

PART TWO: PONDERA COUNTY PROFILE

This section provides a summary of the existing characteristics and projected future trends of Pondera County. More detailed information is included in the separate “Inventory of Existing Characteristics for Pondera County, Conrad, and Valier.”

OVERVIEW

Pondera County covers diverse physical terrain from the Continental Divide as its western boundary to the rolling prairie that has become productive agricultural lands in the east. Conrad is the county seat, located on Interstate 15. Valier is the only other incorporated community. Brady and Dupuyer are unincorporated communities. About 15.5 percent of Pondera County is in the Blackfeet Reservation, and most of that area is tribal land which is not subject to this Growth Policy.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The following is a brief timeline of major events in Pondera County and is not intended as a complete history.

1700s	Tribes of the Blackfoot Confederacy – Piegan, Bloods, and Siksika (Blackfeet) – claim the area known today in Montana as the Hi-Line and including Pondera County
	Old North Trail – which runs roughly parallel to U.S. Highway 89 was a trail of conquest that Confederacy Indians used to travel as far north as Calgary, Alberta and as far south as New Mexico.
1806	Meriwether Lewis and his men travel up the Marias and Missouri Rivers on their way back from the coast.
1835	Government sends exploring parties to determine a practical railroad route.
1837	Small pox epidemic kills 6,000 Blackfeet, two-thirds of the population
1855	Treaty with the Blackfeet Nation signed. Boundaries of the reservation were eventually pushed back from the Musselshell to the Sun river and then to Birch Creek and Marias
1868	Brothers Charles E. and William E. Conrad begin building a business empire. Working as clerks for I. G. Baker, owner of trading companies, they eventually became partners with Baker and then in 1874 they bought the company. Were involved in overland trade, banking, ranching, mining, and real estate. Ended up owning much of the land that is known as Pondera County.

1874	Charlie Thomas and Joe Kipp took up a ranch near present day Dupuyer and started raising cattle
1875	Fort Conrad established by Charles Conrad in 1875. Goods flow between Fort Benton and Fort Conrad and along the Whoop-Up Trail until around 1892.
1877	Town of Dupuyer established
1886	Brothers William G. and Charles Conrad purchase 11 sections and begin building what will become the Conrad Investment Company holdings of more than 312 sections (200,000 acres) by 1898. The land is named the Seven Block Ranch and eventually runs 10,000 head of cattle. They start the irrigation projects that will become the Pondera County Canal and Reservoir Company.
1888	Townsite of Dupuyer is platted.
1889	Old Pondera town was located a mile or so from present-day Conrad and had had one store, one rooming house, two saloons, a section house, a school house, and a water tank.
1890	Great Falls and Canada Railroad makes first run from Great Falls to Lethbridge, Canada.
1901	Great Falls and Canada Railroad sold to Great Northern and new tracks run through present-day Conrad.
1902	620 acre town-site of Conrad is laid out, and buildings from Old Pondera are moved to Conrad. Conrad is named after William G. Conrad.
1904	First school built in Conrad
1908-09	Cargill family from Wisconsin purchases the Seven Block Ranch, including the initial irrigation system of the Pondera County Canal and Reservoir Company. W.S. Cargill and other investors developed the irrigation project that includes Lake Frances.
1909	Valier Townsite Company established and town of Valier laid out for 3,000 people. Within five months, 600 people lived in Valier.
1909	Conrad is incorporated September 24, 1909.
1912	Valier Library constructed.
1916	Conrad has grown to a population of 1500.
1919	Pondera County established
1929	Conrad Library completed
1948	Pondera County Canal and Reservoir Company is completed and consists of two storage reservoirs and 360 miles of canal and lateral ditches.
1950	Conrad High School Completed

PHYSICAL SETTING

Pondera County sits on the east side of the Continental Divide, rising all the way to the divide, and surface water drains into the Marias River. Vegetation varies across the county with elevation and precipitation. According to the Soil Survey, Conrad averages 11.91 inches of precipitation annually and Valier averages 12.7 inches. By contrast, the higher elevation western reaches receive 60-85 inches per year.

LAND USE

Pondera County is 1,638.6 square miles in land area or 1,048,704 acres.

A large portion of Pondera County, that part north of Birch Creek excluding the National Forest, is within the boundaries of the Blackfoot Reservation. The Reservation includes 254 square miles of Pondera County or 15.5 percent of the county. Within the Reservation, there are tribal lands and private lands as well as the unincorporated settlement of Heart Butte (population 698 in year 2000). Privately owned deeded lands constitute 31 percent of the Reservation in Pondera County. These private lands are subject to this Growth Policy and the Pondera County Subdivision Regulations while the tribal lands are not.

Agriculture is the overwhelmingly predominant use of private land in the unincorporated areas of Pondera County. Revenue Department data indicate that agricultural land and related farmsteads account for 99% of the private land in unincorporated Pondera County.

A portion of the Bob Marshall Wilderness Area is located within Pondera County, in the far southwestern corner of the county in the Lewis and Clark National Forest west of Swift Reservoir. The Bob Marshall Wilderness is part of the 109 million-acre National Wilderness Preservation System. Motorized equipment and equipment used for mechanical transport is generally prohibited on all federal lands designated as wilderness.

As of June 2010, there were 71,526 acres under the CRP program in Pondera County. This amounts to 6.8% of the entire county.

Only the City of Conrad and the Town of Valier have zoning and the unincorporated area of Pondera County is not zoned. Pondera County also has subdivision regulations, flood plain regulations, and sewage disposal system regulations. The county-owned airport near Conrad has a designated airport influence area with associated land use standards.

There has been very little residential development in the unincorporated areas of Pondera County. Most residential development has occurred in the communities of Conrad, Valier, Brady, and Dupuyer. The Hutterite colonies are the other locations where residential development is most concentrated.

New rural land uses, such as wind farms, may entail relatively unprecedented economic and land use dynamics leading to changes in the landscape.

POPULATION

Population in Pondera County grew 12% from 5,741 persons at the time of the first decennial census of the county in 1920 to 6,424 persons in 2000. Growth occurred quickly in the first few decades, and then population began to decline in the 1960s.

Population density is 3.95 persons per square mile in Pondera County and 6.2 for Montana

With the exception of Heart Butte, the county population is older than the state's overall population. In 2000, median age in the county ranged from 21.3 years in Heart Butte to 42.7 years in Valier. Median age for Montana was 37.5 and for the nation 35.3.

The 2008 census estimates indicate the population continues to get proportionately older, with an estimated median age of 42.9 in Pondera County compared to 39.3 for the state overall. In 2000, Pondera County had the eighth highest percentage of persons ages 21 and over with a disability among Montana's 56 counties.

The overall population of the county is projected to decrease over the next 20 years, according to projections released from the State of Montana. Population would decrease by nearly 18% from 6,424 in 2000 to 5,280 in 2030. Considering that the population on the Blackfeet Reservation is increasing, the projected population loss off-reservation is likely to be more pronounced.

HOUSING TRENDS

According to the 2000 census there were 2,834 housing units in Pondera County, of which 1,332 were in Conrad, 275 were in Valier, and 185 were in Heart Butte. Data from the Montana Department of Revenue (which would not include housing on tribal lands) shows that new housing starts in the nine year period from 1999 to 2008 as slow in Conrad (10 new units) and the rest of the unincorporated area of Pondera County (32 new units). Housing starts may be on the upswing. At the time of this report, there were 12 homes under construction in the unincorporated areas of Pondera County.

Of the total single and mobile housing units, 17% are in "Poor" (barely usable) or worse in Pondera County (including the incorporated municipalities). These data are based on appraisal data, which does not include data on Indian trust land. Housing units in "Fair" condition (marked deterioration and needs much repair) or worse condition comprises another 25% of all housing units in the county.

Despite low housing prices compared to other locations in Montana and the nation, residents still face a high housing cost burden. Nearly one in four households in Pondera County expends 30% or more of their income on housing.

The only community with licensed senior and special needs housing in Pondera County is Conrad.

ECONOMIC CONDITIONS

Agriculture is a fundamental component of the Pondera County economy. Agriculture is the reason for two processing plants (barley and mustard seed), for agricultural-related

transportation employment (grain elevators), and implement dealers, and indirectly responsible for a portion of other economic sectors, such as health care, retail, etc.

With few exceptions, personal income in Pondera County, Conrad, and Valier is less than the state or national averages and has generally languished below those averages for nearly 30 years.

Earnings from labor have significantly decreased as a percentage of total personal income over the past three decades. Income from property/investments and transfer payments increased proportionately over time at rates much higher than the state or nation. This reflects a shrinking of the labor force as older people retire and few new young workers take their place.

Generally, the business economy has declined in Pondera County for decades. Pondera County was categorized by the Montana Regional Economic Analysis Project as “Lagging” in employment among the 56 Montana Counties. In 2008, Pondera County ranked 56th out of the 56 counties for employment change. Its longer-term average employment growth over 1999-2008 ranked 53rd. Between 2000 and 2007, the number of business establishments in Pondera County decreased by 6.2%, ranking it sixth highest among Montana’s 56 counties for percentage loss of businesses.

Pondera County, Conrad, and Valier are all actively seeking ways to improve their local economies. The Pondera Regional Port Authority, started in 2004, has been responsible for grants for private business development, housing, and senior center improvements. The town of Valier has improved the Lake Frances camping and fishing access area, which it manages. Conrad has an active chamber of commerce with over 100 members.

LOCAL SERVICES

Local public services include law enforcement, fire and emergency services, medical, education-schools, transportation services, library, solid waste collection, and senior and other services.

Pondera County is a commission form of government with general governing powers. There are three members on the Pondera County Board of Commissioners.

County Sheriff’s offices are located in Conrad. The county has a resident deputy in Dupuyer. Valier contracts with the county for law enforcement. There are two resident deputy officers in Valier. Conrad has its own police force. The county and Conrad share a detention facility in Conrad.

The Pondera County Rural Fire District covers most of Pondera County and is comprised of rural departments stationed in Brady, Conrad, Dupuyer, and Valier. Each of these departments is staffed with volunteers. The City of Conrad Fire Department covers fires within the city limits

Pondera County has a Disaster and Emergency Services (DES) Office. The DES Coordinator is also the County Rural Fire Coordinator and Floodplain Administrator.

The county has enhanced-wireless 911 call capabilities.

The Pondera Medical Center in Conrad is the only hospital in Pondera County. The Pondera Medical Center in Conrad manages two ambulances in Conrad and one in Valier. The ambulances serve the entire county.

The Northern Transit Interlocal Bus runs from Shelby to Great Falls, with a stop in Conrad, on Mondays and Thursdays. Northern Transit is a partnership of the communities of Conrad, Cut Bank, and Shelby and the counties of Pondera, Glacier, and Toole.

There are five school districts in Pondera County: Conrad, Valier, Heart Butte, Dupuyer Elementary, and Miami Elementary. The Brady area is part of the Dutton-Brady consolidated school district that spans portions of Teton and Pondera Counties.

Both Valier and Conrad have libraries, both of which are funded jointly by the municipalities and Pondera County.

PUBLIC FACILITIES (PUBLIC INFRASTRUCTURE)

Public facilities include water, sewer, storm sewer, streets, sidewalks, municipal buildings, and street lighting.

Pondera County maintains about 800 miles of county roads, 40 mile of which are paved roads including Price Oil Road, Old Shelby Road, Manson Road, Dupuyer-Valier Road, East Lake Road, Railroad Street in Valier, and Front Street in Conrad. Paved roads are generally in need of deferred maintenance. The majority of improved county roads are gravel roadways that serve rural residents. These roads are generally in good condition. Most of the graveled county roads have 21- to 24-foot-wide graveled driving surfaces. Many bridges in the County's systems are older and will eventually require replacement. The County Road Department is replacing smaller bridges with culverts whenever possible.

The BNSF Burlington Northern and Santa Fe(BNSF) Railway north-south line runs from Great Falls through Conrad and on to the Canadian border at Sweet Grass. The BNSF is a class 1 railway, meaning it is the largest class of railway in terms of company operating revenues. A branch line to Valier serves the agricultural producers in the area.

Pondera County owns and operates the Conrad Airport which is located one mile west of the city. The airport has a 4,601 foot-long asphalt runway in good condition. Pondera County also owns the Valier Airport which consists of three turf landing strips in the Town of Valier.

Major pipelines in Pondera County include the Conoco-Phillips and Front Range crude oil pipelines and the NorthWestern Energy gas line. Many small pipelines serve the oil and gas producers traversing the project area.

The Montana-Alberta Tie Line (MATL) transmission line is a new, high capacity, high voltage, interstate line. The line is a 300-megawatt, 230-kilovolt electrical transmission line allowing the movement of power between Alberta and Montana. It was anticipated to be completed in 2011 at the time this report was prepared.

The proposed NorthWestern Energy Collector Project would cross the county. It was projected to be up to five generator lead lines (i.e. collector lines) that originate in the high wind areas of Montana and move wind energy south to a new 500 kV substation at Townsend, Montana.

The unincorporated town of Brady has water and sewer service provided by the Brady County Water and Sewer District. The Tiber County Water District serves most of Pondera County east of I-15 with treated water. In addition to the municipal systems in Conrad and Valier, other public water systems are located in Birch Creek, Kingsbury, Midway, New Miami, and Pondera Colonies.

There is one general purpose, solid waste landfill in Pondera County. The North Montana Joint Refuse Disposal District landfill near I-15 on Highway 44 handles municipal solid waste from the member jurisdictions (Glacier, Pondera, and Teton Counties and Conrad, Choteau, Cut Bank, Valier). Recycling of a variety of goods and waste presently occurs at a variety of locations in the county.

Pondera County manages the following facilities: County Courthouse in Conrad, road shops in Conrad, Valier, and Dupuyer; airport buildings at Conrad and Valier, hospital building and grounds in Conrad, fire halls in Brady, Dupuyer, and Valier, and the Community Center in Conrad.

NATURAL RESOURCES

The county sits on the east side of the Continental Divide, rising all the way to the divide, and drains into the Marias River. The Marias eventually flows into the Missouri River. Badger, Birch, and Dupuyer Creeks, along with the Dry Fork of the Marias are the primary tributaries to the Marias flowing generally west to east through Pondera County dropping from approximately 8000 to 3400 feet above sea level.

The county has three sizeable bodies of water. Swift Reservoir, created by a dam, is filled by both the South and North Forks of Birch Creek. Lake Frances on the south edge of Valier, also created by a dam, is filled by Dupuyer Creek and Birch Creek. Alkalai Lake sits in the northwest corner of the county. Many small lakes dot the glaciated areas of the high country in the National Forest.

There are 1391 water wells recorded in the county. The deepest well is 2080 feet, the shallowest well is 3 feet deep. The oldest well on record is January 1, 1885. Groundwater is not readily accessible in much of the county and residents rely on cisterns or water systems, such as the Tiber in the eastern part of the county.

In the summer of 2010, all of the 17 water discharge permits in the county had expired, including the municipal waste water discharge permits. Some of these are being addressed.

The Pondera County Canal and Reservoir Company is one of the largest privately-run irrigation systems in Montana. Currently approximately 80,000 acres of ground are irrigated in the county from the PCCRC and the Brady Canals. The higher elevations in the western tip of the county provides key habitat for a variety of important species including elk, moose, bighorn sheep, mountain goats, wolves, and the two species in the county listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act, grizzly bear and lynx. Grizzly bear numbers have been

increasing with a resulting increase in corresponding sightings and expansion of range to the east. The status of wolves under the Endangered Species classifications alternated from not listed in April 2010, then listed by court order. In March 2011, the listing had changed again and gray wolves (*canis lupus*) were classified as “experimental, non-essential.” Their status will be in flux with pending litigation and possible congressional legislation.

The county is home to a diverse fishery, including both cold- and warm-water species. Brook, rainbow, and west slope cutthroat trout are all present in county streams. Lake Frances is noted for walleye, perch, and northern pike.

Pondera County has produced significant amounts of oil and gas since the late 1920's when deposits were discovered in the Sweetgrass Arch.

The Montana Bureau of Mines and Geology prioritized gravel bearing areas as either Priority 1 or Priority 2. The most extensive Priority 1 areas are linear and follow the beds of Dupuyer Creek, Birch Creek, the Marias River, and the Dry Fork of the Marias. The Priority 2 gravel-bearing areas in the County are found largely on the stream terraces of Dupuyer and Birch Creeks. Sand and gravel resources are widely available in Pondera County. There are 21 active permitted gravel pits in the County.

The Pondera County weed district has had a weed management plan since 1987. Noxious weeds are present in the county and primarily spread by roads and waterways. Noxious weed spread is an economic burden to the county and agricultural producers, and diminishes wildlife habitat. Pondera County treats weeds along county roads, state highways and some lands managed by the Bureau of Land Management.

State and federal land managers are required to conduct cultural resource inventories when ground disturbing activities are proposed on their lands. There is no such requirement for private lands. To date, 104 historic and 56 archeological sites have been recorded in Pondera County. The “Badger-Two Medicine Blackfoot Traditional Cultural District” the first of its kind in the nation, is situated in western Pondera, Glacier, and Teton Counties.

According to the Pondera County Pre-Disaster Mitigation (PDM) Plan (2004), the west end of the county and Valier are more seismically active than the Conrad area.

The county completed a Community Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP) in May 2007. In general, the wildland fire hazard increases from east to west due to both steeper slopes and heavier fuels. The CWPP defined and mapped areas of low, moderate, and high density interface. Local jurisdictions in the county should consider risks of wildland fire for proposed development.

According to the 2004 and 2008 Pre-Disaster Mitigation Plans for the county, flood plains have not been designated or mapped. The PDM Plan reported that periodic minor flooding occurs in the county and that the south edge of Conrad appears to be the most flood-prone developed area in the county. The level of confidence by the County Floodplain Administrator in this information is low.

Average annual wind speeds range from 12 – 13.5 miles per hour to over 19.5 miles per hour. Generally wind speeds are lighter on the eastern side of the county and highest on the Front. There is an existing wind farm just north of the county line.

AGRICULTURE

Agriculture is the predominant land use and primary economic driver in Pondera County. Farms and ranches covered 944,486 acres in Pondera County. Nearly two-thirds of the county is in small grain production. The county ranked in the top ten producers for winter wheat, durum wheat, barley, and sheep among Montana's 56 counties in 2008. The county also produces dry peas, alfalfa hay, other wheat, oats, mustard and tricale. Pondera County is a leading producer of canola, producing 4.5 million pounds in 2009. Livestock includes cattle (30,500 head in 2010), hogs, and poultry. Pondera County has a number of the top producers of purebred cattle.

Despite annual fluctuations in income and expenditures, overall agricultural production brings in a considerable amount of revenue to the county. 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 the federal Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) on other rural agricultural community businesses, this is a significant accomplishment. The County is also home to the Western Triangle Agricultural Research Center, mustard processing plant, and a receiving elevator for malt barley.

SUMMARY

Pondera County has strong qualities but has experienced economic slowdown and population decreases since the 1980s. The County is preparing this comprehensive plan to comply with requirements of Montana's Growth Policy to plan for the future.