

Fergus County



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Cattle graze a cover crop field in Fergus County by Emily Standley.

The MSU Extension office in Fergus County serves a population of more than 11,000 people within Fergus County, and has a working agreement to deliver educational programs and 4-H services to Petroleum County’s approximately 500 residents as well. Fergus County is located in Central Montana and covers 4,250 square miles. Lewistown is the county seat, with a population of about 5,800. Other communities served include Denton, Grass Range, Moore, Roy, Winifred, and the Petroleum County seat, Winnett. Agricultural production is the primary industry in most of these communities, but manufacturing, natural resources, health care, education, and government provide many additional employment opportunities. The area is abundant with hunting and fishing opportunities, and is a popular spot for tourists seeking outdoor recreation. The local geography is diverse with mountains, creeks, foothills, rivers, breaks, and prairie.

Ag Ambassador Competition

In 2020, Fergus-Petroleum MSU Extension established a new program that combines youth development with agricultural advocacy. As part of the 75th Montana Winter Fair, held in Lewistown, this youth competition allowed students from across the state to showcase communication skills and their passion for agriculture.

Any high school student in Montana was eligible to participate, and agriculture ambassador participants were tasked

with addressing the broad topic of ‘The Economic Impact of Agriculture in Your Community.’ Each student identified a focus area within that topic, and created materials designed to inform the general public, while also highlighting their skills using a variety of media. Each students’ submission consisted of six components. Participants showcased writing skills through a newspaper article and demonstrated creativity through radio spots and visual displays. They created a social media marketing plan to illustrate their needs assessment abilities, and practiced verbal communication through an interview and prepared speech. In its inaugural year, the Ag Ambassador program had six competitors from six different counties across Montana. Students tackled a wide variety of complex topics including local foods, agro-forestry, removal of lands from production agriculture, wildlife-agriculture interactions, and more.

Generous sponsorships allowed awards of \$1,000 for first place, \$500 for second place, and \$250 for third place. A supportive group of local volunteers helped score the event, and provided resounding feedback that the future of agriculture looks bright in the hands of these capable young leaders. After a successful first year, the Ag Ambassador program will continue as part of the Montana Winter Fair, and is already growing. For 2021, the topic is ‘Diversity in Montana Agriculture,’ and though they may have to compete virtually, we are excited to see what this next group of future leaders brings to the table.

Virtually, Doing Everything We Can

2020 has been a year of learning and thinking out-of-the-box. When COVID-19 introduced itself in March, 4-H families were emailed and asked to stay home, stay safe and stay healthy, so we could have a “normal” year. It was obvious I did not have a clear vision of what was ahead... But, with today’s technology and a lot of proactive planning and determination, 4-H has continued to be an active, vital program.

Camp season was the first item on the agenda to address. Sadly, Cloverbud Camp for our youngest members had to be canceled, but with modifications Junior Camp and Tween Trip happened. Extra tents were pitched, most of the time was spent outside and everyone went home safe and healthy.

The county public speaking contest allowed everyone to learn new technical skills through submitting recorded presentations for judges to watch, score and provide feedback. Best of all, many members choose to post presentations on Facebook, allowing a whole new audience the opportunity to watch and enjoy.

Fair planning required a Plan A, B and C to be ready for whatever stage we might find ourselves by the last week of July. Masks, hand washing, and sanitizing were routine, and great efforts were made to keep crowds small. Members still had the opportunity to practice interview skills while one judge conducted an interview for all of a member’s entries. Animals were shown one species per day, and exhibited in several locations. The sale was live, but online bidding was also available.

With the return of fall, the new 4-H Year has begun. Everyone has become much more adept with online tools and virtual experiences. We have 20-plus teen members participating in Montana 4-H Leadership Academy, where they will meet online every month through the winter and spring to learn leadership skills with 4-Her’s from across the state. Our county awards program was a virtual event, allowing us to recognize member achievements in the last 4-H year. Orientation is being conducted online for new 4-H members, Cloverbuds and their families; I can see their faces and visit while sharing all the 4-H Program has to offer. Plans are under way for conducting online project workshops, which will be recorded and serve as a resource for years to come.

A 4-H Leadership Academy keynote speaker and workshop presenter, Kent Julian, has a tag line to live by this year: You can sit down and whine or stand up and shine. We are all facing new and different challenges, but with a willingness to think outside the box and accept a new normal, the 4-H Program and I will continue to make a positive impact in the lives of Fergus/Petroleum County Youth. It is especially important right now to be that example, a positive mentor, and the supportive person that helps youth see a bright future.



Top: Ag Ambassador winners (left to right) Hayley Stahl, 2nd place; Makayla Dines, 3rd place; Allison Denton, 1st place, by Emily Standley; **Bottom:** Jasper Tholt, local 4-H member, presenting his demonstration during virtual public speaking day, by Jennifer Saunders

Fergus County Staff



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