WATERSHED NEWS, WINTER 2024

STILLWATER VALLEY WATERSHED COUNCIL

Making a Difference in the Stillwater Valley, MT

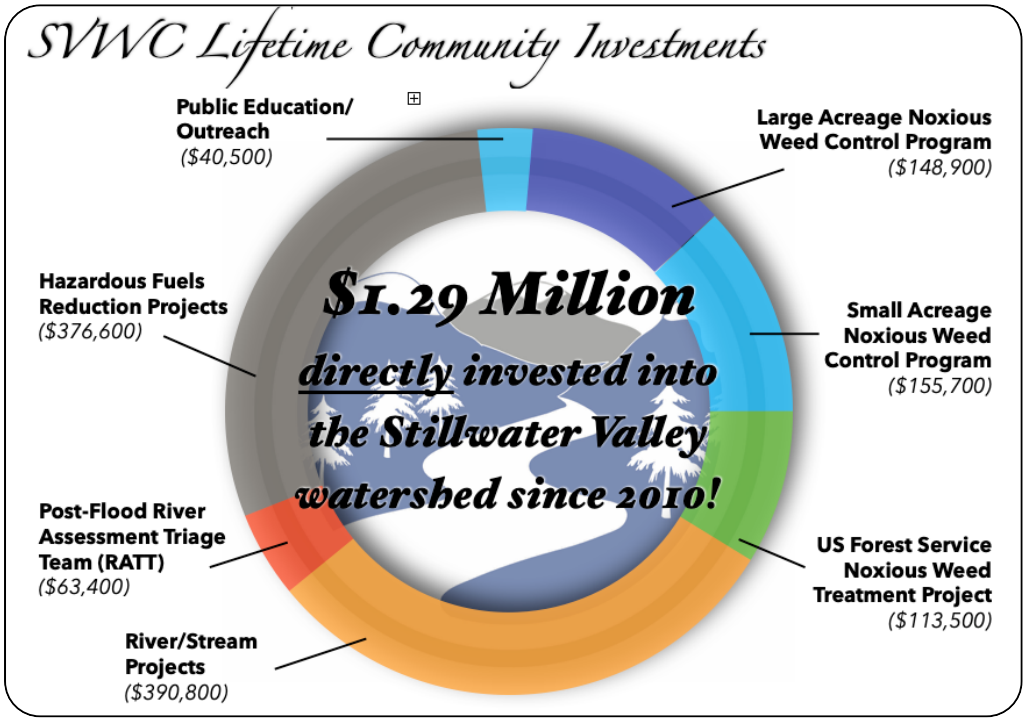
WWW.STILLWATERVALLEYWATERSHED.COM

Our Mission

We will provide an open forum in which all interested parties may work in a collaborative effort to sustain our rural quality of life and protect and enhance our natural resources. We are committed to research and educating our Stillwater Valley residents and the public about our watershed and the steps we can take to preserve and maintain the integrity of the river, the land and the beauty of our valley. We will endeavor to bring together public, private and government resources, funding and grants to achieve our goals.

SVWC CONTINUES TO INVEST IN THE COMMUNITY

2023 marked the SVWC's 13th year as a non-profit organization. With a dedicated board of directors at the helm, we continue to make great strides in a range of program areas that are important for all of us here in our local watershed. Successful expansion of natural resource programs and increased community involvement has enabled the SVWC to continue fostering collaboration with local constituents, agencies, and other nonprofits throughout the Stillwater Valley. Since our inception in 2010, the SVWC has secured $1.29 million in grant funds for on-the-ground natural resource enhancement projects and programs that have benefited our watershed and the people who live and recreate here, both human and non-hunan.



Board of Directors

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Lindsey Clark, SVWC Coordinator
Tommy Flanagan, Assistant Coordinator

2023, A YEAR IN REVIEW

Officially formed in 2010 by local grassroots volunteers with a passion for the Stillwater Valley, the SVWC emphasizes the importance of utilizing the land to enhance natural resources so future opportunities may exist. SVWC's 2023 efforts resulted in:

- Investing in noxious weed control cost-share programs on both public and private lands.
- Leading voluntary water stewardship projects and post-flood remediation efforts grounded in shared knowledge and commitment to our community's dedicated investments in local water resources.
- Utilizing grant resources and forestry expertise to implement numerous fuels reduction and wildfire mitigation projects.
- Promoting the importance of natural resource management and soil health enhancement.

Participation

254 MEMBERS

550 INVOLVED IN EVENTS/PROGRAMS

WEED PROJECT INVOLVEMENT

Small Acreage: 100

Large Acreage: 14

Results

NOXIOUS WEED CONTROL

1070 acres: Large Acreage, Small Acreage, USFS

$ 68,900 in SVWC Contributions

WATER QUALITY

116 miles of baseline water quality monitoring

1 hefty post-flood river summary report

WILDFIRE MITIGATION

8 properties enrolled

FOREST HEALTH

SVWC invested $66,000 to assist the treatment of 67 forested acres

2023 Breakdown

$194K INVESTED IN NATURAL RESOURCE ENHANCEMENT PROJECTS

36% NOXIOUS WEED CONTROL

30% WATER PROJECTS

34% FUELS REDUCTION

COMIN' UP IN 2024...

- FEBRUARY 14 — Stillwater Fuels Council Meeting, 10 am, Cobblestone Community Center, Absarokee
- FEBRUARY 21 — SVWC Board Meeting, 6 pm, Fishtail
- MAY 15 — Cooperative Weed Control Program Enrollment Opens
- JUNE 20 — Three W's Workshop & Mid-Year Meeting, Roscoe
- AUGUST 8 — SVWC Annual Summer Celebration & Hootenanny, Absarokee. Entertainment by Haeli Allen & the Sightliners!
- AUGUST 11 — Stillwater River Float & Weed Pull, Nye
- MID-SEPTEMBER — Small Acreage Cooperative Weed Control Program Spray Days, Nye

BACK TO THE BASICS OF NOXIOUS WEEDS

Adapted from J.E. Holloway's article, Montana Ag News, Summer 2023

Out of 250,000 species of plants known today, 3% are classified as weeds and a few dozen of those are classified as noxious weeds. These plants are considered a danger to agriculture, environment, industry and economy. They do harm wherever they grow, inhibiitng other plants, animals and human edeavors.

Noxious weeds harm the land, many to such an extent, they create a ripple effect beyond their immediate emergence. Noxios weeds are tyoically added to state blacklists and banned for import once enough data is collected. Many noxious weeds do not look harmful until it's too late.

The prominent noxious weeds in the Stillwater Valley include: spotted knapweed, leafy spurge, houndstongue, Canada thistle, sulfur cinquefoil, toadflax and field bindweed.

Prevent the Spread

Noxious weeds proliferate according to the conditions of each environment they're in. Below are guidelines for preventing the spread of noxious weeds:

- Avoid driving or walking through areas infested with noxious weeds
- Refrain from picking, planting or transporting unknown plants
- To identify potentially noxious weeds, put specimens in secure plastic bags and seal
- Use herbicides known to be effective in controlling noxious weeds, following approved label rates
- Plant only certified weed-free seeds

Above: Drone spraying is a new tool for the weed control toolbox is now available for land managers.

Methods of Control

Weed control is typically undertaken according to the age of the weed, the extent of proliferation and the type of weed.

Herbicide application is one method, biologic and mechanical controls are others. While herbicides produce results in days or weeks and can provide residual that prevent weed germination for a year or more, biologic controls can take years to eradicate a large infestation. Mechanical control can be labor intensive and does not take into consideration the seed bed established in the soil.

In summary, weeds are too prevalent and too harmful to ignore, or to do anything less than everything possible to control. SVWC will continue Cooperative Weed Control Programs as well as weed treatments on USFS property in 2024. Be on the lookout for more information this spring!

WATER QUALITY

Stillwater Rosebud Water Quality Initiative Update & Findings

Tom Osborne, Volunteer Hydrologist & SRWQI Lead

The Stillwater Rosebud Water Quality Initiative (SRWQI) began in September 2020 and has completed 40 months of stream monitoring in the Stillwater River and Rosebud Creek watersheds. Two of the nine monitoring locations were modified in October 2022, dropping two sites on upper Butcher Creek tributaries east of Roscoe, and adding two on the Stillwater River (Moraine and Fireman's Point fishing access sites). The backstory of this change, however, actually has to do with Butcher Creek.

The Butcher Creek Backstory

The SRWQI initially gave some emphasis to Butcher Creek due to availability of historical data collected in the 1960's by the US Geological Survey, and in the 1990's by Stillwater Conservation District (SCD), NRCS and DEQ. These agencies in the 1990's, in cooperation with landowners, made large investments in monitoring water quality and on-farm cost sharing projects to reduce the sediment and nutrient loads to Butcher Creek, the lower Rosebud and Stillwater rivers.

After taking a deep dive into all the stream flow and water quality data on Butcher Creek it appears that Butcher Creek in recent years is having a significantly smaller water quality impact than it did historically.

A USGS streamflow gaging station on Butcher Creek (September 1960 to September 1962) logged stream flow every day for two years before being abandoned. Starting June 1 of both years, our flows measured since 2020 are lower than those measured by USGS. A team of scientists from the SCS (now NRCS), the DHES (now DEQ) and the SCD, with the help of our local landowners, spent eight years collecting flow and water quality information on Butcher Creek in the 1990's. The goal was to understand the extent and causes of non-point source degradation of Butcher Creek from runoff and irrigation return flows to develop on the ground solutions.

Those old files were dug up from the depths of the SCD office and extracted 67 flow measurements made from 1991 to 1995, mostly in the growing seasons. Figure 1 shows the 1990s flow measurements by year between April-October in colored lines. Our SRWQI project made 26 flow measurements between September 2020-October 2022, plotted as individual points (black squares). Results show the 2020-2022 flow measurements are typically on the lower end of, or less than those made in the 1990s.

Thanks to the thorough science developed in the 1990s studies, we can also compare the suspended sediment load carried by Butcher Creek. The state SCS office at that time (D.Jones, 1993) used 15 paired flow and suspended sediment concentrations collected on Butcher Creek to calculate total sediment load for the April-September 1992 period. The same procedure was duplicated using 14 paired flow and suspended sediment values from 2021 and 2022. Figure 2 is a bar chart showing the calculated total sediment loads in tons transported by Butcher Creek for April-September 1992, 2021 and 2022.

We can ask why the sediment load of recent years appears to be much less than that documented in the 1990's. We hypothesize that because recent growing season flow rates, especially peak flow rates, of Butcher are significantly less than historical, less erosion and sediment is transported. Lower flow rates may have allowed for the Butcher Creek channel/banks to better stabilize and revegetate. Some landowners suggested farm consolidation and changes in irrigation practices are likely reasons for such observations. Due to limitations of our data, we plan to continue our evaluation as more data become available, and we welcome the public's thoughts and observations.

We stress that the data collected by this project is of an educational and non-regulatory nature, intended to provide basic indicators of stream health to inform the residents of the Stillwater Valley and protect all the uses we make of our streams for this generation and those to come. For more information, contact Lindsey Clark (406.780.1249) or Tom Osborne (406.698.4120).

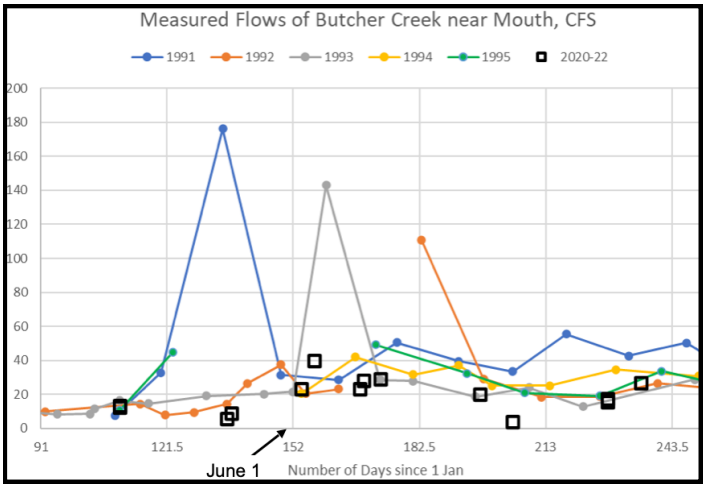


Figure 1. Measured stream flow rates of Butcher Creek near the mouth for selected years. Sources: SCD, 1991-1995; SRWQI, 2021-2022.

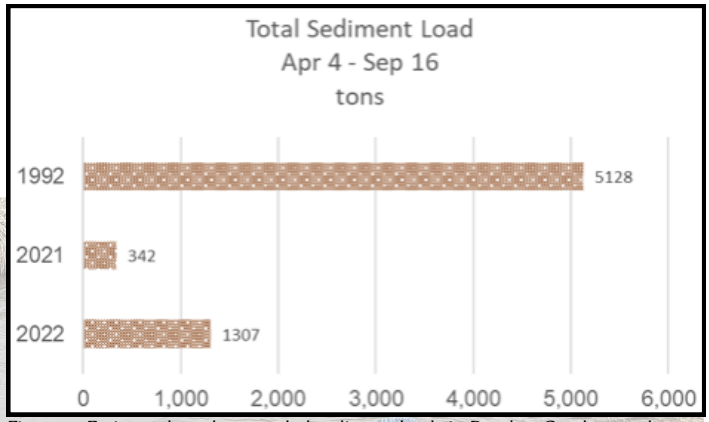


Figure 2. Estimated total suspended sediment loads in Butcher Creek near the mouth, 1992, 2021 and 2022. Sources: SCS, 1993; SRWQI, 2021 and 2022.

View Full Article on our Website!

WATER QUALITY

Post-Flood River Assessment Triage Team

Report from Tommy Flanagan, SVWC RATT Coordinator

It has been quite a productive year for the RATT Team. We came together to develop a plan to analyze the impacts of the 2022 flooding on the Stillwater and Rosebud watersheds, based on specific site visits from participating landowners. Now that the team has conducted these visits, compiled a report, and shared the results last summer, we find ourselves in a period of determining next steps in a way that is most useful for landowners, the community, and indeed, the entire watershed.

Looking to the Future

This fall, we decided to consider different options regarding these next steps with input from our Team and other experts. This update provides some insight into the current considerations for next steps. SVWC strives to utilize the RATT findings in the report for the next impactful project that benefits landowners in the watershed.

As we have come to know all too well, river recovery takes time and often finding the right singular project may present challenges, especially in terms of obtaining further funding. Ideally, a next step has a clear benefit to the public good.

The team should also consider current concerning trends in the local fish population in the river (see FWP article on page 6). Measured in Absarokee after the flood in 2022, sources at Fish, Wildlife, and Parks (MT FWP) indicated that the fish population was largely unimpacted. Measurements in 2023 show, however, historic lows. The reason for this is still not fully understood. A follow-up RATT projects must take this situation into account.

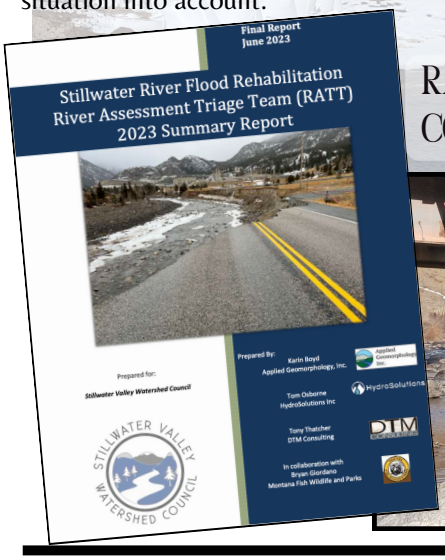
The RATT and SVWC will work with local public and private groups whenever possible to provide the most impact. SVWC has been informed by Stillwater Co. Department of Emergency Services (DES) about their process of applying for funds through the DNRC disaster fund and FEMA. The project is for a 'Master Study' for hazard mitigation of all county waterways. The RATT findings could serve as a basis and the funds that the community has already contributed to RATT work could be applied toward the in-kind matching portion of the grant to reduce the dollars that the county spends.

The results of the county's potential Master Study could be used as justification and background in public and private projects that may be done along the river in the future, hopefully decreasing the need to obtain redundant evaluations done for permitting.

Between now and 2026 there may be much work done on remapping floodplains. Although that is a separate process than RATT, we feel that the next phase of RATT should be informed about planned mapping that may occur along the river so we can maximize cooperation and reduce redundant projects.

We are considering applying for further grants this spring that could help to fund specific projects, for example regarding the fisheries and flood future relief on area waterways.

We look forward to developing these next steps and to keeping the community as up-to-date and informed as we proceed. Thank you to all who have contributed.



RATT REPORTS ARE AVAILABLE ON OUR WEBSITE OR CONTACT LINDSEY TO REQUEST A HARD COPY.

WATER QUALITY

Fish Counts Showing Downward Trend on the Stillwater

Report from MT Fish, Wildlife & Parks

Bryan Giordono, Regional Fisheries Biologist

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks has two long-term electrofishing fish population monitoring sections on the Stillwater River. The upstream section is located near Moraine Fishing Access Site and has been sampled in the spring since 2000 and is primarily a resident brown trout fishery. The brown trout population estimate in this section has decreased significantly from a high of 1,350 brown trout/mile in 2000 to a low of 197 brown trout/mile in 2023 (Figure 1). Along with that downward trend, the average size of fish sampled increased during that time. In 2000, only 2% of the brown trout caught were ≥ 15", while the 2023 sample saw almost 70% of brown trout caught ≥ 15". While the percentage of larger fish has increased, the actual number of larger fish has remained relatively constant with the number of juvenile fish decreasing substantially. This indicates that the fish population decline is not due to harvest or angling, but due to poor juvenile fish recruitment.

The downstream long-term monitoring section is located near Absarokee, beginning just downstream of the Stillwater River and Rosebud Creek confluence. This section is sampled in the fall and is a mixed fishery of brown trout and rainbow trout. From 1992 to 2022, the trout population density had fluctuated within normal expectations for wild fish; however, the population estimate decreased approximately 47% from fall of 2022 to fall of 2023 (Figure 2). While the average size of fish caught has not increased substantially like that of the Moraine section, the data indicate that fewer juvenile fish are being caught in the Absarokee section recently. This may be the beginning of a downward population trend similar to the upper Stillwater population. It's important to note that this section was sampled post-flood in the fall of 2022 and did not show the large decrease in fish density until the following fall in 2023. This indicates that the decrease is not likely due directly to the flood, but potentially the loss of habitat after the flood or during clean up and stabilization efforts.

The downward trend of the Stillwater fish populations, specifically the decreased juvenile fish recruitment, is likely due to the decrease in juvenile fish habitat availability. Juvenile fish use habitat along the stream margins to avoid predators such as larger fish. These habitats usually include woody debris and brush piles along the bank and in side channels. These habitats become inaccessible to juvenile fish during low flows or if woody debris is removed and replaced with rock. While the upper and lower Stillwater fish populations are at different stages of decline, the entire Stillwater River fish population could benefit from protecting and enhancing fish habitat.

Habitat improvement and protection could help increase fish populations and prevent them from further decline. This would include incorporating woody debris into bank stabilization projects rather than riprap, leaving woody debris in stream rather than removing it, placing woody debris into side channels and along banks where the river is lacking such habitat. FWP will continue monitoring these sections over time and encourage any landowners that are interested in habitat improvement projects to contact FWP or the Stillwater Valley Watershed Council.

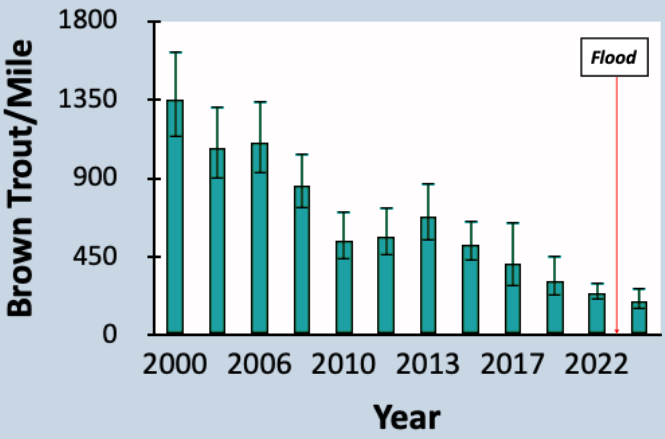


Figure 1.Brown Trout population estimates for fish 7 inches and greater for the Moraine electrofishing section of Stillwater River by year. Error bars represent the upper and lower 95% confidence intervals.

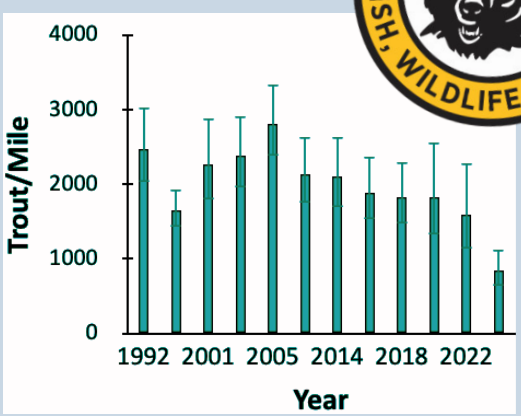


Figure 2.Combined brown and rainbow trout population estimates for fish 7 inches and greater for the Absarokee electrofishing section of Stillwater River by year. Error bars represent the upper and lower 95% confidence intervals.

FOREST HEALTH

Improve the Wildfire Resiliency of Your Property

Decades of fire suppression have increased the density of trees and other fuels in forests across the country to uncharacteristically high levels, resulting in massive tree die-offs and large, severe wildfires. Improving forest health requires reducing the density of trees and fuels through prescriptive thinning.

What is Forest Density?

- Measures the amount/number of trees on a unit of land area
- Describes how much of an area is being used
- Demonstrates the intensity of competition between trees and other forest vegetation

Forest Density Impacts Include:

- Tree vigor and health
- Regeneration and understory growth
- Insects and disease
- Fire risk rating
- Tree size and value
- Stand structure
- Wildlife habitat
- Aesthetics

Indicators of Too Many Trees

- Little to no understory vegetation
- Short/thin crown lengths
- Decline in health and vigor of forest stands
- Reduced tree growth rates
- Thin bark
- Increased insect and disease impacts

$510,000

NOW Available for Fuels Reduction & Fire Mitigation!

Since the end of 2023, the SVWC has secured over half a million dollars in grant funding for on-the-ground fuels reduction work for Stillwater Watershed landowners to be utilized over the next three years!

This opportunity won't last long. Contact Lindsey today to request a site visit to determine your eligibility.

SOIL HEALTH & IMPROVEMENT

What the Heck is Regenerative Ag?!?!

Report from the Stillwater Natural Resource Conservation Service

Cedar Magone, Soil Conservationist & SVWC Board Member

Every few years there is a new buzz word in Agriculture. Not so long ago, the big word was “Sustainable”, now it’s “Regenerative”. What does that actually mean? Terms like these can automatically create preconceived notions, good or bad in people’s minds. Regenerative Agriculture isn’t an either/or, right/wrong way of doing things compared to the traditional ways of farmers and ranchers. It’s about using the power of observation to find potential ways to make improvements to your bottom line while improving the resource rather than degrading it. It’s about your context and what makes sense for you as a producer, your land, your cattle, your specific climate, etc.

With or without a fancy name, every producer I know wants their place to thrive, produce quality forage for their cattle to graze or crops to grow with a nutrient dense end-product. Many landowners are dealing with land that has been degraded since homesteading days. It’s easy for people, all people not just farmers and ranchers, to fall into a rhythm and go through the same motions year after year. Sometimes those repetitive actions lead to continued degradation to the land—without producers even realizing it. Throughout my career with the Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS), I can’t think of a place that didn’t have potential to produce more and better-quality forage. This is based off current forage clipping data that I collect compared to historic climax plant community data. This is data that reflects native range (grasses, forbs and shrubs) in amounts and distribution prior to European settlement.

The Regenified website (www.regenified.com) gives a good definition of Regenerative Agriculture. “Regenerative Agriculture focuses on restoring the health of the entire ecosystem. It promotes biodiversity, soil health, and water conservation. Practices used in regenerative farming include minimizing soil disturbance, maintaining living roots, keeping armor on the soil, building biodiversity, and integrating livestock. The goal is to produce nutritious and high-quality food while contributing to the overall well being of the environment, ecosystem, farmers and ranchers, and our communities.”

Soil health is the cornerstone of Regenerative Agriculture and rightfully so. Healthy, functioning soils are critical to building soil organic matter, storing carbon, infiltrating rain, growing more forage—the list goes on and on! So, before we get caught up in another catchy buzz word, let's take a moment to realize the common goal. Although it’s sometimes hard to step out of our comfort zone, I encourage you to do so, it may just be a learning experience that improves the soil, and bottom line, bringing you one step closer to being more “Regenerative”.

For more information, South Dakota has a wonderful Regenerative Ag website: www.growingresiliencesd.com, as does Understanding Ag: www.understandingag.com.

OUTSIDE THE BOX

SVWC Requests Contributions from Readers and Members!

SEND US YOUR FAVORITE RECIPES AND ENCOURAGE THOSE YOUTH OUT THERE TO SUBMIT ORIGINAL NOXIOUS WEED ARTWORK!

Send us Your Recipes!

A VARIATION OF WHEAT MONTANA'S 7-GRAIN COOKIES

3 eggs, well beaten
1 cup raisins
1 tsp vanill extract
1 cup butter
1 cup white sugar
3 cups flour
1 tsp salt
1 tsp cinnamon
2 tsp baking soda
2 cups Wheat Montana 7-Grain with Flax Seed Cereal or whole grain oats.

THE VARIATION: Add 1/2 cup flaked coconut, nuts and/or dried cranberries with the cereal.

Combine eggs, raisins, and vanilla. Let stand for about 1 hour, covered. Cream together butter and sugars.
Add flour, salt, cinnamon, and baking soda to sugar mixture. Mix well. Blend in egg and raisin mixture, and 7-Grain Cereal. Dough should be stiff. Drop by heaping teaspoons onto ungreased cookie sheet. Bake at 350* F for 10 minutes, or until lightly browned. Makes about 6 dozen cookies, depending how much dough is consumed before baking...

Recipes for SVWC's bi-annaul newsletters are submitted voluntarily by members. Send your favorite recipe of any kind to SVWC2010@hotmail.com. Please include your name, hometown and address. If selected, your recipe will appear in the next Watershed News!

THANK YOU TOM AND ANDREA ROGOFF FOR THE INAGRUAL RECIPE ENTRY!

Youth Invited to Submit Photos or Artwork!

The SVWC invites youngsters under 18 to send in original artwork or photographs to be published in upcoming editions of SVWC's Watershed News. If your submission is chosen by SVWC's board of directors, the lucky winner will win $$$. To be eligible, please include: NAME, AGE, ADDRESS. Send digital copies of your work to: SVWC2010@hotmail.com

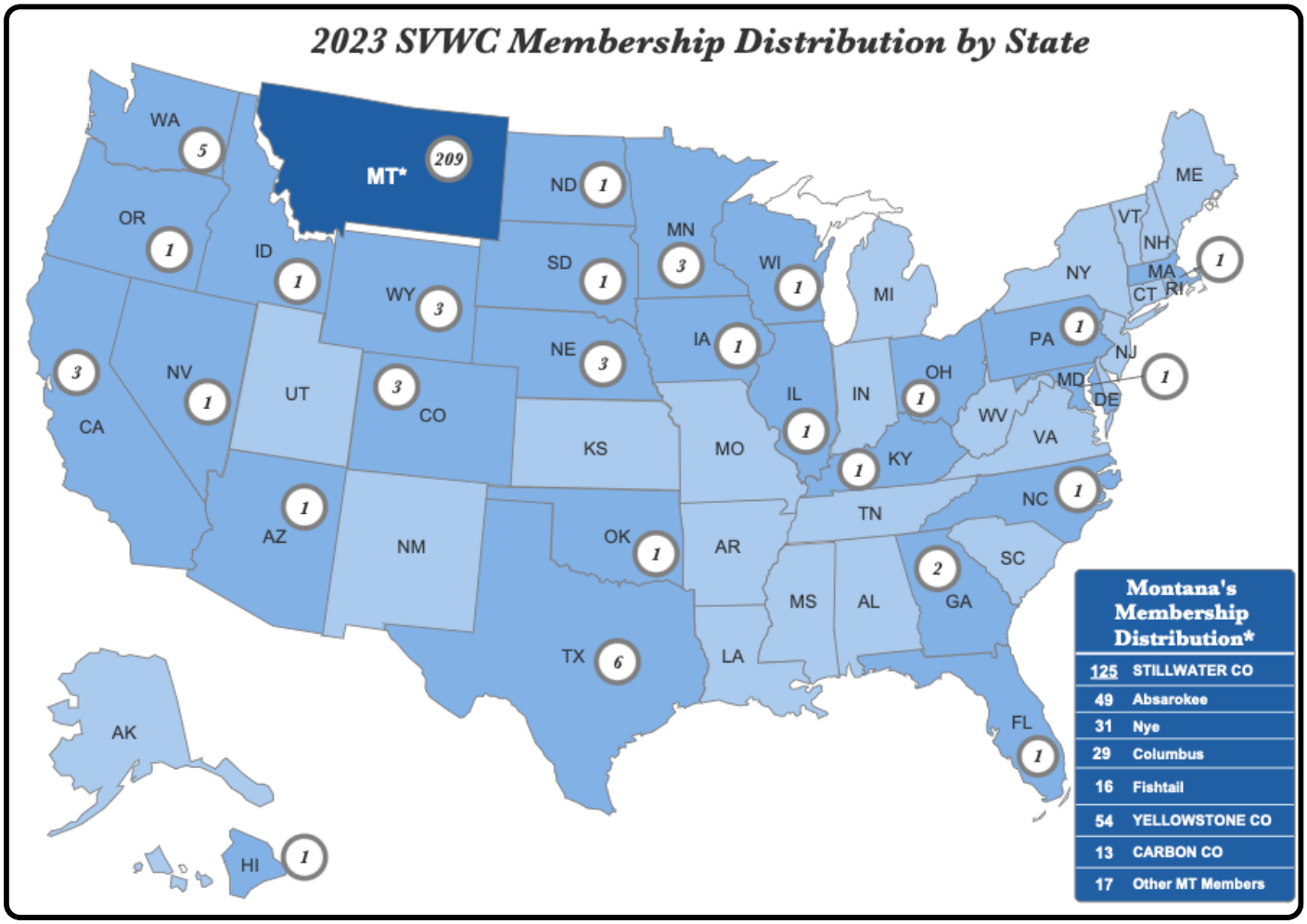
For the inaugural art contest, we put out an APB through social media and local schools for an original artwork of a noxious weeds. Let's do it again for the summer edition! Entries open now and close on June 15, 2024. PASS ON THE WORD FAR AND WIDE!

ART CONTEST WINNER: HANK UNRUH, 7, MOUNTAIN VIEW ELEMENTARY SCHOOL, RED LODGE

SVWC'S REACH

SVWC's Support Spread Across the Country!

The SVWC prides itself on the cooperation and support of over 250 members and donors. This map highlights the distribution of members, although mostly focused in Montana, spread throughout 26 other states across the country! With a common goal in mind, this support has enabled the SVWC's monumental growth and success since inception in 2010.



SPECIAL THANKS TO SPONSORS OF SVWC'S ANNUAL SUMMER CELEBRATION & HOOTENANNY!

LEAFY SPURGE (over $500): Donnes Construction | Grimm Family | First Interstate Bank | Andy & Reg Rockefeller

SPOTTED KNAPWEED ($251-$500): Beartooth Stock Association | Franny & Franny Abbott | High Plains Drifter | Palladium Draughthaus | Rosebud River Farms | Yellowstone Bank

HOUNDSTONGUE ($51-$250): AEI | Aquadrilling | Austin Frank | Beartooth Electric | Burradoo Ranch Australian Kelpies | Helena Agri-Enterprises | RanchWise | Two Rivers Lodge | Stillwater Tire

Contact Lindsey to become a sponsor for our 2024 Hootenanny on August 8!

Donors

We can't thank our members and donors enough, this work would not be possible without your support. When you donate, you truly make a difference!

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Terry & Charlene Adams
Pam Nelson & Mark Albrecht
Mary Jane Alstad
Jim Bill & Debbie Anderson
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We are a volunteer group of local residents and interested representatives working together to enhance the quality of our rural Montana lifestyle by protecting, restoring and conserving our abundant natural resources through good stewardship and community involvement for this and future generations.

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