

The Eastern Plains Resource Conservation and Development (EPRC&D) Area was authorized in 1992. It is a non-profit, 501(c)(3) tax-exempt organization incorporated under the laws of the State of Montana in 1991.

The mission of the Eastern Plains RC&D Area, Inc. is to improve the quality of life in Carter, Custer, Daniels, Dawson, Fallon, Garfield, McCone, Powder River, Prairie, Richland, Roosevelt, Rosebud, Sheridan, Treasure, Valley and Wibaux counties through a comprehensive and coordinated effort of local citizens; and to provide local decision makers with technical information and assistance and the necessary access to resources to better manage, conserve, protect, and utilize the area's natural and human resources. EPRC&D helps secure technical, financial, educational, and other assistance required to develop and carry out an Area Plan. The RC&D cooperates with other organizations whose purpose and goals parallel those of this organization.

The Eastern Plains RC&D Council contains 67 members representing various local city, county, and tribal governments and all the conservation districts. About 51 % of named council membership is made up of elected officials. The Council Elects an Executive Board to oversee the RC & D's operations. Executive Board members for 2008 are:

Chairman – Dixie Berwick - Culbertson
Vice-Chairman – Mickey McCall - Plentywood
Secretary – Ginney Archdale- Wibaux
Treasurer – Kevin Dukart - Baker

Recognizing the need to create a unified, regional approach to economic development in the 16-county Eastern Plains RC&D area of eastern Montana, the Eastern Plains RC&D Council prepared an area plan with assistance from their sponsors. The Area Plan is the result of a local planning and implementation process designed to create jobs, foster more stable and diversified economies, improve living conditions, and provide a mechanism for guiding and coordinating the efforts of persons and organizations concerned with all aspects of rural and economic development.

This Area Plan contains the administrative organization, a history of past activities, a profile of the area and its economy, strengths, needs, opportunities and strategy, and a plan for implementation. The planning process analyzes local conditions, identifies problems and opportunities, sets goals, designs strategies to achieve these goals, coordinates activities to implement the strategies, and evaluates accomplishments. Planning for community, economic or rural development is a continuous process.

The Eastern Plains RC&D area encompasses the eastern one-third of Montana and consists of 16 eastern Montana counties, including Carter, Custer, Daniels, Dawson, Fallon, Garfield, McCone, Powder River, Prairie, Richland, Roosevelt, Rosebud, Sheridan, Treasure, Valley, and Wibaux, and the Northern Cheyenne and Fort Peck Reservations. The area is approximately 280 miles long by 150 miles wide and covers 43,290 square miles. The northern boundary is Canada, the eastern boundary is North and South Dakota, and the southern boundary is Wyoming. The Area has an estimated

population of 74,298 (2002) people. Within the area are two tribal governments, 16 county governments, 16 conservation districts and 33 incorporated cities and towns.

There are two major rivers in the Eastern Plains RC&D Area, the Missouri River and Yellowstone River. These rivers are very important sources of municipal and irrigation water and recreation and tourism opportunities for eastern Montana. The Missouri River flows from west to east in the northern part of the area. A large earth filled dam, Fort Peck, is on the Missouri River. The dam is operated by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers for the generation of hydro-electric power. Fort Peck Lake, which is mostly undeveloped, is 240,000 acres in size and has 1,600 miles of shoreline. The Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge, adjacent to Fort Peck Lake, is the largest wildlife refuge in the continental United States.

Major tributaries of the Missouri River within eastern Montana are Muddy and Beaver Creeks and the Poplar, Redwater, Milk, and Little Missouri Rivers. The Yellowstone River flows from the southwest in a northeasterly direction through the area for convergence with the Missouri River just across the North Dakota border within sight of historic Fort Union. The major tributaries of the Yellowstone River in eastern Montana are the Bighorn, Powder and Tongue Rivers and the Big Porcupine, Rosebud, Sunday and O'Fallon Creeks.

A few aquifers in the northern portion of the area are capable of supporting irrigation wells. The most significant area is in the Medicine Lake/Westby area of Sheridan County. The northeast portion of the area is also included in the prairie pothole region.

In 2001, there were 203,070 acres of irrigated land in the 16 county region. The amount of irrigated land has been increasing by approximately 5,000 acres/year. These new lands are primarily being irrigated using sprinkler systems. Most of the older irrigated lands are flood irrigated. A conversion to center pivot sprinkler is occurring along with other water saving conservation practices, such as irrigation pipeline, gated pipe, and better water management tools like irrigation scheduling. These current and future irrigated lands are an important part of the economy of those counties with irrigation.

Ten counties in eastern Montana have reserved water for future irrigation development. These water reservations are held, allocated, and managed by the local soil conservation districts. Reserved water rights priority dates for the Yellowstone River are December 15, 1978. On the Lower Missouri River and the ancestral Missouri River in Sheridan County, one of only four groundwater reservations in the nation, the priority date is July 1, 1985.

Soil conservation districts were allocated 495,545 acre feet of reserved water that can be used to irrigate 183,414 acres of new land in the RC&D Area. The Fort Peck Tribes were allocated 475,000 acre feet of water to irrigate 263,888 new acres of land on the Fort Peck Indian Reservation. Tribal and Conservation District reserved water totals 970,545 acre feet of water that can be used to develop 447,302 new irrigation acres.

Average annual rainfall for most of this area of Montana is 10 to 14 inches. The extreme southern section of the area receives 15 to 20 inches of rainfall. Eastern Montana experienced severe drought conditions throughout the 1980s; rainfall was below average and temperatures were very high. Rainfall returned to what residents considered more normal in the 1990s; however, winters in the early 1990s were very mild. Winters in eastern Montana have seen very cold temperatures over an extended period of time and also at times having several feet of snow. These extreme climatic and windy conditions are common to eastern Montana.

The 16 counties in the RC&D Area are governed by three- member county commissions, elected for 6 years on a rotating basis. Within these counties are 33 incorporated cities or towns, operating under the jurisdiction of city councils. In eastern Montana incorporated communities, three to nine council members are elected every 4 years in rotation, usually in non-partisan elections. A mayor is elected separately and possesses veto powers but is not allowed to vote. Unincorporated communities have no organized governmental structure. See Appendix 32 for city and county government information.

Conservation districts, subdivisions of state government, are located in each county. Each district is governed by a board of five to seven supervisors, elected in the general public election, and two urban supervisors appointed from incorporated municipalities within the district.

Tribal members living on reservations have dual citizenship status. While enrolled members of the Fort Peck and Northern Cheyenne Tribes over 18 year old can vote at tribal council meetings, tribal members of the same age may also vote in city or county elections.