

MONTANA LANDMARKS

Summer 2022

A Magazine of
The Nature Conservancy in Montana

The Nature
Conservancy 



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Letter From The Director

Dear Friends,

I know we are all happy to welcome spring and summer. Our staff have begun their busy field season. As we welcome the change in season, everyone is bracing for another hot, dry summer. According to a recent study, the Western U.S. is experiencing the worst drought in 1,200 years. That has everyone preparing for the impacts. Our Matador Ranch has cut back on the amount of cattle that will be using our grassbank and our Western Forests crews have ignited several prescribed fires in an effort to reduce the fuels that could feed a severe wildfire. The terms megadrought and megafire are becoming common in our conservation lexicon as the realities of climate change become more and more evident.

Despite the challenges, we remain hopeful. While we have reduced the number of cattle at the Matador Ranch, we know we are playing a critical role for sustainable grazing to continue in Montana. And our prescribed fires have had more partners show up than ever before because of our years of work to build strong partnerships with state, federal and Tribal fire crews. We remain dedicated to continuing this critical conservation work in our favorite place—Montana.

We couldn't do any of this without the support of people like you. Your confidence in and support of our mission is essential to helping us to protect the lands and waters on which all life depends and keep Montana a place where nature and people thrive.

I hope to see some of you this summer.



Amy Croover, State Director

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FRESHWATER



Surviving the Age of Drought

When the Big Hole River went dry at the Wisdom Bridge in 1988, the community responded by creating the Big Hole Watershed Committee. For more than two decades, the Committee has been the gold standard for a local, voluntary approach to dealing with drought. Its mission: conservation through consensus. The committee's pioneering drought management plan relies on give and take—voluntary conservation action by irrigators, anglers and agencies to keep healthy levels of water in the river.

As commendable as the Big Hole and similar local efforts are, they weren't designed to deal with the extraordinarily severe and long-lasting droughts now facing our agricultural communities, rivers and fisheries. The magnitude of the problem demands actions that reach well beyond individual river valleys.

Drought in Montana is no longer a passing phenomenon. With our changing climate, dire conditions like the ones we experienced in 2021 are becoming more frequent and more persistent. We're facing a process known as "aridification"—the gradual change from a wetter to a drier climate. That means average conditions are now shifting toward warmer and drier. One year of good precipitation cannot pull us out of this cycle. Even years

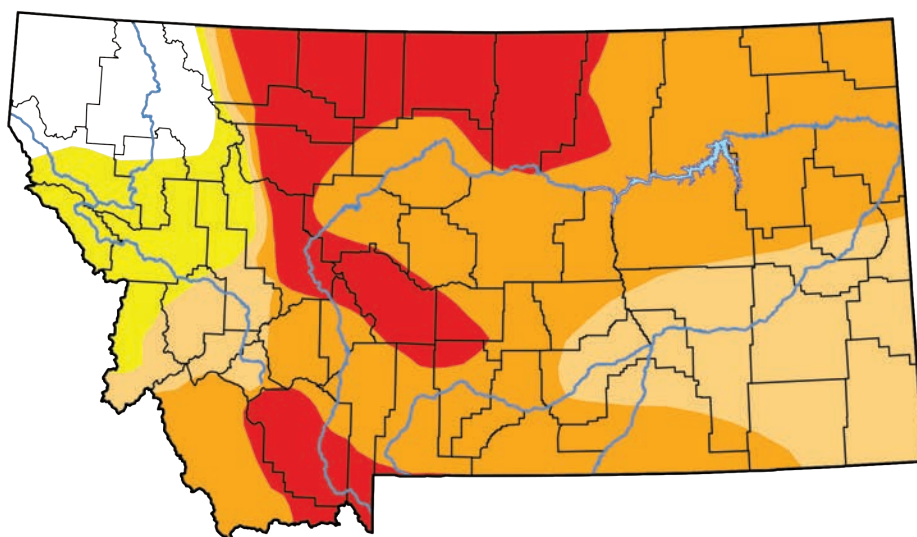
when levels of rain and snow are normal still end up being drier than in the past because of longer, hotter summers. These severe conditions demand a change from business as usual. And there is no time to waste.

We need policies at the state level that incentivize water conservation and support water users who make sacrifices to keep our rivers healthy. We need water conservation measures in cities and towns to reduce demands on our precious water resources. We need to scale up the kinds of restoration projects The Nature Conservancy is undertaking to improve the resilience of our rivers and store water naturally to buffer us from drought. Most importantly, we need our political leaders to confront the source of these problems and advance policies to reduce the emissions that cause climate change, nationally and globally.

At the local level, if Montana can tap federal infrastructure funding in the next five years to accelerate meaningful actions here, we can improve the future for nature, ourselves and our children. These solutions require change—in our policies and behaviors—and that change will only come if we work together to face the problem, honestly and directly.

Montana Drought Conditions

May 10, 2022



Intensity:

- None
- D0 Abnormally Dry
- D1 Moderate Drought
- D2 Severe Drought
- D3 Extreme Drought
- D4 Exceptional Drought

The Drought Monitor focuses on broad-scale conditions. Local conditions may vary. For more information on the Drought Monitor, go to <https://droughtmonitor.unl.edu/About.aspx>

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GRASSLANDS



Leading-Edge Science on the Prairie

On the flat, open expanse of Montana's Northern Great Plains, it's hard to sneak up on anything. Trees are at a premium and the occasional sagebrush doesn't offer much cover. Since most of the animals here are dinner for larger critters, they are quick to scurry into burrows or take flight at the approach of a human. That's a problem for researchers studying prairie wildlife.

Five years ago, Jason Hanlon, The Nature Conservancy's Northern Great Plains land steward, began testing drones to survey greater sage-grouse during the birds' spring mating dances. After a bit of trial and error, he discovered just the right altitude and angle to observe the birds closely enough for a good count without scaring them off. Since then, his work has really taken off.

Drones are also great for watching prairie dog towns. Prairie dogs are the real estate moguls of the grasslands. Their towns provide homes for wildlife such as burrowing owls and swift foxes. Prairie dogs are also the preferred food for highly endangered black-footed ferrets.

That's why members of our Matador grassbank get grazing lease discounts for protecting the towns. The bigger the towns protected, the greater the discount. So, it's important for us to know the location and size of these enclaves and to keep track of how long they last. Traditionally, that involved staff cruising the grasslands in four-wheelers and on foot with handheld GPS units. Drones are not only much less invasive, the information they gather is more robust and far more accurate. Plus, drones can get to locations that are impossible to approach on foot without being spotted by the wildlife on the sites.

Hanlon and the crew on the Matador have taken the lead in advancing the use of drones for grassland conservation. The team's expertise, coupled with advances in the technology, have enabled them to step up their game to the point that Hanlon is being invited to speak at conferences, and other researchers are reaching out to him, eager to learn his techniques. This is just one more way that TNC is playing a leading role on the frontiers of conservation science.



FORESTS



A Legacy of Fire

The use of prescribed or controlled fire has recently garnered a lot of attention. Its use is increasing to reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfire and restore degraded forests and habitat. Of course, controlled burning isn't new. Indigenous people have been burning for centuries. Compared with them we are late to the game, but this spring The Nature Conservancy marks the 60th anniversary of our first prescribed burn, carried out on a preserve in Minnesota.

Here in Montana, where we began burning more than 25 years ago, we are working with Tribal, public and private partners to put fire on the land where it is needed most. Since fire does not recognize property lines, the value of this kind of partnership can't be underestimated, and its potential for good is limited only by our financial and human resources.

It takes enormous trust, earned over years, for landowners to allow someone, however well-trained, to set fire to one of their most important assets. It can mean putting livelihoods and reputations on the line. The credibility of TNC's science, our willingness to share technical information and the results of burns on our land help build that trust. Burning our own land also shows that we aren't suggesting others do something we wouldn't do on our own property.

Prescribed fire is a critical tool in a broader strategy to help Montana's forests adapt to a changing climate and to the subsequent increase in wildfire. To protect the places we all hold dear, we need to accelerate this work quickly. While prescribed burns won't make wildfires go away, dramatically increasing their use in the right places gives us a fighting chance of protecting our forests and communities.

BY THE NUMBERS

6,150

acres treated with prescribed fires by TNC in Montana 1997-2021

2.6

million acres treated with prescribed fire by TNC in the United States since records began in 1988

120,000

acres burned by TNC every year in the United States

PROTECTION



Rich and Remote Protection in the Big Sheep Valley

The Big Sheep Valley of the High Divide Headwaters is one of those truly spectacular parts of Montana that not a lot of people know about. That may be one reason it retains such extraordinary conservation value. Besides hosting a stunning diversity of native plants and wildlife, it provides a vital connection for animals moving between the Greater Yellowstone and the Salmon Selway/Bitterroot region to the west.

That's why The Nature Conservancy is so excited to complete our first conservation easement in Big Sheep. With views of the Beaverhead Range and Italian Peaks, the 3,400-acre Peters property is richly endowed with native sagebrush grasslands, abundant wet meadows and healthy streamside and wetland habitats. The list of wildlife it supports ranges from pronghorn, elk and moose to greater sage-grouse and

even elusive wolverines. It's paradise for songbirds, and rare Westslope cutthroat trout still swim its creeks.

"I am deeply grateful for the trust and patience of Roger and Carrie Peters, whose commitment to Montana's ranching heritage and love for this corner of Montana carried them through the easement process. Such tenacity and values are instrumental in keeping Montana wild and working," says Jim Berkey, TNC's High Divide Headwaters director.

Funding for the project came from both the Natural Resources Conservation Service's Agricultural Land Easement program and the State of Montana's Sage Grouse Habitat Conservation Program, both of which have been transformative in the protection of Montana's High Divide.

Aaron Brock Joins the Team

In March, we welcomed Aaron Brock to our staff as the new director of development. Brock comes to The Nature Conservancy from the Missoula Food Bank & Community Center, where he served for more than seven years as executive director. He has a solid history with the nonprofit community in Montana, and we are happy he's joining our team.

"I've spent my career working on the most important issues," Brock says. "Protecting this great place and tackling climate change are critical, and I'm excited to get to work alongside this great team."

Brock was born in Lansing, Michigan, but came to Montana as a toddler and was raised in Bozeman and Great Falls. Although he left briefly for college in Pennsylvania, Montana drew him back. Brock calls Missoula home and will be based at our Missoula office. He, his fiancée, and two daughters love spending time in the outdoors, so you may run into them on the local ski hills, hiking trails or rivers.



There's Still Time

We are in the final weeks of our More Montana fundraising campaign, and we hope you are ready to step up to the plate with your gift to conserve Montana's true nature.

Please use the envelope included in this publication, or visit nature.org/moremontanacampaign.

Double Your Donation

A generous group of donors has created a \$500,000 fund that will match gifts of \$10,000 or more to our More Montana campaign. This is a fantastic way to double the power of your contribution toward conserving and restoring Montana's forests, grasslands and freshwater.

But you must act by the end of June to take advantage of this opportunity. Contact Alison James at ajames@tnc.org or 406-202-0201, or visit nature.org/moremontanacampaign.

OUR MISSION:

TO CONSERVE THE LANDS
AND WATERS ON WHICH
ALL LIFE DEPENDS.



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Together We Find a Way

Montana's lands, waters and wildlife are facing unprecedented challenges from a changing climate and rapid new development. With the support of our friends and partners, The Nature Conservancy is meeting those challenges with innovation, experience and a commitment to excellence and integrity. Thanks for being part of the team.

