MONTANA FOREST & CONSERVATION EXPERIMENT STATION 2025

DEAN & DIRECTOR ALAN TOWNSEND
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SCOTT FERRENBERG

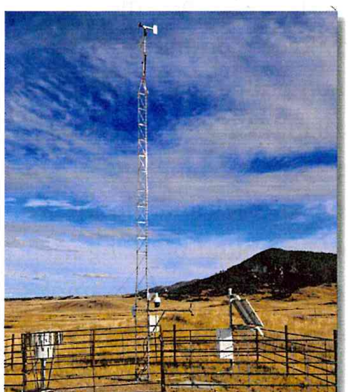
WILDLIFE

The University of Montana's **Wildlife Biology Program** is recognized as one of the very best in the country. It attracts students from all over the U.S., and includes faculty members who are truly among the world's best in this arena. The MFCES serves as a key partner to this program, providing real-world opportunities for student training and research that translates into policy-relevant information. The **Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) Block Management Access (BMA)** program traces its roots to Lubrecht Forest and its neighboring partners through the early "walk-in hunting access" initiative. Today, Lubrecht Forest and Bandy Ranch play a key role in the program, participating in multiple BMA agreements and spanning several FWP Units. Together, they host hundreds of hunters annually, contributing over 5,000 "hunter hours" each year.

FIRE SCIENCE, MANAGEMENT AND TRAINING

Montana's first **Prescribed Fire Training Exchange (TREX)** will be held at Lubrecht Forest in April 2025. Participants from across the U.S. will join Montanans to learn, practice, and share experiences in a hands-on training environment focused on fire management, fire ecology, monitoring and the operational implementation of prescribed fire. The main goal of TREX is to develop local and state capacity in the effective use of prescribed fire as a wildfire risk reduction tool. This specific program reflects the broader, nationally recognized excellence in fire science and management that is part of the MFCES. This work includes the development of cutting-edge new approaches to monitoring fire risks, from the application of drones to the recent testing – at Lubrecht – of the **SMART FIRES** mobile technology van, a multi-institutional project that includes the University of Montana, Montana State University, Montana Tech, Salish Kootenai College, Little Big Horn College and Flathead Valley Community College.

DROUGHT, FLOODS AND CLIMATE



The Montana Climate Office (MCO) is a state-authorized entity that exists under the auspices of the MFCES and the Franke College, and is designed to provide critical information to ranchers, farmers, state agencies and other stakeholders on risks such as drought and flooding, among other climate variables. In the last two years, the MCO has partnered with multiple landowners across the state, with an emphasis on Eastern Montana, to build out and operate the **Montana Mesonet**, a rapidly growing network of weather, soil moisture and snowpack monitoring stations established in partnership with federal and state agencies as well as those local landowners. The remainder of the Mesonet will be completed over the next 2-3 years, is supported by a $21 million contract with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, as well as a variety of other partners, and is designed to provide critical, real-time information for key components of the Montana economy.

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The **Montana Forest & Conservation Experiment Station (MFCES)** empowers scientists in the W.A. Franke College of Forestry and Conservation and their collaborators to tackle critical questions and conduct use-inspired research focused on conservation and sustainable natural resource management. With a global reach and a commitment to addressing land management and economic development challenges across Montana, MFCES serves as the steward of two iconic western Montana properties: the 28,000-acre **Lubrecht Experimental Forest**, a hub for forest research and education, and the 3,436-acre **Bandy Ranch**, a working cattle ranch that exemplifies the important role of conservation practices in modern agriculture.

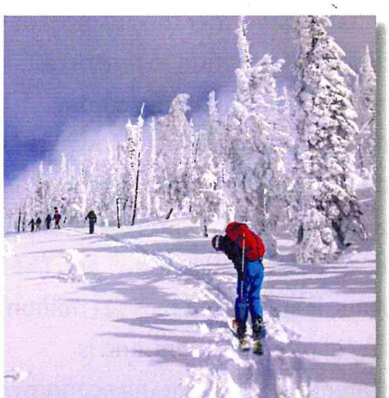
THE HEADWATERS TECH HUB

AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

In 2024, the MFCES partnered with **The Headwaters Tech Hub** to successfully land a major award from the Economic Development Authority, in a multi-institutional mission designed to stimulate technological innovation and economic opportunity here in Montana. The role of MFCES is to provide a "rugged terrain" test bed at Lubrecht Forest to support research and development, workforce training, and venture studios to launch new firms focused on smart, autonomous photonic sensing technologies. This initiative targets critical needs in defense, resource management, and disaster prevention that align with the MFCES mission.

OPPORTUNITIES AT MFCES

RECREATION



Lubrecht Forest manages timber and meadow habitats along 5 miles of the Blackfoot River. In the 1990s, the MFCES joined with state and private partners to initiate what became the **Blackfoot River Recreation Corridor**. Lubrecht Forest and Bandy Ranch continue to provide year-round recreation opportunities in partnerships with local non-profits and businesses that attract thousands of visitors to the properties including dozens of miles of groomed cross-country ski trails, short to day-long horseback riding experiences, bird watching, and orienteering courses. Researchers from the Franke College pursue research and educational opportunities presented by these recreational activities to complete ground-breaking science and train the next generation of parks, tourism, and recreation specialists. Recent examples include undergraduate student efforts to identify trail improvement opportunities and to create impactful interpretive displays that describe the historical and contemporary management of Montana's diverse forests.

The Montana Forest and Conservation Experiment Station is the statewide agency research unit of the W.A. Franke College of Forestry and Conservation. The Montana Legislature created MFCES in 1937 to foster research and outreach to support the state's economy and sustain its natural resources.

UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA
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