

Pondera County

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Cows enjoying a sunny winter day, by Adriane Good

Pondera County is a rural agricultural county approximately 1,640 square miles in size. It has private, state, tribal and federal lands. Pondera County is on the western edge of the Golden Triangle area of north central Montana and produces some of the best winter wheat grown in the United States. In addition, barley, pulse crops, hay, and livestock (cattle and sheep) support many families and five Hutterite Colonies as the largest income-producing segment of the local economy. The educational role of MSU Extension in Pondera County is significant to the producer's bottom line.

Programs of note in 2019 include the Master Farmer class, Calvin' Fever class and the launch of the Conrad Farmer's Market. MSU Extension Agriculture Agent Adriane Good received an individual national award for the Master Farmer Class and a team national award for the Calvin' Fever class with the Glacier and Toole County MSU Extension Agents.

In 2019, Pondera County 4-H had 75 members (8-19 years), 11 Cloverbuds (6-8 years) and 31 volunteer leaders. One leader has been active in the Pondera 4-H program for 53 years!

Master Farmer

The average age of a farmer in Montana is 58.9 years and increasing, meaning we will more likely be relying on young

and beginning producers to contribute to agriculture in the coming years. The Master Farmer program was developed to teach young and beginning producers about crop marketing, soil fertility, integrated pest management, crop scouting and plant staging, crop diversification, and web-based tools to help them make management decisions on their operations. Classes were held once a week for six weeks with experts in each subject area using video conferencing or in Conrad to teach the group. Each class started with dinner, allowing the group to network and share tips with each other based on their own experience. Each class featured presentations by the experts, opportunities for open dialogue with the presenters, and hands-on activities.

Twenty-four people attended this course, including young and beginning producers, veteran producers, industry professionals, and wives of producers who had previously been less involved in farm business. When asked if they were planning on making immediate changes on their farm based on what they had learned in this course, 77% of participants said they would, although some are not yet in a position to do so. One producer estimated that the knowledge gained could save their farm \$50,000 a year. The changes suggested during the course also reflect an improvement in farm sustainability, including

improving soil health, reducing dependency on pesticides, and incorporating new crops into production.

4-H Pheasant Project

Eight 4-H members and three Cloverbuds took part in a brand new project offered in Pondera County: raising and releasing ring-necked pheasants. Members bought 400 newly-hatched pheasant chicks from a local pheasant farm and raised them for release as part of Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks Upland Game Bird Enhancement Program.

In recent years, upland game bird populations have struggled due to habitat decline and harsh winters. With this in mind, and some help from Montana FWP, the group picked three locations with prime pheasant habitat to be a new home for their birds. Throughout the winter, the group prepared to care for birds with a few project meetings where they learned about the life of a pheasant in the wild and their habitat requirements. In June, the members picked up chicks straight from the incubator and brought them home. The youth spent the next 11-12 weeks caring for their birds. They fed, watered, and kept their chicks warm. They built pens and outfitted the birds with peepers to reduce pecking. Unfortunately, the 4-H members gained first-hand knowledge of predation when a weasel got into a pen and killed over 100 birds in one night. That didn't stop the kids from trying and they carried on with the remaining pheasants. At the end of August, the members gathered up the grown chicks and brought them to release sites. A total of 168 birds were released into the wild.

This project was a broad learning opportunity for 4-H members. They learned the importance of conservation and that without appropriate habitat and food, their beloved birds wouldn't survive in the wild. It is also hoped that the pheasants these 4-H members released will boost wild populations of ring-necked pheasants in Pondera County.



(top) The first 4-H pheasant project members, by Adriane Good; (bottom) 4-H members hatching their new pheasant chicks, by Adriane Good

Pondera County Staff



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