Nestled between two mountain ranges in western Montana, Ravalli County and the Bitterroot Valley are a haven for those who wish to live the Montana lifestyle. The 43,000 residents of Ravalli County enjoy blue-ribbon trout fishing on the Bitterroot River, hunting, hiking, and recreating in the Bitterroot National Forest, and partake in a diverse and growing local food scene. Agriculture, natural resources, recreation and tourism, construction, and small business opportunities all combine to contribute to the county economic base. There are nine small, rural communities spread through the valley. The Ravalli County MSU Extension office has four staff members offering services to all Ravalli County residents, offering a wide diversity of programs to address the county’s needs and interests.

WINter Wellness

In partnership with MSU College of Nursing interns, a winter wellness program was created to encourage Ravalli County residents to engage in physical activity during the cold, dark months from November 15-February 15. Participants who engaged in at least 10 minutes of daily activity could log their efforts and enter into a drawing to win prizes. Over $2,000 in prizes were donated by local foundations and businesses to encourage participants to keep active.

WINter Wellness is the fourth health-incentive challenge offered by MSU Extension in the past three years. During this challenge, 211 adults from every community in the county logged over 4,192 entries of physical activity during this three month challenge.

Participants reported the following impacts:
- 30% improved mental health
- 32% increased physical activity
- 31% increased motivation to move due to this program
- 8% increase in social ties to the community

A Hamilton resident shared, “I will continue with my indoor planks, squats, etc. and walking down the hill and back up again to the mailbox. Your program has helped me to be stronger because it has given me incentive to keep up daily exercise.”

In addition to the personal incentives for physical engagement, three wellness-focused educational classes were held with community partners and engaged more than 115 adults. Programs included: Sound Bath and Mindfulness with...
Bitterroot Sound Healing, Walk & Talk with Bitter Root Land Trust, and Full Moon Hike at Teller Wildlife Refuge with RCKN IT! Outdoors and MPG Ranch.

Mental Illness Community Discussions

Partnerships are the key to creating community change through collaboration. This last year, MSU Extension partnered with Rocky Mountain Laboratories (RML) to offer an educational speaker series focusing on mental health, coined M.I.K.A., which stands for Mental Illness Knowledge and Awareness.

RML is a part of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID) and the National Institutes of Health. The mission of NIAID and RML is to do research to understand, treat, and prevent infectious, immunologic, and allergic diseases. RML can assist community stakeholders in accessing resources through the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH). NIMH is the lead federal agency for research on mental disorders. This past year, RML invited expert speakers to talk about research in mental illness and related topics, which aligned with their role of educating the community about science and public health.

The following presentations were offered to the public by researchers from NIMH: Changing the stigma: understanding and living with mental illness by Dr. Maryland Pao; Is this normal? Navigating the lifetime changes from puberty through menopause, by Dr. Pedro Martinez; After surviving trauma, can you get to thriving? Recovery and PTSD (and everything between), by Dr. Susan Borja.

Mental health and illness potentially impacts every facet of a community. The attendance at the speaker series spurred MSU Extension and RML to offer community discussions surrounding mental illness. Together, community members, agencies and organizations have generated a prioritized list of action items to create community impact related to mental health. MSU Extension now sends a monthly update with the efforts of the community discussions, upcoming trainings and educational articles focusing on mental health to over 400 individuals in Ravalli County and throughout the nation.

4-H Camp Counseling Leadership Development Program

Through the Camp Counseling, a long-standing teen leadership development program, teens indicated the development of valuable life skills. Each summer the Ravalli County 4-H Camp is offered to youth to spend a week at an outdoor camp. The effectiveness of the camp is dependent upon the preparedness of the planners and facilitators of the event. Interested teen leaders apply and interview for the position to serve the campers, youth ages 8-12, and create a camp that is age appropriate with educational workshops, activities and situations that enhance positive youth development.

One previous camp counselor expressed, “Counselor training has taught me the importance of rules and safety at camp. As a camper it’s difficult to grasp how important safety is at camp and it is easy to break rules. At trainings, I realized how critical it is for us to make sure that campers are having fun in a safe environment because parents are trusting us with their kids for four days.”

Teen leaders who participate in the camp planning and training meetings prepare for camp through the collaboration of adult leaders, youth directors and a team of teen leaders to plan, implement and evaluate the summer 4-H camp. Teen counselors develop marketable life skills for future leadership positions, such as team building, group leadership, effective communication, conflict resolution and event planning.

Farmer Bootcamp Supports New Small-Farm Landowners with Knowledge and Planning for Success

Ravalli County MSU Extension hosted the second annual Farmer Bootcamp class series in the spring of 2019. This nine-week course included classroom instruction, guest speakers, and field trip opportunities to connect new small farm owners with the tools and information to develop and implement farm management plans for their small spaces.

Topics of instruction included soil health, plant communities, weed management, livestock integration, high-value crop opportunities, and land evaluation skills. Field trips to orchards, small farms in the area, and to the Western Agriculture Research Station helped build knowledge and ideas for each participants’ own farm.

Each farm owner developed a set of goals, implementation timeline, and budget for projects that became the framework for a farm management plan.

Jeff, a small farm owner said of the class, “I learned a lot, and it really helped me focus my goals for my property and plan the steps necessary to bring those goals to life. The class was also the motivation I needed to take the plunge into farming.”

Montana Berry Growers Association Forming to Support the High-Value Crop Possibilities of Small Fruits

Ravalli County MSU Extension partnered with Missoula County MSU Extension and the MSU Western Agriculture Research Center to develop and implement multiple seminars and training sessions for the emerging small fruit and berry orchardists throughout Montana. This growing industry holds a promise of high per-acre incomes, enabling smaller farms to produce a desirable income from a small footprint of land.

In April 2019, a statewide workshop was held in Missoula with 30 interested growers in attendance. Presentations included
Top row: (left) Building leadership, interpersonal, and problem-solving skills at 4-H camp, and having a great time doing it, by Katelyn Andersen; (right) The farmyard of a small farm, by Patrick Mangan; Middle row: (left) Finishing up the harvest in Ravalli County, by Patrick Mangan; (center) Farmer Bootcamp class engaged in discussions, by Patrick Mangan; (right) Community members engage in a hike to Lake Como with an educational class led in partnership with MSU Extension, by Katelyn Andersen; Bottom row: (left) Berry growers learning while on a tour of the Western Agriculture Research Center berry trial plots, by Patrick Mangan
choosing the right berry varieties, establishment of berry orchards, and disease and pest management, and the workshop included a discussion panel for marketing and processing possibilities with the different types of fruit.

Growers requested the formation of a state growers association for berries that would increase public awareness about new fruits entering the market and provide an association voice for continued statewide advocacy and development. MSU Extension agents from Ravalli and Missoula Counties have been leading the group through the process to form a growers association, which officially filed paperwork in late 2019.

The new Montana Berry Growers Association is planning the first annual member meeting and educational conference for April of 2020 with the help of MSU Extension and university staff.