

A man with a beard, wearing a red jacket, is looking through yellow binoculars. He is standing in a field with tall grass. Other people are partially visible in the background.

**November  
2014 Edition**

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## **ROUNDUP**

**MOSS  
Brings  
Outdoor  
Science to  
Brorson**

See page 4

**Farm & Ranch  
Monthly Magazine**

Published monthly by The Roundup  
PO Box 1207 • Sidney, MT 59270 • 1-800-749-3306



# Jones Retires After 34 Years at Sidney Sugars



**Jones looks forward to his final harvest amid a sugar beet field north of Sidney.**

**By Meagan Dotson**

After 34 years at Sidney Sugars, Randy Jones is working his last harvest. He will be retiring from his position as the Ag Finance Superintendent to enjoy his family, hobbies and volunteer work.

"I'm 67 years old and it's time to step aside and do some of the things I've missed out on like pheasant hunting which is always during harvest season. It's time to let younger people step in and take over," says Jones about his decision to retire.

The factory employs about 230 people during the harvest season, and Jones' final harvest is expected to be a record year. A potential twenty-nine tons of beets per acre could be harvested this fall.

Jones originally moved to Sidney from Northern Wyoming to work for Holly Sugar and over the years he has seen his fair share of changes. When Jones started the factory was owned by Holly Sugar; it was later acquired by Imperial Sugar and is currently Sidney Sugars which is owned by American Crystal Sugar located in the Red River Valley in North Dakota.

Other than the changes in ownership, Jones notes that the biggest developments over the years have been in the growing process. It used to be that farmers seeded beets two inches apart and then hand-thinned them to six inches apart, which involved hiring additional people to work in the fields. Approximately 20 years ago, all of that

changed; beets are now planted four and three-quarter inches to five inches apart which is a much better method as it eliminates the need for thinning and is more cost effective. Planting Roundup Ready Beets (beets that are genetically engineered to withstand the herbicide roundup) has also been a major improvement in the growing process. Beet fields no longer need to be sprayed numerous times with six or seven different types of herbicide.

In addition to his job, Jones has been a judge of the Make it With Sugar contest every year since it began. While he has always enjoyed sampling the tasty entries, he has really appreciated getting the recipes, too. After being a long-standing judge, Jones does admit that he's looking forward to entering in the contest next year.

His current job will be split into two positions. Cheryl Riedel will take over the administrative work such as grower payments and doing the purchasing for the Ag Department. Vanessa Pooch is an agriculturalist who will be overseeing the Tare Lab.

"It's been a great 34 years. I've worked with a lot of great people, both growers and employees," Jones says of his career at Sidney Sugars and he admits he will miss it. However he is looking forward to enjoying his pastimes.

His plans for retirement include hunting, fishing, woodworking, and gardening. Jones also plans on volunteering at the local food bank and spending lots of time with his family as his two daughters and six grandkids all live in the area.



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# MOSS Brings Fun-Filled Opportunity to Brorson Elementary



Brorson students prepare for a fun afternoon of exploration.



Casey Dilg discusses why a bear's pelt is a beneficial adaptation.



Sarah Normandeau helps Brorson students study samples.



Brorson students look on as observational backpacks are handed out.

**By Meagan Dotson**

The Montana Outdoor Science School (MOSS) out of Bozeman visited Brorson Elementary on Monday, October 13<sup>th</sup> and Tuesday, October 14<sup>th</sup>. MOSS is a privately funded science program that goes into schools across the state teaching the global leadership concept of science, technology, engineering and mathematics. MOSS brings a hands-on approach pairing lab studies in the classroom with field science. The no-textbook method encourages kids to explore science in the world around them.

"MOSS's main goal is connecting students with the outdoors," says Sarah Normandeau, who has been with the program for three years. "We want them to be connecting what they learn in school with what they're observing outside."

Topics covered were aquatic plants, photosynthesis, animal tracking, renewable resources and predators.

The students were separated into two groups; kindergartners through third-graders focused on sustainable energy, while fourth through sixth graders studied airborne engineers relating to a predator unit. Students studied how flight for birds of prey such as hawks and eagles differed from the flight of other birds.

The younger group had in class lab studies with Casey Dilg who has been with MOSS for about six months. Students studied a bear pelt and discussed how the animal's hide would benefit it in ways such as keeping it warm and protecting it from elements of nature as well as competing predators. The children drew pictures of animals with adaptations and were asked to explain why those adaptations would benefit it. Dilg also discussed how an adaptation could benefit an animal in more than one way, such as the spots on a peacock being beneficial to both scare predators and attract females. He explained that certain adaptations can be used for entirely

different purposes in varying species, for instance a predator's speed allows it to catch its prey while a prey's speed allows it to avoid predators. The involved method of teaching allowed kids to both answer and ask the questions of why and how do things in nature work.

With the instruction of Normandeau, fourth through sixth graders studied samples, attempting to determine what each sample was and where it had come from. The class discussed different elements of tracking animals such as animal signs like waste, prints, gall and exoskeletons. Near the end of the lab studies on Monday, the students were guided through the process of deductive reasoning to figure out what a worm is as it isn't an insect or arachnid. The energetic discussion opened the door for the class to collect worms during the field study portion of the day so that they could study them later.

For the field study, Brorson students took a trip to a wooded area near a creek. Backpacks were handed out containing observational tools like binoculars, magnifying glasses, and pencils and paper to record findings. Group discussions reviewed findings and individual observations were encouraged making the day a fun learning experience.

MOSS has regular programs, field day events, day camps, and a Master Naturalist program for adults; one benefit is that MOSS can boost a science curriculum and offer experience and equipment that schools may not have available to them on a regular basis. To bring the MOSS program into schools there is a financial obligation which the program will match 50% of with grant money. Schools in a localized area can also coordinate the program to come in during the same week and share the remaining traveling costs. For more information on the Montana Outdoor Science School, please visit [outdoorscience.org](http://outdoorscience.org).





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# Edam Discusses Changes as a Fourth Generation Wheat Farmer

**By Meagan Dotson**

Dale Edam, a fourth generation wheat farmer in the area, is still working the land that his father and grandfather worked before him. The original homestead of his great-grandfather is about a mile away from the current farm which is located west of Crane, MT.

In 1912 Edam's great-grandfather Bert Edam established a homestead and farmed 160 acres near Crane, MT as well as owning the first tractor and threshing machine in the area. Edam's grandfather, Wilbert Edam, and his brother George began farming at 14 and 16 years of age; Edam's father, Wilbert (Dale) Edam also began farming as a teen and following with tradition, Edam himself began farming as a teenager by raising a family garden as a 4-H project. Later he would purchase a small herd of cattle in FFA and lease crop land from the family farm. He notes that growing up on the farm instilled in him a good work ethic while giving him a place to work with animals and enjoy nature, a large garden, and riding motorcycles. Edam officially purchased the farm in 2000 where he and his wife LaDean raised their twin sons, Koby and Keevin.

The farm has approximately 2080 tillable acres and Edam notes that one of the biggest changes over the years has been the no-till or minimum till method of farming.

"Growing up, so much of my summer was spent tilling fallow ground," he says. "Forty to fifty percent of the land was not cropped and left idle to prepare the soil for crops the next year. Today we use rotation crops to break up the cycle of continuous cropping and we have a more diverse cropping system which includes spring wheat, peas, beans, millet, sunflowers, safflowers and alfalfa."

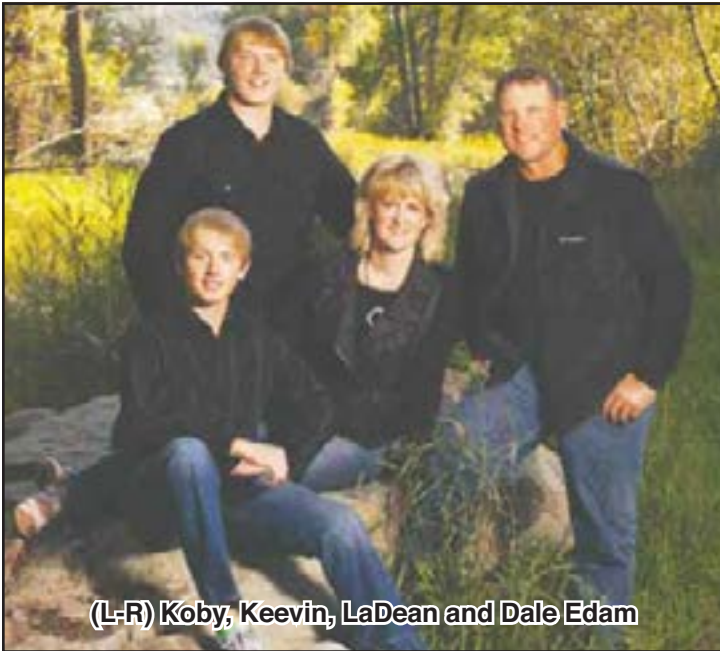
Raising livestock has also been an asset to the farm; three and a half sections of grass are designated for grazing allowing for alfalfa and hay crops to be incorporated. This system helps to break down disease and weed cycles. In addition, cattle are beneficial reducing labor and fuel costs by helping maintain land and provide organic matter where needed.

Weather has always been the biggest challenge when it comes to farming in Northeastern Montana. Severe climates and intense snow storms are just as much of a concern now as they were to previous generations. However, larger equipment is available today to move snow and livestock can be reached more quickly after a storm.

In addition, the oil-boom has brought changes to farming in the form of both opportunities and challenges.

"Finding experienced farm labor has been difficult with the draw of the oil field and high paying jobs. I have reduced my labor force, leased some land, but have also had some great opportunities to work in the oil field as well," says Edam.

Despite challenges both new and old, Edam notes that he has always enjoyed farming and ranching and continues on in the tradition of generations before him.



(L-R) Koby, Keevin, LaDean and Dale Edam



Dale Edam prepares to take calves to market.



Above: The original 1912 homestead which Edam's great-uncle George Edam lived in until the early 1970s without electricity or running water.



Farming equipment buried in the snow is just one example of the challenges severe weather brings to farmers.



Right: Wilbert Edam learned to drive a tractor on this 1927 McCormick Deering model.





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# USDA Agricultural Research Service (ARS) Scientists at the Northern Plains Agricultural Research Provide Valuable Information to Producers

By Beth Redlin

Farmers have a multitude of variables to consider when planting their crops. For example, they must decide what to plant and when, what and how much fertilizer to use if any, what kind of tillage to use if any, and when and how much water to apply if irrigating. The carry-over effects of previous crops and their residues, the impacts of microorganisms in the soil, likely disease and insect pest pressures, equipment needs and, of course, the weather can make decisions to move to new management systems risky even if producers anticipate real benefits from doing so.

USDA Agricultural Research Service (ARS) scientists at the Northern Plains Agricultural Research Lab in Sidney, MT are providing producers help in answering these questions. Recently ARS researchers in Sidney completed data analysis of crop water usage and crop water productivity (also known as water use efficiency) on a three-year study of strip tillage versus conventional tillage systems in sugarbeet fields in the MonDak region. That research has already demonstrated significant fuel and labor cost savings for producers opting for strip tillage due to significantly reduced trips across the field under strip tillage (one vs six for fall seedbed preparation), but questions remained on how strip tillage affected crop water use and productivity.

"We wanted to know if the strip tillage system's water use and resulting crop yield and sugar content were comparable to existing conventional tillage systems," ARS Research Agronomist Bart Stevens, one of the scientists on the project noted. "They were, and in some circumstances were even a little better."

The results were published this week in the online edition of the "Agronomy Journal."

In that article, researchers noted interest in strip tillage has been increasing among MonDak sugarbeet producers because of its ability to reduce soil erosion, reduce tillage costs and conserve soil water by maintaining crop residues on the surface.

The study itself was conducted on land provided to ARS by Montana State University's Eastern Agricultural Research Center in Sidney from 2006-2008 using an overhead linear irrigation system, with sugarbeet planted following malt barley under both tillage practices in each of the three study years.

One of the added benefits of strip tillage, which leaves alternating strips of tilled and untilled soils, was immediately evident in the first year when a strong wind storm passed through in early May 2006 shearing off several of the young beet seedlings in the conventionally tilled plots. In contrast, the rows of standing crop residue left in the strip tilled plots protected the young seedlings there from significant damage.

"Sugarbeet seedlings are pretty delicate so when spring wind events occur in the MonDak, which happens frequently, there can be significant damage to young plants," ARS Research Soil Physicist Jay Jabro, another scientist on the project, noted. "That's what happened in 2006 in our conventionally tilled plots."

That damage led to a 17% reduction in root yield in those plots compared to the strip tilled acreage. In the remaining two years of the study, the strip tilled plots also produced higher root yields (4% and 8% respectively) but those differences were not statistically significant, Jabro said.

Similar results were reported for both crop water use and sucrose yield, with larger differences in 2006 attributable to the wind damage in conventional plots, while water use and sucrose yield were not significantly different in the remaining two years of the study.

When considering overall crop water productivity, strip tilled plots once again came out ahead, according to Jabro. Altogether, strip tilled plots used 2.5 gallons less irrigation water to produce one kilogram, or 2.2 pounds, of sugarbeet root yield as compared to conventionally tilled plots, and 16.12 gallons less irrigation water to produce 1 kilogram of sucrose.

"That means strip tillage is a promising practice which provides conservation benefits over conventional tillage that can be used to produce comparable sugarbeet yield at a lower cost and with greater crop water productivity," Jabro concluded. "Sugarbeet producers can also reduce their fuel and labor requirements, use less water and increase their profitability by using strip tillage practices."

And that profitability can have a big impact on the MonDak area, where total direct economic impacts from sugarbeet production, processing and marketing were estimated at \$73.9 million in 2011 by Sidney Sugars, Inc.

Link to original article, for more information: <https://www.agronomy.org/publications/aj/pdfs/106/6/2280>





# 2014 Beet Decorating Contest Winners

The entries for the annual beet decorating contest were fantastic again this year, making the judges work hard to pick only three in each age group. A huge Thank you to The Powder Keg, Lori Yadon (Avon), Fairview Super Valu and Kayla Watters (Something About a Cupcake) for providing great prizes, and Fairview SuperValue for providing space for the contest.



Abbey Moreno, 4, with her third place "Crab Named Crabby".



Allison Thiel, 7, with her first place "Hula Dancer".



Bailey Schlothauer, 12, with her third place "Weird Alien".



Cooper Thiel, 3, with his second place "Pirate Hula Dancer".



Hannah Hurley, 8, with her second place entry, "Three Blind Mice".



Dawson Ball, 11, with his first place entry, "The Hobo".



Riley Bushnell, 10, with his second place entry, "Strange Guy Wearing a Yellow T-Shirt".



Kyle Skogas, 5, with his first place beet, "Olaf".



Jeff Tjelde, 8, with his third place entry, "Dinosaur".



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The Smelser family opened their family owned Border Steel & Recycling business in December 2011 at 35002 CR 123, Sidney, MT.

In the spring of '06, Border Steel opened its facility in Plentywood, expanded to Williston in '07 and came home to Sidney in December 2011. In 2014 they expanded into Miles City as well.

They are truly happy to be back in Sidney. According to Bret and Brady, they "do it all". From new steel, aluminum and stainless to all your ag and construction and recycling needs, Border Steel & Recycling can take care of you. They also handle new and used iron. "We're adding to what we already had to offer from our other locations and growing on that," Brady said. He added, "This gives us the opportunity to better serve our loyal customers and to build new ones. Competition is healthy, the winners will be public-the consumers." Border Steel & Recycling can be reached at 406-433-7737 or toll free at 1-855-810-2995.

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# USDA Expands Access to Credit to Help More Beginning and Family Farmers

## Changes Increase Eligibility and Financing Options for Hard Working Families

Submitted by USDA Office of Communications

Agriculture Deputy Secretary Krysta Harden today announced that the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) will improve farm loans by expanding eligibility and increasing lending limits to help more beginning and family farmers. As part of this effort, USDA is raising the borrowing limit for the microloan program from \$35,000 to \$50,000; simplify the lending processes; updating required "farming experience" to include other valuable experiences; and expanding eligible business entities to reflect changes in the way family farms are owned and operated. The changes become effective Nov. 7.

"USDA is continuing its commitment to new and existing family farmers and ranchers by expanding access to credit," said Harden. "These new flexibilities, created by the 2014 Farm Bill, will help more people who are considering farming and ranching, or who want to strengthen their existing family operation."

The microloan changes announced today will allow beginning, small and mid-sized farmers to access an additional \$15,000 in loans using a simplified application process with up to seven years to repay. Microloans are part of USDA's continued commitment to small and mid-sized farming operations.

In addition to farm related experience, other types of skills may be considered to meet the direct farming experience required for farm loan eligibility such as operation or management of a non-farm business, leadership positions while serving in the military, or advanced education in an agricultural field. Also, individuals who own farmland under a different legal entity operating the farm now may be eligible for loans administered by USDA's Farm Service Agency (FSA). Producers will have an opportunity to share suggestions on the microloan process, and the definitions of farming experience and business structures through Dec. 8, 2014, the public open comment period.

FSA is also publishing a Federal Register notice to solicit ideas from the public for pilot projects to help increase the efficiency and effectiveness of farm loan programs. Comments and ideas regarding potential pilot projects will be accepted through Nov. 7, 2014.

Since 2010, USDA has made a record amount of farm loans through FSA — more than 165,000 loans totaling nearly \$23 billion. More than 50 percent of USDA's farm loans now go to beginning farmers. In addition, USDA has increased its lending to socially-disadvantaged producers by nearly 50 percent since 2010.

These programs were made possible by the 2014 Farm Bill, which builds on historic economic gains in rural America over the past five years, while achieving meaningful reform and billions of dollars in savings for taxpayers. Since enactment, USDA has made significant progress to implement each provision of this critical legislation, including providing disaster relief to farmers and ranchers; strengthening risk management tools; expanding access to rural credit; funding critical research; establishing innovative public-private conservation partnerships; developing new markets for rural-made products; and investing in infrastructure, housing and community facilities to help improve quality of life in rural America. For more information, visit [www.usda.gov/farmbill](http://www.usda.gov/farmbill).



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# Montana Stockgrowers 130<sup>th</sup> Annual Convention Planned for Dec. 11-13 in Billings

Submitted by Ryan Goodman

Do not miss your chance to attend Montana's largest ranching industry Convention and Trade Show. The Montana Stockgrowers Association (MSGA) and Montana CattleWomen invites you to join us for our 130<sup>th</sup> Annual Convention at the Holiday Inn Grand Montana in Billings, December 11-13. This year's Convention will be bigger than ever with an extended line up of Cattlemen's College courses and live entertainment from Wylie and the Wild West.

"2014 marks 130 years for the Montana Stockgrowers Association and we will be closing out the year in a big way," says MSGA President, Tucker Hughes of Stanford. "We want to invite everyone to come participate in the fun, gain valuable insight from speakers from across the cattle industry, and participate in our policy meetings."

This year's Annual Convention will feature a great line up of speakers for the extended Cattlemen's College. Topics covered will include fetal development, nutrition for the cowherd, health strategies for calf health, biosecurity, genetic selection for replacement animals, and hands-on workshop with reproductive technologies.

Several top speakers including Greg Hanes from US Meat Export Federation, Lois Olmstead, and a live broadcast with Northern Ag Network will highlight the agenda. Everything will wrap up on Saturday night with the Grand Finale Banquet featuring the annual live Cattle Directory auction and special entertainer, Wylie and the Wild West!

A major component of the convention is the setting of new policy and the review of past policies to guide the association through its day-to-day work. MSGA's annual policy meetings will take place on Thursday and Friday, discussing topics in the areas of membership, land use, environment, agriculture policy, beef production and marketing.

This year has been active in several policy areas as Montana ranchers have dealt with sage grouse conservation, changes to EPA water jurisdiction, challenges for the national Beef Checkoff program structure, and Board of Livestock budget deficits. These issues, plus discussion leading up to Montana's 2015 legislative session will be covered during the meeting.

MSGA and Montana Ford Stores have teamed up to give a Ford F-250 Super Duty truck to one lucky member who attends convention. The drawing will be held on Saturday during the Grand Finale Banquet. To be eligible for the truck drawing, you must attend convention, be a current Rancher, Stocker/Feeder or Young Stockgrower member, and fill out the truck entry form.

Other prizes to be awarded during the convention include a raffle drawing for an 8-month/200 hour lease on a 130-HP tractor and loader from Montana Massey Ferguson dealers, a John Deere Gator courtesy of Frontline Ag, and a trip to San Antonio, Texas for the 2015 Cattle Industry Convention sponsored by Northwestern Energy.

This year's Trade Show will feature over 100 companies providing all types of products, services, and the latest technology to the cattle industry. The Trade Show is open to the public all three days during Convention until 9:00 p.m.

To learn more, please call the MSGA office at (406) 442-3420, or visit [www.mtbeef.org](http://www.mtbeef.org). If you would like to reserve a trade show booth or sponsor part of the convention, please contact the MSGA office soon as there are limited spaces open at this time. Preregistration for attendees is currently open at a discounted price for those that register prior to December.

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# MSU Hires Livestock Judging Coach, Instructor and Steer Program Manager

**By Jennifer Lavey, MSU College of Agriculture**

For the first time in recent history, Montana State University has hired a dedicated livestock judging coach who will also teach applied coursework and manage a program that is designed to give students hands-on experience in the beef industry.

Hannah DelCurto recently joined MSU's animal and range sciences department as an instructor and coach of the MSU Livestock Judging Team and the Steer-A-Year program.

"These programs provide valuable experiences for students that will help them in their future careers," DelCurto said. "I'm really looking forward to working with MSU students and further developing these programs."

As part of her position, DelCurto will coach the 15-member livestock judging team, which plans to travel to eight states and 10 competitions this year. She will also teach the technical aspects of animal health and livestock judging talents in a livestock evaluation class.

"Coming to MSU is exciting for me because of the incredibly strong animal science programs here," DelCurto said. "MSU is well-positioned to be nationally competitive in its livestock judging program."

In a traditional livestock judging competition, students examine cattle, sheep or swine in a variety of classes relating to the animal's gender and commercial use. Students examine an animal in front of multiple judges and assign the animal a numeric value for marketability. Students must then orally defend their assessment of the animal to the judges. Explanations generally include facts about body condition like the animal's weight, build, structural soundness, muscle tone and fat composition. The judges then give the students a score for their overall scoring and oral defense.

"Everything the students speak to directly relates to the value of the animal, either for breeding or commercial use from the perspective of a producer," DelCurto said. "Students learn critical thinking, decision making, networking and public speaking, which are qualities that go beyond judging competitions and will apply to future careers."

To fund the team's travel expenses for regional and national competitions this year, DelCurto will also manage the MSU Steer-A-Year program, which accepts castrated male steers from private producers. The steers are used for teaching and educational purposes and in several courses on campus dealing with beef cattle management and marketing. MSU houses and feeds the steers, while livestock judging team members oversee and manage care of the animals. Students send a monthly newsletter to donors, updating them on the health and progress of the animal. At the end of the year, students sell the steers back to the community during the annual Steer-A-Year sale.

Proceeds from the sale fund the livestock judging team's travel expenses for regional and national competitions, student scholarships and student

activities. The program is currently accepting tax-deductible steer donations.

"The Steer-A-Year program is about (students) having hands-on educational experience in the beef industry," DelCurto said. "Giving students the opportunity to see the steps and process to raise a feed lot steer for commercial production is a unique privilege. It's a positive experience for the both the student and the donor."

Livestock judging and the Steer-A-Year program ultimately involve all aspects of agriculture business and production and life-long skills needed to be successful in those fields, according to Patrick Hatfield, interim head of the MSU Department of Animal and Range Sciences.

"The ability to speak clearly and communicate effectively about an animal's physiology and marketability is a skill that transfers to a multitude of fields and careers," Hatfield said. "Experience on a judging team and caring for an animal are important opportunities for our students because the skills garnered are an intersection of technical anatomy and physiology, communication and the business side of agriculture production – qualities that every job in ag demands."

DelCurto joins MSU from Texas A&M University, where she recently completed her master's degree in animal science. She also has years of experience in agricultural leadership and showing animals in 4-H and FFA in Oregon. DelCurto has an undergraduate degree in animal science from Kansas State University, where she was also a member of the KSU's Livestock Judging Team.

For more information about the MSU Livestock Judging Team, the Steer-A-Year program, or to make a donation, visit <http://animalrange.montana.edu/> or email [hannah.delcurto@montana.edu](mailto:hannah.delcurto@montana.edu).

Contact: Jennifer Lavey, (406) 994-7866 or [jennifer.lavey@montana.edu](mailto:jennifer.lavey@montana.edu)



**MSU's new Livestock Judging Team Coach Hannah DelCurto says students learn critical thinking, decision making, networking and public speaking skills through participating in the university's Livestock Judging Team. Team members are pictured here evaluating cattle. MSU photo courtesy of the MSU College of Agriculture.**



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# Noxious Weed Trust Fund Grant Applications due December 1st; Over \$1 Million Available to Fight Noxious Weeds

**Submitted by Dave Burch**

The Montana Department of Agriculture is accepting applications for grant funding from the Noxious Weed Trust Fund (NWTF). Grant applications are due by December 1, 2014.

The Trust Fund, established in 1985 by the Montana Legislature, can provide grant awards up to \$75,000 for eligible noxious weed research projects, state and community education or development projects, and local cooperative landowner cost share grants. Over \$1 million dollars from the NWTF program will be available for the development and implementation of noxious weed management programs. "The department and organizations such as county and tribal weed districts, extension offices, and conservation districts are available to assist with the completion of a grant application. We are here to help," explained Program Manager Dave Burch.

With 98% of Montana's total land area either rangeland, pastures, cropland, forests, or wildlands, noxious weeds can have a devastating impact on the states ecosystems and economy. Past studies estimate that just the proliferation of leafy spurge and spotted knapweed cost the Upper Great Plains, including Montana, grazing lands and wildlands \$129.5 million annually.

"While awareness, management, and control measures have become much more sophisticated, the spread of new and existing noxious weeds are still negatively impacting the economy and the ecological vitality of Montana's vast land area. We all have a stake in managing and preventing noxious weeds," said Burch

Grant applications are submitted electronically through the WebGrants system at <https://fundingmt.org>. NWTF grants should complement and enhance the Montana Weed Management Plan. Additional information and instructions for submitting an application can be found on the Noxious Weed program's website.

The Noxious Weed Management Advisory Council will hold final grant hearings beginning on March 2, 2015, in Helena, to make recommendations to the department's director for final approval.

The Montana Department of Agriculture's mission is to protect producers and consumers, and to enhance and develop agriculture and allied industries. For more information on the Montana Department of Agriculture, visit [agr.mt.gov](http://agr.mt.gov).



# MSU Ag Specialist Offers Advice for Fall Soil Sampling

Submitted by Clain Jones

Guided by their research, experts at Montana State University have developed guidelines for soil sampling to help growers get the maximum benefit out of their fertilizer.

Soil sampling can increase yield and/or save on fertilizer costs and decrease environmental risks. The worth of soil testing is influenced by when the sample is taken. Soil testing as late in the fall as possible or even in the spring improves the reliability of fertilization recommendations.

In Montana, soil sampling is often conducted from late summer to late fall because of better soil sampling conditions than in winter or spring, and because it gives growers time to make fertilizer decisions prior to application.

However, MSU fertilizer rate guidelines are based on spring soil test levels because spring levels are more indicative of growing season nutrients than fall nutrient levels.

Clain Jones, soil fertility specialist with MSU Extension and the Department of Land Resources and Environmental Sciences, cautions that if soil nutrient levels are substantially different between fall and spring, then fertilizer would be either over or under applied.

While phosphorus and potassium levels have not been found to change much between fall and spring, nitrogen in the form of nitrate can change dramatically. Over-application is an economic loss and excess nitrate may contaminate groundwater. Under-application of nitrogen may cause sub-optimal yields and grain protein. Based on a three-year study led by Jones, changes in nitrate levels from August to April can be large and highly variable. Jones found nitrogen fertilizer would be

over-applied by an average of 18 pounds of nitrogen per acre if August samples were used to make spring nitrogen recommendations.

"But, one in three times, it would be under-applied, and sometimes by a lot," said Jones.

The large range suggests that late summer or early fall soil samples may not accurately determine spring fertilization rates.

In short, high nitrate levels on shallow and/or coarse soils can be lost over winter, and using fall test results would result in under-fertilization. In contrast, nitrate levels can increase over winter due to decomposition of plant residue, especially in deep soils and following broadleaf crops such as annual legumes or oil seeds. Such fields would be over-fertilized if rates were based on fall soil samples.

Jones suggests sampling in late fall or later to best capture growing season nitrogen availability. If fall fertilizing is preferred, soil test as late as possible while still allowing time for test results before fertilizing. If fall nitrate levels are very high (e.g., greater than about 60 pounds nitrogen per acre) and soil depth is less than two feet, Jones strongly suggests a second sampling in spring because there is a higher likelihood of overwinter nitrate losses.

Although it may seem wasteful to soil sample twice, laboratory soil analyses often cost less than \$40, yet under- or over-applying by just 10 to 15 pounds of nitrogen per acre can often affect the bottom line more than this for a 160 acre field.

For more information on soil testing, see the new "Soil Scoop" on Jones' website <http://landresources.montana.edu/soilfertility/>, or contact Jones at 994-6076 or [clainj@montana.edu](mailto:clainj@montana.edu).

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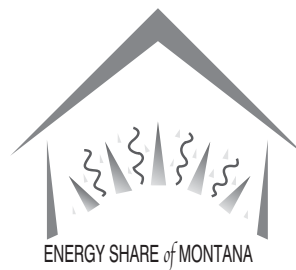
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