Radioactive oil waste: Eastern Montana fights back

Ranchers speak up for water

Five years ago, Seth Newton was shocked to learn a radioactive oil waste landfill had been permitted and built just upstream from his ranch. Why site it here when the drilling activity is so far away? A majority of the activity was east of Williston and Watford City, ND.

“The facility had operated for a year. I became increasingly alarmed with the frequent spills and the consistently high volume of truck traffic” says Seth, who ranches northwest of Glendive.

Called Oaks Disposal, the landfill was designed and permitted to take radioactive oil waste from North Dakota’s Bakken oilfields.

Permit denied for America’s largest proposed coal port

On November 14th, Cowlitz County, Washington denied a permit application that would have allowed Millennium Bulk Terminals, LLC (a subsidiary of the same company that owns Montana’s Decker coal mine) to develop and use that County’s shoreline in the town of Longview to export Montana and Wyoming coal to Asia.

The County’s decision followed a September 26th decision by Washington’s Department of Ecology (DoE) to deny a water pollution permit for the proposed coal port, citing the project’s negative impacts to the climate, clean water, air, and public health.

The decisions follow a review conducted and released by Washington State and Cowlitz County that found the port would have significant and unavoidable impacts in nine different categories – including air quality, traffic congestion, rail safety, tribal resources, and more. Among other things, the review found that the coal port would lead to increased incidence of cancer along the tracks.
Building communities of action and hope

As I write this note to you, a beautiful (though chilly!) snowfall has draped us in a bright white blanket of fresh snow. I was briefly lost in the beauty of the moment when my thoughts took a sudden turn to the increasing intensity of weather events. I thought, will we have a lush spring like last year, followed by another intense drought and wildfire season?

Montana's 2017 fire season left 1 million acres burned with a cost of fighting these fires at over $284 million. This does not include the cost to citizens' health and the loss of income from local tourism and agriculture.

Climate scientists and our own experience tell us that climate change is being caused by greenhouse gas pollution. But many politicians still pretend there's no such thing as climate change.

Wendell Berry warns, “People who own the world outright for profit will have to be stopped: by influence, by power, by us.”

Northern Plains has long been a leader in the grassroots movement of protecting our water, land, and air quality – as well as family farms and ranches – for future generations. We understand that climate change is not only an environmental issue but an economic and social justice issue, as well.

Our history is one of challenging the costs that dirty energy shoves off onto everyone else – the air pollution, the degraded aquifers and poisoned rivers, the hardships imposed on farmers and ranchers who only want to use their land to earn an honest living.

All of Northern Plains’ task forces – Coal, Oil and Gas, Keystone XL Pipeline, Agriculture, Homegrown Prosperity, the Good Neighbor Agreement and, of course, Clean Energy – are working in different ways to attack the problem of climate change.

Energy corporations and the politicians who do their bidding say that fighting climate change will cost too much. Really? Just wait till we all see what it costs to live in a world of disrupted climate patterns:

• the costs to fight and recover from the wildfires, floods, and other extreme weather events (including damage to our infrastructure);
• the costs to our food-producing capacity;
• how much it disrupts the food web in the world’s oceans;
• the costs when sea levels really start to rise.

For years, the Pentagon has regarded climate change as a security threat to our nation and our military forces. We all know that problems don’t go away just because we ignore them.

Northern Plains members form a powerful community of action and hope. We support and encourage one another and together we are able to go “the long haul” and win because we are the people of this place. We are not about political parties or corporations. We are about neighbors, community, and grassroots organizing. We honor our past. We are lovers of democracy.

This year, I encourage you to respond to action alerts, attend a Northern Plains event, or ask a friend to join Northern Plains. Together we will make 2018 a year of action.

– Becky Mitchell
Northern Plains Chair

The Plains Truth
The Plains Truth is published by Northern Plains Resource Council. Northern Plains members receive The Plains Truth as one of the benefits of membership.

Membership Dues
$500+ - Sahara of the Big Sky $100 Rough Rider $200 Bottom Line Rider $50 Range Rider $40 General Member $100 - Living Lightly

Endowment
The Northern Plains Endowment is a permanent fund established to help sustain Northern Plains’ work into the future. If you want to make a donation, a memorial gift, or a bequest to this fund, please contact the Northern Plains office.

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Comptroller: Paula Berg
Former staff Adam Haight, Alicia Pettys, and Sarah FitzGerald contributed articles to this edition of the Plains Truth. We wish them luck in future endeavors!

Western Organization of Resource Councils (WORC)
Northern Plains is a founding member of the Western Organization of Resource Councils. WORC is a regional network of eight grassroots community organizations that include 12,200 members in seven Western states. WORC helps its member groups succeed by providing training and coordinating regional issue campaigns. Visit www.worc.org.

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For as long as she can remember, the Northern Plains Resource Council has been a part of Annika Charter-Williams’ life.

“My mom used to bring me to meetings in my car seat when I was less than a year old,” Charter-Williams recalls. “I always used to say that I’d never do that. But what happened after I got married and we had Stevie? She was coming to meetings with me at just a few months old! I just couldn’t imagine not being involved.”

Passed down through the generations

Annika first became a Northern Plains member of her own accord at age 23. She was Chair of YVCC’s Community Food Campaign and Vice Chair of YVCC as a whole from 2014-2016. She currently sits on the Producer Steering Committee for the nascent Yellowstone Valley Food Hub.

“My goal has always been to make good, local food more widely available,” said Charter-Williams. “It would be good for our ranch, yes, but also for our health and our local economy. Local food was one of my mother’s greatest passions; I learned so much from her about cooking and how your health revolves around what you eat. I couldn’t help but care about local food and want to educate people and get them involved.”

She comes by her passion honestly. In fact, it’s a multi-generational affair. Annika’s grandparents, Anne and Boyd Charter, were founding members of Northern Plains in 1972. Their son – Annika’s father – Steve Charter, is a former Chair of Northern Plains who has fought tirelessly for the family’s local beef business, Charter Beef. With a growing family – she and her husband Michael now have two children, Stevie Marie (3) and Willie (1) — it’s hard to balance all these roles. But Charter-Williams relishes the challenge.

“Something I learned from my mother’s example,” she said, “was that you can be a great mother and wife, help around the ranch, and stay involved. You can be multi-faceted as a woman and have many things you’re passionate about. My mom cared about more than just her family—she was more than a singular entity – and that became engrained in me.”

She hopes her children will be the fourth generation to be involved with Northern Plains.

“It’s not like I decided to make my kids come to meetings just so they’ll become activists,” Charter-Williams joked, “but I do think it’s a good example for them to see their mom being involved. I love it when other parents come with their children, too!”

— Alicia Pettys

What will your life legacy be?

Most people would like to make a lasting contribution toward a better world, but don’t know how. Planned gifts, made during life or through the donor’s estate, will carry on the donor’s name and memory and enhance Northern Plains’ ability to provide a cleaner, more sustainable future for generations.

A well-structured planned gift offers you:
- Significant tax benefits;
- Increased income for life;
- The ability to make a larger gift than otherwise possible;  
- The opportunity to establish a permanent memorial in your name or that of someone else.

A well-structured planned gift offers Northern Plains:
- A measure of security for an uncertain future;
- A long-term relationship with you;
- An enhanced capability to work for what’s important to you.

Please call Steve Paulson at 406-248-1154.

Why am I a Monthly Sustainer?

I’m a monthly contributor first and foremost because I believe so firmly in our mission and our work. Serving on the Northern Plains Board for a number of years has made me mindful of how important it is for us to be able to count on regular sources of income. Finally, if I just put it on my monthly bill-paying list, it’s an easy routine to follow.

-Janet McMillan, Greenough
Radioactive
Continued from Page 1

Oaks was – and still remains – the first and only facility allowed to accept this waste in both Montana and North Dakota.

DRC takes action

Seth and his neighbors sought out help. They joined Dawson Resource Council (DRC), and jumped feet-first into a fledgling campaign. Meanwhile, Oaks continued accepting loads of radioactive oilfield waste. Landowners around the landfill experienced heavy truck traffic, spills, smells, and worry that their waterways would be contaminated.

Despite the influx of radioactive oil waste, Montana had no rules around its disposal. “It felt like the state was sleeping at the wheel,” says Seth, “even as they rushed to permit new facilities.” In 2015, the DEQ permitted two more landfills for radioactive oil waste, one in Culbertson and one in Plentywood. A fourth is currently proposed for outside of Sidney.

DRC and Northern Plains pushed the state to create rules, and – last August – the Montana Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) finally published draft rules for radioactive oil waste disposal. The rules are a testament to the power of organizing, and they would not exist without the hard work of members like Seth.

But the DEQ’s rules aren’t final yet, and they still fall short in big ways. “I was disappointed to see the lack of attention paid to water,” says Seth. “If we are to have radioactive oil waste in Montana, we need to do it right—no ifs, ands, or buts.”

-David Newton, Glendive

What do we like about the new rules?

- They apply to existing facilities, such as Oaks Disposal near Glendive.
- They apply to drill cuttings, fracking sands, and drill mud in the definition of TENORM waste. This extends the regulatory umbrella to substances that are exempt in other states.
- Require disposal facilities to screen every incoming load.
- Create more thorough testing and screening requirements for filter socks, specifically.

What needs improvement?

- Liquid waste: The proposed rules allow landfills to accept liquid waste in addition to solids. Liquid waste is harder to contain, it can leak and spread contamination more easily. The final rules should explicitly prohibit liquid waste.
- Metals: The proposed rules allow disposal of “TENORM-contaminated equipment.” Metals threaten the integrity of the liner. Sharp corners can puncture the liner, while the added weight of metal can put undue stress on it.
- Groundwater Monitoring: The rules only require annual sampling, and do not require sampling and analysis to be conducted by an independent, third-party operator. The rules should require quarterly or more frequent groundwater sampling, and should not rely on self-reporting by the company operating the landfill.
- Leachate: The rules allow facilities to recirculate leachate (the liquid that drains or ‘leaches’ through a landfill) by sprinkling it back onto the top of the waste. The rules should require a plan for removal, treatment, and disposal of leachate if conditions threaten the integrity of the liner.

What’s next?

The DEQ recently announced its intention to extend the rulemaking process by an additional 90 days in order to “allow sufficient time to address the numerous comments” they received during the comment period. More than 800 of those comments were from Northern Plains members. Great job!

This spring, DEQ will hold another public comment period for the revised rules, and possibly another public hearing. Final rules will be published by DEQ by this fall.
Northern Plains started 2017 with a bang when we sued the Trump Administration for approving the Keystone XL pipeline without due process of law and using outdated data of the project’s threat to our water, land, and communities.

Unfortunately, throughout last year, the Trump Administration dug into this shortsighted decision. The State Department and TransCanada actually tried to get our lawsuit thrown out by arguing that the President of the United States is not required to follow our nation’s bedrock environmental laws – the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) or the Endangered Species Act (ESA) – and that the President’s decision is above judicial review.

The court heard oral arguments on those disturbing concepts on October 11th in Great Falls. Before the hearing began, more than 50 Montanans gathered, along with friends from South Dakota and Nebraska, in front of the Great Falls Civic Center to speak out against the Keystone XL pipeline’s threat to communities, land, and drinking and irrigation water.

Among them was Bill Whitehead, Chairman of the Assiniboine and Sioux Rural Water Supply System (ASRWSS) on the Fort Peck Indian Reservation. “We have to protect this land,” Whitehead, said at the rally, “There’s a lot of things that we can look at in terms of commonality. And water affects us all. We all need water in order to survive.”

On November 22nd, District Judge Brian Morris rejected the State Department and TransCanada’s argument that the President does not have to comply with NEPA and ESA. This means we will have our day in court to oppose Keystone XL’s permitting. We even have a date: May 23rd, 2018. We hope to see you there!

Northern Plains members rally in support of clean water before the hearing on our Keystone XL lawsuit.

Nebraska permit creates KXL uncertainty

Despite receiving a federal permit early in 2017 to construct the Keystone XL pipeline, TransCanada still had not secured state-approval of a route through Nebraska. After a lengthy review, Nebraska’s Public Service Commission granted TransCanada a route for the pipeline in late November 2017. However, the path approved through Nebraska was not the route TransCanada wanted or had prepared for. As a result, rather than removing a barrier for Keystone XL’s construction, the Nebraska Public Service Commission’s decision has opened up a slew of new obstacles for the pipeline. Since making the permitting decision, the Nebraska Public Service Commission has rejected a request from TransCanada to reconsider this permitting decision.

The pipeline’s newly approved route through Nebraska:
• Is longer, and would therefore be more expensive to build;
• Affects landowners who were never given the chance to participate in the pipeline’s permitting deliberation and decision and who do not have easement agreements with TransCanada;

WHAT’S NEXT?

Coal port backers are individually suing each branch of government that has denied a permit or lease to the proposed Longview, Washington, port. On January 3rd, they also filed a separate federal lawsuit against Washington State, seeking to have a federal judge overrule the state’s decision and require Washington to proceed with processing and issuing port permits.

Northern Plains is confident that our side will win these challenges, as the company has a steep legal hill to climb, but these suits mean there will likely be work and controversy around the project for years to come.

Permit denied

Continued from Page 1

If built, the port could lead to an additional sixteen coal trains (half full, half empty) rolling through Montana communities every day to ship coal to Asia. This traffic would bring Montana increased air pollution through diesel pollution and coal dust, and increased blockages as traffic, including emergency vehicles, would spend more time stuck waiting at railroad crossings. The nearly 50 million tons of coal shipped through the port per year would also worsen global climate change.

“It’s just another example of projects proposed at the public’s expense. Asia would get the energy, corporations would get the profits, and Montanans would pay the price,” said past Northern Plains chair Mark Fix, whose ranch faced potential condemnation by the Tongue River Railroad, in large part to ship coal to the Longview port. “‘The people have spoken, and we’re glad Washington and Cowlitz County are continuing to say no to these proposals.”

Northern Plains has fought the proposed Millennium Bulk Terminals and other proposed Pacific Northwest coal ports since their proposal in 2010. We have submitted lengthy and detailed technical comments over the years since then, held house parties, hearings, and other events (bringing in speakers from Beijing, Longview, and more) across the state to educate and engage Montanans. We have taken bus and van-loads of Montanans to four hearings in Spokane and flown affected ranchers and tribal members to other hearings. We have produced and distributed fact sheets, pamphlets, and postcards; and more, and will continue to work to protect our communities by ensuring these coal ports never get built.

-Svein Newman

Northern Plains members rally in support of clean water before the hearing on our Keystone XL lawsuit.

There’s a lot of things that we can look at in terms of commonality. We all need water in order to survive.”

- Bill Whitehead
Chairman of the Assiniboine and Sioux Rural Water Supply System

Trump’s Keystone XL lawsuit upheld

Before the hearing began, 50 Montanans gathered in front of the Great Falls Civic Center to speak out against the Keystone XL pipeline.
Montana's ranchers are heavily impacted by NAFTA.

Montana producers need a good, fair way to sell excess raw products to the rest of the world. We need access to markets, and while NAFTA has provided some of that, NAFTA has also taken the U.S. from a $2.5 billion ag surplus to a $1.1 billion deficit with Canada and Mexico since 1995 (U.S. International Trade Commission, 2017). Clearly, access to more markets doesn’t equate to more success for agriculture.

NAFTA has also denied all Americans the right to know where their meat comes from. Through a NAFTA rule, ISDS (Investor State Dispute Settlement) allows foreign countries or corporations to sue the American government for unlimited sums of money for implementing laws that may affect their own “expected future profits.” As a result, our popular country-of-origin labeling (COOL) law was rescinded after the World Trade Organization threatened $1 billion a year in trade sanctions.

To make a long story short: Trade is critical to the global economy, but we, the public, must also have a role in making sure that trade benefits Montanans and our communities.

Right now, NAFTA is under renegotiation by the Trump, Trudeau, and Nieto administrations of the U.S., Canada, and Mexico, respectively. While renegotiation could have been a great opportunity to fix some of the major problems with NAFTA (ISDS and COOL), our worst fears are being realized. NAFTA is being renegotiated by the most powerful corporate interests in North America, just like the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) was (with no labor, environmental, or family agriculture groups allowed entry). The reason TPP was so unpopular was not because Americans did not want to trade with Trans-Pacific nations, but because the rules being set were largely unfavorable to the majority of the people in each of those nations. Now the NAFTA renegotiation is following the same formula.

Once again, family farmers and ranchers are being put in an impossible position. Do they support trade that maintains market share for them, but also sets rules that continue to depress prices and outsourcing? Or do they continue to fight for a fair trade deal and an equal voice in trade negotiations, which may take years to be heard?

– Maggie Zaback

**Federal appeals court hears arguments over land, water in Bull Mountain coal lease case**

On December 4, a three-judge panel of the federal Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals heard oral arguments on Northern Plains’ lawsuit over a Bureau of Land Management coal lease in the Bull Mountains north of Billings. Northern Plains brought the suit because the BLM failed to take a hard look at the impacts to area ranchers’ land and water if Signal Peak Energy’s underground longwall coal mine is expanded.

When coal seams are mined out using longwall methods, the ground above the removed coal shifts, cracks, and subsides. This can create fissures – sometimes wide, sometimes narrow, and often deep. These fissures can impact water resources that ranchers depend upon for their livelihoods. They can also pose a safety risk, particularly on or near steep rock slopes.

Northern Plains members hope the lawsuit can be a tool to require the BLM to insist on additional protections for landowners and water when the coal is mined. “If we don’t have water, we don’t have much. It’s important to me to be able to continue this ranch and pass it on to my family,” said past Northern Plains chair Steve Charter, who ranches above some of the coal contained in the BLM’s lease. “I’m hopeful that we can help protect the future of agriculture out here.”

– Svein Newman

**Arguments heard in federal suit over public lands, minerals use**

On November 2, federal District Judge Brian Morris of Great Falls heard oral arguments in a case brought by Northern Plains and others against the Bureau of Land Management’s Resource Management Plans for eastern Montana and northeastern Wyoming. The plans manage the largest fossil fuel-producing region in the nation.

Resource Management Plans are the process by which the BLM plans the use of public lands and minerals. By law, the agency is supposed to look at various options and alternatives, and then pick the best land uses that balance agriculture, recreation, resource development, and more. And yet, despite its legal mandate and the competing needs of ranching, hiking, hunting, and other public goods, the BLM only considered options that offered almost all of Montana and Wyoming’s coal for development (collectively, 110 billion tons). The agency didn’t even consider requiring oil and gas development on public lands to use best available technologies to limit methane waste and pollution, or other strategies that could have reduced the threat of climate change.

Through this suit, Northern Plains and our co-plaintiffs hope to get the BLM to consider more protections for our climate and our public lands and minerals beyond a wholesale development focus. Co-plaintiffs include the Western Organization of Resource Councils, Powder River Basin Resource Council, Montana Environmental Information Center, Sierra Club, and Natural Resources Defense Council. Northern Plains is being represented in the case by the Western Environmental Law Center.

– Svein Newman

**CONTACT THE MONTANA DELEGATION**

Call Sen. Daines, Sen. Tester and Rep. Gianforte today to ensure that ISDS is taken out of NAFTA, and Country of Origin Labeling is put in!

**Rep. Greg Gianforte**  
Phone: 202-225-3211  
[Online contact form](https://gianforte.house.gov/contact/email)

**Sen. Steve Daines**  
Phone: 202-224-9412  
[Online form](http://www.stevedaines.com/contact/)

**Sen. Jon Tester**  
Phone: 202-224-2644  
[Online contact form](https://www.tester.senate.gov/?p=email_senator)
Federal methane rules delayed, saga isn’t over

For over four years, Northern Plains members have supported the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in establishing protections against the wasteful and dangerous practices of unnecessary venting, flaring, and leaking methane and other hydrocarbon gases at oil and gas development sites.

While protections at both the EPA and BLM were finalized late in the Obama Administration, the Trump Administration has worked to roll back these important rules using whatever means possible. While the EPA methane standard was finalized early enough to prevent a congressional rollback, Republican leaders attempted to use the Congressional Review Act (CRA) to repeal the BLM Methane and Waste Prevention Rule. A herculean effort by Northern Plains members and our partners across the country ultimately prevented the Senate from approving a repeal of the BLM rule.

Northern Plains members have been working to preserve these important protections in the courts as well. The Western Organization of Resource Councils (WORC), our regional network, joined with allies to challenge and overturn Secretary Zinke’s executive suspension of the rule without proper process. (The BLM has appealed this decision.) Additionally, WORC and a coalition has filed legal suit challenging Zinke’s second attempt to suspend the rule. This lawsuit is moving forward in the courts, with a hearing scheduled for Feb. 7 on a preliminary injunction that, if successful, could put the rule back into effect.

**Moving forward**

Despite these wins in the Congress and in the Courts, neither the BLM’s nor the EPA’s methane protections are safe from being rolled back. Because overwhelming public outcry and legal challenges have prevented the Trump Administration from repealing the protections wholesale, the BLM and EPA are now attempting to rescind and replace the rules from within the agencies themselves. By all indications, the “replacement rules” being proposed will simply be the newest strategy to remove the Obama-era methane protections and replace them with substantially weaker requirements.

As part of this internal process to rescind the rule, the EPA issued two “Notices of Data Availability” on Nov. 8, justifying its delay of its methane rule. The EPA took comments and has left the rule in effect, but only until the EPA publishes a final replacement rule. On the BLM side, on December 8, the BLM finalized its proposal to delay until 2019 provisions that were supposed to take effect in 2018 to control methane and other dangerous hydrocarbon gases.

Draft versions of these replacement rules from both agencies are expected between January and March of this year. When these replacement rules are released, the public will have an opportunity to comment.

— Hannah Hostetter

Investing in the future, not the past

It’s been almost a year since the Trump Administration resurrected TransCanada’s permit to build the Keystone XL pipeline to transport tar sands oil – the dirtiest of oil products – right through Montana. Along its way, it would endanger two of our most iconic and critical waterways – the Missouri and the Yellowstone Rivers – along with dozens of smaller rivers and streams that would also be crossed.

Since the pipeline’s permitting, Northern Plains has doubled down on our commitment to protect Montana’s water and our members’ land threatened by Keystone XL. In order to stop this dirty and unnecessary pipeline before it begins, Northern Plains is joining the effort to move the investments of banks, institutions, and individuals out of Keystone XL and other projects that threaten the future of communities and the health of our people.

This “divestment” opens up whole new pathways to growing economies that also promote sustainability and build homegrown prosperity. When money stops going toward new fossil fuel infrastructure, it will be free to go somewhere else, such as the cleaner, more sustainable projects of the future.

In December 2017, Northern Plains collected signatures for a petition asking 19 big banks, with JP Morgan Chase in the lead, to stop investing in tar sands infrastructure projects. While JP Morgan Chase has continued to provide TransCanada with the funding it needs to build Keystone XL, Northern Plains will continue work to promote divestment from unnecessary fossil fuel infrastructure and spur investment that builds our future.

— Hannah Hostetter

Oil and gas leasing sees major uptick in Montana

Federally owned oil and gas minerals are leased to development companies in quarterly sales hosted by the Bureau of Land Management. In order for parcels to be included in a lease sale, a potential buyer must indicate interest in a particular parcel of oil and gas minerals. Starting with the December 2017 lease sale, the number of mineral parcels being offered for sale has seen a notable increase.

**Federal oil and gas minerals offered for lease in MT**

**December 2017 sale:** 204 parcels covering 99,265.87 acres

**March 2018 sale:** 110 parcels covering 63,616 acres

**June 2018 sale:** 217 parcels covering 104,000 acres

— Hannah Hostetter
Did anybody ask you if they could do this to Montana? So asks the very first Northern Plains newsletter, written in the summer of 1972, typed painstakingly on a typewriter, then mimeographed and shipped off to the first crop of members. 45 years later, it was dusted off for a refresher at a panel during the 2017 Annual Meeting.

As Paul Hawks, Melville rancher and past Northern Plains chair, reminded us, “they” were the 35 major utilities and the federal government who put together the North Central Power Study. Published in 1971, the North Central Power Study called for the immediate development of the nation’s coal reserves west of the Mississippi. In Montana, the study forecast 21 mine-mouth coal-fired electrical generating plants, which would produce a combined 69,000 megawatts of power and divert half of the Yellowstone River. (For the sake of context, Colstrip’s peak generating capacity is just over 2,000 MW.)

Jeanie Alderson, current Northern Plains treasurer who ranches near Birney, was just a kid at the time. But she remembers the shock her parents felt when they learned about the plans for coal development in their area. “Coal representatives came in and told us, “This is what reclamation is going to do to your dry, useless land,” shared Jeanie. “We didn’t like that so much.” Her mother, Carolyn Walker, got on the phone, started calling neighbors, and organized a meeting in their living room. Before long, they had formed a local organization.

The story was similar in the Bull Mountains, where Steve Charter, past Northern Plains Chair, lived at the ranch with his parents, the late Anne and Boyd Charter. Land men “informed us that all of our neighbors had signed up and that if we didn’t follow suit, we’d be in the unenviable position of being an island of nothing in a sea of plenty,” wrote Anne in her 1999 book, Cowboys Don’t Walk. Soon, “the telephone lines were hot between the Bull Mountain ranchers,” who formed their own local organization, the Bull Mountain Landowners Association.

Over on Rosebud Creek, past Northern Plains chair Wally McRae and other area ranchers were getting their own visits from slick company representatives. They, too, formed a local organization, this one the Rosebud Ranchers.

Northern Plains was formed by those first three local groups — by people who read the energy industries’ “plan” for Montana, and said, “No, thanks.” “We had the foresight to think broader than just our own interests,” said Steve. “And if not us, who?” added Paul. They incorporated Northern Plains, recruited members, raised funding, hammered out newsletters, and shared information with their networks and their neighbors. Before long, Northern Plains was making waves at the Montana Legislature—and winning on issues.

“Did anybody ask you if they could do this to Montana?” The question is now 45 years old, but it persists in our work today. We still believe in keeping Montana a good place to live and work. We still believe that Montana is not the path of least resistance for irresponsible energy development. And perhaps most of all, we still believe that people can make a difference in this country.

“Encourage others to join,” the first newsletter concludes. “Only by standing together can we live in an unpolluted and beautiful land.”

– Caitlin Cromwell
Webber, Newton win annual honors

Cindy Webber of Big Timber was named 2017 winner of the Bob Tully Spirit Award. A longtime Northern Plains Board member, Cindy also serves on the Oil and Gas Task Force and chaired affiliate Cottonwood Resource Council for several years.

In receiving the award, Cindy reflected, “I’m definitely something of a reluctant dragon. But I know my treasure and I am willing to protect it.”

The 2018 Mary Donohoe Tell It Like It Is Award went to Seth Newton of Glendive, a member of Dawson Resource Council and an undaunted advocate for construction standards for facilities that accept radioactive oilfield waste in Montana, as well as protections for the landowners who live nearby.

In his acceptance, Seth said, “All I know for sure is I’m so thankful that this organization is in place. This is really an award that goes to Northern Plains itself for being here, to do what we can do.” In reflecting on the radioactive oilfield waste campaign, Seth continued, “I’m really thankful that when it was time for the rubber to hit the road and attend the hearings, give testimony, and roll your sleeves up, the membership really showed up in support.”

The award for greatest percentage of new members in an affiliate went to Dawson Resource Council. The award for the greatest number of new members in an affiliate went to Yellowstone Valley Citizens Council.

Meet our officers for 2018

CHAIR – Becky Mitchell: Becky Mitchell of Billings has chaired her local affiliate (Yellowstone Valley Citizens Council), served on the Coal Task Force, and was most recently our Vice Chair. Becky is a Livingston native and grew up with a great love for the landscape and quality of life in Montana. She works as a social worker at St. John’s Lutheran Ministries in Billings.

VICE-CHAIR – Bill Hand: Bill is a retired agricultural economist, and spent a career working in international development. He grew up in Custer County, and lives at Nye today. He has represented Stillwater Protective Association on the Northern Plains Board and serves on three Task Forces.

SECRETARY – Ed Gulick: Ed has served as Northern Plains Chair (2009-11), Chair of Yellowstone Valley Citizens Council, and represented YVCC on the Board for several years. He currently chairs the Clean Energy Task Force. Ed is an architect who focuses his work on green buildings.

TREASURER – Jeanie Alderson: Jeanie has served on the Board since 1995, most recently as Vice-Chair. She is a second-generation Northern Plains member and lives on the family’s ranch near Birney where she and her husband Terry Punt market grass-finished Wagyu beef. She serves on our Coal and Homegrown Prosperity Task Forces.

ASSISTANT SECRETARY – Sue Beug: Sue grew up on a farm in oil and gas country in eastern Colorado. She and her husband John eventually moved to the Red Lodge area. Knowing what it’s like to farm in an oil patch, she became very motivated when Energy Corporation of America proposed wells near Belfry. She currently serves as CCRC’s Chair.

ASSISTANT TREASURER – Deborah Muth: Deborah is the former Chair of Carbon County Resource Council. She has served on the Northern Plains Oil and Gas Task Force and now on the Ag Task Force. Deb and her husband Steve were longtime Red Lodge residents, and now live in Bozeman.
Tammy Agard discusses Pay As You Save financing.

It is possible to increase people’s comfort, improve their homes, and put dollars back in their pockets, at no cost to the taxpayer.

That was the message that Tammy Agard of EEtility delivered to the attendees of Northern Plains’ Annual Meeting. She also spoke to six Montana rural electric co-op General Managers and staff during a webinar on the day before the Annual Meeting.

Agard started EEtility three years ago to design and develop holistic, cost-effective, and sustainable residential, multi-family, and small commercial energy efficiency programs. The company works with rural electric cooperatives and municipally-owned utilities.

Tammy’s work is currently focused in Arkansas, where EEutility is working with six co-ops including Ouachita Electric Cooperative and Arkansas Valley Electric Cooperative.

EEtility is a certified B-corporation, a for-profit private enterprise that aims to achieve a mission beyond making money. The company works with co-ops or municipal utilities to demonstrate that electricity providers have an economic interest in reducing their members’ utility bills. Such a program can also improve homes and businesses, create local jobs, and generate local investment.

That program is called “tariffed on-bill financing” or “Pay As You Save” (PAYS) because a pricing structure or “tariff” is set, allowing the co-op to invest in energy-reduction measures in members’ homes and businesses.

The co-op customers repay this investment over time on their bills, using the energy savings generated. This is achieved by ensuring that the resident’s savings will be at least 20% greater than the cost of the improvements.

Tariffed on-bill financing is considered very inclusive, because any member-customer can participate, regardless of whether they are a renter or homeowner, and regardless of their credit score. If a co-op member moves, the next resident would continue repaying because they are also reaping the cost savings.

Flathead Electric Co-op is the only cooperative in Montana that currently offers such a program — and theirs is not true on-bill financing, but rather a traditional loan program with on-bill repayment. In Flathead Electric’s program, members’ personal credit history is taken into account, and financing is tied to the individual.

Multiple of the Montana rural electric cooperatives that participated in the webinar with Tammy Agard expressed interest in pursuing Pay As You Save programs. The committees of Northern Plains’ members working with their co-ops in Fergus Electric and Park Electric service territories are both interested in advocating for their co-ops to adopt PAYS, and we intend to form a Beatroot Electric Co-op committee soon for the same purpose.

If you missed Agard’s presentation, you’re in luck! A recording of her webinar is available on the Northern Plains Resource Council channel on YouTube or by contacting Organizer Sydney Ausen at sydney@northernplains.org or (406) 248-1154.

— Alicia Petry

Keynote speaker gives energy perspective

Tyson Slocum, Energy Program Director at Public Citizen, delivered the Annual Meeting’s keynote speech this year. He provided us with a vantage point on our current place in history, focused on energy use, which is sometimes hard to see without the perspective afforded by time.

“We’re seeing energy technology disruption firsthand, he told us. As the example of cellular telephones shows, “disruptive technology comes at you fast.” (In 2003, only 4% of US households relied solely on a cell phone with no landline. By 2017, that percentage had jumped to 65%).

There are three main factors currently driving “disruption-level” change in American power markets:

• First, renewables and storage are getting cheaper and cheaper, and they’re deploying fast.

• Second, electricity demand since 2007 in the U.S. has been flat. Mandates and incentives for energy efficiency improvements in buildings and vehicles have worked.

• Third, inexpensive fracked natural gas is displacing coal and nuclear.

Fracking has been its “own little revolution causing lower prices,” but after doing a lot of looking at the numbers, Slocum concludes that “production isn’t sustainable.” Of course, we know it’s not environmentally sustainable. But he also informed us that the pace and supply aren’t sustainable either.

Twenty years of state-level renewable mandates had an important role in kicking renewables into gear. For example, Montana enacted a renewable energy standard in 2005 which mandated that 15% of its energy be generated by renewable sources by 2015, and we successfully got there. Corporate procurement of utility-scale renewable development and retail-level distributed generation incentives also helped push renewables to the front of the pack, where they now stand on their own as the cheapest option.

Throughout history, America has helped along technological advancements. Slocum says that “Government mandates and investment have always played a central role and that must continue.” From the telegraph network to the railway system to the highway system, our government has regularly written our laws and budgeted our public dollars in ways that bring a better collective future to all of its citizens.

Slocum advises that we need to keep innovation rewards in the public interest. It’s not hard to make the leap to understanding that today’s equivalent role for government is to keep it working hand-in-hand with the sectors of our energy economy that will promote economic health and public health over pollution and concentrated profits.

Toward this goal, Northern Plains continues to advocate for the removal of barriers to energy efficiency and distributed renewable generation. This includes working to influence our state lawmakers every legislative session as well as aiding our members in dealing directly with decision-makers at their Rural Electric Cooperatives.

— Olivia Stockman Splinter

Tyson Slocum presents his keynote address.
2017 Annual Meeting

Northern Plains explores the potential of the soil

Soil Health is an increasingly hot topic in agriculture, but what “soil health” actually means is up for debate. Gabe Brown, a North Dakota farmer and soil health guru, preaches 5 principles of soil health:

1. Minimum disturbance of soil – as little tilling as possible;
2. No bare soil – always keep it covered by vegetation;
3. Diversity – try different plants and animals to complement each other; monocultures breed weeds;
4. Keep a living root as long as possible – don’t plow them up, don’t spray them out;
5. Livestock integration – let the animals mow, fertilize, and do your weed control; they have legs to save you diesel.

Brown’s principles, along with the work of soil specialists like Nicole Masters, have translated soil health into a tool for rangeland managers as well as farmers.

Farmers and ranchers across the region are using these principles to increase productivity and water retention. They are diversifying their businesses and bringing their families back home.

Annual Meeting panelist John Brown (no relation to Gabe Brown) – local ranch assistant and “worm herder” – traveled to South and North Dakota to tour four farms and ranches where soil health has been a priority for at least a decade. He shared his experience at the 2017 Annual Meeting: “One farmer’s kids called and said, ‘I want to come home’ and the dad said, ‘Great, what business are you bringing with you?’” The kids came back to the farm and started various new enterprises including hunting getaways and an event venue. They’re all succeeding through their healthy landscape and diversified operation.

Gabe Brown’s ranch was another stop on John’s tour. Gabe predicted that a family of four could survive on just 20 acres if they diversified and used soil health practices.

Melstone rancher (and panelist) Bill Milton extended that line of thinking to propose a challenge: “Can we as ranchers invite new, landless producers onto our land with very low rent, and offer them an opportunity to build new enterprises to complement our own work, just to prove Gabe Brown’s theory, and with minimized costs?”

Dr. Tony Hartshorn from MSU’s Land Resources and Environmental Sciences program added a new dimension to the conversation, as a group of his students listened from the back of the room. Hartshorn is concerned with how we monitor what’s going on in the soil. So far they have been working with several Northern Plains members in the region to dig pits and take initial soil tests, a critical first step. Monitoring soil health is such a holistic process that scientists around the globe are debating what must be included and what can be dropped. More research and understanding are needed. But with constant collaboration and creativity, producers across the region are establishing baseline data for how much water, carbon, and nutrients they have below ground, and what kind of production and wildlife they are seeing above ground.

~ Maggie Zaback

Meeting the challenge of a declining coal industry

At our 2017 Annual Meeting, we approved a resolution supporting the 4 per 1000 soil health initiative.

Members attending the Annual Meeting approved two resolutions:

- Opposing the transfer of federal lands and/or minerals to the states; and
- Supporting an international initiative to improve the health of soil as a means of protecting our food-producing capacity and fighting climate change.

We did not have the space in this issue needed to print the resolutions in full. If you would like to read them in full:

- Go to www.northernplains.org/2017-resolutions/
- Call the office (406-248-1154) and ask for a printed set to be mailed to you.

At the Annual Meeting’s final session, WORC’s retired Executive Director Pat Sweeney moderated a panel titled “Jobs vs. the Environment, A False Narrative.” The discussion looked at how communities deal with the decline of a single large employer.

Pat began the panel with a nod to past alliances between Northern Plains and labor unions before turning things over to the guest speakers. Rebecca Newberry from the Clean Air Coalition in Buffalo, NY, overviewed the organization’s work in the small city of Tonawanda, NY. Her community weathered 85 layoffs when the Huntley Generating Station closed down, but not a single worker filed for unemployment.

Rebecca stressed planning when dealing with economic changes. Forming a broad coalition of labor unions, school staff, environmental groups, and citizens helped Tonawanda avoid the “scraping” mentality that often emerges during an impending plant shutdown.

Representing labor, Al Eklbad, Executive Secretary of AFL-CIO Montana, stressed the importance of a good standard of living to working people. The son of a union member, Al pointed to high-wage jobs and how they build a stable community where families achieve a desirable standard of living.

Having spent 17 years in the dislocated workers unit, Al billed job retraining as a tough sell for labor because union jobs take years to bargain toward. Keeping these benefits must be central to any discussion about renewable energy transitions in our state. He closed with a look to the future. Alliances between labor and conservation groups are powerful, he said, as evidenced by the $4.7 million Department of Labor grant that IBEW (International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers) Local 1638 and Northern Plains worked on together to secure funds for a study of post-coal economic opportunities at Colstrip.

~ Alex Cunha
When we created the Good Neighbor Agreement in 2000, we expected it to protect the water we use downstream of the Stillwater and East Boulder mines for drinking, agriculture, and recreation.

As of December, our agreement with Stillwater-Sibanye now includes the strongest groundwater protection program ever created for a hard rock mine in Montana. At both the East Boulder and Stillwater mine sites, we have created a protection program with strict limits on groundwater pollution. This includes new monitoring wells surrounding mining facilities and a complete response plan for how to manage water quality impacts should problems arise.

Our citizen committees, made up of members in Stillwater and Sweet Grass counties, worked for many years to get this program adopted. These protections for groundwater, in addition to the surface water protection plans initially written into the GNA, will go far toward protecting the Stillwater and Boulder Rivers and all of us who rely on them.

– Cameron Clevidence

A big step toward protecting Paradise Valley

Senator Jon Tester’s bill to withdraw federal land at the headwaters of the Yellowstone River from mining cleared a major hurdle in December.

Sen. Tester introduced the Yellowstone Gateway Protection Act back in April of last year. The bill would permanently protect more than 30,000 acres of national forest land in the Paradise Valley from new hard rock mining development. This would conserve the upper reaches of the Yellowstone River as it flows out of Yellowstone Park, protecting the river as it flows 671 river miles to the Missouri, providing water for drinking, crops, and recreation.

Senator Steve Daines and Representative Greg Gianforte had been dragging their feet on supporting Tester’s bill, despite widespread public support in Montana. That was a major problem, because this bill needed bipartisan support from the Montana delegation. Fortunately, after 7 months of delay, Rep. Gianforte was persuaded to introduce the Yellowstone Gateway Protection Act companion bill in the House.

Once the companion bill is given a House committee hearing, we will send you an Action Alert to show support for the bill and to put pressure on Senator Daines to protect the Yellowstone.

– Cameron Clevidence

Stakeholders study Colstrip’s future

The Colstrip Generating Station began operations in Rosebud County in the mid-70s. For four decades, units 1 and 2 at the plant generated power for consumers across the Pacific Northwest. But both units will retire in 2022 as the result of a diminishing market for coal-fired electricity, competition from natural gas, and a court case over the plant’s pollution. The closure of 1 and 2 will reduce plant power production by roughly a third, and the associated layoffs will have a serious effect on the county’s economy and tax base.

The larger Colstrip units 3 and 4 are due to close in 2027, the result of a customer base that no longer wants to buy coal-generated electricity.

Since the plant was first being built, Northern Plains members in Rosebud County worked to ensure that the coal boom did not hollow out the economy and threaten the region’s historic industry, agriculture. Today, contaminants leaking from waste coal ash impoundments continue to damage groundwater sources around the plant.

As the Colstrip plant nears its end, Northern Plains is excited to announce a formal partnership with the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers at Colstrip initiated this past December. Executive board members for Local 1638 voted to work on a study with Northern Plains to examine the job-creation potential of cleaning up the leaking waste impoundments. The study will focus on similar ash pond cleanup cases around the country and examine what a remediation project would look like in Colstrip.

Northern Plains has commissioned research (expected to be completed by March 2018) to help identify sustainable economic opportunities in Colstrip and help keep the plant’s five owners accountable for any lingering effects on groundwater. In addition to the study, Northern Plains is participating in the Colstrip Community Impact Advisory Council.

Governor Bullock invited Wally McRae – longtime Northern Plains member and past Chair – to sit at the roundtable with regional stakeholders and advise the Governor on $10 million in transition money provided to the city of Colstrip by Puget Sound Energy.

– Alex Cunha
Gaining Ground

Homegrown Energy Film Festival hits the road

Clean energy innovation is alive and well in Montana! All across the state, Montanans are turning toward solutions that can shape an energy future that works for everyone. This is the message of the Homegrown Energy Film Festival, a series of short home videos of clean energy projects from Miles City to Helena.

Last spring Northern Plains called upon Montanans to share their clean energy stories with us, and so many of you did! We received submissions from all over the state showing a wide variety of clean energy projects. Many submissions came from homeowners who are taking action to reduce their energy bills. Rita Sommers-Flanagan, featured in the festival, was excited to tell the story of her passive solar home, telling viewers that, “passive solar design is so simple, anyone can do it. There’s no technology, no moving parts. All it takes is some intention as you site and design your home.”

The Homegrown Energy Film Festival is sponsored by the Northern Plains Clean Energy Task Force. According to task force chair Ed Gulick, “In the past, for our annual fundraiser, we’ve hosted tours of green buildings with clean energy. This year, we were having trouble thinking of locations that many people could easily access… So we decided to bring the clean energy innovation to you!”

In the course of these films, we hear from Montanans about why they made the move to adopt clean energy. For members of Fergus Electric Cooperative in central Montana, purchasing a panel from the community solar array was an affordable and accessible step into renewable energy. For Livingston resident Ken Decker, installing solar on his roof provided him with some energy independence. Then there is Carl Borgquist, whose company Absaroka Energy is behind the new Gordon Butte Pumped Storage facility. For Carl, innovations like Gordon Butte ensure that Montana is a leader in energy development into the future.

The Homegrown Energy Film Festival demonstrates that a clean energy future is possible, and Montanans are leading the way!

The next screening of the Homegrown Energy Film Festival will be in Livingston, MT, on February 1 at Elk River Books at 6:30pm. Stay tuned for a screening near you!

– Sydney Ausen

Community Solar Comes to Central Montana

In September 2017, Fergus Electric Cooperative brought a 100 kW community solar array online in Lewistown.

Community solar allows participants to choose solar without having to install a solar array on their own property. Owners are credited on their energy bills for the electricity generated by the panels they own. All 324 panels in this project were sold; some members bought just one panel, others as many as 20 or 25. A second phase is now being considered!

This project is a prime example of how positive results can come from co-op members building relationships with their co-op’s management and democratically-elected boards.

Members of Central Montana Resource Council (CMRC), a Northern Plains affiliate, repeatedly expressed interest in community solar, prompting Fergus Electric to conduct a member survey on the topic. Member support was strong, so Fergus Electric proceeded with the installation. CMRC and Fergus Electric partnered to hold a Community Solar Seminar last year, which helped the project succeed.

Fergus Electric Cooperative is the 4th in Montana to build a community solar project, joining Flathead, Missoula, and Ravalli Electric Cooperatives.

– Alicia Pettys

Central Montana Resource Council member Laurie Lohrer speaks in front of the new community solar array built by Fergus Electric Cooperative.
2018 Jardine Ski Run set

Join Bear Creek Council on February 25 for the 2018 Jardine Ski Run! All ages and skills are welcome to participate in this fun-filled day of cross country skiing, eating, and awards. Local sponsors will help make the Ski Run possible. For more information about the Jardine Ski Run, contact Maggie by emailing maggie@northernplains.org or calling (406) 248-1154.

Bear Creek Council has also successfully sponsored the installation of a projector screen at Gardiner School, to be used for films and other presentations. The screen itself was generously donated to the school by a Bear Creek Council member.

– Maggie Zaback

YVCC works toward climate action

The Yellowstone Valley Citizens Council Sustainability Committee is working in earnest toward a City of Billings Climate Action Plan. To date, the committee has formed a coalition with the Billings League of Women Voters and learned from the experiences of the Montana cities that have already enacted Climate Action Plans.

Next steps include meetings with business leaders, the Billings Chamber of Commerce, and individual city council representatives.

The ultimate goal is for the Billings City Council to pass a resolution supporting a Climate Action Plan and creating a community-wide Climate Action Task Force that would 1) conduct a baseline assessment of the city’s greenhouse gas pollution, 2) set a reduction goal, 3) create an action plan to meet that reduction goal, 4) implement the action steps, and 5) verify and measure the reductions. The scope could focus solely on municipal government and/or include the entire community; typically, cities tackle their own operations first.

– Alicia Pettys

CMRC hosts solar film festival, protects water

The “Central Montana Goes Solar” Film Festival attracted a full house, as more than 60 citizens joined CMRC on October 19 for the premiere of CMRC’s new solar energy video. Solar owners Bud Barta, Jean Collins (of the St James Episcopal Church), Janine Didie, and Melanie Foran (Fergus Electric Co-op), Leah Grunzke (Lewistown Art Center), and Roger Lohrer took questions.

The Lewistown Art Center (LAC) installation (a 20 kW rooftop, grid-tied solar project) was funded by Northwestern Energy’s “USB” grant program. CMRC members voted to donate $1,000 to LAC as matching funds. LAC says of this project, “Significant cost savings on monthly utilities will be funneled directly back into Art Center programs.”

CMRC held a 3rd meeting with the Judith Basin Conservation District Board to ask the Board to move forward on a Conservation District ordinance to provide landowner protections during oil and gas drilling and avoid drawdown of our aquifer.

– Adam Haight

YBCC’s campaign to encourage local solar projects has landed another success… the Park County Senior Center will become the latest Livingston community building to receive a solar installation! The Senior Center hopes to receive a North Western Energy Universal Systems Benefit (USB) grant and low-interest loan from the Montana DEQ to offset part of the project cost.

YBCC has partnered with the Senior Center to fundraise for the remaining expenses. YBCC is proud that our partnership with our Senior Center will result in this 50 kW solar array, a huge asset that will generate savings for the Center far into the future.

– Sydney Ausen

Cousin Bend’s solar success

On January 11th, Cottonwood Resource Council held its annual winter potluck and annual meeting. Members approved 2018 officers: Teri Schlabach as Chair, Cindy Webber as Vice-Chair, Michael Drye as Treasurer, Lisa Wagner as Secretary, Paul Hawks as East Boulder Oversight Committee member, Betsy Baxter as East Boulder Oversight Committee alternate, Charlie French as Responsible Mining Practices and Technology Committee member, Cindy Webber as Northern Plains Board representative, and Connor Murnion as Alternate Northern Plains Board representative.

During the potluck CRC held a screening of the short film “One Hundred Thousand Beating Hearts,” a short film on soil health.

– Hannah Hostetter

CRC hosts annual meeting and winter potluck

Contestents take off in the 2016 Jardine Ski Run. Not pictured: the warm, tasty food and all of the crazy costumes that contestants wear each year.
COUNCIL ROUNDUP

Sleeping Giant helps solar projects

Sleeping Giant Citizens Council successfully organized the 3rd Annual Helena Sun Run. The 2017 Sun Run raised over $12,000 toward a solar array for Carroll College. The array will be installed on the roof of the science building, which will allow it to be used as a practical teaching tool. Nearly 200 people ran or walked in this year’s Sun Run.

Sleeping Giant held a quarterly General Membership Meeting on January 31 at the Emily Free Wilson Building. Food and beverages will be provided and a speaker will explain local opportunities to enact a Property-Assessed Clean Energy program in Helena that will enable community members to access low-interest loans for energy efficiency and renewable energy projects.

– Adam Haight

CCRC focuses on forest plan revision

CCRC remains committed to empowering Carbon County communities to promote conservation and sustainable development practices that protect our water, soil, air, agriculture, and unique quality of life.

In 2018, CCRC is focused on encouraging Carbon County residents to adopt renewable energy and energy efficiency, promoting soil health in Carbon County, and ensuring that protections for clean air, clean water, and healthy ecosystems are upheld in the revised management plan for Custer Gallatin National Forest.

In January, CCRC held its annual meeting where members celebrated another year of grassroots action with pizza and a presentation on the Custer Gallatin National Forest management plan from Beartooth District Ranger Ken Coffin.

– Sydney Ausen

DRC's efforts pay off in 2017

Dawson Resource Council members logged some serious mileage this fall. The state finally released its draft radioactive oil waste rules in August. Along with Northern Plains members from around the state, DRC members attended hearings, offered consequential testimony, puzzled out formal language, consulted experts, called their neighbors, and wrote voluminous comments.

While the rules were a step forward in the fight to protect eastern Montana from threats to our land, water, and livelihoods, they leave much to be desired. See the front page for more.

When DRC members weren’t crisscrossing the state to testify on radioactive oil waste, they also made headway on a local recycling campaign. Members tabled at local events, surveyed community members about their interest in recycling, and researched recycling options around the state. DRC is convening a recycling panel of experts and entrepreneurs from around the state as part this year’s Glendive Ag & Trade Expo (GATE) in February.

DRC was proud to be recognized at the Northern Plains Annual Meeting for the biggest percentage increase in membership. Seth Newton, Glendive rancher and DRC member, also received the Mary Donohoe “Tell It Like It Is” Award for his leadership on the radioactive oil waste campaign.

– Caitlin Cromwell

SPA faces hurdles for zoning petition

SPA members continue their work to pass a citizen-initiated zone to protect county landowners affected by oil and gas development along the Beartooth Front. After Stillwater County refused SPA’s initial petition on the grounds that signatures for trustee landowners didn’t have notarized affidavits, SPA members became notaries and got the signatures again.

Members collected the necessary signatures to keep more than 60% of landowners signed on. Upon turning in the petition for a second time, Stillwater County Commissioners halted the process by seeking an Attorney General’s opinion on whether mineral rights owners should have been included in the petition (even though no provision of state law requires this). The Attorney General refused to offer an opinion.

The County Commission will now decide whether to insist that the rights of mineral rights holders supersede the rights of property owners in the petition process, or to give the zoning petition the public hearing it deserves.

– Cameron Clevidence
I learned so much at POCO, from both the instructors and from other participants! For example, we discussed what shared leadership is, and why it’s so important to the vitality of an organization like Northern Plains and my affiliate, Dawson Resource Council. Shared leadership taps into the talents of many, challenges individuals to grow, helps unify a group, and lessens the burdens of core leaders. We’re a strong organization because we have many leaders! It’s been really helpful to understand the ‘why’ behind a lot of what we do, and to begin putting those lessons to use in various ways.”

-Rachel Torres, Glendive

Principles of Community Organizing
March 21-24
Billings, MT

Principles of Community Organizing (POCO) is a nationally recognized organizing training that covers the most important skills for leaders of grassroots community organizations.

To sign up or to learn more about POCO email info@northernplains.org or call (406) 248-1154

ABOVE: Rachel Torres and family
BELOW: Northern Plains’ 2017 POCO attendees