 50 years, to a dedicated savings account for future maintenance needs. These funds will be managed by the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC) exclusively for the Milk River Joint Board of Control (MRJBOC) and will accrue interest, further strengthening the project's long-term sustainability.

If all anticipated funding is released as appropriated, approximately $212 million will be available for the Milk River Project, ensuring that critical infrastructure improvements move forward as planned. The top priorities for funds include the St. Mary Diversion Dam, St. Mary Siphon, and Halls Coulee Siphon.

The Halls Coulee Siphon replacement, scheduled for 2025-2026, will be constructed adjacent to the existing structure to maintain water flow once the St. Mary Siphon is completed. A similar strategy is being used for the St. Mary Diversion Dam, where a bypass channel has been installed to keep water flowing throughout construction. The St. Mary Diversion Dam replacement itself is planned as a three-year project, ensuring long-term reliability for the Milk River Project and its users.

Once federal funding is released, the project team will reassess the best use of any excess state funds, prioritizing additional improvements along the canal system and at Fresno Reservoir to increase storage capacity. This strategic reinvestment ensures that every dollar is maximized, reinforcing the long-term reliability and sustainability of the Milk River Project for future generations.

Legislative Action on Ft. Belknap Compact

Efforts to secure long-term stability for the Milk River Project also took a major step forward last month. On January 24, 2025, Senator Steve Daines, with co-sponsorship from Senator Tim Sheehy, introduced the Ft. Belknap Compact (S.241), which has been referred to the Committee on Indian Affairs.

The Compact includes $275 million for the St. Mary Project, a critical investment that will help maintain the Milk River Project's viability following the development of the Tribal Water Right. These funds will support expanded water storage and full rehabilitation of the St. Mary Canal, ensuring the system remains effective for years to come. Since the Milk River Project is a federal project, Congressional authorization is required before these improvements can move forward as mitigation to the implementation of the Ft. Belknap Compact.

Follow Along for Updates

As work continues, the Milk River Joint Board of Control is committed to keeping the public informed. Weekly updates and photos are available on the Milk River Project Facebook page, and additional information can be found on the www.milkriverproject.com website.

Despite the harsh winter conditions and funding hurdles, construction crews remain steadfast, pushing forward through freezing temperatures, rugged terrain, and logistical challenges to keep the St. Mary Siphon Repair Project on track. With unwavering dedication from contractors, tribal workforce members, and project stakeholders, steady progress continues. As funding efforts persist and on-the-ground work advances, the team remains fully committed to delivering this critical infrastructure project—ensuring the Milk River Project's long-term reliability for generations to come.

KRTV 3 GREAT FALLS

Fort Belknap Indian Community
ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION DEPARTMENT
Fort Belknap Agency
656 Agency Main Street
Harlem, Montana 59526

FBEPD Directory:

Ina Nez Perce
Environmental Manager
inperce@ftbelknap.org
(406) 353-8429

Lonette BlackCrow
Administrative Assistant
lonettebc@ftbelknap.org
(406) 353-8384

Mitchell Healy
Water Quality Coordinator
mitchell.healy@ftbelknap.org
(406) 353-8433

Jeremy Walker
Environmental Specialist
jeremy.walker@ftbelknap.org
(406) 353-8465

Cody Shambo
GIS Technician
cody.shambo@ftbelknap.org
(406) 353-8412

Shelby Main
Nonpoint Source Coordinator
shelby.main@ftbelknap.org
(406) 353-8416

Adrian Kulbeck
Brownfields Coordinator
adrian.kulbeck@ftbelknap.org
(406) 353-8411

Kermit Snow, Jr.
Environmental Compliance Officer
ksnow@ftbelknap.org
(406) 353-8368

Megan Martin
Brownfields Environmental Technician
megan.martin@ftbelknap.org
(406) 353-8431

Dennis Longknife, Jr.
RMP Project Coordinator
dlongknife@ftbelknap.org
(406) 353-8348

Austin After Buffalo
RMP Project Assistant (Temp)
afterbuffaloaustin@gmail.com
(406) 353-8348

Circle Speaker

Aaniiih & Nakoda Environmental Newsletter

VOLUME 29, ISSUE 4
(July-September, 2025)

Deadline for Articles is Friday, September 5th, 2025 @ 5:00 p.m.

Articles can be emailed to: lonettebc@ftbelknap.org

To allow time for editing and layout of the newsletter, articles must be submitted on time in order to be considered for publication. Articles received after this deadline will be considered for the following issue. All articles submitted are subject to review and approval.

Find our newsletters on https://**ftbelknap.org**/forms%2Fdocuments (EPA)