Sweet Grass County is located in south central Montana. Don’t confuse the town of Sweetgrass with the county of Sweet Grass. Sweet Grass County became a county in 1895, formed from parts of Park, Meager, and Yellowstone Counties. It has been at its present size of 1,855 square miles since 1920. The current population is 3,623. Ranching and mining are the primary economic drivers. When Lewis and Clark traveled through this region, they named the area where the Boulder River and Big Timber Creek empty into the Yellowstone River as “Rivers Across.” In the late 1800s, an Irish immigrant named the settlement Dornix, meaning “a rock that fits in the hand and is handy for throwing.” In 1883, the town was moved due to complications with the railroad and was re-named Big Timber for its abundance of cottonwood trees lining the banks of the nearby Boulder and Yellowstone Rivers. In fact, a majestic 125-foot-tall cottonwood is located on the banks of the Yellowstone River right outside the city limits and was close to being the national champion cottonwood. Today, 200-year-old cottonwood trees still line the banks of the Yellowstone River, meaning they are the same trees as the ones Lewis and Clark passed by two centuries ago. Sweet Grass County is home to the Crazy Mountains. There are several theories on how this range was named. The Indians called them the Mad Mountains for their rugged beauty and haunting winds that blow down the canyons. The Mad Mountains were so called because they could not tell if the weather was going to be fair or stormy, as all signs failed in that region. Geology plays a part in another theory. The lava upthrusts are young in the perspective of geologic time and do not fit in with neighboring rock formations, hence the name “crazy,” or because of being wholly disconnected from any other range and being a sort of “crazy” formation. Another naming theory, and more widely accepted, is about a woman who went mad on the prairie, perhaps due to an attack and the death of her family. She took refuge in the mountains. Indian beliefs suggested crazy people be left alone, and this legend lives on in the movie “Jeremiah Johnson.”

Continuation of using wool as a soil amendment

Blackface, belly wool and tag wool have historically been low-value wools for producers. In an effort to find alternative markets for these low value wools, Sweet Grass County MSU Extension embarked on a demonstration project utilizing wool as a soil amendment. A collaboration of high school students...
and home gardeners utilized low value wool and measured the effects on various garden plants.

The high school students incorporated wool in a community pumpkin patch with over 300 plants. Pumpkins grown with wool on native soil showed more pumpkins per plant and larger pumpkins. Pumpkins grown in composted soil with wool measured earlier growth rates, but by seasons end showed no advantage. In large garden boxes, home gardeners reported increased yields of potatoes, the herbs thyme and dill, carrots, parsley and peas and beans with decreased irrigation. Tomatoes, however, did not respond as favorably to wool as a soil amendment, as it is theorized that there was too much soil water retention. Once irrigation was limited to the tomatoes, increased growth rate and production were noted.

Due to limitations because of COVID-19 restrictions, and limited resources and human interaction, this years project was not performed following strict research guidelines. This project will be replicated in future years following a more scientific design and findings made available to both wool producers and horticulturists. Initial findings suggest that wool as a soil amendment has the potential to improve horticultural production. This could potentially benefit wool producers in adding value to lower value wools while helping horticulturists improve yields.

4-H activities during the pandemic

Due to the effects of COVID-19 restrictions, numerous 4-H events adapted to a virtual platform. One such event that was impacted was Montana 4-H Congress. Sweet Grass County MSU Extension took the lead in managing the state livestock judging contest. Ten high quality livestock classes were made available for 4-H members to evaluate. Six of the classes had thought provoking questions that members had to answer pertaining to specific criteria used to place the classes. Thirty-three members participated, representing five counties. Post-contest evaluations from members were positive with respondents saying that they appreciated the flexibility and that they were able to continue improving their livestock evaluation skills.

While many counties held their county fairs virtually, Sweet Grass County worked with local officials to implement safety protocols and held an in-person fair. The Sweet Grass County Fair was altered in some respects, compared to our historically typical county fair, but members still were able to participate in most of the normal activities. All livestock shows were livestreamed online for community members to watch. Most other fun activities were still held for the members but were structured following safety guidelines. The Sweet Grass County Fair sale was held as a socially distanced in-person event that sold 204 lots with a gross of $340,126, ranking as the top grossing sale in Sweet Grass County Fair history.
Cows headed to fresh grass, by Marc King
Western Extension Risk Management Education Program

In collaboration with Park County Extension, Gallatin County Extension and specialists from MSU Extension, a farm and ranch estate planning program was held. The program consisted of two, 3-hour, in-person seminars, one full day in-person seminar and one virtual seminar. Participants learned about numerous issues that focused on the financial, personal and legal aspects of estate planning. Eighty agriculture families were invited to participate and 12 different ranches were represented in this series. Of those that participated, three have indicated that they have begun working on estate planning documents as a result of the workshops.