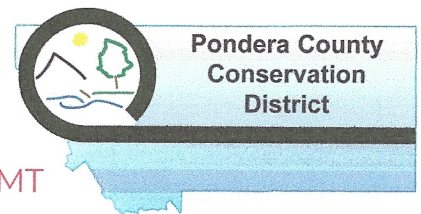


# Pondera County Conservation District Board Meeting



14 APRIL 2026 / 8:00 AM / USDA Service Center, Conrad, MT

## Meeting Minutes

The Pondera County Conservation District (PCCD) Board of Supervisors met on **Tuesday, April 14, 2026** at 8:00 AM at the USDA Service Center in Conrad, MT.

**Call to Order** - Chairman Paul Jones called the meeting to order at 8:02 AM.

### Present

Paul Jones	Koltin Christiaens	Eric Gunderson
Darla Baliko	Roger Paulsen	Ramsey Offerdal, Jr.
Ali Marschner	Katie Vivian	Hailey Graf (remotely present for training)
Heather Rice	Commissioner Zane Drishinski	

### Absent

Kesler Martin

**Approval of Previous Meetings' Minutes** - Ramsey motioned to approve the February 10 and March 10 meeting minutes. Roger seconded. All approved. Motion passed.

### Financial Report

Darla Baliko presented the financial report. Ramsey motioned to approve the financial report. Roger seconded. All approved. Motion carried.

**Public Comment** *No public comments.*

**Commissioner Zane Drishinski** - discussion of Dawson County Conservation District's move to regulate wind and solar.

- Drishinski cited Calumet Industries' proposed injection wells west of Lake Frances, which the commissioners are actively opposing, as the context for their concerns. This issue has raised the commissioners' awareness of the impact of alternative energy facilities and their waste which disproportionately affect rural communities.

- Drishinski requested the CD's support regarding the commissioners' efforts in opposing the injection wells. He suggested a letter in support of their efforts.
- Heather said she learned at one of the public hearings about the wells that injection well permits can be given for one type of waste, with no further permits required if/when there is a change in what is being injected. The proposed permits are for Class 2 Oil and Gas Waste.
- The commissioners have been meeting with elected officials, including Troy Downing and Sen. Sheehey, both of whom have been supportive of the county's objections.
- Eric mentioned that conservation districts are on the forefront of groundwater conservation issues in TX.
- Katie mentioned there is scoping for potential data centers in Bonner, Broadus County, and Billings. Discussed that data centers are massive in size.
- Drishinski encouraged PCCD to look into Dawson County's work in creating a county ordinance, which was recently approved by voters, which would help restrict/regulate alternative energy facilities in their county.
- The board expressed interest in learning more about Dawson County's ordinance.

## Reports

- **NRCS** - Koltin Christiaens and Ali Marschner reported on NRCS. Ali said they have finished ranking CSP and EQIP applications and is not sure when they will hear who gets funded. She said people can still apply for anything until Oct for 2027. She said there is a lot of funding for crop-to-grass projects, mostly in the form of free seed (a nice mix of five grasses and four or five pollinator species), with a few things not allowed (crested, alfalfa, brome). For the grasslands RCPP program, once someone is newly establishing grass, they can apply for payment over three years to help with income loss from not being cropped. This involves a ten year non-conversion agreement, though after the grass is established, it can be hayed or grazed (within reason). She said they have had a lot of people express interest but have not yet committed. She emphasized that while this program exists currently, it might not be available in the future. Koltin said NRCS just got a handful of pre-approved EQIPS and they are working on CSP now. He wanted to know if the CD likes TIPS. Paul said yes, he likes TIPS. Koltin and Ali said they are unable to write any *new* TIPS, but Ali said it is permissible to do a copy-and-paste of *past* TIPS and that they are fairly easy to find. Koltin questioned whether it was worth doing TIPS at all, given the changes to the program and uncertainty of future availability. He also said they cannot allocate new dollars to new TIPS. Koltin also wants to know what the board sees as the county's highest-priority land use, with Ali explaining that the CD's priorities help NRCS rank applications for funding. The last TIP was for pollinator corridors. Koltin also mentioned the Regenerative Pilot Program.
- **MSCA** - No report given.
- **Community Garden** - no one present to report.
- **PCCRC** - Heather Rice gave an update on the Birch Creek Diversion Automation Project grant. Heather stated that the state has finally accepted the revised MOU between PCCRC and PCCD, allowing the project to move forward.
  - When asked by Eric what the substantive differences are between the new MOU and the past MOUs, Heather said it was not clear to her why the past ones were not accepted, as she did not feel like the new MOU was significantly different from past ones. She also mentioned some confusing MOU examples the state had provided along the way.
  - Darla gave her take on the state's feedback, agreeing that some of the state's feedback was confusing. Darla thought that the state was basically asking the MOU to be more explicit in the delineation of some responsibilities, with PCCD being responsible for

overseeing the grant (not in a technical sense or managing the project *per se*, but simply accepting responsibility for the funds being granted). The example the state gave, and which Darla shared at the meeting, was that if, for example, the funds were for headgates, PCCD should ensure that the funds are being used accordingly, and not for a different purchase/project. The state also wanted it made explicit that no grant funds would be used to reimburse engineering services that had already been done, as funds cannot be used for any services that PCCD did not procure.

- Heather said she is hopeful that for coming projects she and Darla can make a different plan for future projects' engineering services.
  - Darla and Heather said they anticipate future grant projects being easier than this one, as we should be able to use the finalized MOU as a template.
  - Heather expressed gratitude to Darla and PCCD for their help with the grant and offered for PCCRC to reimburse the District for Darla's time. When asked by Darla if she should track the time she spends on the grant, Eric said yes.
  - Roger motioned to accept the revised MOU. Ramsey seconded. All approved. Motion passed.
- **MSU Extension** - no one was present to report.
  - **Pondera Weeds District** - no one was present to report.
  - **PCCD Administrator** - Darla Baliko submitted a written report. See notes below under New Business heading.

### 310 Permit Training

Hailey Graf, DNRC 310 Permit Coordinator, to present 310 Permit process overview via Teams. Ali Marschner (FWP) to present briefly on how FWP evaluates projects.

Hailey Graf gave a 35 min presentation via Teams. The presentation covered the following topics:

- 310 legal authority: ultimately, authority comes from the MT Constitution. Also Statutes, Administrative Rules of Montana (ARMS), and finally, local rules which, once adopted, have the force of law.
- Jurisdiction: Explained the definition of a "Project" and said that both location and activity are relevant when considering jurisdiction. Even if an activity is simply adjacent to a perennial stream, it still could require a permit if that activity has the potential to change the state of a stream. Graf also noted that the DNRC can provide technical assistance (e.g. hydrologists to assess if something was historically a stream).
- Complaints
- The "Reasonableness Test"
  - If FWP requests an onsite inspection, PCCD must send a team member go onsite with FWP. Statute requires the team member and board must assess *purpose* of project and whether the project is the "reasonable means" for accomplishing the project. The statute emphasises the importance of the means matching the stated objective. Mis-matches between the objective and means is problematic. But also, sometimes the project itself is problematic because of being unreasonable.
- Misuse of emergency permits. In the case of an imminent threat = loss of life or property (including crops, etc.), then the landowner can take action to prevent it. The action they can take is only the *minimum* required to prevent emergency. If there's time to fill out the permit application, it's not an emergency yet. If someone had an opportunity to fill out an application earlier and didn't do so, it is not an emergency. Emergencies are *unforeseen* events. Maintenance of irrigation diversions is not an unforeseen emergency. In a true emergency, landowners can do work, then have 15 days

to submit the paperwork. Once turned in notice of emergency, CDs are required under Statute to do an on-site inspection to determine whether or not it was an emergency and whether the action taken was necessary/appropriate.

- Violations: if it was *not* emergency, or if it *was* an emergency, but the landowner did *additional work* not required by the emergency itself, it is a violation. If the work done was appropriate, the CD approves notice of emergency, and process is complete. If additional work is needed, then CDs can approve the permit with a modification. The landowner then has 90 days to submit a plan. If there's been a violation, the landowner has 90 days to submit an application detailing how they will restore the site (per Statute).
- Violation doesn't *have to* be a big deal resulting in a fine, etc. Violations can simply be opportunities to educate, work with the landowner, etc.
- CDs can also assess a civil penalty (maximum of \$500/day, not to exceed 15k), and can also require the landowner to restore the site at their own expense.
- Graf also noted that conservation districts are required to adopt new local rules to be in compliance with the Montana Code Annotated's updated model rules. An email was sent to Conservation District's, which Darla will follow up on.

Following Graf's presentation, Katie Vivian (FWP Fisheries biologist) gave a presentation on some of the things she looks at when considering issuing permits:

- Whether or not culverts are the right size for the area/volume of water
  - noting that multiple smaller culverts in place of one larger culvert is not acceptable
  - FWP has Future Fisheries Funds that can help districts correct culvert size. CDs can apply to fix these - three grant cycles per year, with 40-50k typically awarded (sometimes up to 100k).
- No clearing of riparian corridors
- Broken concrete is not allowed as riprap. Landowners should be asked to remove/replace. FWP has funding that can possibly help.
- Bridges with center supports are either strongly discouraged or not allowed.
- FWP reclaims bridge timbers for reuse by landowners. Most are 20-25' long, with some 40' ones anticipated to be available soon. These are stored in Great Falls, Havre, and at Freezeout Lake and are free to landowners.
- Projects and Grants. Grants are available for stream bank stabilization. CD has authority to do private projects. Stream bank stabilization is important. Ranching for Rivers has funds to pay ranchers to keep cattle off streams (helping with fencing costs, off-site water infrastructure, etc.). There is a lot of funding available for the east side of the state, as much has been used on the west side.

### **New Business**

- Rental equipment: Darla gave an update on payments received on the tree planter rental/usage, noting it has not been returned. Eric mentioned he thinks he knows who might have the scraper and will ask that person.
- Darla mentioned ideas for tracking future equipment rentals, payments, etc.
- Darla mentioned the tree spade needing a new tire so it can be rented and that Superior Machine and Welding just needs us to give them the green light to order it and put it on for us.
- Darla mentioned that seedling delivery is scheduled for May 1, and that payment of \$3387.00 is due to the nursery, having already paid a portion of the bill that came earlier as an individual bill when we were between administrators. Ramsey helped to clarify. A board member motioned to pay the state nursery. Motion was seconded. All agreed. Motion carried.

- Darla said outdoor classroom planning is going well. It is scheduled for May 8, and a new presenter this year is the Montana Discovery Foundation which will be teaching about controlled burns and wildfires. Also new this year is including the Conrad Christian School in the invitation list. At the time of the meeting, she was expecting 58 students and six adults. She gave a list of presenters and other details about the day, and noted that historically, PCCD has paid for the materials out of our operating budget, rather than applying for a mini-grant. She also noted that most administrators say that mini-grants aren't worth applying for when it comes to small projects/events, due to the time it takes to do the application and reporting. The Board agreed that it would be a good idea for PCCD to have bear spray to take to the Outdoor Classroom event happening in May, as well as future events, including the Patti Armbrister event in June. Ali said that Teton Bear Smart could probably donate a couple of canisters, and she would get those for us.
- Darla gave an update on the ReThinking Weeds Workshop planning. Ramsey motioned that we officially decide to do the event. Roger seconded. All agreed. Motion carried.
- Darla said that 310 permit paperwork that was due last year was turned in, as well as payment for their water reservations. This paperwork has been filed with last year's records.
- Darla suggested starting social media presence. A board member said they thought we already had an account, but it was decided that the account was no longer active, and that we would need to start a new one. The board agreed it was a good idea. Darla will work on a social media policy, based on a suggested policy from MACD, as well as work on starting the Facebook and Instagram accounts.
- Darla gave a report on the information gleaned at the March Meet and Greet she attended with administrators from Glacier, Toole, Liberty, and Chouteau counties. She highlighted the opportunity to apply for the CDA grant. Ramsey moved to explore the CDA grant. Someone seconded the motion. All agreed. Motion passed.
- Darla also mentioned learning that switching to the Quickbooks online version (rather than the Desktop version) could potentially save the District money. The board agreed that Darla should research this.
- Darla shared that the annual convention will be December 1-3 at Fairmont Hot Springs.
- Darla mentioned that she shared MACD \$1000 student scholarship info with Gail Hofstad, CHS guidance counselor.
- Darla reported on her office phone not working and steps being taken to resolve that (i.e. onboarding with USDA LincPass credentialing, which she is in the process of doing).
- Darla mentioned data needed for a "high priority data call" email she received. Paul advised her to have Koltin review her report before submitting it.
- Darla's report mentioned Montana Mesonet training. Ramsey said he has attended a MESONET training and thinks it is a very useful tool for everyone in the ag industry, from producers, to banks, to insurance agents. He noted that in most states, MESONET requires a paid subscription but is currently free in Montana.
- The board agreed that Darla could get a MACo state ID card for potential travel lodging discounts for work-related trips.

**Correspondence:**

- Darla highlighted Catey Bauer's March report. Paul recommended Darla forward Catey Bauer's email to the board members so they can read it online, rather than the printout she had provided. Darla agreed to forward the current and future reports.
- Copies of an email about AIS Short Course was available for board members in their meeting binders. This email was not highlighted or discussed but was available to board members in case they wish to attend.

**Adjournment:** There was a motion to adjourn the meeting. Motion was seconded. All approved. Motion passed. Paul Jones adjourned the meeting at 10:27 AM.

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**Calendar**

- May 1 - Tree Delivery (10:30 - Noon)
- May 8 - Outdoor Classroom
- May 12 - PCCD Board Meeting
- May 31 - CDA Grant application due
- June 11 - proposed date for ReThinking Weeds Workshop
- Early December - MACD Annual Convention (Fairmont Hot Springs)

*Paul R. James*

CHAIRMAN PCCD  
5-12-2026