



## **LINCOLN CONSERVATION DISTRICT ANNUAL REPORT JULY 1, 2022, TO JUNE 30, 2023**

The past year brought some much-needed moisture throughout the Lincoln Conservation District (LCD). The last couple of years were fairly droughty. The U.S. Drought Monitor Map had the LCD in severe drought conditions. It changed quickly in November last fall with snowpacks starting to build throughout the winter months. Before long snowpacks were approaching record levels. It was an anomaly when snowpacks really accumulated in the low valley elevations, making difficult conditions for county residents and agriculture producers to travel, and feed livestock.



*Winter snowpacks started to accumulate in mid-November (2023) resulting in record high elevation snowpacks.*

There are no Snotel sites in low elevation areas in the LCD, they are basically in the mountains. While the high elevation snowpacks were getting above average snowpacks it was never as high proportionally to the low elevations snowpacks. Although, there are no quantifiable measurements or records to clarify the low elevation snowpacks, let it be said, many LCD residents had their fill of shoveling snow before it started to melt.

Flooding was a concern this spring, but weather conditions cooperated by melting out the low elevation snow before the high elevation snow, with little cross over. Cool, springtime temperatures were also very helpful in keeping the high elevation snowpack runoff in check before causing property damage. It was about the best scenario you could expect. A bullet was definitely dodged for many cooperators.

The past spring weather events helped with moisture needed for agriculture crops. Many agriculture producers had plenty of ground water to grow a good first crop of hay and start the small grain crops growing well. There was also ample

irrigation water for second crop hay. Overall, hay production was excellent throughout the LCD. The only downside was moisture events during the growing season caused difficulty getting the hay dry to harvest, resulting in poorer quality hay production.

The overall rangeland production was very good. There was good forage for livestock and wildlife. Critical wildlife winter ranges look good for this time of the year. Hopefully, this will help compensate for the wildlife losses last winter.

This winter is predicted by some to be another La Niña type event like we had last year. Others are predicting an El Niño type event, which is dryer than last year. Pick your choice, who knows?

### **LCD Leadership and Technical Staff**

The LCD board members this past fiscal year (2023) were Erick Esterholdt, Chairman; Kenny Petersen, Vice Chairman; Robert Peternal, Secretary and Treasurer; Paula Bowling, Member; and Paul Clark, Member. There will be three positions open for next year's general election (2024), two rural positions and one member-at-large position. Board members were very engaged this past year attending board and area meetings, conferences, and directing the day-to-day activities of the district. With all the natural resource discussions and changes going on nation-wide, it has been difficult to keep on top of new federal land policies and regulations. Climate change seems to be the new buzz word throughout the environmental community. One thing is certain, climate change is difficult for landowners to understand and develop agriculture strategies. One size does not necessarily fit everybody, usually it fits nobody.

The LCD technical and administrative assistance this past year was once again given by part-time employees DeMont B. Grandy, Natural Resource Specialist, and Brenda Lazcanotegui, District Clerk. The USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service's (NRCS) federal assistance was provided to the LCD by Wade Payne, NRCS Civil Engineering Technician, Cokeville Field Office, Adam Clark, NRCS District Conservationist, Afton Field Office, and Janessa

Julson, NRCS Range Management Specialist, now new District Conservationist, Afton Field Office.

### **Important LCD Conservation Activities this past year**

#### **Cooperative Agency Planning Efforts**

Some of the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) initiatives the LCD has been trying to oversee and provide valuable input are as follows:

a) BLM's proposed rule regarding Conservation and Land Health. This rule would allow conservation leases on public lands. This is quite controversial, possibly eliminating multiple use including, grazing, mining, and oil and gas operations.

b) BLM's Grazing Rule Update. This rule was suspended but now the BLM is adjusting its approach to consider changes to its grazing policy and guidance. BLM grazing policy changes can be made internally without N.E.P.A. compliances required by rule changes.

c) BLM's EIS to amend the Greater Sage Grouse Management Plans. The LCD appears to be in never ending negotiations with many other state and national entities to come up with a public land management plan for the Greater Sage Grouse. Ever since the Greater Sage Grouse could be listed by the U.S. Fish and Game Service (USFWS), affected federal, state, county, and special district agencies have been trying to develop a management plan to curtail its listing. Over the years, the BLM 2015 and 2019 multi state and federal management plans have been ruled by federal courts to be inadequate. Currently, the LCD is working with the BLM and numerous other entities to come up with a 2024 management alternative to Greater Sage Grouse that would be palatable to all parties involved.

d) BLM's Programmatic EIS for Utility-Scale Solar Energy. The last several years solar development has been pushed to the front by national leaders. Large tracts of solar energy developments cause problems for wildlife migrations, plus research is showing it could have long-term impacts to the soils within the development area, not alone the reclamation issues for the solar panels when the life span of the project comes to a close.



Some of the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) initiatives the LCD has been trying to oversee and provide input are as follows:

a) The LCD board members and employees are providing input to the new Bridger-Teton National Forest 10 Year Vegetative Plan. It is a big undertaking with several federal, state, county, special districts, and private entities involved. It has been several years since this effort has been undertaken.

b) The LCD is working with the Greys River Forest Collaborative and the Lincoln County Commissioners to create a Lincoln County-wide Collaborative composed of a Greys River Working Group and a South Lincoln Working Group. The proposed Collaborative will develop short and long-term strategies, recommendations, and measurable actions for federal, state, and private land managers. It will be an avenue to bring finances to complete needed forest health, grazing, recreation, and wildlife projects.

d) Currently, the USFS is making rules on Climate Resilient Forest and Grasslands. Efforts will center on forest products and outdoor recreation. The LCD will be participating in national webinars giving local grassroots input to the process so local residents are not negatively impacted.

### **Energy Issues**

One of the more troubling issues the LCD has tried to provide direction to the Wyoming State Legislators and Wyoming Public Service Commission (PSC) is Rocky Mountain Power's (RMP) decision over the past several years to eliminate fossil fuel power plants and go to green energy. Costs were projected to skyrocket; well, it has come to fruition. Recently, RMP has proposed a 28.7% increase in power rates over the next several years. This will cause irrigation pumping costs to greatly increase for agriculture producers and devastate individuals on fixed incomes. It will take a combined effort of everybody to contact legislators and PSC officials to curtail this projected increase.

Another issue the LCD has been working with the Lincoln County Commissioners and local Wyoming State legislators has been the proposed alignment of the RMP's Gateway West Electric

Transmission line through the LCD, especially in the Town of Cokeville area. Plans were decided at an earlier meeting this year to place the new transmission line in the existing Transmission Line Corridor on the southside. This would eliminate most of the concerns to local agriculture producers and the Town of Cokeville. At a recent meeting in October this year, RMP tried to change the proposed transmission line route to just north of the existing transmission line. This is unacceptable to local agriculture producers' infrastructures and the Town of Cokeville's Municipal Waste Plant. The LCD is back to negotiations again, it is never ending.



*Rocky Mountain Power employees explain Gateway West Power Transmission Line proposed route to Cokeville residents*

### **Range Activities**



*Neighboring conservation districts' employees met with the LCD and USFS employees to discuss Tall Forb Community Sites in the Bridger Teton National Forest.*

The LCD completed the Rangeland Habitat Assessment Program (RHAP) grant through the Wyoming Department of Agriculture for the Southern Wyoming Range Condition and Trend Assessment for Ecological Site Development for the Tall Forb type in the Bridger Teton National Forest (BTNF). The USFS and conservation district employees have gathered enough Tall Forb Community vegetative information to start developing Ecological Site Descriptions (ESDs) to determine the status of Tall Forb Communities within the BTNF. This is necessary when determining desired conditions for grazing activities within the BTNF.

Over the last several years the LCD has been very concerned about cheatgrass invasion throughout the district. Areas in Idaho, Nevada, and Utah have had serious invasions of cheatgrass, compromising their rangelands' ability to produce productive grazing grasses for livestock and wildlife. This year the LCD is identifying areas throughout the district in conjunction with the Wyoming Game and Fish Department (WGFD) to control cheatgrass invasion. A research study was conducted by the WGFD, NRCS, and the LCD with a newly released herbicide call "Rejuvra" to eliminate cheatgrass. Its results were excellent eliminating almost all of the cheatgrass in the controlled area. It appears to have good control over time with little to no reinvasion so far, which is better than other herbicides tried. Those interested in controlling cheatgrass invasion on their property need to contact the LCD office or WGFD office in Green River, WY.



*NRCS employees evaluate cheatgrass control efforts within the BLM Smiths Fork Allotment.*

## Wildlife

The LCD really accelerated their Wildlife Friendly Fence Program with the NRCS and WGFD. Six cooperators signed up to remove some 52,918 feet of woven and 5-wire fence and replace with 4-wire Wildlife Friendly Fence. Already, 25,030 feet of new fence has been built. This program basically is funded by the NRCS, WGFD through their Mule Deer Initiative Program, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and the Wyoming and Natural Resources Trust (WWNRT). The LCD helps gather the construction money under one roof and makes payments to cooperators. Contact the LCD office if you have an interest to replace some old fences on your property.



*New 4-wire Wildlife Friendly Fences help curtail Mule deer entanglements.*

## Water Activities Completed

Due to high snowpack levels this spring, river runoff levels were very high. Some agriculture producers had damage to irrigation infrastructures and heavy riverbank erosion. A couple of cooperators qualified for financial assistance through the NRCS' Emergency Watershed Protection (EWP) program to help repair the damage to their irrigation ditches, riverbanks, and access roads into their property. The Town of LaBarge qualified for EWP financial help to repair their municipal water intake system out of the Green River. Bank erosion had jeopardized the infiltration pipes for their culinary water.





*The Smiths Fork River was eroding the Whites Water Ditch away through active beaver holes.*

The LCD will sponsor the two agriculture producers' EWP grant from the NRCS. The LCD is currently helping obtain other grant funding to help with the repair of damaged riverbanks since costs for the projects are very high. The EWP grant only covers 75 percent of the construction costs. The Town of LaBarge will sponsor their own EWP project.

The LCD's Cokeville North Wetlands Improvement Project was completed this past fall. Project work was undertaken on six private landowners' properties. Work completed consisted of 28 water control structures. 17,800 feet of flood-irrigation dikes have been repaired or constructed and 1,100 acres of flood irrigated wetlands benefited. This project was a definite win-win for both agriculture producers and wetland waterfowl. Over \$219,198.70 was gathered up by the LCD, USFWS, WWNRT, and several other conservation groups to get the work completed.



*Newly restored wetland ponds enhance waterfowl habitat north of Cokeville.*

The LCD was made aware of some lotic, riparian and wetland (R/W) vegetation monitoring within some BLM allotments this past summer in the district by the Colorado Natural Heritage Center in Fort Collins, Colorado, partnering with the University of Montana. The BLM contracts with different groups to complete Assessment Inventory Monitoring (AIM) on terrestrial, lotic and R/W monitoring on BLM land. The LCD's Natural Resource Specialist attended a monitoring day on Little Muddy Creek in the Smiths Fork Allotment to gain an understanding of their protocols. They are gathering some basic vegetation data to compare with future monitoring activities. It is unclear if the BLM has ESDs developed for riparian sites to determine if the current vegetative gathered is in an upward or downward trend otherwise, the data gathered is not too useful.



*Little Muddy Creek's riparian zone within the Smith Fork BLM Allotment was monitored this summer for existing vegetation composition.*

### Miscellaneous Activities

The LCD has had several requests for subdivision reviews this past year. With the current projected growth in the LCD, subdivision reviews could become a major activity for the district in the upcoming years.

The LCD sponsored another rural water quality testing day on September 18, 2023, to test well and springs for bacteria presence/absence. The testing costs for this service were funded from a grant through the Wyoming Department of Agriculture (WDA). Other chemical parameters may also be tested through the LCD's water quality program,

but part of the costs will need to be paid by the cooperator. Nine water quality samples were taken by cooperators this past fall. All of the WDA grant money was expended for this biennium. Plans are to continue this program next fall (2024) when new grant funding becomes available. Contact the LCD office for details at (307) 279-3256 ext. 4.

### A Big Thanks

The LCD gives a “Big Thank You” to all district cooperators and local, county, state, and federal entities for help in implementing district programs and activities. The LCD board members would like to thank the Lincoln County Commissioners and WDA for their financial support and input to the district. This coming new year will be challenging but with every bodies’ help it will be manageable.

### NRCS Report

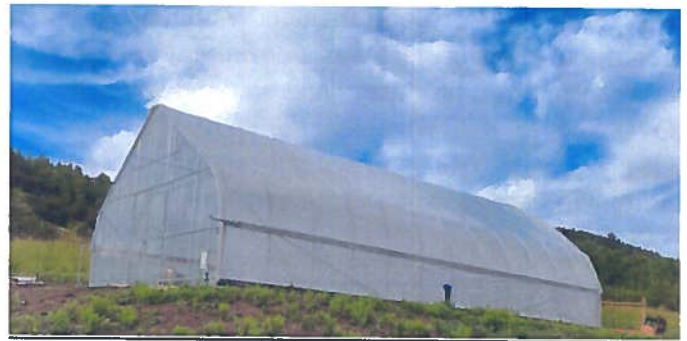
Greetings from the NRCS! A thank you and farewell to Adam Clark who moved on to be a Soil Conservationist in the Lovell Field Office starting in June. Adam served as District Conservationist (DC) for three years, starting in March 2020. We appreciate the great work he accomplished while serving in the DC position. I (Janessa Julson) was selected to be the new DC and officially started in the position in October. I have been with the Wyoming NRCS since 2018, and many of south Lincoln County’s producers may have already met and worked with me. I previously served as the Rangeland Management Specialist in Afton’s NRCS FO and helped in conservation planning efforts across both Lincoln and Teton counties, with a short stint in Sublette County. For those who may not have met me, here is a brief summary of my background. I grew up on a family-owned operated sheep and cattle ranch in eastern Utah. I graduated with my bachelor’s degree from Utah State University, and my master’s degree from the University of Idaho, both degrees being in Rangeland Management. My husband and I have two young and wild boys, and two very big rambunctious dogs! I am looking forward to serving as the new DC for the Afton FO.

Wyoming NRCS welcomed our new State Conservationist, Jackie Byam, earlier this year.

Jackie has expressed and encouraged field offices to start outreaching to landowners and operators that would be quality candidates for the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP). As stated on Wyoming’s NRCS website “The CSP helps you build on your existing conservation efforts while strengthening your operations. Whether you are looking to improve grazing conditions, increase crop resiliency, or develop wildlife habitat, we can custom design a CSP plan to help you meet those goals. We can help you identify natural resource problems or attain higher stewardship levels in an environmentally beneficial and cost-effective manner”. If this program sounds like something you may interested in, please reach out to the office, and discuss potential CSP options with me.

One of the practices that has become popular in the past few years is the High Tunnel. High tunnels are very similar to a green house, which allows vegetable growers to extend the growing season. If you enjoy growing a garden and wish to extend the growing season for your vegetables, a high tunnel is a great option for you and NRCS is taking applications. .

As always, it has been great working with the LCD. A huge thank you to the staff and board members.



*A recently installed high tunnel*

Please check out the LCD web site at [www.lincolnconservationdistrict.org](http://www.lincolnconservationdistrict.org)

#### FINANCIAL STATEMENT

Balance on Hand July 1, 2022	\$	78,380.57
Receipts for FY 2022 - 2023		186,886.30
Expenditures for FY 2022-2023		193,784.73
Balance on Hand June 30, 2023	\$	71,482.14

The Lincoln Conservation District is an equal opportunity employer, and offers all programs, services, and assistance on a nondiscriminatory basis, without regard to age, creed, marital status, national origin, physical or mental handicap, politics, race, religion, or sex.