



MITIGATION Minute

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Coal Seam Mapping Progresses

Thermal mapping of coal seams in the Short Draw and Remington burn scars has been completed by a subcontractor, bringing the total number of active burning coal seams mapped in eastern Montana to over 1,300.

According to Cory Chegus, Custer County DES Emergency Manager, "These burning coal seams are like unattended campfires in the hills, just waiting for a windy day and some dry grass to ignite a large wildland fire. They represent a significant risk to our landscapes and infrastructure."

Funding for this project was secured from a mitigation grant and awarded to Custer County DES to map coal seams in Custer, Rosebud, Bighorn, and Powder River counties in 2022. Future plans include mapping of McGhee, Deadman, and Prairie Fire burn scars with the hiring of a sub-contractor that was procured. The contractors will use thermal flights and ground verification will follow.

This ongoing mapping effort is part of a long-term strategy to help fire managers have an inventory of active burning coal seams, secure funding for mitigation projects, and develop mitigation strategies to reduce the risk these burning seams pose to Montana communities and agricultural producers.

Eastern Montana continues to grapple with persistent coal seam fires that quietly smolder underground and periodically erupt into fast-moving wildfires, threatening ranchlands, tribal lands, and rural communities. These long-burning seams have contributed to several recent large incidents, including major fires in Rosebud, Custer, and Powder River counties over the past few seasons.



Above: Image of smoldering coal seam.

Rocky Fork Property Acquisition



Above: Bastian Property during 2022 flooding.

The Rocky Fork Inn, also known as the "Bastian property" in Red Lodge, Montana, was acquired through a federal and state mitigation program after sustaining damage in the 2022 Yellowstone flood, and its demolition began in October 2025.

The project was part of a hazard mitigation effort to turn the riverside property into a green space or recreational area, preventing permanent structures from being built in a high-risk flood zone in the future. The project was a partnership among the property owners, the community, MT DES, and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA).

The acquisition was a significant, multi-year, multi-agency effort aimed at hazard mitigation following the devastating 2022 flooding.

Acquisition Process and Funding

- Voluntary Participation: The property owners voluntarily agreed to sell their property.
- Funding Sources: The acquisition and demolition costs were covered by federal and state funds, with zero local tax dollars used.
 - 75% came from the FEMA Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP).
 - 25% came from state resiliency funds via MT DES.

Demolition and Future Use

- Timeline: The process took over three years from the flood in June 2022 to the start of demolition in October 2025. The city formally acquired the property around September 5, 2024, and awarded the demolition bid in July 2025.
- Demolition Details: Demolition began on October 21, 2025. The process involved environmental assessments for hazardous materials to ensure public safety.
- Future Use (Deed Restriction): A key requirement of the FEMA grant program is that the land must be deed-restricted and converted into permanent open space, preventing any future structures from being built in the high-risk floodway, thus mitigating future disaster losses. The site will likely become a green space, park, or trail, offering public, creek-side access to the community.

Community Impact

While lengthy, the process was seen as a positive step for the community, turning a visible "eyesore" and symbol of the flood's devastation into a community asset and a sign of healing and resilience.



Above: Bastian property site after demolition and debris removal in October, 2025.

Federal Emergency Management Agency Launches New Archived Flood Data Website

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) launched a new “Archived Flood Data website” which is an alternative to request technical data and administrative information for flood insurance studies and flood maps.

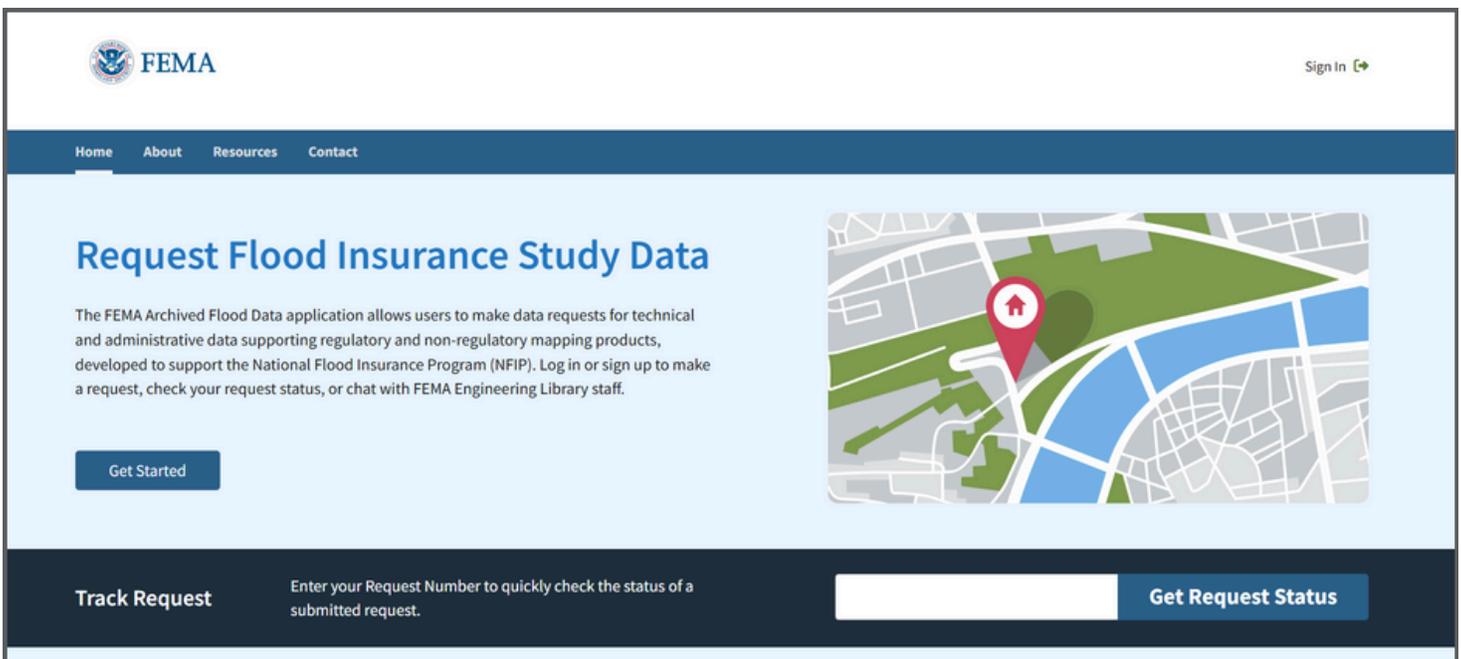
Requesters are encouraged to create a personalized account and make their submissions online through the Archived Flood Data website where they have the following benefits:

- Tracking requests
- Faster filing speed
- Active support from staff
- Virtual guided walkthrough
- Secure payments through [Pay.gov](https://www.pay.gov/)
- Secure login through [Login.gov](https://www.login.gov/)

Archived Flood Data is easier to use than the current request process. It has a simple workflow and lets users communicate directly with Engineering Library staff.

Users can access Archived Flood Data at <https://hazards.fema.gov/flood-maps/archived-flood-data/home> or through the Risk Analysis & Management Access Portal. Users making requests on behalf of the Federal Emergency Management Agency should use their existing Risk Analysis & Management Access Portal accounts to maintain their fee exemption status.

Where To Go for Help or More Information: Users can contact the Risk MAP Outreach Team at fema-riskmap-outreach@fema.dhs.gov.



The screenshot shows the FEMA Archived Flood Data website interface. At the top left is the FEMA logo, and at the top right is a "Sign In" link with an external icon. Below the header is a navigation bar with links for "Home", "About", "Resources", and "Contact". The main content area features a large heading "Request Flood Insurance Study Data" and a sub-heading "Request Flood Insurance Study Data". Below this is a paragraph of text: "The FEMA Archived Flood Data application allows users to make data requests for technical and administrative data supporting regulatory and non-regulatory mapping products, developed to support the National Flood Insurance Program (NFIP). Log in or sign up to make a request, check your request status, or chat with FEMA Engineering Library staff." A "Get Started" button is located below the text. To the right of the text is a map showing a street grid with a red location pin and a house icon. At the bottom of the page, there is a "Track Request" section with a text input field and a "Get Request Status" button. The text next to the input field reads: "Enter your Request Number to quickly check the status of a submitted request."

Collaborative Fire Mitigation Project Provides Template for Cross Jurisdictional Fuel Breaks

A collaborative wildfire mitigation project along the East Fork of the Bitterroot near Sula is helping to reduce fire risk and protect the single power line serving over 280 homes. The project focuses on creating a shaded fuel break and removing hazard trees along the power-line corridor in one of the highest wildfire-risk areas in the state.

East Fork Mitigation Snapshot

- The Montana DNRC, Bitterroot National Forest, Ravalli Electric Cooperative, and Ravalli County partnered to thin vegetation and clear “strike trees” that could fall into lines and start fires or cut power. Crews worked along the narrow access road where residents have only one way in and out, improving both evacuation safety and firefighter access.
- Treatments are funded through the Montana Forest Action Plan with state legislative appropriations and implemented under the Good Neighbor Authority, which allows DNRC to conduct forest management on federal land and streamline work across boundaries. The goal is to lower flame lengths and slow fire spread so future incidents are easier to contain before they reach homes and infrastructure.
- Local officials also plan to link nearby landowners with a Ravalli County cost-share program that can cover up to 75% of the cost of defensible space and fuels work on private property. By aligning private treatments with the larger fuel break, partners hope to create a continuous zone of reduced hazard across public and private lands.

Project partners expect the East Fork work to cut the likelihood that a falling tree will trigger a power-line fire, while also reducing the chance that a fire starting elsewhere will race unchecked into the corridor. By lowering flame lengths and removing hazard trees, the treatments should also make it safer for firefighters to defend homes and operate along the narrow road during an emergency.

"By lowering fuel loads and creating defensible space, this project has reduced the wildfire risk for more than 280 homes along East Fork Road," said Jacques Thayer, DNRC Hamilton Unit Manger. "This work helps ensure residents have safer evacuation routes during a wildfire event while giving first responders a greater chance of safely engaging to protect lives and property."

The East Fork effort is also viewed as a template for similar cross-jurisdictional fuel breaks elsewhere in Ravalli County and across Montana, especially in areas where critical energy infrastructure runs through high-hazard forests. Agency leaders say the project is already strengthening relationships among utilities, land managers, and local governments that will be needed for long-term wildfire adaptation in the Bitterroot Valley.

Mitigation Funding Opportunities for 2026

Funding Opportunity	Funds Available	Application Deadline
State Resiliency Fund Application	*\$4,000,000	March 6, 2026
DR-4813	* \$424,520	February 13, 2026

If you are interested in any open mitigation funding opportunity, please complete a NOI (Notice of Intent) located on the [Mitigation Grants page](#) on the MT DES website and submit it to the Mitigation team. Once we receive your NOI, we will reach out to you to further discuss project eligibility and the application process.

*Current Estimated Amounts

State & Regional Hazard Mitigation Plan Updates

State Plan Update:

- Approved and Adopted

Western Regional Plan Update:

- Base Plan: FEMA Approved and Adopted
- Annexes/Addendums: Approved and Adopted

Central Regional Plan Update:

- Base Plan: FEMA Approved and Adopted
- Annexes/Addendums: Approved and Adopted

Eastern Regional Plan Update:

- Base Plan: FEMA Approved
- Annexes/Addendums: FEMA APA
- Receiving final adoption resolutions for Eastern Region

To obtain updates on HMP status, please view the [MT Regions HMP Status Tracker](#).

Training Opportunities

- **Floodplain Bootcamp Sessions.** Every Friday morning beginning at 9:00AM through May, 2026. For Zoom link and agenda contact: Shylea.Wingard@mt.gov.
- **Association of Montana Floodplain Managers Conference.** February 24-27; Great Falls. Save the date.

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