



Welcome to Sweet Grass County

Sweet Grass County is located in south central Montana. Don't confuse the town of Sweetgrass with the county of Sweet Grass. Sweet Grass County became a county in 1895, formed from parts of Park, Meagher, and Yellowstone Counties. It has been at its present size of 1,855 square miles since 1920. The current population is 3,623. Ranching and mining are the primary economic drivers.

When Lewis and Clark traveled through this region they named the area where the Boulder River and Big Timber Creek empty into the Yellowstone River "Rivers Across." In the late 1800s, an Irish immigrant named the settlement Dornix, meaning "a rock that fits in the hand and is handy for throwing." In 1883, the town was moved due to complications with the railroad and was re-named Big Timber for its abundance of cottonwood trees lining the banks of the nearby Boulder and Yellowstone Rivers. In fact, a majestic 125-foot-tall cottonwood is located on the banks of the Yellowstone River right outside the city limits and was close to being the national champion cottonwood. Today, 200-year-old cottonwood trees still line the banks of the

Yellowstone River, meaning they are the same trees as the ones Lewis and Clark passed by two centuries ago.

Sweet Grass County is home to the Crazy Mountains. There are several theories on how this range was named. The Indians called them the Mad Mountains for their rugged beauty and haunting winds that blow down the canyons. The Indians referred to the highest peak as Awahawapiia Peak, meaning mad mountain. It was so called because they could not tell if the weather was going to be fair or stormy, as all signs failed in that region.

Geology plays a part in another theory. The lava upthrusts are young in the perspective of time and do not fit in with neighboring rock formations, hence the name "Crazy," or because of being wholly disconnected from any other range and being a sort of "crazy" formation.

Another theory, and more widely accepted, is a woman went mad on the prairie. Perhaps this was due to an attack and death of her family. She took refuge in the mountains. Indian belief required crazy people to be left alone. The legend lives on in the movie "Jeremiah Johnson."

Crazy Mountains



Livestock in Sweet Grass County

Livestock Judging Teaches Life Skills

Livestock judging is a 4-H event in which youth place classes of four animals after considering the species and desired use for the livestock. Several classes are placed and oral reasons are presented on a predetermined number of the classes in the contest. This activity uses livestock as a vehicle to teach youth time management skills, decision making skills, and oral presentation skills, as well as industry standards for each species of livestock. During the 2017 4-H year, youth from Sweet Grass County competed in numerous local and national contests. Youth members competed in Phoenix, Arizona; Denver, Colorado; Kearney, Nebraska; Twin Falls, Idaho; Spanish Fork, Utah and Louisville, Kentucky. These youth placed fourth overall in Arizona, fourth in Denver, second in Nebraska, first in Idaho and Utah and finished eighth overall in Kentucky.

RIGHT: Jess Moody, Reserve National Champion

BELOW: Sweet Grass County Team at the North American International Livestock Exhibition



The contest in Kentucky is the North American International Livestock Exhibition and is considered the National 4-H Championship Contest. Jess Moody from Big Timber was the Reserve National Champion at this prestigious contest and his teammate Dylan Laverell was the Reserve National Champion Sheep judge at this contest. This activity has allowed students to showcase their abilities and has resulted in these students receiving college scholarships to continue their post-secondary educations. Moody received a full-ride scholarship as a result of his abilities in this activity and he is currently enjoying a tuition free education at an institute of higher learning. Since 1996, students from Sweet Grass County have accumulated over \$320,000 in scholarships for livestock judging at colleges across the U. S.

Wool Harvesting and Marketing

During the 1950s and 1960s, Sweet Grass County was the largest inland shipping point of domestic wool in the region. During the late 1990s the number of sheep began a rapid decline in our region. Today there are 38 producers actively marketing wool through the Sweet Grass County Wool Pool. The Extension office plays a vital role in the Sweet Grass County Wool Pool. The Sweet Grass County agent manages the warehouse inventory, cores the wool, sorts the wool into marketing lines, provides harvesting information to the growers and advises the Wool Marketing committee on marketing options and market dynamics for the current inventory. The wool grading and coring was extremely important to the growers involved in the pool during the 2017 marketing year. One producer who markets 7,553 pounds of wool was able to improve his clip by grading and proper harvesting, and that translated into an additional \$1,815 to this producer. Thirteen other growers also improved their wool clip through grading and sorting, resulting in an increase of \$10,958 on 11,125 pounds of wool.

During the 2017 shearing year, the Sweet Grass County Extension office was able to acquire a new tool to measure the fiber diameter of wool prior to shearing. The FibreLux instrument allowed producers to sort fleeces prior to shearing and to package them into lots that resulted in the increased revenue for the producers.



Shearers harvesting wool

Rancher Roundtable Discussions

In an effort to leverage rancher's limited time, yet still provide quality educational opportunities, Sweet Grass County Extension collaborated with the Crazy Mountain Stockgrowers Association to present four educational sessions. The sessions started with a day-long cattle handling workshop that provided guidance comparing being on foot, to horseback, to working cattle with ATVs. This session also provided producers the opportunity to become BQA certified. The following three sessions were evening sessions that focused on estate planning, emerging technologies in the cattle industry and forage crops.

One hundred and twelve area ranchers participated in at least one of the sessions, representing 56 ranches in Sweet Grass County.

Post-session evaluations indicated that all participants found the sessions to be timely and very educational as they applied to their respective operations. At least two respondents have reported that the cattle handling workshop has had a direct impact on their ranch and the ATV section of the talk has changed the way they and their employees view and use ATVs. Further, three ranches have implemented a genetic testing protocol following information received in the emerging technologies session. The discussion on forages has led to an increased interest in annual crop options for forages in Sweet Grass County and there has been a notable increase in the acreage planted to Willow Creek Winter Wheat.

Ranchers learning about emerging technologies



Sweet Grass County Cover Crop Project

The Sweet Grass County Extension office has been working with local producers to plant and evaluate alternative crops, such as cover crop cocktails. This program is due to the increased frequency of drought conditions in our region and a local interest in soil health. These crops have been planted on approximately 1200 acres in Sweet Grass County. Throughout the growing season, plots were monitored for growth characteristics of each of the species in the mix. In late August, the plots were clipped to measure bio-mass produced. Soil pits were also excavated to evaluate root structure of the plants, look at soil properties and to evaluate root penetration. Soil samples were also taken

and sent to labs to measure a wide range of soil dynamics. During the course of the growing season, three field days were held for producers to evaluate the plantings. These field days were attended by 43 producers. The crops were then terminated by grazing with producer-owned cattle and days of forage availability and animal plant selection were monitored. Data is being evaluated currently. However, preliminary production data from two of the plots showed 5,821 pounds per acre and 6,558 pounds per acre of usable plant material.

This ongoing project will continue to evaluate the long-term effects and production potential of cover crop mixes in Sweet Grass County. The next step of this project will be to document ideal seasons of use for the different mixtures, which in the long term will provide agriculturalists with another cropping tool to improve soil properties on their operations while also providing alternative forage resources.



LEFT: Monitoring cover crop production
RIGHT: A field of cover crops

contact us:



EXTENSION

Sweet Grass County

PO Box 640
515 Hooper St.
Big Timber, MT 59011
(406) 932-5146
sweetgrass@montana.edu
www.msuextension.org/sweetgrass



Marc King
Extension Agent



Kandi Schuman
Administrative Assistant