

Stable funding for the Natural Resource Information System (NRIS)

Since 1985, NRIS has collected, maintained, and distributed information about Montana's natural resources to government agencies, citizens, and businesses as part of its primary information clearinghouse role. During these years, NRIS has proven to be an invaluable resource to these users by providing information in a standardized, readily available, well documented and unbiased form.

Funding for the program has always been complex and inherently unstable. Funds have come from a mixture of sources, including the Resource Indemnity Trust (RIT) fund, a small amount from the General Fund, contributions from state agencies that rely heavily on NRIS (source agencies), and contracts. Before the 57th Legislature, source agencies included Fish Wildlife and Parks, the Department of Environmental Quality, and the Montana Department of Transportation.

In her 02-03 budget, Governor Martz supported more stable funding for NRIS by adding modest funding increases from the General Fund and RIT and adding the Department of Natural Resources and Conservation and the University System to the list of source funding agencies. The funding to be passed through to NRIS from source agencies was added to their respective base budgets by the 57th Legislature. MSL requests that the Governor continue to approve this funding and include it in our base budget as well. It is important to note that all current source agencies acknowledge their dependence on NRIS and support the continuation of the 02-03 funding allocation for the 04-05 biennium, although the University System requests that their appropriation, set at one half of their contribution for the 02-03 biennium, be increased to cover the full amount of their contribution of \$88,506 for 04-05.

During the 02-03 biennium, the increased funding allowed NRIS to be more selective in directing our limited resources to projects that contribute to the overall benefit of the NRIS mission and our users' needs, including:

- Consolidated and improved the inventory of its clearinghouse data holdings;
- Increased the stability, responsiveness and reliability of its network to ensure users have access to information as needed;
- Developed an on-line request log that allows users to easily request NRIS data and information and to track the status of their requests;
- Added many important data layers to its on-line mapping applications, greatly increasing its utility for users;
- Added aerial photography for almost the entire state to its clearinghouse;
- Provided more effective review of plant and animal lists and more accurate ranking of Animal and Plant Species of Concern;
- Assisted with special management initiatives such as sagebrush and prairie dogs;
- Upgraded its database platform to provide far greater query and reporting capabilities for users;
- Developed far greater web dissemination capabilities, offering a much greater array of information to our users more efficiently and with less effort on their part in obtaining it;

- Provided additional outreach to users and potential users, including county governments, weed district managers, the agriculture community and real estate and recreation communities.

State and local governmental agencies, consultants, private businesses and the public have all greatly increased their dependence on geographic information systems (GIS), and all of these groups are increasingly dependent on the availability of current, accurate and unbiased data. An audit completed by the Legislative Fiscal Division in 2001 points out that NRIS serves as the primary source for much of the data used by these groups and recommends that GIS tools (and therefore NRIS data) be better utilized by all state agencies. Currently, 6 NRIS FTE are funded through the combination of RIT, General Fund and agency contributions described above to provide statewide service to all user groups. In addition, MSL has historically used LCA/BA contracts as necessary to respond to specific agency needs, as the numbers and types of NRIS users continue to increase and as their dependence on the NRIS clearinghouse grows, it is increasingly difficult for NRIS to serve the needs of its users at its current core staffing level of 6 FTE.

To meet the growing demand for legislatively mandated services from NRIS, the State Library requests an additional Grade 15 position, to be funded through RIT at an estimated cost of \$47,887 per year. This position will:

- improve data flow from agencies into the NRIS clearinghouse;
- provide users one-stop access to a wider variety of data;
- help develop and improve data access, display and analysis tools, providing users increasingly flexible and powerful tools they need to easily locate and efficiently use data; and
- improve response to the data and information access requests from NRIS users.