MtHPHC

2025

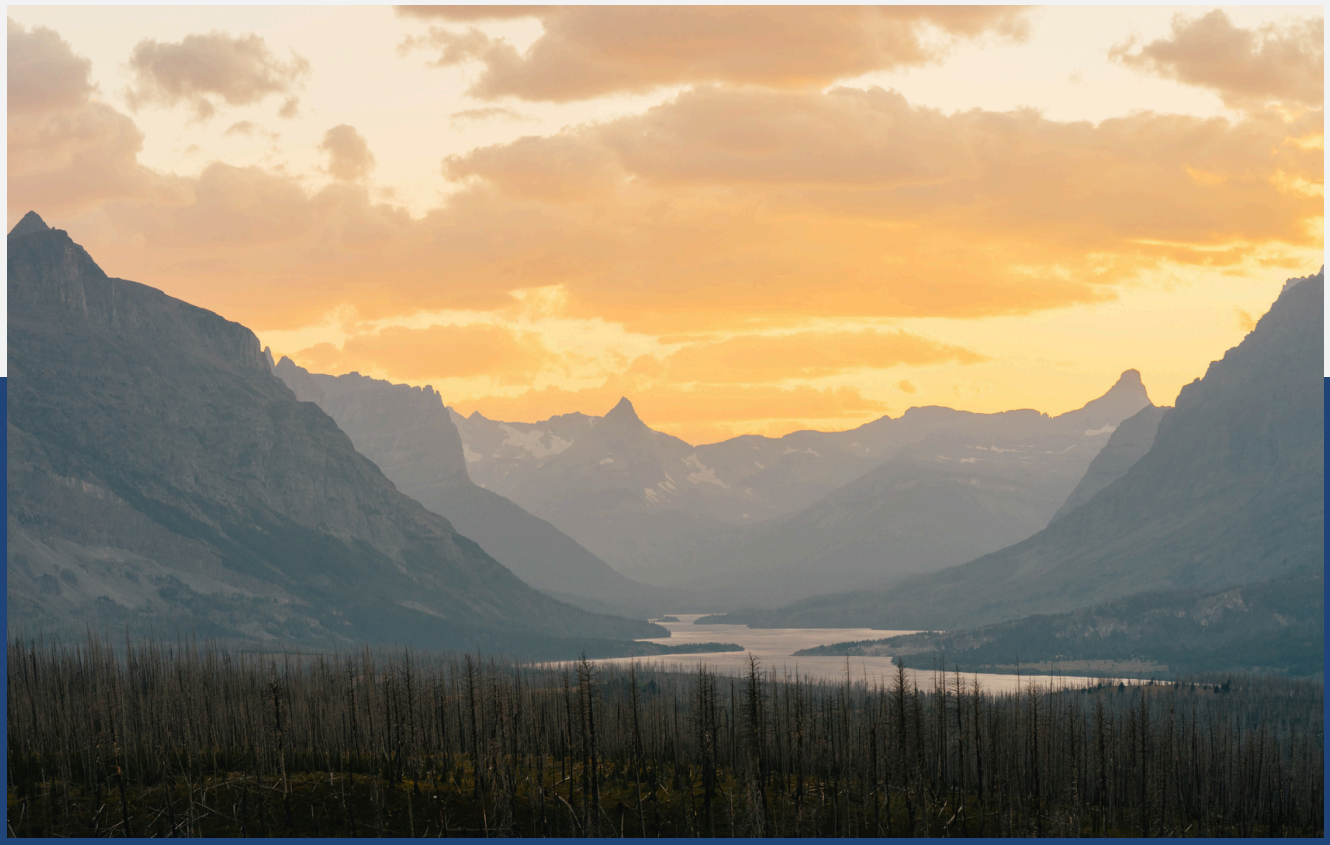
PROJECT EVALUATION REPORT

Prepared By
Julia Ryder
Lori Byron
Program Manager, Board Chair

Prepared for
Jason Gerlich
Regional Drought Coordinator
NOAA/NIDIS

https://www.montanahphc.org/

Montana Health Professionals for a Healthy Climate



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Montana Health Professionals for a Healthy Climate (MtHPHC) proposed a year-long outreach initiative, funded by a NOAA grant of $9,500, to raise public awareness about the health impacts of drought throughout Montana. From October 1, 2024, to September 30, 2025, MtHPHC engaged rural populations—particularly farmers, ranchers, and food producers—through healthcare-led educational efforts. The project aimed to enhance understanding of the relationship between climate change and public health, focusing specifically on drought and wildfire smoke.

Outreach primarily occurred through tabling at agricultural and health-related conferences, where MtHPHC staff shared banners, posters, flyers, and other educational materials. Events included the AERO Expo, the Montana Farm Bureau Federation Convention, and the Montana Organic Association Conference, among others. These engagements enabled MtHPHC to facilitate critical conversations, distribute resources, and build partnerships throughout the state.

Key findings from these events reflected both the immediate and emotional toll of climate change on rural communities: reductions in livestock due to drought, air quality concerns, mental health struggles, and a strong desire for practical, local solutions. Feedback from stakeholders also highlighted the need for deeper discussions about mental health, broader distribution of drought materials, and increased coordination with local and state organizations.

This outreach campaign was documented through photographs and updates on MtHPHC's website and social media platforms, extending its impact beyond the events themselves. The project concluded with an evaluation of results, challenges, and lessons learned, which will inform future public health and climate communication strategies in Montana.

MONTANA HEALTH PROFESSIONALS FOR A HEALTHY CLIMATE

PROJECT OVERVIEW

Description

Title: Montana Health Professionals for a Healthy Climate: Drought & Health Outreach Initiative
Service Dates: October 1, 2024 – September 30, 2025
Requested Budget: $9,500

Objective

Montana Health Professionals for a Healthy Climate (MtHPHC) launched an outreach initiative to raise awareness of drought's health impacts in rural Montana, focused on engaging healthcare providers and agricultural communities, especially farmers and ranchers. The outreach mainly occurred through tabling at key agricultural and health events statewide, where healthcare professionals shared educational materials, engaged in discussions, and gathered personal insights from rural Montanans facing climate-related stress. Highlights and photos from these events were posted on MtHPHC's website and social media, as well as shared through allied climate-health networks in Montana.

Scope

This targeted, face-to-face strategy creates opportunities to build trust and mutual understanding between health professionals and agricultural workers—two groups directly affected by and essential to Montana's resilience to climate change. MtHPHC's outreach fostered a feedback loop: listening to community needs, offering health-based resources, and building new partnerships.

MONTANA HEALTH PROFESSIONALS FOR A HEALTHY CLIMATE

METHODOLOGY

MONTANA HEALTH PROFESSIONALS FOR A HEALTHY CLIMATE

Analysis

This face-to-face approach fostered trust and mutual understanding between health professionals and agricultural workers, both of which are crucial to Montana's climate resilience. MtHPHC's outreach created a feedback loop: listening to community needs, providing health resources, and forming new partnerships

Key Outreach Events

- AERO Conference (Billings, Oct 4–6): Discussed long-term drought adaptation in ranching, such as herd size reduction.
- Rocky Mountain Wildfire Smoke Symposium (Missoula, Oct 17–18): Shared public health tools and received interest in air quality education and banners.
- Montana Farmers Union Convention (Whitefish, Oct 18–19): Engaged with dual-role farmers/healthcare workers and explored flag dissemination.
- Northern Plains Resource Council Annual Meeting (Billings, Nov 14–16): Community networking on climate and agriculture.
- Montana Farm Bureau Convention (Billings, Nov 18): Resulted in an invitation to present at the 2025 Safety Convention.
- Grain Growers Annual Meeting (Great Falls, Dec 3–5): Conversations highlighted mental health challenges and practical responses to wildfire smoke.
- Montana Stockgrowers Association Annual Meeting (Billings, Dec 4–6): Made new connections with agricultural sustainability groups.
- Montana Organic Association Conference (Great Falls, Dec 10–12): Focused on resilience, lived experience, and mental health stigma in drought-prone areas.
- Advanced Practice Nurse Pharmacology Conference (Helena, Mar 28): A chance to educate healthcare providers directly.
- Upcoming Presentation: Drought and Heat at Montana Farm Bureau Safety Convention (Bozeman, Apr 15).
- Montana Public Health Association/Confluence Public Health Alliance
- Invited to give a presentation for the Montana Public Health Association.
- Montana Healthcare Conference.

METHODOLOGY

Quotes and Feedback from tabling

Rocky Mountain WF Symposium

- Dr. Steve Running, the keynote speaker, appreciated the information on our drought banner. Marcy Ballman from the American Lung Association liked the air quality flags being promoted, and another attendee enjoyed seeing the Why is Coco Red Display

Montana Farmers Union

- Several farmers in healthcare showed interest in air quality flags, and two promised to ask community organizations to display them. Farmers noted that dust is a major challenge during plowing, and drought causes significant distress.

Grain Growers

- The drought banner attracted considerable attention. Many farmers paused to read the banner. It may be beneficial to distribute the banners to additional rural clinics. The MT Drought Management resources were noted by a CPA firm specializing in agriculture that was previously unaware of them.

Aero Expo

- A rancher in Lewistown adapted to the 2021 drought by reducing their herd from 300 to 100 cow-calf pairs. This ensures they have enough feed despite the significant cut to profits.

MOA

- “We believe that you deserve to eat really good food and know the farmers that grew it. Grit Together.”

Mental Health Promotion Beyond the Weather

A Montana campaign to raise awareness and address mental health in the agricultural community.

- Members called the governor’s office in support of funding Beyond the Weather
- Advertised Beyond the Weather on social media, webpage, and in the MtHPHC newsletter.
- Suggested Viewing, *A Tough Breed*: https://youtu.be/0QiNsFEXUa8

Banner Displays

Billings Clinic
Bozeman Billings Clinic
School of Public Health and the University of Montana
Holy Rosary in Miles City
Madison County Health Department
Black Feet Tribal Offices
West Montana Clinic
Bozeman WWAMI Program
Montana American Academy of Pediatrics
Maggie Beeson’s Naturopathic Clinic

Riverstone

Made a copy of the Banners for a permanent display.

KEY FINDINGS

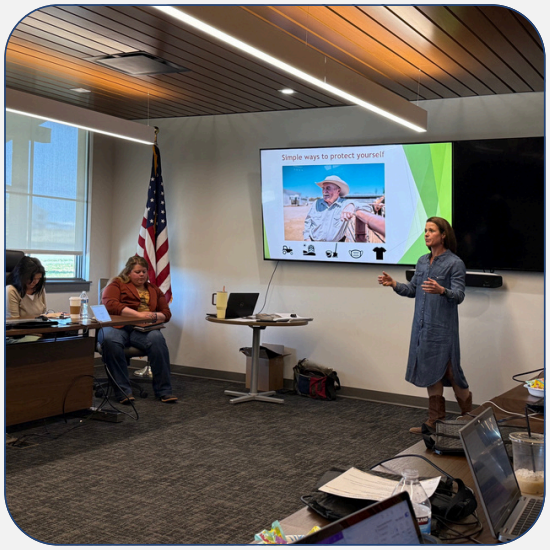
MONTANA HEALTH PROFESSIONALS FOR A HEALTHY CLIMATE

Community Engagement

MtHPHC participated in eight significant agricultural and climate-health events statewide, directly reaching hundreds of farmers, ranchers, agricultural workers, and healthcare professionals. Conversations revealed how communities adapt to worsening drought conditions—downsizing herds, modifying farming practices, and addressing mental health stressors.

Building Trust with Rural Stakeholders

Healthcare experts were welcomed in rural agricultural areas, where attendees valued the connection between environmental and human health. This approach fostered trust, resulting in an invitation for MtHPHC to speak at the 2025 Safety Convention hosted by the Montana Stockgrowers Association and the Montana Farm Bureau Federation.



Health Education Tools Disseminated

Educational materials like drought banners, air quality flags, and children's books (e.g., Why Is Coco Red?) sparked discussions. The drought awareness banner drew the attention of attendees. Healthcare workers emphasized the necessity for greater integration of environmental health in rural clinical settings.

KEY FINDINGS

MONTANA HEALTH PROFESSIONALS FOR A HEALTHY CLIMATE

Mental Health Visibility

Discussions frequently centered on the mental health impacts of climate stressors, ranging from casual remarks to detailed conversations about issues such as suicide, depression, and PTSD. These discussions underscored the critical need for enhanced mental health services within agricultural communities. Stakeholders identified the loss of counseling resources, highlighting a service gap that MtHPHC can address in future initiatives.

New Partnerships and Collaborations

The project established connections with esteemed partners, including the American Lung Association, Agoro Carbon Alliance, and Climate Smart Missoula. These organizations have expressed a keen interest in future collaborations, thereby contributing to an expanding network focused on addressing climate-related health issues in Montana.

Increased Visibility of Climate and Health Messaging.

Through photography, social media, and event recaps, MtHPHC highlighted the stories, challenges, and innovations of Montana's agricultural community in adapting to drought. This visibility normalizes discussions about climate health and encourages peer learning across regions.

CHALLENGES & LESSONS LEARNED

While the 2024–2025 drought and health outreach initiative was successful in forging connections and raising awareness, several challenges emerged that offered key lessons for future work

1. Limited Time for Deep Conversations

At many tabling events, the fast pace of attendees limited the time for in-depth discussions. Although materials were picked up and messages conveyed, meaningful conversations often needed follow-up or opportunities for informal engagement.

Lesson: Future outreach should include both tabling and scheduled speaking opportunities or workshops for more detailed discussions and dialogue.

2. Mental Health is a Major Concern—But Still Stigmatized

Many participants expressed concerns about mental health in a guarded manner. Discussions on depression, anxiety, PTSD, and suicide were common, yet the attitude remained to “push through it.” There is a need for culturally competent mental health outreach respecting rural values while providing genuine support.

Lesson: MtHPHC should partner with rural mental health organizations to create targeted materials that de-stigmatize seeking help.

CHALLENGES & LESSONS LEARNED

3. Gaps in Basic Health Knowledge On Climate Impacts
Simple health practices to protect the lungs from wildfire smoke were often unknown or misunderstood. Recommendations such as
Changing car air filters or wearing masks during periods of poor air quality were not widely recognized.
Lesson: Public health messaging about drought, heat, and smoke should be more visible and accessible through trusted sources like agricultural extension offices and rural clinics.

4. **Rural Health Clinics Need More Climate Resources**
Multiple participants, including healthcare professionals, expressed a desire for drought and climate-health materials in their clinics. However, distribution channels are limited, and rural health providers are already stretched thin.
Lesson: Developing ready-to-use, low-effort educational kits for clinics (e.g., posters, brochures, social media content) could be a cost-effective way to scale impact.

5. Building New Relationships Takes Time.
Introducing healthcare perspectives into agricultural spaces has been generally accepted, but establishing long-term trust and collaboration requires time. Relationships initiated at this year's events—such as with the Montana Farm Bureau Federation and Agoro Carbon—show potential, yet are still in the early stages.
Lesson: Maintaining a consistent presence at annual gatherings and regular follow-up will be important for developing partnerships and ensuring the work is community-driven.

6. Weather and Timing Challenges
Montana's seasonal weather and agricultural calendar affected both attendance at certain events and farmers' ability to participate fully.
Lesson: Outreach schedules should continue to align with major conferences and take weather constraints into account, while also exploring off-season educational opportunities (e.g., winter webinars, print mailers).

CONCLUSION

Building on the 2024–2025 drought and health initiative, Montana Health Professionals for a Healthy Climate (MtHPHC) will educate rural Montanans about climate change and human health. We will strengthen partnerships with rural clinics, public health departments, and agricultural groups by providing resources like drought-health posters, climate-health clinician kits, and mental health support for farming communities. We will attend one last conference, and through advocacy for programs like Beyond the Weather, media outreach such as radio PSAs, and speaking at events like the Montana Farm Bureau Federation Safety Convention, we aim to boost awareness. Collaborations with groups like Climate Smart Missoula, the American Lung Association, and MSU Extension will help develop a climate-health network. MtHPHC will also focus on youth education, engage emerging health professionals, and participate in agricultural events. Finally, we will enhance our digital presence to share stories, resources, and updates on a year-round basis.

CONTACT INFORMATION

Mail info@montanahphc.org

Phone 1-406-671-5824

Website https://www.montanahphc.org/