

8. AGRICULTURE

8.1 Executive Summary – Key Findings

This section examines agriculture in Pondera County in terms of land use and inventory and production.

Key findings include:

- Agriculture continues to be an important economic activity and land use for Pondera County. Total agricultural sales for the county in 2007 were \$75,108,000. Agricultural production in the county is diverse and includes a variety of crops and livestock.
- The 2007 Census of Agriculture reports that government payments to farms in the county totaled just over \$9 million in 2007 with the average payment per farms receiving payments was \$22,160.
- The county ranks in the top ten counties in Montana’s statewide rankings for barley, oilseeds, milk and dairy, and hay production, and hogs and poultry numbers.
- Strong current malting barley supplies may produce less return for county farmers in the short-term.

8.2 Key Issues/Perspectives/Preferences

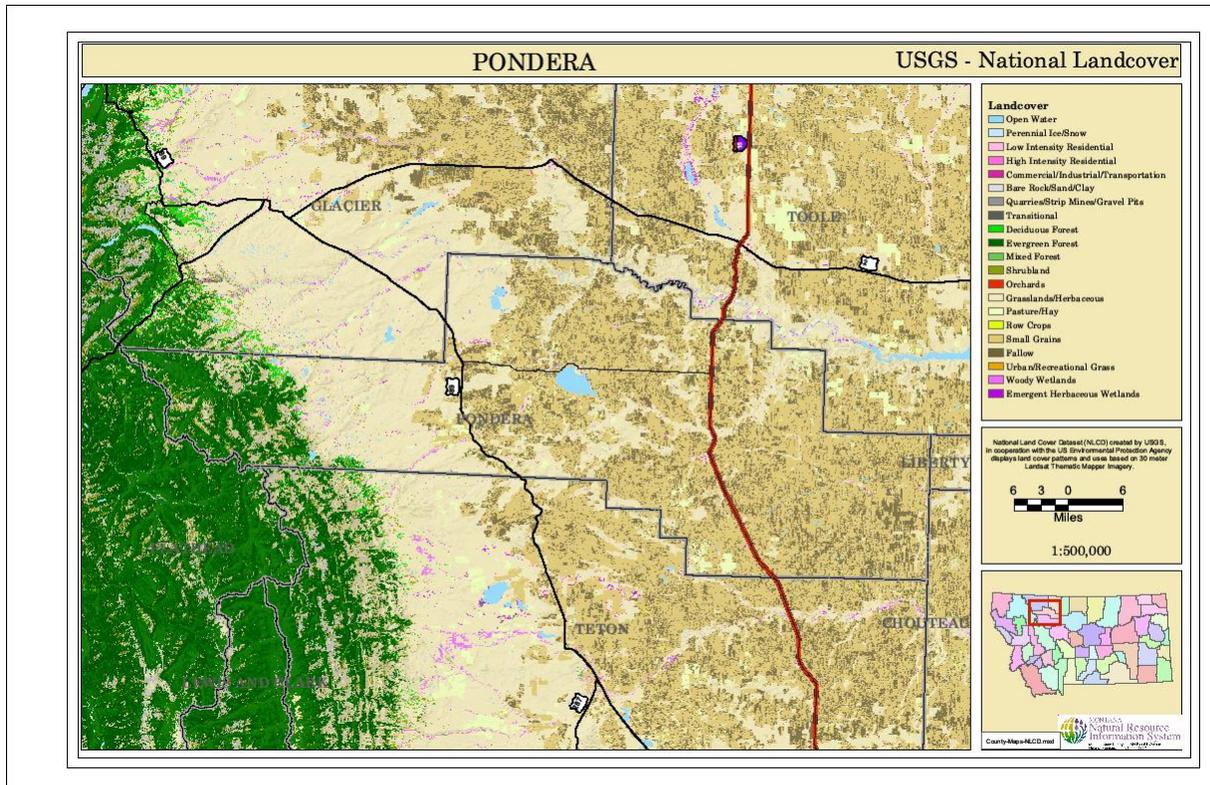
Growth policy committee meetings were held throughout the county in 2009. Comments that were received (and recorded) from those meetings included agricultural use of Lake Frances, right to farm, protecting land, and developing value-added goods from local agricultural products.

8.3 Existing Conditions

8.3.1 Land Use: Size and Number of Farms and Ranches

Farms and ranches constitute the largest land use in Pondera County with 944,486 acres of land in farms. According to the 2007 Census of Agriculture, there were 542 farms in the county in 2007. The number represented a 4% increase in the number of farms (520) from 2002. The average size of farm in 2007 was 1,743 acres, an increase of 1% in size from 2002. Approximately half of the 542 farms are over 1,000 acres in size. Very few farms are smaller than 10 acres. (USDA 2007 Census of Agriculture)

Figure X. Land cover for Pondera County



As shown in the above map roughly two-thirds of the county is in small grain production. Pondera County has both dryland and irrigated crop production. State appraisal data for the county for 2008 shows 423,193 acres of tillable non-irrigated land in the county. The two main dryland crops are barley and wheat. Because most of the area does not receive enough annual precipitation to produce a profitable crop every year, many producers use a crop-fallow-rotation system to assure a successful crop. (Soil Survey of Choteau-Conrad Area; Parts of Teton and Pondera Counties, Montana, 2003)

According to state appraisal data, there are 84,000 acres of irrigated land in Pondera County. The irrigated land is used mainly for malting barley, feed barley, spring wheat, and hay and pasture. The benches and terraces along Birch Creek are the largest concentration of irrigated acres in the county. Irrigation is applied through contour-ditch, random-ditch, graded-border, and sprinkler systems. (Soil Survey of Choteau-Conrad Area; Parts of Teton and Pondera Counties, Montana, 2003) The two main irrigation systems in the county are the Pondera Canal and Reservoir Company and the Brady Irrigation District. (Dan Picard, County Extension Agent) Land capability and yields per acre of specific crops are provided by soil type in the soil survey.

8.3.2 Inventory and Productions

Crop sales from the county are almost double the value of sales from livestock. Total agricultural sales for the county in 2007 were \$75,108,000. Crop sales represented 64% of the total at \$48,379,000 and livestock and poultry sales, 36% of the total sales at \$26,730,000. The total market value of products sold in 2007 was up 56% from 2002. Average market value of products sold per farm in 2007 was \$138,576. (2007 Census of Agriculture)

Table 1: Montana Pondera County Data – Cattle and Calves 2005-2010			
Year	Cattle All	Beef Cows	Milk Cows
2005	22,300 head	15,800 head	700 head
2006	28,000 head	18,000 head	900 head
2007	31,300 head	17,200 head	800 head
2008	34,700 head	18,800 head	900 head
2009	30,300 head	21,000 head	900 head
2010	30,500 head	18,300 head	900 head

Source: 2010 Montana Agricultural Statistics

Approximately one-quarter of the farms in the county (131 farms) had less than \$1,000 in annual sales value in 2007. Another quarter (129 farms) had sales of between \$100,000 and \$249,000. (2007 Census of Agriculture)

The 2007 Census of Agriculture reports that government payments to farms in the county totaled just over \$9 million in 2007 with the average payment per farms receiving payments was \$22,160. While the total amount of payments was up 5% from 2002, the average per farm was down by 7%.

Table 2: Montana Pondera County Data – Hogs and Pigs 2005-2008		
Year	District	Hogs All
2005	20	22,500 head
2006	20	24,000 head
2007	20	26,900 head
2008	20	23,000 head

Source: 2010 Montana Agricultural Statistics

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s 2007 Census of Agriculture, Pondera County ranked in the top ten for value of sales, number of acres, and/or numbers of inventory for several agricultural products. The county ranked:

- Number one in Montana in 2009 for barley production (96,000 acres yielding 6,220,000 bushels.) (Montana Agricultural Statistics)
- Number one in Montana in 2007 for both the inventory number (27,325) and the value of sales of hogs and pigs (\$6,296,000.)
- Number one in Montana in 2007 for pullets for laying flock replacement (17,278 pullets.)
- Number two in the state in 2007 for acres of barley for grain (74,747 acres.)
- Number three in Montana in 2007 for layers (35,256 layers.)
- Number three in Montana in 2007 for the value of sales of other crops and hay (\$711,000.)

- Number five in Montana in 2008 for the production and rank of durum wheat.
- Number five in the value of sales of the commodity group grains, oilseeds, dry beans, and dry peas (\$45,587,000.)
- Number six in Montana in 2007 for the value of the commodity group milk and other dairy products from cows (\$2,501,000.)
- Number six in Montana in 2008 for the production and rank of winter wheat.
- Number seven in Montana in 2007 for acres of field and grass seed crops. (Specific acreage information can not be disclosed by the USDA.)
- Number seven in Montana in 2007 for numbers of broilers and other meat-type chickens (7,600.)
- Number eight in Montana in 2009 for the total sheep inventory and rank.
- Number ten in Montana in 2007 for cash receipts from farm marketings and rank.

Table 3. Pondera County Crop Totals for 2009				
Commodity ↑	Planted All Purposes	Harvested	Yield	Production
Wheat Winter All	107,600 acres	103,600 acres	46 bushel	4,779,000 bushel
Wheat Durum	12,000 acres	11,300 acres	64.5 bushel	727,000 bushel
Wheat Other Spring	61,300 acres	61,100 acres	43.5 bushel	2,652,000 bushel
Barley All	96,000 acres	93,000 acres	67 bushel	6,220,000 bushel
Canola	2,400 acres	2,400 acres	1,890 pounds	4,526,000 pounds
Peas Dry Edible	3,100 acres	2,900 acres	1,450 pounds	42,000 hundredweight
Hay Alfalfa (Dry)		29,000 acres	2.75 tons	80,000 tons
Hay Other (Dry)		13,000 acres	1.85 tons	24,000 tons

Source: 2010 Montana Agricultural Statistics

According to Agricultural Research Station associate, John Miller, 2009 production of malting barley was very good and resulted in overages or amounts exceeding what farmers had under contract. Good supplies overall resulted in a full pipeline for barley and the overages were not purchased for malt. Healthy stockpiles of barley may affect short-term profitability with purchasers requiring producers to store production on the farm. Busch Ag operates a receiving elevator for malt barley in Conrad and sells seed from the facility in Fairfield.

Table 4. Pondera All Barley, 2005-2009				
Year	Planted All Purposes	Harvested	Yield	Production
2005	103,000 acres	100,000 acres	58 bushel	5,806,000 bushel
2006	92,500 acres	90,500 acres	56 bushel	5,103,000 bushel
2007	86,000 acres	76,000 acres	42 bushel	3,221,000 bushel
2008	86,000 acres	84,000 acres	64 bushel	5,352,000 bushel
2009	96,000 acres	93,000 acres	67 bushel	6,220,000 bushel

Source: 2010 Montana Agricultural Statistics

Pondera County also produces winter wheat, springwheat, lentils, corn, legumeseed, durum, canola, dry peas, alfalfa hay, and other wheat and hay, oats, and triticale. Pondera is also a leading producer for canola in the state producing 4,526,000 pounds in 2009.

Table 5: Montana Pondera County Data – Wheat All, total for crops 2005-2008

Year	Planted All Purposes	Harvested	Yield	Production	Yield per Net Seeded Acre	Net Seeded
2005	179,000 acres	176,200 acres	47.4 bushel	8,358,000 bushel	46.7 bushel	179,000 acres
2006	177,800 acres	176,800 acres	47.5 bushel	8,393,000 bushel	47.2 bushel	177,800 acres
2007	182,700 acres	179,700 acres	31.9 bushel	5,736,000 bushel	31.4 bushel	182,600 acres
2008	196,600 acres	186,800 acres	41.5 bushel	7,781,000 bushel	40.5 bushel	191,600 acres

Source: 2010 Montana Agricultural Statistics

The county is home to a mustard processing plant. There are approximately 500 acres of mustard planted in the county. Pondera also is home to a number of top producers of purebred cattle. There are two agriculture implement dealers located in Pondera. (Dan Picard, County Extension Agent)

8.3.3 Western Triangle Agricultural Research Center

Pondera County is home to the Western Triangle Agricultural Research Center (WTARC.) The research center has three employees and a 75-acre farm. Research by the WTARC also occurs off site on plots scattered across several area counties including Pondera, Toole, Choteau, Teton, Liberty and Glacier—depending on the year. Soil fertility, small grain variety tests, pulse crop (peas, chick peas, and lentils) variety tests, oil seed tests, cultural practices, and wheat-stem sawfly management research projects are all conducted by the Center. (John Miller, WTARC research associate, personal communication, June 21, 2010 and <http://ag.montana.edu/wtarc/about/htm>)

8.4 Conclusions and Projected Future Trends

Agriculture continues to be a mainstay of the basic economy in Pondera County. Despite annual fluctuations in income and expenditures, overall agricultural production brings in a considerable amount of revenue to the county, as evidenced by sales of \$75 million in 2007. Much of the income filters out of the county in purchase of goods and services purchased elsewhere; still the activity supports many related businesses in the county, including two implement dealers. To those familiar with the effects of CRP on other rural agricultural community businesses, this is a significant accomplishment.

As in other agricultural communities across the nation, the farmers and ranchers are generally getting older, and there are fewer persons working on the operations than a half century ago. The challenge facing rural communities is to enhance employment opportunities related to agriculture and to retain locally larger proportions of the gross agricultural revenue. Pondera County has made some strides toward those efforts with the mustard processing plant, and barley malting facilities.

Sources

Dan Picard, MSU Pondera County Extension Agent

<http://ag.montana.edu/wtarc/about/htm>

John Miller, WTARC staff, personal communication, June 21, 2010

Montana Agricultural Statistics

Soil Survey of Choteau-Conrad Area; Parts of Teton and Pondera Counties, Montana, 2003

USDA 2007 Census of Agriculture