Welcome to Fort Belknap

Fort Belknap Indian Reservation is the homeland to the Gros Ventre (Aaniiih) and the Assiniboine (Nakoda) Tribes. Fort Belknap Indian Reservation is located 40 miles south of the Canadian border and 20 miles north of the Missouri River, which is the route of the Lewis and Clark Expedition. Fort Belknap Indian Reservation is the fourth largest Indian reservation in Montana. The Fort Belknap Indian Reservation encompasses an area consisting of 675,147 acres, which extends approximately 28 miles east and west and 35 miles north and south. The land is mostly rolling plains. The main industry is agriculture, consisting of small cattle ranches, raising alfalfa hay for feed and larger dry land farms. The Little Rocky Mountains, located at the southern end of the reservation, has two small communities. Hays, located at the southwest portion of the reservation, has both a public school (7-12), and a Catholic School, Saint Paul’s Mission, grades K-6. Lodge Pole, located at the southeast portion of the reservation has a public school, grades K-6. Fort Belknap has a tribal membership of 7,000 enrolled members.

MSU Extension, Fort Belknap Reservation: Federally Recognized Tribal Extension Program

The MSU Extension program on the Fort Belknap Reservation is one of the long-standing 33 Federally Recognized Tribal Extension Programs in the county. The role of FRTEP on the Fort Belknap Reservation has been historically integral to knowledge acquisition and skill development in the lives of tribal members at Fort Belknap for over 30 years. The Fort Belknap Reservation Extension staff have had a very busy year, providing education and outreach to many of the 3,500 members of the reservation. As agents worked to identify and prioritize the needs and interests of the reservation, community members of Hays, Lodge Pole, Dodson, and Fort Belknap Agency also showed increased interest in learning about and participating in various programs. Though it was a difficult year due to the drought conditions affecting our reservation, there seemed to be a steady interest in continuing to address our goals and objectives as we respond to the emerging needs of families, producers, businesses and industry. We continue to see how MSU Extension’s structure encourages true engagement and local involvement and expertise.

Hays Community Garden Chopped contest
The Growth of Fort Belknap Food Sustainability

Fort Belknap Reservation Extension food sustainability programming began initially with the community’s humble interest in a garden. During 2016, participants indicated they’d like to learn more about how to extend the growing season to produce more fruits and vegetables. This interest quickly grew into a series of efforts in 2017 directed at gardening, food preservation, traditional food rediscovery/use/preservation, orchards, high tunnels/greenhouses, cook-offs, and harvest festivals. A new collaboration with NACDC Financial Services allowed our communities to establish small poultry flocks, thereby increasing local egg production potential. Our First Nations grant provided home-based high tunnels for more experienced gardeners, as a foundation for next year’s peer gardener program. The Fort Belknap Food Summit was held in September, showcasing the community gardens, as well as providing a new, exciting, and continuing forum for local food issues. In 2017, more focus was placed on extending our current resources as well as initial discussions for creating new resources in 2018. We are hopeful that we may discover new collaborations in the coming year, as we have realized increased sustainability through our partnerships. A total of 667 people participated in 65 food sustainability events in 2017.

Rancher Roundup & Producer Outreach

Fort Belknap Extension conducted educational outreach workshops for local seasoned and potential cattle producers. Fort Belknap Extension co-sponsored with Fort Belknap Livestock Marketing Co-op and Native American Community Development Corporation, the Rancher’s Roundup during the local Mid-Winter Fair. USDA, NACDC, INCA, FSA, MSU Extension, local bankers and local producers presented information to participants. This workshop brought eight presenters to one place, which eliminated travel costs for more than 26 producers. Eight local youth from Hays Lodge Pole High School attended and participated in the Agritourism workshop and learned additional ways to utilize their ranch and lifestyle. A new addition to the 2017 Rancher’s Roundup was a High Tunnel Workshop. Aniiih and Nakoda College Welding Department donated their space and tools to help teach the workshop. 10 participants went home with a constructed high tunnel ready for spring.

Fort Belknap Extension collaborated with Fort Belknap Livestock Marketing Co-op to provide economic opportunities to local ranchers and encourage new youth producers. The Montana Department of Agriculture Loan Programs provides opportunities for youth and beginning ranchers to apply for small loans. The Extension agent aided the completion of four Rural Ag Loans and three
Junior Ag Loans, bringing in seven new young ranchers with a total of $325,500 in new cattle on Fort Belknap. Along with financial literacy trainings, Private Applicator Training was conducted in collaboration with surrounding Blaine, Phillips, and Hill County MSU Extension agents. Eight individuals participated and became certified for the Private Applicator Licenses for weed/pest control. The 72-tree experimental orchard has grown to 83 apple, plum and pear. In the spring of 2017, the orchard produced over 53 pounds of fresh produce that went directly to the local community. Brent Sarchet, MSU Extension agent from Helena, is conducting the tree orchard experiment to find varieties that will produce in different climates throughout Montana. Sarchet conducted a tree pruning and grafting class at the orchard in the spring. 15 participants learned hands-on how to correctly prune a fruit tree and how to graft a tree.

Youth Development & 2017 Mid-Winter Fair - Music, Honoring Our Past

As most of Fort Belknap Extension involves families, the local youth did get opportunities to participate in some fun activities throughout 2017. The community gardens created a great avenue for the youth to get dirty, plant, and maintain the gardens. Ag in the Schools taught third to sixth grade students how to identify different seeds, plant a tomato and pepper starter, water/maintain, and plant their starter in the community gardens. The students’ plants were planted in the local high tunnels and harvested in the fall. Youth also learned about different varieties of squash. The hands-on lessons in school and after school increased the interest in community garden involvement in the summer. Over 134 youth participated in school, after school, and summer garden, nutrition, cooking, youth ag loans, noxious weed bio-control, and sewing Extension activities. Even though Fort Belknap does not have any 4-H clubs, the non-traditional youth participants enjoy their activities and leave with a better appreciation of our natural resources.

The 2017 Mid-Winter Fair was a huge success. Music was celebrated in many different avenues throughout the fair. The MWF opened with a family banquet highlighting the youth talent show. Youth from all over Fort Belknap Reservation shared their dancing, singing, storytelling, drumming, and art with the crowd. The next day, baked goods, pies, canned goods, and Chopped participants showcased their culinary skills. The youth enjoyed entertainment from a Hawaiian dance group on Youth Day. The Fiddle and Jig Night brought musicians and dancers from all local areas. The fair finished off with a Stick Game Tournament and Traditional Pow Wow. There was a little bit of everything for anyone. Fort Belknap will celebrate 50 successful years of Mid-Winter Fair in 2018.
Accessing Healthy Lifestyles

MSU Extension classes in cooking, sewing and other healthy lifestyle topics have been well-attended, with increased participant ownership of resources and direction. Extension staff have focused on instruction in many topics, all with the focus on cost-effective resource use. The participants continue to contribute to guiding the direction of classes, leading to increased enthusiasm and interest in the educational offerings. A sewing group was formed this year, allowing women to come together to make ribbon skirts, a garment that has traditional significance in cultural attire. Some of the women intend to produce the skirts as a small business opportunity. A young single mother began attending food preservation and cooking classes, and has become a steady, reliable presence within our community events. She was surprised by her own capabilities to provide for her family in a new and healthy way, while expanding her own social, physical, and spiritual resource base. Fort Belknap Extension has had 108 adult participants and 20 youth participants in 30 healthy lifestyle events.