Located in the heart of the Hi-Line region of north-central Montana, Liberty County covers 1,458 miles of prime agricultural land. Liberty County MSU Extension partners with organizations at the county and state level to help people learn and grow in the fields of agriculture, family and consumer science, 4-H and community development. While methods to reach people have changed during 2020 due to COVID-19, Liberty County MSU Extension has continued to focus on programming that impacts the lives of residents. From teaching about mental health awareness in school, to making sure the community is kept abreast of current agricultural issues and home gardening techniques, to working with youth as they develop lifelong leadership and communication skills, Liberty County MSU Extension’s mission is helping people and community.

Mental Health Takes On Added Importance During COVID-19 Pandemic

As a result of the COVID-19 virus, youth and adults alike had their worlds turned upside-down in 2020. Periods of social isolation and loss of normal activities have made indelible impressions on the mental health of everyone. For those reasons, Liberty County MSU Extension continued to partner with Chester-Joplin-Inverness (CJI) High School and Liberty County Public Health Nurse Melissa Kantorowicz to help youth understand how to maintain positive mental health and how to help those around them do the same. Through a 5-hour long curriculum, titled Youth Aware of Mental Health (YAM), facilitators met with the CJI freshman class to showcase an interactive program for youth, promote increased discussion and knowledge about mental health and aid in the development of problem-solving skills and emotional intelligence. As one of the few MSU Extension-school district partnerships to offer the five-session YAM course in 2020, 20 youth gained an awareness of mental health and suicidal thoughts and developed problem-solving skills in relation to those issues. Students began to recognize the need to think through different stress and crisis situations and understand the importance of mental health. Students have also initiated conversations with their peers about mental health. As students continue to practice good mental health skills learned during YAM, they will be better prepared to face stresses in their lives.
Students stated the following class observations:
- “I learned how to tell/help people that are depressed.”
- “I learned coping mechanisms for stress and depression.”
- “I learned there is always someone there for you.”
- “I learned how to help others feel better about themselves.”
- “I learned different situations people might be put in and how they get out of it.”
- “I learned that reaching out is better than hiding your feelings even though you might not have the strength.”

Wrapping Up a Year in Agriculture

2020 has been the beginning of the end...of growers’ five-year private pesticide applicator cycle in District 3. Throughout the year, growers in Liberty County have been able to attend various programs aimed at helping them meet credit needs to maintain pesticide applicator licenses. In January, 55 local growers attended the multi-county Cropping Seminar, a series offered in nine locations over five days. Learning about fungicide efficacy, web-based agricultural tools, incorporating oilseeds into wheat-based cropping systems, and resources for farm and ranch stress and other resources available to them gained growers two pesticide credits.

In February, a private pesticide applicator initial training class was offered for new applicators or certified applicators in need of credits. Topics included the Montana Private Applicator License, how to read the pesticide product label, calibration of backpack, boom and broad-jet sprayers, integrated pest management, pesticide laws, pesticides in the environment, and pesticide safety. Twenty-seven participants from five different counties received their initial pesticide applicator license. Ten certified applicators fulfilled credit requirements. Those attending classes stated that as a result, they would “be more careful around restricted use pesticides,” institute “better personal protective equipment usage,” and “read non-ag instructions for rangeland.”

Moving into the fall, attending in-person events became much more difficult due to the COVID-19 pandemic. By following local Board of Health guidelines, 12 growers were able to attend the 2020 Pest Management Tour in October. Guest lecturers led virtual presentations over the WebEx media platform as growers gathered in one location. Attendees completed the recertification process for private applicator licenses and gleaned information on a variety of topics from managing leafy spurge to identifying drift reduction strategies.