

Taylre Sitz was one of the “Ranchkids” who helped out at the dinner!



photo by Dennis Loreth

Ranchlands Quest

Working collaboratively to enhance production agriculture, open space, resource stewardship, wildlife, and habitat management.

Newsletter of the
Madison Valley Ranchlands Group
Volume 7 - Issue 2 - Fall 2008

10TH ANNUAL NOXIOUS WEED FUNDRAISER A HUGE SUCCESS

Thank you to all of our donors, sponsors and volunteers

The Weed Committee celebrated its 10th Annual Noxious Weed Fundraiser at the Sun Ranch, home of the 1st ever weeds fundraiser 10 years ago!

Thank you Madison Valley for another spectacular event! Hosted by Roger Lang at the Sun Ranch on August 23, the 10th Anniversary MVRG Noxious Weed Fundraiser was a huge success. Near the Buffalo Jump at the Madison River, socializing, live and silent auction bidding, and a wonderful dinner were enjoyed by over 350 attendees. Without the continued support of local businesses, private landowners and individuals, ranchers and volunteers the event would not be possible. This year was no exception, and the Sun Ranch was the perfect setting to

celebrate ten years of aggressive weed management and treatment within the Madison Valley.

Funds raised at this year’s annual Noxious Weed Fundraiser will be used to support the MVRG Weed Committee’s activities in the coming year. The committee will work to leverage these funds to bring additional dollars into the valley; for noxious weed education, on the ground weed treatment and to provide cost-share to private landowners. In 2008 the Weed Committee has facilitated and/or participated in a number of weed control and educational projects, with total project budgets in excess of \$1.3 million. For more information about the committee or its activities please call 682-3731.

From left, Larry Zabel, Roger Lang, Lane Adamson and John Crumley stand beside Larry Zabel’s donated original painting “Wolf Talk at Wolf Creek” that was sold during the Live Auction



photo by Dennis Loreth

MVRG ANNUAL MEETING

The annual membership meeting of the MVRG was held June 19th at Lion's Park in Ennis. It was a beautiful, dry evening with no wind. In the past, the annual membership meeting has been held the second Thursday of January. It was a pleasant change this year to avoid the 20 below weather. The Lion's Club barbecued hamburgers and hot dogs for the event. The hamburger, which was natural grass-fed beef, was provided by Crumley Ranches. Germann Ranches provided all natural beef hot dogs and Hollowtop Ranch provided some all natural pork and beef hot dogs.



One topic of discussion during the evening was the Range Rider program which is beginning its fourth season. Jim and Marilyn Powers are the Range Riders here in the Madison Valley. They provide a presence and buffer between wolves and livestock for many of the local ranchers. In the past, the funding for this program has been arranged by Keystone Conservation. They have allocated that funding this year for other Range Rider programs and so we are working to raise funding to cover those costs ourselves. It costs \$16,000 a year for the riders. We are close to having half of the funding raised for this year.

MVRG strives to facilitate community participation in discussions regarding local natural resource issues. Through the Madison Growth Solutions process there has been over three years of forums and other educational activities addressing growth and the Madison Valley. As a result of forums last summer and fall, citizens requested that the county look at streamside protection beyond what the subdivision review process covers. A draft ordinance was created for citizens

to consider and work from to come up with something that was well supported for all members of the community. There have been some misunderstandings and misinformation concerning the intent of the Madison Growth Solutions process and the part which the Madison Valley Ranchlands Group plays in that process. Good governance comes from a well informed citizenry who choose to be involved in addressing local issues. The Growth Solutions process has made the effort to provide that opportunity for community participation in dialogue regarding growth and its impact on the valley and its citizens. MVRG, as a 501 C 3 non-profit, has administered funds which were granted or donated for this educational purpose. Linda Dyk, a MVRG board member, clarified the agenda of the MVRG. She said, "Our agenda as an organization is to facilitate and encourage community participation in finding well supported and substantiated solutions to all community issues which will impact the future of ranching."

The question was asked during the evening concerning what stand MVRG has taken regarding the recent incident of brucellosis in the Paradise Valley and the subsequent loss of brucellosis free status for the state of Montana. As an organization we don't generally issue a statement of policy on behalf of the members. The brucellosis issue will have a huge financial impact on livestock producers throughout the state and should be addressed decisively. Brucellosis is harbored in Yellowstone Park and on Wyoming feed grounds through poor or inappropriate management practices. The Park Service, US Department of Agriculture, Idaho, Wyoming and Montana state governments need to formulate and implement a proactive program to address the elimination of brucellosis from wildlife. We encourage MVRG members to participate in supporting a common sense and responsible effort to accomplish this.



Living with wildlife workshops

On July 10th, more than 50 people gathered at the equestrian center at Sun West Ranch to learn more about living with wildlife. There are challenges to living in an area frequented by bears, wolves and other critters. Val Asher, who is one of five wolf specialists for Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks, discussed the current wolf management situation in Montana. She also discussed the nature and sociality of wolves and how they interact with humans and domestic pets. Tim Bennett works for US Forest Service and is their bear specialist in the area. He gave an energetic presentation on how to avoid problems with bears while hiking or at your residence. There is an increasing number of black and grizzly bears in the Madison valley. That number will likely increase in the future. James Stuart, manager of the Sun Ranch, had examples of different types of fencing typically used in the valley. He discussed with participants the functionality of various types of fencing. Some types of fencing have a lower impact on migrating wildlife. Scott McClintic of the Madison Rural Volunteer Fire Department, Joe Husar, Madison County Fire Mitigation Officer and John Agner from the US Forest Service presented information on wildfire and private/public lands interface. Their information related to creating defensible space for those living in that interface. Following the workshop there was a barbecue. There will be another Living With Wildlife Workshop for the residents of the northern part of the Madison Valley in September.

TOO MUCH OF A GOOD THING?



Visitors and residents of the valley are used to seeing lots of wildlife on the landscape. One of the shared values of folks who spend time here is the numbers and variety of wildlife. People often see elk, deer and antelope giving birth to their young here in the spring and then enjoy watching them grow up during the summer. We are fortunate to live in such a biologically abundant valley. As the wildlife populations continue to increase along with the number of human residents of the area, how do we determine the appropriate balance?

The situation with the wolves in Montana, Idaho and Wyoming certainly raises the question of how much of a good thing is enough. The Endangered Species Act was utilized to justify bringing Canadian wolves into Yellowstone Park and northern Idaho. In 2002 the population goal was achieved for sustainable wolf populations in the three states. In early 2008 the wolves were delisted by the Federal government. Several conservation and environmental groups promptly sued the government saying they didn't feel there were enough wolves yet. It makes you wonder who is in charge. From December 2006 through December 2007, there was a 34% increase in the number of wolves in Montana. During that same period of time there was an increase of 280% in wolf depredations on livestock in Montana. Who is carrying the financial burden in this philosophical discussion about enough? Be assured unequivocally that the livestock producers who lost livestock were not compensated for all of their losses. If the livestock producers are not key in the decision making process about wolf numbers in the various states, then we don't have a collaborative or equitable process for wildlife management.

Elk numbers have continued to increase over the past 40 years in the Madison

Valley. This increase has been more significant since the late 1980's and early 1990's. There has been some debate as to the cause of those increases in population. Regardless of the causes, there are more elk in the valley now than ever before. The people population of Madison county was at its highest in 1900 with 7,695 residents. The 2006 census shows 7,404 people in Madison county and we are increasing at the rate of 8% per year. Back in 1900 when we had about the same amount of people that we have now there were hardly any wildlife in the valley. People ate deer, elk and antelope along with other types of critters. So, today we are looking at a situation that we have not had to deal with before. We have an increasing population of people and an increasing population of wildlife. Where and when do we reach an equilibrium that works for both people and wildlife. It is not likely we will put up a sign saying we are not going to allow more new move-ins. We better find some realistic and innovative ways to avoid the impending train wreck between the key species here in the valley.



The majority of the landowners on the east side of the Madison who raise or run livestock are presently participating in a collaborative effort to achieve some kind of a solution to this increasing dilemma. The economic impact of present elk numbers is becoming overwhelming for some of these landowners. The loss of forage, fence damage, and increased labor is more than should be born by a few for the benefit of many others. There need to be equitable and sustainable management

practices implemented to benefit everyone. That is a huge challenge. Some hunters and sportsmen along with some residents would like to see even more wildlife numbers. Hunters contend that hunting is a right guaranteed by the constitution of Montana, and they are right. Some landowners that may not be involved in production agriculture may feel that the forage they raise can be used to support increasing wildlife numbers. Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks is mandated to manage wildlife numbers within the parameters of the resources to sustain appropriate numbers. But, they do not have the financial resources to merely balance the biological budget according to supply and demand. Land owner tolerance and social acceptance operate outside the realm of biological criteria and make it much more difficult to achieve a win-win solution.

When you throw brucellosis into this mix, with its financial implications, then the challenge becomes much more complex. Brucellosis is a human health issue under federal management. Elk and bison are under Park Service management, state management and federal management depending where they are in time and space. If it were strictly up to the state to manage the dynamics of the wildlife and brucellosis issue, there would probably be a solution by now or, if it were up to just the ranchers. But, when you mix them all together and ask for a collaborative solution, you better be an eternal optimist.

What we hope is clear in looking at the incredible wildlife and other resources of the valley, is that it is a complex and dynamic situation. Any good solutions will be determined through open and honest participation by all stakeholders. If you live here you are obviously a stakeholder. But what about those who visit or come here to appreciate what others may take

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Streamside Protection

Throughout Montana there is an increasing interest and effort in streamside protection. The drought of recent years, the wildfires of the past, ever increasing growth along stream corridors, energy exploration and out of state demands for water have all raised the awareness of the limited and fragile nature of our local water resources. The Governor has convened a Task Force on Riparian and Wetland Protection to address a growing concern for our water resources. There has been a legal process going on since 1973 to reassess the adjudication of water rights in the state.

In August of 2007 there was a Water Summit held in Ennis to provide appropriate information regarding water issues in the valley. Other watershed communities have addressed similar concerns and have taken various steps to find solutions to the challenges. Some have implemented stream setbacks to prevent further encroachment and degradation of water quality and riparian health. Some have ignored the situation. Some have utilized other regulatory tools to achieve their goals. It seems logical that the more good information we can obtain from other citizens and scientists in their efforts to achieve similar goals regarding streamside protection, the more informed we could be in addressing our concerns.

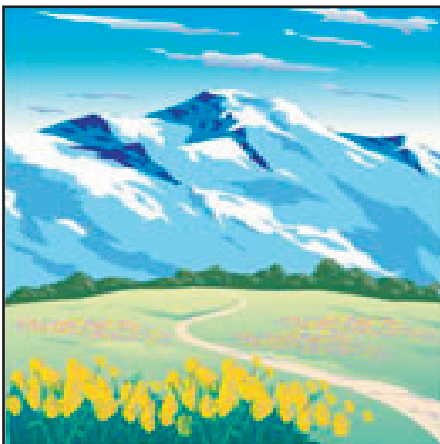
Many streams have adjudicated water rights which exceed the flow. As growth continues and more farm and ranch lands are converted to residential and urban use, the water rights which were essential for agricultural production are no longer needed under the new use. The water rights can be bought and sold. If a farmer or rancher sells his land for residential development he can also sell the water right to the highest bidder. This is happening in Colorado and other states right now. The water right is more valuable than the land. Water rights can be sold to municipalities down stream or even on the other side of a mountain. When water is used for irrigation purposes within a watershed, a good portion of the water returns to the streams as recharge. This keeps the wildlife habitat and fisheries viable and productive. When a water right is sold beyond the watershed it is 100% gone and will never provide any natural recharge. This can have a devastating impact on local wildlife and fishery dynamics. When Montana was first settled it was an arid landscape. These high mountain valleys were not productive until irrigation was implemented. If all of the landscape is converted to non-agricultural use then the water rights go somewhere else and the land will once again become arid.

There are many who do not understand the big picture implications of growth in our valley. Growth will continue to occur and it can be a great boon to the economy. If we sit back and take no thought for future implications and impacts which growth will continue to have on those aspects of our valley which we value the most, then we will lose many of those valued aspects just as they have and are being lost in other communities and watersheds around the west. If we are only concerned about our own property and our own use of it, then we will probably regret what this valley looks like in 25 or 50 years. Most of us won't be around to see those outcomes but our children and grandchildren may wish we had been more thoughtful concerning the future. If we all work together to insure that growth occurs in a manner that does not degrade or impair our landscape and streamside areas, we will maintain the natural beauty and function of our watershed.

Let us be wise enough to prepare for the future rather than falling into the trap of instant gratification for selfish reasons.

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Too Much of a Good Thing?



for granted? What about those who never come here but donate to conservation groups who do research to find better ways to conserve and restore a fragile and sometimes impaired ecosystem? What about those who work for conservation organizations who work on a much broader landscape to understand how various watersheds and beyond interact for the health of all the resources? What about agency personnel who are often mandated to make stewardship decisions which impact this valley? Local issues will be best resolved by the participation of local people, but not to the exclusion of all the other stakeholders who can bring to bear experience and resources far beyond local potential. Local citizens should provide the leadership and passion to address issues equitably while benefitting from the myriad of stakeholders who may appreciate from afar but love the place just as much. The key is the true engagement of local community members who are unafraid to learn and benefit from other valid stakeholders.

Cows Eat Weeds!

A press release recently ran in several Montana newspapers

Three-hundred twenty cows and 38 bison on six Madison County ranches are the latest recruits in the war on weeds in Montana. They were trained to eat Canada thistle as part of the “We’d Eat It!” project sponsored and coordinated by the Madison Valley Ranchlands Group’s Weed Committee and the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). The trained cows are now grazing their pastures in search of that noxious weed.

“We are always looking for more cost effective tools for managing noxious weeds,” said Melissa Griffiths, project coordinator. “As prices for fuel and chemicals continue to increase, it makes sense for us to solve our weed problems by turning all our cattle into weed managers.”

“It was easy and fun,” said Brett Owens, of Owens Ranch in McAllister, Montana of the training. His herd of twenty-one also learned to eat musk thistle and spotted knapweed.

Alder rancher Steve Wood noted that the steers that simply pastured next to his “trained” heifers also started eating Canada thistle. He said, “Even if they don’t eat it all, they’re eating 200% more than they did. I’m tickled.”

Craig Woodson sees potential profit in his small herd of Canada thistle eating heifers. “It’s possible we could rent them out to neighbors who have weed problems on small properties but have no cows of their own,” he said.

This isn’t the first time cattle in Montana have been turned into weed managers, but it is the first time it’s been done on such a large scale or with bison. Kathy Voth of Livestock for Landscapes developed the steps to train cows to eat Canada thistle, leafy spurge and spotted knapweed in a pilot project at Grant-Kohrs Ranch National Historic Site in Deer Lodge in 2004.

Now Voth can train cows to start eating weeds in a matter of days by introducing unfamiliar nutritious foods, and by day five, adding the selected weed. She has trained cows in Montana, California and Colorado to include a variety of thistles, knapweeds, and mustards in their diet. “For less than \$200 in materials and ten to twelve hours of my time, I can teach about 50 cows to eat a new weed, and they will teach their calves and they’ll teach their herd mates, and at that point we have a whole weed eating army going out there,” said Voth.

Most weeds are actually high in nutritional value and Voth has found that cows gain weight at normal to better than expected rates while grazing weeds in pasture. “We are truly excited by the results of this project and will incorporate the technique as part of our Conservation Planning efforts throughout Madison County”, stated Marni Thompson, the local District Conservationist for NRCS in Sheridan, MT.

This year’s project was funded in part through a Conservation Innovation Grant from the NRCS. “NRCS was an invaluable partner on this project, providing local leadership as well as technical and field assistance. We’re looking at additional funding opportunities as a way of adding more ranches and a monitoring component to the project next year,” said Griffiths.

The Madison Valley Ranchlands Group’s Weed Committee was formed in 1999 to address invasive plant concerns in the Madison Valley. They work to promote noxious weed awareness and education through a variety of projects and partnerships. The committee also facilitates on the ground projects by working collaboratively with private individuals, organizations and agencies.



“Trained” cows eat Canada Thistle



Thistle that has been grazed



2009 Weed Calendars Are Available!

MVRG Weed Committee calendars featuring scenery from the Madison Valley and noxious weed education are still available. Calendars can be purchased by visiting local businesses or by calling 682-3731. We will gladly ship calendars anywhere in the United States.

WEED COMMITTEE UPDATE

Here's a glimpse at what we've been up to this summer. We will provide final project summaries as they are completed later this fall.

EQIP – The Weed Committee was pleased to facilitate the first year of the EQIP Special Weed Project Initiative in Madison County. Landowners within the project area near Harrison have been working on treating their weeds throughout the summer. While there is still some fall work to be done, they have done a great job in tackling their weeds and making a real difference on the landscape. This grant is funded by the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), and participating landowners will receive weed control cost-share for a period of seven years. This long term commitment and landscape-scale approach are an exciting way to make a real impact on weed populations within a geographic area.



MVRG "Ranchkids" and students working with the Insectary collect bio-control agents, aka 'Bugs', near Darby this summer

Insectary- The Madison County Bio-Control Project was busy this year, collecting and re-distributing insects to interested landowners. They were thrilled to find several new sites within the County where insect populations were robust enough to allow collection and distribution elsewhere. The success of this project increases yearly and the committee is happy to be a partner in this project that provides a valuable service to county residents.

DOA River Grant- Several miles of the upper Madison River was treated by a commercial applicator as part of a project funded by the MT Department of Agriculture's Noxious Weed Trust Fund. This project also provided cost-share for many private landowners in the Madison Valley treating noxious weeds on their property.

National Forest Foundation Grant "Bear Creek Project Area" – The committee is still in the process of working with private and public landowners in the Bear Creek area to address the growing yellow toadflax population. The goal is to control this relatively new invader before it spreads further into other areas, including the neighboring Lee Metcalf Wilderness Area.



Will Hogan of Heli-works refuels while spraying weeds near Harrison this spring

Sheep Pilot Grazing Project – The project continued this year, facilitating sheep grazing as a weed control tool along eight miles of the Madison River. Project partners include the Montana Sheep Institute, MT FWP, BLM, Missouri-Madison River Fund, Madison County and the Weed Committee. To date the project has seen a marked decrease in spotted knapweed within the project area.



River Fund- As a result of funding from the Missouri-Madison River Fund and PPL MT, the weed committee was able to contract with TKO Invasive Weed Management to treat weeds at 10 different fishing access sites along the Madison River, as well as several miles of river frontage. Additionally, the committee produced and published a brochure and poster addressing noxious weeds along the river and ways that we all can work together to control the further spread of invasives.

Save the Date!
Cheatgrass Seminar
Tuesday, September 23
6-8 p.m.
Ennis Fire Hall
sponsored by
TKO Invasive Weed Mgmt
and Wilbur Ellis
co-sponsored by
Harrison Elevator and
MVRG Weed Committee

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Come and learn about new options and information for cheatgrass management. Dinner provided by Wilbur Ellis Co. RSVP no later than Saturday, September 20 to 682-3022 or 682-3149. For more information call TKO at 682-3022.



Madison Valley Award

The Greater Yellowstone Coalition holds its annual meeting each June. This year they awarded their community activism award to residents of the Madison Valley. For the past three years there has been a series of community forums examining the nature and impact of growth in the Madison Valley. Growth has a significant impact on all of the natural and community resources. Those folks who live and recreate in this valley have indicated a concern and interest in learning from the experiences of others who have already seen much growth in their own areas across the west. To be forewarned is to be forearmed. The mission of GYC is to help conserve

the incredible resources in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem. Part of this interest is to see communities participate in determining how best to address the many issues related to that mission. People are the key species in conservation. The passion and perspective of community stakeholders who work together for the common good of landscapes is dependant upon valid information and open mindedness. Success is measured by the ability of stakeholders to focus on common ground issues and leave the issues where there is not agreement for another day and time. People and organizations learn from experience and change their views on issues in accordance with their understanding from an ever dynamic educational process called life. This award is a recognition of those who are unafraid of addressing change on their own ground. As residents and participants in the Madison Valley we thank GYC for their leadership and passion. We also commend them for their willingness to listen to those who may not always agree with them about various issues.

Will you join us in our efforts?

The Madison Valley Ranchlands Group works to protect the ranching way of life and the biologically healthy open spaces on which ranching depends.

Yes! I want to help the Madison Valley Ranchlands Group.

Please accept my tax deductible contribution of :

___ \$25 - \$100 ___ \$125 - \$250 ___ \$275 - \$500 ___ \$1,000
___ \$5,000 ___ \$10,000 ___ \$25,000 ___ other

**annual membership dues are \$25*

NAME _____

ADDRESS _____

CITY _____ STATE _____ ZIP _____

PHONE _____ EMAIL _____

PLEASE MAKE CHECKS PAYABLE TO:

MVRG - P.O. BOX 330 - ENNIS, MT 59729

(406) 682 - 3259 MVRANCH@3RIVERS.NET

The Madison Valley Ranchlands Group is a 501(c) 3 nonprofit organization and deeply appreciates your financial support!



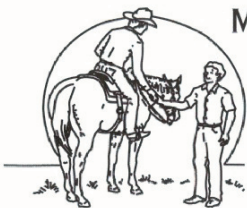
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*Kay Willett and
Dave Schulz sell
tickets for the
Buffalo Skull Raffle*

*Glimpses of
the 10th
Annual
Noxious Weed
Fundraiser*



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