

Powell County



409 Missouri Ave, Suite 102 | 406-846-9709 | powell@montana.edu | <https://www.powellcountymt.gov/county-departments/msu-extension-service/>



The foothills of the Flint Creek Mountains, Deer Lodge, MT by Powell County Chamber of Commerce.

Powell County is a rural county with a total population of about 6,800 people and over 35,000 cows. Powell County’s economy is heavily based on natural resource industries like agriculture, forestry, and mining. Over 50% of the county is owned by either federal or state government, most of which is open to livestock grazing, timber production, and mineral extraction. Powell County is home to beautiful and scenic landscapes composed of six distinct mountain ranges, three major rivers, vast swaths of rangeland, and small amounts of irrigated cropland and pasture.

Powell County MSU Extension provides information and outreach to local constituents in agriculture, horticulture, 4-H/youth development, and more. The Powell County MSU Extension office provides newspaper articles and free publications, hosts public workshops in numerous program areas, offers one-on-one consultations for local constituents in several capacities, and works with school children and 4-H youth across the county.

Road Management and Elk Distribution on the Spotted Dog Wildlife Management Area

Powell County MSU Extension, in partnership with MSU Extension Specialists, Powell County, and Montana Fish, Wildlife, & Parks (MTFWP) will begin studying the impacts of road management on elk distribution across the Spotted Dog Wildlife Management Area (SDWMA) and adjacent private

lands in the fall of 2022. Currently, the “Spotted Dog Road” bisects the nearly 60 square miles of public land that make up the SDWMA, and has been illegally gated – blocking legal public access – for over 50 years. Thanks to recent pressure from Powell County Constituents and Public Land Water Access Association, Powell County Commissioners have voted to formally remove the illegal obstructions on the road, restoring public access. While this situation is a “win” for public access advocates, opening a road through the interior of the SDWMA, which boasts the second largest overwintering elk population west of the Continental Divide in Montana, may have implications for elk distribution across the SDWMA and adjacent private lands.

Overwintering elk populations on the SDWMA range between 1,300 – 1,700 elk each year. As such, conflict with private landowners in the area is high and may be exacerbated by increased human vehicle and foot traffic along the Spotted Dog Road. In order to help Powell County Commissioners make informed decisions about the management of the Spotted Dog Road, Powell County MSU Extension has created a stakeholder group composed of local landowners, sportsmen associations, and other non-governmental associations who will participate in a collaborative research process in partnership with MSU and MTFWP scientists.

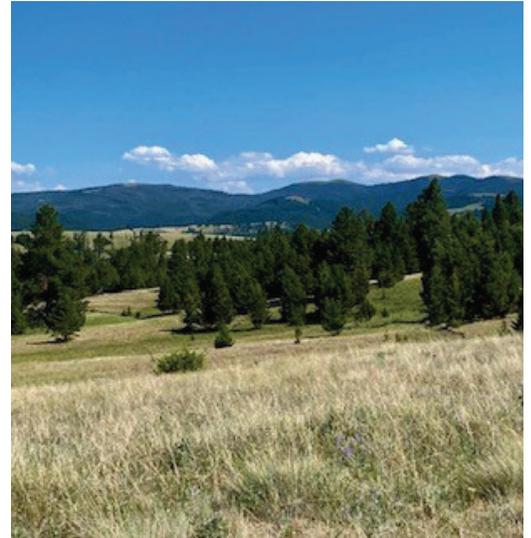
The goal of the research project is to understand how management of the Spotted Dog Road will impact elk distribution across the SDWMA and adjacent private lands. The study will use a combination of camera traps and GPS collars

to track elk movement on and around the SDWMA with both a seasonal road closure from September 1 – May 15 and no seasonal closure on the Spotted Dog Road. Vehicle and foot traffic along the Spotted Dog Road will also be tracked. The study is scheduled to begin in September of 2022 and conclude in the summer of 2026, pending funding. Two years of seasonal road closures versus two years of no seasonal road closures will be used to better understand how traffic on the Spotted Dog Road impacts local elk distribution across both public and private lands in the area. This research project presents an opportunity for Powell County MSU Extension to build stronger relationships with local stakeholders, via the collaborative research process, and in the pursuit of utilizing science as a tool to make informed management decisions regarding the Spotted Dog Road. The results of this study will help inform Powell County Commissioners how management of the Spotted Dog Road impacts both local elk populations and local producers, and will be used to help determine how to manage the road moving forward.

4-H Working Ranch Horse Project Comes to Powell County

The 4-H Working Ranch Horse Project is a heritage-based, activity-rich program designed to pass on the traditional practices of safe livestock handling from horseback to today's youth. The project focuses on teaching practical skillsets for handling, sorting, and moving cattle from horseback. As ranching operations across the state continue to become increasingly automated with the use of four-wheelers and other machines to manipulate livestock, preservation of the age-old tradition of livestock handling from horseback is increasingly important. Powell County MSU Extension, in partnership with a cohort of dedicated 4-H volunteers, started the first Working Ranch Horse Project in Powell County with 11 4-H'ers participating.

4-H'ers enrolled in the Working Ranch Horse Project attended two practices per month where they practiced the skills and techniques required to safely handle livestock from horseback. This year, the Working Ranch Horse Project hosted a number of guest speakers who offered workshops on ferrying and horse hoof care, proper rope building and maintenance, sorting and cutting livestock training, and horse health and vaccination schedules. Of the 11 4-H'ers who participated in the Working Ranch Horse Project, 11 completed level one of the project and seven completed at least two levels. Thanks to the initial success of the program, several 4-H'ers have already enrolled in the Working Ranch Horse Project for the 2021-2022 4-H year, indicating that this traditional method of livestock handling will continue to be preserved by the next generation of Powell County ranchers.



Top: The Spotted Dog Wildlife Management Area in late June, Powell County, MT, by Bo Walker; **Bottom:** Working Ranch Horse participants practice their roping technique at the Powell County Community Center, Deer Lodge, MT, by Bo Walker

Powell County Staff



Montana State University Extension is an ADA/EO/AA Veteran's Preference Employer and provider of educational outreach.

Bo Walker

4-H and Agriculture and Natural Resources Agent

Sheila Finco

Administrative Assistant