



Regional Conservation Partnership Program Success Story: Missouri Headwaters and Lower Gallatin Basin Conservation and Restoration

Interviews with Justin Meissner and Brendan Weiner

June 2021

The Missouri Headwaters and Lower Gallatin Basin Conservation and Restoration RCPP is located in Montana's Gallatin Valley, near Bozeman. The project began in 2015 and involves the purchase of conservation easements from willing landowners as well as land stewardship projects to protect water quality and soil health, preserve prime farmland, and reduce urban sprawl. To learn more about the project, RVCC interviewed two project partners: Justin Meissner, District Conservationist with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and Brendan Weiner, Conservation Director with the Gallatin Valley Land Trust (GVLT). Below are summarized Q&A's of those interviews.

Project link: <https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/mt/programs/farmland/rcpp/STELPRDBI267734/>

Interview with Justin Meissner, District Conservationist with the NRCS:

Q: What sort of groundwork did it take to develop the RCPP project proposal?

A: NRCS worked with GVLT to hold several different partner meetings to get feedback on what was important to them. Those included people from Yellowstone National Park, conservation groups, and others. There were 17 partners at the table and we held three to four different scoping meetings to see if people were supportive of the process. We worked with the Gallatin Conservation District and the Gallatin Local Working Group and went through every watershed. We found that urban sprawl was the highest resource concern in Gallatin county, so it really made sense for RCPP to have a significant focus on working lands conservation easements. That was the way they made sure the application would be supported by a broad base of supporters.

Q: How did you determine project scope?

A: In terms of the geographic scope of the project, Gallatin County has a huge Forest Service component

that takes out a large portion of the county that NRCS can't work on, then you have the Bridger Range on the east side with lots of Forest Service land and smaller acre landowners. Then you take out the city of Bozeman and what's left is where the traditional ag community is. We started looking at where it's possible to have additional conserved land and that defined the boundary of the project naturally. We also give (ranking criteria) points to a property's proximity to impaired streams as water quality is also one of the top resource concerns in Gallatin County. So those factors confined the project area to central Gallatin County, which is where streams run through private property.

The easement side of it needed to be focused on where the threat of conversion was the highest, because unfortunately only so much money can go to any one program. To spread that effort out to a larger geographical area would dilute our success. It also makes the most sense for (conservation practices funded through) RCPP EQIP to focus on lands that would be conserved with easements (so that they aren't likely to be developed, thus negating the benefits of the conservation practices). Under the ranking point system, we rank proposals higher if the landowner has a letter of intent from a land trust to put in easement or if it is already in an easement.

Q: How much of your time is dedicated to RCPP?

A: About a third of my staff time.

Q: What is the working relationship like between GVLТ and NRCS?

A: We've been working with GVLТ and their staff for six years, so if I need something within their project work, they get it for me and same with them. If they need a success report for example, I have it within hours. Without this partnership and being committed to the team, we wouldn't be nearly as successful.

Q: How do NRCS and GVLТ work together during project implementation?

A: NRCS and GVLТ work jointly on announcing an application batching period, ranking applications, and developing conservation plans. There is an annual application period announcement that we both publicize. We work together to make sure the application ranking questions are the best they can be to meet the intention of the project. Once we have project applications, we work with GVLТ and the landowners to conduct an inventory on the property, identify resource concerns and treatment alternatives, then decide on the practices to address the resource concerns. This helps make sure everyone is on board with the projects and timelines. If people call us about easements we send them to the land trust and GVLТ forwards us the contacts for landowners of who they feel may be interested in RCPP-EQIP.

Q: What sort of capacities does GVLТ add as a partner?

A: One is their ability to do outreach. Another is monitoring. NRCS doesn't have time to walk through

every easement and identify resource concerns, but they monitor land easements every year. The GVLТ person can say this one has some erosion and weed control issues and they can bring it to us and we'll try to work with the land owner to develop a conservation plan that fits their needs and possibly provide financial assistance through RCPP-EQIP. GVLТ has already built trust with landowners, so they introduce us and give us a foot in the door. They also bring broad local knowledge and community contacts.

Q: What factors have been important to the project's success?

A: The knowledge that GVLТ has of this project area, and the trust that they've been able to develop with the ag community and the urban community has been phenomenal. If there was a fire or a flood event on a conserved property, for example, they rally people to repair fencing. We also work well together. We're both flexible and dedicated to moving the project forward. NRCS also does some outreach to support the easement program. We try to plant the seed a little bit with the landowner.

Q: What about challenges the project has faced?

A: There haven't been a lot of challenges. We're working through trying to get the RCPP project renewal finalized so we can keep going and there are intricacies with getting projects renewed.

Interview with Brendan Weiner, Conservation Director with the Gallatin Valley Land Trust

Q: How did the project come about?

A: We were in the first round of RCPP applications in 2015. We were experiencing a lot of demand for easement activities, and wanted a more secure funding source. RCPP was a great way to do focused conservation. We have a pretty clear geographic area in the Gallatin Basin and RCPP was a way to bring in cash just for our area. We were the first land trust that was a lead partner in RCPP and we focused on the conservation easement part of it. We used Agricultural Land Easements (ALE) and Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) funding for conservation restoration. We at the land trust took the lead on easement-related activities and partnered with NRCS District Conservationist Justin Meissner who did all of the EQIP work. As we worked on easements, we talked with those landowners about the conservation work they wanted to do, then Justin Meissner (NRCS) could connect them with EQIP dollars to cost-share those improvements.

Q: What is the relationship between conservation practices and conservation easements in your project?

A: Combining easements and conservation practices on the same properties improved those lands so they weren't adding sediment or nutrients to waterways, while ensuring those improvements would be good long-term investments because the lands would remain undeveloped.

Q: What were the overarching goals of the project and how did those come about?

A: The goals were improving water quality, protecting soil health, and the long term protection of undeveloped land. Soil health meant protecting and managing soils to prevent them from eroding near waterways and maintain their ability to absorb rainwater. Water quality meant implementing agricultural practices that reduce runoff and reduce water consumption. Those

goals came forward as priorities from a local NRCS Local Working Group. We talked with NRCS and there was alignment from the very beginning on the type of resource concerns we saw and what NRCS had also identified. When GVLTL created its proposal, we knew it would be stronger if we were aligned with what the working group was prioritizing.

Q: How did you build landowner interest and engagement for this RCPP?

A: Going into this we had a lot of these landowners and projects already earmarked.

Q: What have you accomplished?

A: Over the past five years the Gallatin Valley Land Trust worked on seven ALE projects through RCPP and five EQIP projects through that RCPP funding pool.

Q: What did you use as match?

A: We used donated conservation easements as part of our match. We collected all other easement work that was going on in the area during the time the project was happening. We also had a county open space measure, which served as additional cash match. (Under that measure, voters approved a tax increase to fund the purchase of conservation easements.)

Q: How did you prioritize lands for easements and conservation activities?

A: Our state conservationist revived the NRCS Local Working Group and asked them to come up with a focused conservation plan (known as a Targeted Implementation Plan in Montana). That plan was meant to avoid doing random acts of conservation, and instead focusing on properties that were near one another, had the best soils, and had interested operators, among other factors. The local working group helped think about where those areas are and what priorities are and how to get NRCS funds focused in those areas. *(continued next page)*

(continued from page 3)

It seems like successful RCPP projects need to stick to tried and true conservation practices but also include some element of innovation-how did this project achieve that balance? How should applicants think about doing both?

Our thinking was, “we know what works and we know how to use the programs but how can we take it to the next level or think about it in a different way?” So what we did is bring on a bunch of partners. We had something like 17 partner groups in our initial application. We connected with other groups (Gallatin Water Council, USFS, Gallatin Conservation District, county open lands) that have connections to people who we don't have connections to and used those channels to connect with other landowners. So that was our innovation, to connect with these groups in a more formal way and bring them together for a more diverse agriculture protection group. Then we were able to have a collaborative conversation about coordinating efforts. Our watershed council had put together a watershed restoration plan and had identified impaired waterways in the valley so we were able to use what they put together and say there are 2-3 waterways in the valley that have impairments that are sometimes due to agricultural lands nearby and can we focus our work around those waterways as way to improve those waterways--so we built off that research

It seems like scope and outcomes of the project are really important to get clear from the beginning. How did you determine scope and define outcomes?

It was easier in our area because the Gallatin basin is pretty defined. We could probably go smaller but the way we thought about it was ‘let's define the whole valley and within that let's define specific waterways that are our focus waterways.’ Then we created ranking criteria that said projects adjacent to those target waterways ranked higher, so in that way we prioritized projects nearer to those waterways.

Based on staff capacity and average project size, we thought we could do two projects per year and then we

built it out from there. So we said we'll do 6-10 projects over the five years for a total of 2,000 to 4,000 acres, and will have another two projects per year that are not NRCS projects that are our matching projects. So in total we would have 4,000 to 6,000 acres of conservation. Our original request was maybe \$10 million and we scaled it down to \$4 million. That highlighted the importance of designing a scalable project. That way you can ask for what you think you can do and if you only get half of the funding, you will still be able to do really good projects.

Q: How are you assessing and reporting outcomes (vs outputs)?

A: In the first round, we didn't have a clear sense for what NRCS wanted in terms of outcomes. We recorded the number of projects, acres, and types of conservation practices we got done. With the second round, we are still trying to figure out what it looks like. NRCS is more interested in broader in-depth assessment of outcomes--social, environmental and economic impacts. We don't want to report on everything. We want to report on projects and make it meaningful but at the same time we have limited capacity and don't want to spend all of our time reporting. NRCS in Montana has been really in-line with that approach of figuring out easy ways to get reporting done without overburdening us with crazy reporting. GVLTA is moving away from reporting the number of projects and acres and addressing the stories a bit more (of families and social pieces). We have a lot of long term farming families and a lot of plans that identify the value of open lands and scenic views and agricultural heritage. So we tell that story and add the economic story about how agriculture has been important to the county. That's the angle we're working -- what are the societal and community impacts?

Q: What's the process of setting screening and ranking criteria to make sure you get the landowners who the project was envisioning?

A: NRCS gave us a lot of leeway to set them up how we wanted and we worked closely with District

Conservationist Justin Meissner. We've always been on a similar page about protecting the best farmland we have amidst growing development pressure and there are pretty defined rivers through the valley and working near those makes sense. We just built ranking criteria around those things. We had a pretty good selection of projects with landowners who fit those criteria, so we were able to select the projects we knew would rank out pretty well. It was a little more organic than putting out the RFP and seeing what came in. When we put out the RFP we knew which projects would be coming in, mostly from land trusts and other conservation groups that are qualified to hold easements.

Q: Can you talk about the shared position between the Montana Association of Land Trusts and the NRCS state office?

A: The focus of that position goes beyond RCPP, but demand for NRCS ALE funding in Montana has been high for a while and growing. With the growing number of projects and limited capacity at the state office, this shared position was a creative way to build capacity within NRCS to help them tackle the many projects coming in the door. It helped improve communications, coordination and the overall process, so NRCS would be willing to take on a higher number of projects. This person works mostly out of NRCS office. They connect dots, help run down questions for land trust applicants, attend NRCS staff meetings, facilitate calls and if some of the applications have questions that need to be answered, they would bring those to land trust to get them addressed. It also helps to have another person advocating for our projects within the NRCS pipeline and to have more of a presence at NRCS staff meetings.

Q: Do you have any overall takeaways about factors that helped make this project successful?

A: Don't overthink it, we know what works well--conservation easements and conservation practices work well and the need is pretty apparent and it's pretty simple. We didn't try to do anything too complicated,

especially at the beginning. We showed a need and had really good leverage (matched NRCS dollars 5:1), a lot of which came from the value of other donated conservation easements. The donated easements also come on forestland properties, which complement NRCS work and produce a well-rounded conservation picture throughout the valley by protecting areas at the headwaters and areas downstream.

It's also important to communicate early and often with NRCS staff, build relationships, and make sure you're aligned with the work they're focused on as well. The more you can align with what NRCS wants to do, the easier it all is. We're just connecting with landowners we all want to connect with. It did take work to take the initiative to meet with Justin, to have extra meetings, to loop Justin into meetings with landowners, doing small steps to get out in the field together and talk about different projects.

What were some of the challenges you had to work through or are still working through? We would love to see RCPP get more efficient. There are a lot of bureaucratic hurdles, including lots of paperwork and reviews and lengthy timeframes for the ALE program. From the time we submit an application to the time we close is 18-24 months and that doesn't include initial conversations with landowners. If we were doing it without federal reviews we could do the project in half the time. And you have to have the funds obligated by the time the RCPP project term expires.

RVCC would like to thank Justin Meissner and Brendan Weiner for taking the time to participate in these interviews.