Fort Belknap Indian Reservation is homeland to the Gros Ventre (Aaniiih) and the Assiniboine (Nakoda) Tribes, and located 40 miles south of the Canadian border and 20 miles north of the Missouri River. The area consists of 675,147 acres with the main industry of agriculture, and small business development. The Little Rocky Mountains, located at the southern end of the reservation, are home to the small communities of Hays and Lodge Pole. The MSU Extension Fort Belknap Extension program is one of the long-standing 33 Federally Recognized Tribal Extension Programs. The role of FRTEP has been historically integral to knowledge acquisition and skill development in the lives of tribal members. While our agents work to identify and prioritize tribal member’s needs and interests, members show increased interest in learning through a variety of media. We reach over 824 followers on our Fort Belknap Reservation Extension Facebook page.

Fort Belknap Coming Together

A major current focus of our development and outreach efforts have centered on our role in responding to COVID-19-related needs. Fort Belknap Reservation Extension staff have operated as an integral component in developing local capacity in resource acquisition and distribution to community members. Within the framework of Extension’s directives, we are working online to bring trusted resources to help families, businesses, ranches and communities during these ever-changing days. Daily, we have seen the value and urgency of the power of education, diversity and community.

Our outreach and programming have largely been limited to online, virtual and one-on-one appointments. We have been able to continue some of our out-of-doors activities, such as gardening, rancher/farmer consultation, and 4-H weigh-ins.

In light of this changing environment, we continue to address local community needs and interests through our work with progressive initiatives, such as the Natural Resources Conservation Service High Tunnel program, No Kid Hungry programming, Kinship Caregiving, Farmer-Rancher Stress Management, SNAP-Ed, and Opioid Abuse Prevention. Additionally, USDA online resources have supported the Coronavirus Food Assistance Program (CFAP), beef processing, small business assistance, cattle markets, and stimulus packages for individual producers.

Prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, the Mid-Winter Fair was held, organized by Extension staff, local community members, Tribal programs, and local businesses. Extension staff assisted 15 Mid-Winter Fair event chairs to fundraise, market, and organize fair events.
Food Sustainability

It’s been a busy year, with wrapping up the community gardens and research orchard, and teaching food preservation classes. Approximately 150 home gardens now exist on the Fort Belknap Reservation, in addition to four productive community gardens. We are continuing to work on building our capacity for food security at Fort Belknap. The Well-Connected Communities Project through MSU Extension supports the training of food preservation “mentors” in the form of local people (6 adults and 2 youth) trained to offer expertise about canning, pickling, drying and freezing food.

These mentors reach out to all community members who may need information on safe and approved methods of food preservation, as we anticipate a future where food security skills and knowledge will remain essential to our community’s well-being. In a new partnership with the Western Ag Research Center, a fruit tree grafting project was instituted, allowing tribal members to learn new methods of propagation. This recent initiative has positively impacted the community’s ability to expand private orchards, potentially generate larger amounts of locally-grown fruit, and enhance economic opportunities for small-fruit market growers.

4-H Resiliency

Fort Belknap Reservation established two new clubs with 28 new members, bringing the total number of clubs to three with 58 enrolled 4-H members. Volunteers trained and then recruited club members and met monthly from November 2019 to February 2020. The 4-H members had signed up for a total of 15 non-animal projects (that varied from photography, cooking, veterinarian, and robotics) and 27 livestock projects (13 steer and 14 hog projects).

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, in March we shifted all the 4-H fair organizing and project development to virtual using Zoom.

After much consideration and planning a virtual 4-H fair, the Fort Belknap Tribal Council did not accept the 4-H Virtual Fair COVID-19 Safety Plan. Hence, a 4-H Private Treaty Sale was conducted on August 13. Hogs averaged 260 pounds and average sale price was $4.97/lb while steers averaged 1058 pounds and sold at $3.76/lb. Non-livestock project members were able to post and present their projects online.

The top priority of 4-H programs across the state is the health and safety of our youth, families, volunteers, faculty, staff and supporters throughout our communities. Through this year and in the future, we encourage our future leaders in learning resiliency and developing community support.

Tribal Producer Outreach

Fort Belknap Extension collaborated with MSU Extension specialists, Extension agricultural agents, and Tribal Colleges
Processing Skills

- Dependent on raw materials
- Dependent on end use
- Deorcification
- Hurd
  - Animal bedding
  - Hempcrete
  - Bast
  - Cordage
  - Textiles
  - Insulation

Previous Page: (top) Lynn’s Carrot at Lodge Pole Community Garden by Hillary Maxwell; (center) Traditional Dried Meat by Warren Morin; (bottom) Lucky Charms 4-H Member Tahlia Walker by Lisa Horn; This Page: Robbie Klingaman at the Rancher Roundup Hemp Workshop, by Liz Werk
to extend outreach to local producers. Producers were offered workshops, Montana State Rural Assistant Loan and Junior Agriculture Loan preparation help, one-on-one agriculture consultations, and virtual webinars throughout 2020.

Ranchers Roundup occurred during the Fort Belknap Mid-Winter Fair in early February. Eighteen local producers attended the two-day workshop. Extension agents, Tribal Youth Ag Leaders, Tribal Natural Resources, and local Ag Programs presented topics on hemp production, hemp processing, and hemp marketing along with agricultural financial management and local resources. Also, two local tribal high school students presented their Intertribal Agricultural Council local food development essays. The essays secured the students a trip to the IAC Annual Meeting in Las Vegas. The meeting inspired the high school students to optimize their own Tribal Natural Resources for local food sustainability.

Fort Peck Community College (FPCC) USDA Producer Education (a two-year program) started in March then quickly stopped. FPCC and MSU Extension have adapted and are offering weekly agriculture webinars online to producers across the state. The current topics are the Coronavirus Food Assistance Program (CFAP), beef processing, small business assistance, cattle market, and stimulus package for individuals.

In collaboration with Washington State University FRTEP Extension, educational noxious weed mailers, posters, and outdoor signs were posted, emailed and mailed to 146 landowners and producers on the Fort Belknap Reservation to educate about noxious weed identification and management.