Many things in Hill County stayed the same in 2017. A few highlights include: population (16,500+); top employers: U.S. Border Patrol, BNSF Railroad and MSU-Northern University; and the county’s ranking as the second highest wheat producer in the state. However, change occurred also. Perhaps most notable is Hill County has two new Extension agents. Shylea Wingard (MS, Ag Economics, Purdue University) from Ennis, MT, replaced Nicole Gray as the agriculture and natural resources agent on July 16. Jasmine Carbajal, (MS, Teaching ESL, University of Arizona) from Beloit, WI, replaced Katrin Finch as the family and consumer sciences agent on Sept. 5. Both agents will share 4-H and youth development duties.

Wingard hit the ground running by starting work the week of the county fair. Carbajal started right after Labor Day and immediately began arranging the local 4-H exchange program with Pima County, AZ. Both agents had previous work experience, thus enabling them to assess needs and provide programming and assistance to Hill County constituents during the fall of 2017. Wingard and Carbajal bring a unique background, perspective, and energy to Hill County. They look forward to providing education and outreach to improve economic and social well-being to folks along the Hi-Line in 2018.

Agriculture

Hill County producers faced many challenges in 2017. Drought, fire and low commodity prices left a few producers questioning the financial feasibility of their farming and ranching operations. Some dubbed it “the year kochia wouldn't die.” Others remained steadfast, planted pulse crops or cover crops for diversification; some explored other risk management options. By fall, Hill County was designated a drought disaster area so federal relief programs became available at USDA-FSA and USDA-NRCS. Despite the variability of the year, most farmers who contacted the Extension office seemed to appreciate their “lifestyle” choice and still maintained optimism. One farmer summed it up well, “things might be a little tight right now, but we’ll get by, we always do.”

Harvest also came earlier than usual (mid-July). Crop yields and market prices were lower than previous years. Crops and pastures were dry, hay tonnage was low and watering holes dried up. Just before Labor Day, the East Fork Fire erupted in the Bears Paw Mountains and burned 22,000 acres. Agricultural land wasn’t all that suffered this past summer. Local gardens endured flea beetles, sun scald and extreme heat. Trees suffered twirps, withered leaves, and an October 2 storm that dropped 15 inches of snow, causing extreme
breakage and a 17+ hour power outage. Extension programming responded quickly to the needs of the community. Early 2018 workshops will continue to address these ongoing issues with a cropping seminar that offers soil fertility, pesticide use and cover crop grazing education, along with PAT credits. Another early January workshop will host MSU’s Animal and Range Science professor, Dr. Clayton Marlow, to address “Grazing Management and Decision Making Following Drought and Fire.” More education will be offered at local grower meetings regarding pesticide labels, record keeping and safety.

While farming and ranching is filled with uncertainty, one thing should remain certain in 2018: MSU Extension in Hill County will strive to offer relative and applicable programming and services to its constituents.

**MSU Forestry Specialist Peter Kolb shows local land owners how to assess fire damage in pine trees in Beaver Creek Park. Photo by Shylea Wingard**

**Family and Consumer Science (FCS) Education**

Carbajal began her FCS role by getting training for Serv Safe, participating in canning classes, and networking for the Grandparents Raising Grandchildren program in September. The Center for Mental Health Research and Recovery ([www.montana.edu/cmhhrr](http://www.montana.edu/cmhhrr)) offered a rural mental health information event in October. Quickly recognizing suicide, depression and mental health were local concerns, Carbajal focused on this need. She assisted the Liberty County agent, Jesse Fulbright, with a youth program called YAM at Chester High School. She also offered adult Mental Health First Aid Training in November to 25 participants from Havre, Rocky Boy and Harlem. Backgrounds varied from law enforcement to education to healthcare. This training provided informed resources to community members capable of assessing mental health symptoms.

Collaboration and co-programming were developed with Havre High School’s Family and Consumer Science teacher, as well as MSU-Northern, Rocky Boy and Bullhook Community Health. Carbajal taught 16 local high school seniors a four-week nutrition and finance series, covering topics of food needs vs. wants, food budgeting, eating away from home, and budget finances. Twelve students reported that since participating in the series, they are now able to identify unhealthy habits when eating out, able to differentiate a food want and a need, able to look up the nutrition facts on fast food menus and know ways to maintain good credit scores. Carbajal looks forward to the opportunity to offer more mental health and consumer-based programming in 2018.

**Ag agents across the Hi-line gather as part of the NARC Advisory Board. Left to Right: Jesse Fulbright (Liberty), Jasmine Carbajal (FCS-Hill), Shylea Wingard (Hill), Tyler Lane (Chouteau), BJ O’Doherty (Blaine) and Marko Manoukian (Phillips).**
Hill County 4-H Summary
Hill County 4-H had 114 members in 10 clubs in 2017. Livestock projects and the Great Northern Fair are always highlights. The Nebraska exchange kids were hosted in June, making lifelong friendships. The 4-H year got more exciting for youth and adults in August when the old Chuckwagon building was torn down and construction began for a new building. It will be 150’x40’ and will serve as a community event center that will house a commercial-grade kitchen and 4-H shooting sports area. This major capital improvement project is the result of six years of planning, fundraising and effort by Hill County 4-H and the community.

Also new and exciting in 2017 was the chartering of Rocky Boy’s new 4-H club, Four Bodies; grant funding by the state 4-H Foundation for a local robotics program and shooting sports; and member participation at the first annual State Ranch Horse Competition in Great Falls in September. Plans for 2018 are generating more interest and participation in aforementioned programs and volunteers look forward to cooking burgers in the new Chuckwagon.

Hill County 4-H Members Excel at State and National Levels
Cassie Gibson placed second in Cattle Sorting at the inaugural State 4-H Ranch Horse Show in Great Falls.

4-H Ambassador Sydney O’Neil placed second in the state Steer of Merit Competition, Carcass Division (breeder was Chad Murnin of Bar Star Cattle of Loma, MT). There were a total of 762 entries from 38 counties and one reservation. Only 91 received elite status.

Amelia Beard placed sixth in the Montana Swine Symbol of Excellence (light) Carcass Competition (breeder was Habets Show Pigs from Ledger, MT). Only 221 hogs out of 1520 met the standard of excellence.

Angelina Toth attended Montana 4-H Congress in Bozeman in July. She competed in quilting and won first place with a quilt she made for her grandmother. It was her first time to attend Congress. This honor earned her another chance to travel and learn – an expense paid trip to National 4-H Congress in Atlanta in late November.
SNAP-Education

SNAP-Educator Rhonda Gregoire organized 30 educational programs in 2017 in the communities of Havre, Box Elder and Rocky Boy. “My Plate” and other educational programming was taught to 458 children and adults. Out of the classroom, Rhonda is often recognized by child participants as the “Vegetable Food” lady. She taught 201 classes in 2017 and exceeded her original goal by 80 percent (112 classes). Rhonda has worked as the SNAP-Ed coordinator for Hill County since 2002 and her services are very much appreciated. MSU also recognized her for 15 years of service at an awards ceremony.

Photo courtesy of USDA