Continuing our work in challenging times

Northern Plains members are finding creative ways to connect and organize even during shelter-in-place

Major Keystone XL Victory!

Our recent legal win invalidates a major permit for KXL, halting most construction along the pipeline route. We still have more organizing to do, though...

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Northern Plains Resource Council is a grassroots conservation and family agriculture group. Northern Plains organizes Montana citizens to protect our water quality, family farms and ranches, and unique quality of life.

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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
$1200+ Rider of the Big Sky
$600 - $1199 Bottom Line Rider
$51 - $599 Rider
$50 General Member

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.

Western Organization of Resource Councils
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 15,200 members in seven Western states. WORC helps its member groups succeed by providing training and coordinating regional issue campaigns. Visit www.worc.org
Greetings from the East Fork of Hanging Woman Creek.

While feeding cows this morning I saw a great blue heron, so spring must be here. We are looking forward to green grass and longer days. We’re starting to garden and there are lots of baby calves on the ground.

Here at Bones Brothers Ranch, we – like many of you – are staying home. But unlike many of you, our quarantine still allows much of our life to go on as usual. We are grateful to be able to get up and go to work – to be outside and to be with family doing all the spring work that a ranch entails.

We know these are luxuries many of you do not have right now. We’re thinking of those of you who work on the front lines of this pandemic, and all of you who are struggling to stay healthy as well as to keep your heads above water.

Many of you are also busier than ever in your own lives, but have still taken time and energy to show up and ensure that Northern Plains’ work goes on. We had our first virtual meeting of our board of directors in April. We’re all still learning to gather and do our work in this way, but the meeting went surprisingly well. I’m exceedingly proud of our talented, imaginative, smart, and dedicated staff! And I’m thankful for all of you who have adapted, adjusted, and persevered!

While COVID-19 has changed some of our schedules and how we gather, all of our campaigns carry on and remain busy… some even busier! Many of you have received our email alerts and responded to them. Thank you!

Please see on these pages an update of the work we are up to (and that you make possible).

I do want to mention that, this May, we celebrate the Good Neighbor Agreement turning 20 years old! It’s an achievement to be proud of, and one that still takes an immense amount of work to uphold.

In the coming weeks, we know we will have to be vigilant against this virus. We know that our air, land, and water – and the communities that they sustain – are both threatened and hold the answers to getting through this time.

Through it all, Northern Plains will take on challenges and opportunities with the same tenacity our founders showed in the face of the North Central Power Study.

We will reach out, gather, listen, share what we know, and make ourselves heard.

COVID-19 seems especially deft at harming families and people who live and work in close relationships. Yet, I think in the long run it will ALSO be the strength of our relationships and our ability to lean on them, form them, and work within them that will get us through.

I know I’m not alone being grateful for Northern Plains. I know I have a community and family that will work for all of us, and we will all do our best to care for each other. Stay in touch! Reach out. And be well.

-Jeanie Alderson  
Chair
Being a part of the Northern Plains community is one of the greatest gifts of my life. A few years back, we began to see an increase in politicians colluding with powerful industries to roll back protections for our land, air, water, and bedrock democratic processes. Many friends felt confused and uncertain about where to put their energy. Not me. I felt a resolve coalescing. How would I respond to the coming threats to environmental and social well-being? I already knew – I would rededicate myself to the work I had already been doing with Northern Plains and our local affiliate, Yellowstone Bend Citizens Council.

It was not until I got to be part of Northern Plains that I felt the exhilaration of democracy in action. How else can we explain feeling energized after an entire day sitting in a board meeting? The magic of democracy is there in those meetings; the respectful listening to other viewpoints, sometimes challenging, the determination to find common ground, the just-below-the-surface humility of people who know they don’t know everything. Coming to collective, thoughtful decisions for a common good is something people around the world long for, and sometimes are willing to give their lives for.

With the arrival of the coronavirus, we in Northern Plains have a whole new set of challenges. One of those will be finding ways to keep the tender core of our “working” relationships alive. While Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg raves about the “connectivity” of the internet, we commit to another kind of connectivity, the connectivity that comes from being fully present with others in person. In good times and bad, in joy and sadness, through losses and the inevitable conflicts that arise in our work, our time together deepens our understanding of each other and our world. Nothing can replace that. For now, we’ll use our devices in the best and most thoughtful ways we can. And when we can gather in person again, we’ll be ready for that moment.

Before our local affiliate formed, I tried to find ways to create progress on energy independence and local sustainability. It was a small version of the very human story the Greeks told; pushing forward only to have the gains evaporate. Once our affiliate launched, I understood that to be powerful as one person, we need a powerful organization, and that our organization is powerful because of us. It’s the very reciprocity that keeps ecosystems in balance, the ecosystems we in Northern Plains are so deeply determined to protect and preserve.

- Joan Kresich
Co-Chair
Yellowstone Bend Citizens Council
Congratulations to Mark Fix on his appointment to the Water Pollution Control Advisory Council (WPCAC) by Governor Bullock! The Council plays an important role in formulating Montana’s water quality policies. WPCAC advises the Department of Environmental Quality and reviews draft administrative rules. Mark serves as WPCAC’s Irrigated Agriculture Representative.

We wish Mark the best in his new leadership role for the state! Thank you for all you give to Montana!

Nearly a dozen Northern Plains members (including Julie Holzer pictured at the bottom right of this photo) joined over 50 organizer-leaders from across the West to attend an all-day grassroots fundraising training in Billings last March.

These trainings are essential to keeping our organization strong, ensuring we can do the important work of protecting Montana over the long haul. Thank you, Julie, and everyone else who attended this lively day helping us hone our fundraising skills!

“\n
We are monthly members because we think that Northern Plains does good work, and we’re happy - not only to donate - but also to an active part. By supporting Northern Plains, we can achieve things that we could not achieve by ourselves; Northern Plains not only brings issues to our attention but organizes us to be a part of those issues.

For us, giving monthly instead of annually spreads it out a bit more so that we don’t have to plan and I think it means that we can give more than we could annually – it makes it easier.”

- Barbara and Walt Gulick

Visit NorthernPlains.org/donate to learn more.
good cartoonist (and member) like the late Helen Clark can strengthen the work of a citizens organization like ours. For several years in the late 80s and through the 90s Helen – who lived near McLeod on the Boulder River – provided witty and beautifully drawn cartoons for the Plains Truth and other Northern Plains alerts and posters.

Helen was an active member of the Cottonwood Resource Council and often hosted gatherings of staff and members at her dude ranch, the X Bar A. Not only was Helen a talented artist, she was a fantastic cook, whose meals and treats enticed those attending meetings or events at the ranch.

Often, our staff or members would make a stick-figure drawing of an idea and mail it to her. A few days later, a cartoon was mailed back, often on a scrap of paper or leftover material from some art project.

We have almost 20 original Helen Clark drawings and we plan to have them framed and displayed for the wider enjoyment by our members.

These four cartoons are timeless – just change the names of villains and the situation still exists!

-Teresa Erickson

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**Legislation As Pollution**

Montana water quality law got the stuffing beat out of it by the 1995 legislature. In this cartoon, Helen shows what she thought of the Montana legislature. The 1995 session led to a large coalition effort by eight conservation organizations that became the Clean Water ballot initiative (I-122) of 1996. It was one of the first times the state’s environmental groups worked together on a single issue. Many lasting professional and personal relationships resulted from that all-consuming effort.
Mining Vs Water

Helen’s version of what happened with the Clean Water ballot measure in 1996. The mining industry spent nearly $2.5 million to defeat the grassroots ballot measure aimed at pollution from hard rock mines. Though the measure failed, the following year we passed a ballot measure that banned cyanide heap leaching mining.

End of Montco

In 1977 a new proposal to dig up eastern Montana coal appeared as the Montco Mine. The speculative mine hung over the heads of ranchers in the Tongue River Valley for nearly 20 years until the Department of State Lands canceled the mine’s permit on December 29, 1994, for failure to do anything with the federal and state coal leases. It was the first time Montana had ever canceled a mining permit, and the decision was upheld by the Montana Supreme Court in 1997.

Weaker Groundwater Standards

In the late 90s and early 2000s, industry was relentless in thinking of ways to reclassify groundwater in order to allow pollution to be pumped underground. This cartoon shows our frustration with corporations attempting to make it OK to pollute.
What’s this “pre-approval” thing at the PSC all about?

This winter, NorthWestern Energy (NWE) applied to the Montana Public Service Commission (PSC) for pre-approval to buy a 25% greater share in Colstrip Unit 4. But what does pre-approval really mean?

Pre-approval is the process in which a utility asks its regulatory body for assurance that the utility’s projected costs will be covered by ratepayers before the utility acquires an energy resource (like a coal plant, or a hydropower dam). In other words, NWE is asking the PSC to assure them that ratepayers will bear the costs of Colstrip Unit 4, shifting the risks from company shareholders to captive customers.

The problem is, NWE won’t tell us how much it costs to run Colstrip Unit 4. The company emphasizes that the increased share of Unit 4 will only cost $1 (latest news now indicates their updated deal will be $.50), but has been less than forthcoming about what the aging power plant will cost ratepayers over time.

For decades, members of Northern Plains have worked hard toward an energy future that is fair, affordable, and sustainable for all Montanans. That’s why we’ve been getting involved in major decisions before the Public Service Commission on topics like protecting rooftop solar and making sure NorthWestern’s 20-year plan includes a transition to renewable energy.

Members of the public, including many Northern Plains members, pack the Public Service Commission Bollinger Room in Helena, weighing in on NorthWestern Energy’s plans for future energy procurement.

We plan to stay just as diligent in making sure that the PSC upholds ratepayer fairness and public transparency in the Colstrip Unit 4 pre-approval process. Utilities in the West are making strides in renewable energy, and we don’t want to be forced to pay off a bad (and backward-looking) investment by NorthWestern Energy.

NorthWestern’s recent behavior doesn’t give us much confidence. In February, a third-party consulting firm, Synapse Energy Economics, published a report finding a fossil fuel bias in NWE’s 20-year plan (more about this report can be found on the next page.)

NorthWestern is also keeping key information about Colstrip Unit 4 out of the public eye, like the cost of the coal and cost of operating. But there’s a bit of good news, too; in March, the Public Service Commission found that NWE’s pre-approval application had major flaws that included failing to disclose how long NorthWestern plans to keep the plant running or how the cost breakdown will look. NorthWestern Energy was given until mid-April to fix those flaws in their application. With the news that Talen Energy now wants to purchase the same share of Colstrip Unit 4 and sell it on the open market, there will be even more changes to NWE’s application. (Continued on following page)
NorthWestern Energy (NWE) concluded in their 20-year energy procurement plan that they would need to build two new gas-fired power plants to meet energy demands. In response, the Public Service Commission (PSC) hired a third-party (Synapse Energy Economics) to review the modeling used to reach NWE’s conclusion. Synapse concluded that, given the modeling inputs related to renewable energy options, it was a “foregone conclusion” that the models would show gas-fired power plants are the best option.

Some ways NWE cooked the books against renewable energy include:

- NWE assigned a prohibitively low capacity credit and high capital costs to renewable resources. This implies that wind and solar projects will not contribute significantly to peak energy demands.
- NWE did not set up any resources as “retirement options”. This means that no project, regardless of its economic viability, could be considered for retirement from NWE’s portfolio. This is important because Colstrip, which the model could not choose to retire, is the most expensive resource in NWE’s entire portfolio.
- The fixed operational and maintenance costs for solar resources were set unreasonably high.
- This is just to name a few.

For more information on, or for access to, the Synapse report, please contact mikindra@northernplains.org.

-Mikindra Morin

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Report shows NorthWestern cooked the books

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-Mikindra Morin
**Clean Energy**

**Rural Power Campaign: working to increase democracy at Tongue River Electric Co-op**

Montana’s 25 rural electric cooperatives aspire to seven principles:

1. Voluntary and open membership
2. Democratic member control
3. Members’ economic participation
4. Autonomy and independence
5. Education, training, and information
6. Cooperation among cooperatives and
7. Concern for community.

Tongue River Electric Co-op, or TRECo as its better known, is falling behind on many of these principles. At TRECo, members - who are also owners by virtue of the co-op model - have been blocked from board meetings, do not have access to the decisions made on their behalf at board meetings, get the runaround when they ask questions, do not have the option for community solar, nor do they have access to a program that could help co-op members make meaningful energy efficiency upgrades.

For many member-owners at TRECo, power bills are piling up, rates are too high, and disconnection is a chronic threat. Some member-owners tell us they choose between keeping the heat going in the winter or buying important medication. Or that when they have a hard time paying their bills and the power gets turned off, their mother can’t use her oxygen machine or they can no longer obtain water from their well.

In short, for some member-owners electricity is a question of life or death.

That’s why members at TRECo are coming together to talk through solutions for how to restore the seven co-op principles at their co-op, and embrace innovative ideas that can help save money, lives, and create a just energy future for all TRECo member-owners!

Where does your co-op stand on these principles? Write to us at sydney@northernplains.org and let us know!

-Sydney Ausen

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**Giving through donor-advised funds**

Donor-advised funds are a great way to set aside money for charitable giving that can go exactly where you choose (for instance, to supporting this great work!) If you already have a donor-advised fund, Northern Plains is qualified and able to accept gifts from them.

If you’d like more information about how you can take part in this rapidly growing way to support the work of nonprofits, consult your tax advisor or contact Caleb Lande at caleb@northernplains.org.
Defending Democracy

Northern Plains holds politicians accountable

Northern Plains has been working since the last legislative session to hold state lawmakers accountable for their actions and votes on key conservation and family agriculture bills. Our members have written scores of letters to the editor (see page 13 for examples), and we’ve held events, had hundreds of door-to-door canvassing conversations, and run digital ads that have been seen by more than 62,000 Montanans.

Winning good policy decisions at the legislature requires year-round efforts to elevate issues, spark conversations, build public support, and increase our own readiness to play a big role in the 2021 session. It also means educating lawmakers, thanking them for good votes, and holding them accountable for bad votes (like blocking clean energy and country-of-origin labeling for beef and pork).

-Svein Newman

Members testify to protect America’s bedrock environmental law from Trump administration attack

Northern Plains members traveled to Denver during February to speak up against the Trump administration’s latest attack on the public’s right to know and speak up about federal government decisions that affect America’s environment.

The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), which was signed by President Richard Nixon in 1970, requires federal agencies to consider whether major projects would harm air, land, water, or wildlife. It is also the most fundamental tool through which the public can speak up and have an impact on proposals that would affect their communities. It allows for public hearings and comment periods, and requires expert analysis before companies can develop mines, build pipelines, and more.

The White House proposal, put forward by the federal Council on Environmental Quality, would allow companies to write their own environmental reviews, skip public hearings, and otherwise reduce public participation, ignore climate change impacts, and ramrod projects through the permitting process, regardless of whether environmental assessment and consultation is complete.

Northern Plains members Mark Fix, Sue Beug, and Wade Sikorski testified at one of only two hearings the Trump administration held on its proposed reforms. Fix, who ranches south of Miles City, testified about how NEPA was a vital tool in defending southeastern Montana landowners from condemnation by the Tongue River Railroad, and protecting the region’s rivers and streams from becoming unusable due to salt loading from coal bed methane development. “The blue skies and clean water that we love in Montana could be forfeited for big company greed and profits,” he testified. “We must protect the public’s right to have a say in what goes on in their neighborhood… Our values mean that we want to pass this land on to future generations in as good or better condition than now.”

-Svein Newman

Northern Plains ran digital ads on the Bozeman Daily Chronicle and Livingston Enterprise websites (and on facebook) holding decision-makers accountable for votes during the 2019 Legislative Session.
Restoring Country-of-Origin labeling will benefit both ranchers and consumers. Currently, imported meat labeled “Product of USA,” betrays American ranchers, rural communities, and consumers by misrepresenting imported beef as American. Consumers deserve the right to choose USA beef and pork, and ranchers deserve the right to an honest market.

Northern Plains is continuing the fight for COOL, especially during this ongoing livestock market crisis. There’s a lot of misinformation out there on COOL – especially from legislators who voted against COOL in the last legislature – so we’re equipping you with the facts. Check out our helpful guide for how to respond to misinformation.

### WHAT THEY SAY | WHAT WE SAY
---|---
“I support voluntary COOL.” | We have voluntary COOL now, it isn’t working. We need mandatory COOL.
“COOL will cost ranchers money.” | COOL wouldn’t cost ranchers a penny!
“Montana COOL would put our mom and pop grocers out of business.” | Under Montana COOL, mom and pop grocers would be penalized only if they knowingly mislead the customer.
“Consumers will choose cheaper beef over U.S. beef.” | In studies, over 90% of consumers approve of COOL.
“COOL will drive down demand for beef.” | Honest labeling will make customers more comfortable with their beef purchases.
“The government shouldn’t interfere with private industry and the free market.” | There is no free market if beef isn’t labeled honestly.

- Caroline Canarios
Members speak out on COOL

Want to read what our members say about COOL? Check out some great excerpts from our members’ letters-to-the-editor!

“‘We need to do everything we can to get these calf prices back up so the cow-calf guys and gals have a little bit of profitability. They are the backbone of this community and work hard to produce a superior product.’

– Alan Shammel, CMRC member and rancher

“You, as a consumer, should have the right to know where your meat comes from. Please contact your representatives at the state and national level to voice your support for mandatory country of origin labeling for beef and pork.’

– John Bailey, RPA member and rancher

“COOL is not a political issue. Ranchers deserve an honest market, and consumers have the right to know where their meat comes from.”

– Walter Archer, former Northern Plains Chair and retired rancher

Planning under way for 2020 Soil Crawls and Soil Summit continues

Northern Plains’ Soil Task Force anticipates another summer of fun and informative soil crawls, providing opportunities to learn about soil health from Montana producers. With COVID-19 distancing measures in practice for now, the calendar is filled with uncertainty but also hope. The Soil Task Force wants to see the soil health movement expand, and they remain optimistic that soil crawls will proceed in the late summer. Stay tuned for soil crawl updates on Northern Plains’ website, Facebook page, and Instagram account.

The Soil Task Force is also planning for its 2020 Soil Summit, to be held in Billings on October 7. The Soil Summit will direct the creative energy of the soil health movement into a focused discussion of policy and financing. This conversation will inform the Soil Task Force’s efforts to produce a soil health bill at the 2021 legislature that will bring Montana up to speed with other states.

Ahead of the Soil Summit, the Soil Task Force needs feedback from producers to help pre-think this policy conversation. If you are a producer, we would love for you to take our survey to help us get a sense of the obstacles to implementing regenerative practices. If you have neighbors or friends who are trying to do anything regenerative, we can also send you a survey for them to fill out!

If you’d like a survey or want to get involved with our soil work, contact Tai at (406) 248-1154 or email tai@northernplains.org.

-Tai Koester
AG Fox tries to sue Washington to force opening of coal ports

Earlier this year, Montana Attorney General Tim Fox and the Wyoming AG filed a petition with the United States Supreme Court, seeking permission to sue the State of Washington for denying a permit for a proposed coal port in Longview, WA. If built, the port would ship Powder River Basin coal to Asian markets. This could dramatically increase coal mining in Montana, resulting in increased coal train traffic that would disrupt day-to-day life in communities from eastern Montana to the West Coast.

Fox’s argument? Coal companies have a constitutional right to force a community to allow a port. Taking away local control of water and land use decisions is a misuse of the Constitution and taxpayer dollars, all to benefit the coal industry.

Under Fox’s logic, if Microsoft wanted to bulldoze half of downtown Miles City to open a microchip factory, they would have a guaranteed constitutional right to do so, regardless of the will of local people or the impact to existing businesses, homes, or roads. There is no constitutional right to force someone to develop their land in a certain way.

Northern Plains members across the state have worked for years – organizing events, writing hundreds of letters and comments, attending hearing after hearing, and more – to successfully push Washington to deny the proposal coal ports. Fox’s lawsuit could revive these threats to our communities.

-Svein Newman

Sovereign immunity waiver silent on citizens’ rights

Governor Steve Bullock and NTEC (Navajo Transitional Energy Company) signed an agreement on March 12th to address NTEC’s legal status as a native-owned coal company. NTEC currently operates the Spring Creek Mine in southeastern Montana. The company agreed to waive any future claims of “sovereign immunity” in this agreement and thus allow the state of Montana to enforce environmental, labor, and tax laws on NTEC.

For background, NTEC was created by the Navajo Nation in 2013 to operate the Navajo Mine outside Farmington, New Mexico. Although the company is Navajo-owned, NTEC’s top management are all white, former coal company executives. In 2019, the management went rogue from the company’s original charter (to transition to renewable energy) and bought three financially troubled coal mines in the Powder River Basin.

In response, Navajo President Jonathan Nez revoked agreements that allowed NTEC to use the Navajo Treasury as a financial backstop for the company’s mine holdings. This forced NTEC to search for $400 million in reclamation bonds from surety companies on the open market. That search is still ongoing.

Unfortunately, the waiver of sovereign immunity that Gov. Bullock and NTEC agreed on did not include a clause on citizen rights under state environmental law. It’s unclear if NTEC will be able to shield itself from legal challenges by citizens or third-party groups – like Northern Plains, for example – over mine plans, reclamation, or water quality impacts at the Spring Creek Mine. The U.S. Supreme Court is considering taking up a case right now that would answer this legal question, but, for now, we are unclear if our rights are protected.

-Alex Cunha
DEQ takes first step in Colstrip cleanup

The Montana DEQ took a major step forward in the cleanup of Colstrip’s toxic ash ponds this February by issuing a “conditional approval” of Talen Energy’s Remedy Evaluation Report for the Units 3&4 ponds. The plan requires Talen Energy to:

• Drain the massive, 400+ acre ponds associated with Units 3&4, starting in 2021.
• Test the underdrain beneath the 3&4 ponds this summer.
• Install 53 freshwater injection wells to “flush” pollution in soils and the aquifer toward recovery wells that return pollution to the surface for treatment.
• Build new water storage ponds to hold contaminated water.
• Post $107 million in bonds to DEQ.

The plan is a major first step to address four decades of groundwater impacts on agriculture in the Rosebud Creek drainage. DEQ’s approved plan will attack the pollution at its source by stopping the 400,000 gallons of contaminated water that leak every day into the aquifer from wet and toxic coal ash. However, it remains to be seen if Talen Energy really can drain the ponds and keep coal ash high and dry, away from the local aquifers.

“The plan has several unknowns on the table, and DEQ will need to be vigilant in the months and years to come to make sure Talen repairs our groundwater and prevents further contamination,” said Clint McRae, Northern Plains’ Coal Task Force Chair and Rosebud County Rancher.

A much simpler plan that DEQ did not move forward with is to physically remove the coal ash and store it somewhere high and dry.

Northern Plains members will have another shot at requiring excavation of Colstrip’s coal ash ponds later this year. The DEQ is reviewing a proposal for the older Units 1&2 ponds, where there is clear evidence that capping the toxic coal ash in place will leave a source of pollution directly in contact with the shallow aquifers of the Armells Creek drainage.

“The real work of cleanup needs to start as soon as possible – there are enough stories around Montana where corporations pushed legacy pollution cleanup onto taxpayers,” said Northern Plains chair and Birney rancher Jeanie Alderson about the entire cleanup effort. “Let’s get this right the first time.”

Stay tuned for the public comment period on those ponds this summer or fall.

-Alex Cunha

The Units 3&4 ash ponds hold 27 million cubic yards of coal ash and contaminated water.
Our campaign for strong protections from radioactive oil waste has been one hell of a rollercoaster.

Ever since Oaks Disposal, the first radioactive oil waste landfill in Montana, opened near Glendive in 2013, our members have tenaciously campaigned for state rules to protect our land, water, and communities.

But after six years of a long, slow rulemaking, in August 2019, the DEQ pulled an 11th hour bait-and-switch: they suddenly wanted to quadruple our state’s radioactivity limit. DEQ was proposing to raise the limit from 50 picocuries per gram to 200, while North Dakota’s limit would remain at 50. This came after years of public comment from Montanans requesting safe standards that matched the level of protection offered in North Dakota to avoid incentivizing these dumps to locate in Montana.

Weaker protections in Montana would position us to forever be North Dakota’s dumping ground. More disturbing, we learned last fall that the groundwater around Oaks Disposal is already showing signs of pollution from the landfill. How could DEQ weaken protections when the one landfill accepting this waste is contaminating water?

So Northern Plains members from Plentywood to Missoula did what we do best – organized. Members wrote comments, did research, and drove long distances to hearings. Together, we urged DEQ to bring the radioactivity limit back down to match North Dakota’s.

Our members ran an effective ground game at the DEQ this winter:

• We blanketed Helena’s air waves with radio ads.
• We got hundreds of people to flood the Governor’s office with phone calls – enough calls, even, that their staff was unable to complete their other work!
• We put up yard signs all around Helena that said “Don’t let Montana become North Dakota’s dumping ground.”

The result? In late January, the DEQ announced that they were lowering Montana’s radioactivity limit back down to 50 picocuries per gram. They made this change by releasing a “supplementary draft” to their proposed radioactive waste rules.

In addition to lowering the radioactivity concentration limit, the supplementary draft also:

• Lowered the limit on a different type of radioactivity
• Ended use of a “rolling average” to measure radioactivity
• Required stronger and more specific remedies if radioactivity spikes, including the option to close the facility.

While these changes aren’t final, this “victory on the way to a victory” belongs to you all – the members of Northern Plains. You pulled this off. Thank you for every call you made, every idea you shared, every door you knocked, and every comment you submitted.

A step forward like this restores our faith in the power of regular people to make a difference. Most important, it protects Montana for generations to come.

We are also grateful to Governor Bullock, Lieutenant Governor Mike Cooney, DEQ Director Shaun McGrath, and the rest of the DEQ staff for these changes.

Stay tuned for news of final rules!

-Caitlin Cromwell
Another major KXL legal victory!
(But we still have work to do...)

We won another important victory in our work to protect our water, climate, and rural communities from the Keystone XL tar sands pipeline! On April 15, the Federal Court for the District of Montana ruled – yet again – in our favor by invalidating a key permit for the Canadian-owned pipeline. Judge Brian Morris said the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers violated core environmental laws when it approved Nationwide Permit 12, a “streamlined” federal permit that allows approval for hundreds of waterway crossings at once.

The ruling didn’t just invalidate Nationwide 12 for Keystone XL, but it found that this entire “fast-tracked” approval process is unlawful for pipelines nationwide. Judge Morris also placed a prohibition against construction of the KXL pipeline for all of the water crossings involved with Nationwide Permit 12 – almost 700 on its route. This means that the vast majority of the project cannot proceed!

“This ruling proves, once again, that we are a nation of laws no matter how many times powerful forces seek to undermine bedrock American legal protections,” said Dena Hoff of Glendive, Northern Plains member and chair of the KXL Task Force.

On March 31 – before the ruling by Judge Morris - the government of Alberta, Canada, invested over $1 billion in KXL. The subsidy props up TC Energy (formerly TransCanada), the Canadian corporation that owns the pipeline project, at a time when oil prices are in the gutter. This led TC to announce it would immediately begin construction across the US/Canada border, even during a global pandemic.

Unfortunately, our legal victory invalidating Nationwide Permit 12 does not prevent construction of this short 1.2 mile KXL section across the border. The ruling also does not prevent the construction of man camps and pump stations in rural Montana communities.

All of these construction projects are currently under way. TC is bringing out-of-state workers into our rural communities during a national health crisis, recklessly risking the spread of coronavirus to areas with limited medical resources. This is dangerous for the workers as well as the rural and tribal communities close to this activity.

On April 1, before our court victory, our KXL Task Force sent a letter to Governor Bullock telling him to halt all KXL construction during this health crisis. Bullock has so far refrained from taking any such measures.

As of this writing, we are organizing our members to keep a steady drumbeat of calls and emails to Governor Bullock demanding that he stop KXL construction, especially now that this major permit has been invalidated.

“Given this new development, it's imperative that all construction be halted to protect Montana's rural and tribal communities during this pandemic,” continued Dena in a written response to the ruling. “How, in good conscience, could we risk overwhelming our most vulnerable health care systems for a Canadian project that has never proven to be legally viable?”

If Governor Bullock has not yet halted KXL construction by the time you're reading this, please visit: https://svc.mt.gov/gov/contact/shareopinion and tell him to protect the health and safety of Montana's rural and tribal communities by halting all KXL construction during this COVID-19 health crisis.

-Dustin Ogdin

Our recent court win goes a long way in protecting our waterways after the ruling invalidates a permit that had approved almost 700 KXL water crossings.
Climate change presents one of the biggest challenges humanity has ever faced. Its effects are gradual and insidious. Some powerful people continue to deny that they exist at all.

Our responses may be individual, national, or international, but inaction is simply not an option. The futures of our children, grandchildren, and nation are at stake. Increasingly, the costs of climate-fueled problems are becoming clearer to all of us.

Northern Plains members are doing inspiring work in all areas of the organization to cultivate climate solutions. Those include increasing access to clean energy in Montana, advancing local food systems and healthy soils that sequester carbon, fighting the would-be carbon-catastrophe that is the Keystone XL pipeline, pushing to cut methane pollution in oil fields, and putting the brakes on coal mine expansions. Your work is creating a more climate-resilient future!

As we work together doing this essential, on-the-ground work, we also support efforts to provide structural, systematic change at the government level. This is why Northern Plains members spoke up to shape and strengthen a statewide climate plan crafted in Helena.

Last July, Governor Bullock created a Climate Solutions Council, tasked to prepare Montanans for climate impacts, reduce greenhouse gas pollution in our state, address the needs of communities in transition, and craft a plan to get there. The Council comprises labor, industry, nonprofit, agriculture, government, and university representatives. On February 11, the Climate Solutions Council released its plan, with an opportunity for the public to provide comments.

It’s worth mentioning that the plan included recommendations to bring greenhouse gas pollution from Montana’s electric grid to net-zero by 2035, though the specifics and viability were not fully defined. Instead of focusing on those uncertainties, members took the opportunity to support some of the key goals in the plan while suggesting revisions or even outright omissions of bad ideas that have proven to be wasteful dead-ends.

In addition to supporting the plan’s broad aims to mitigate carbon pollution and promote innovation and cooperation, responses from Northern Plains members focused on three key areas:

1. Suggesting the state increase funding and support for local food systems, which will reduce the carbon footprint of food (often trucked thousands of miles) and increase Montana’s food security in the face of climate-caused system disruptions.

2. Recommending that Montana limit the flaring and venting of methane and other greenhouse gases by the oil and gas industry.

3. Recommending removal of the plan’s Carbon Capture and Sequestration (CCS) suggestions. Even with significant public funding, CCS facilities have not proven to be viable in reducing greenhouse gas pollution, nor have they helped make coal more economically competitive.

We will be watching closely to see what the plan’s final draft looks like when it’s released in June. But it’s only one element – one first step – of what Montana needs to accomplish to protect our economy and the natural resources we all depend on.

We know you will continue your efforts to fight for climate protection, in the halls of Helena and on the ground in your local community.

Climate change didn’t occur overnight, and it won’t be solved overnight. But we know that our work across many issues will build healthy, prosperous communities for generations to come.

-Dustin Ogdin
As one of our largest annual outreach events of the past several years, Northern Plains has hosted “Wild and Scenic” Film Festivals in various locations across Montana. Maybe you have been to one, or even taken part in helping to plan one!

Northern Plains started hosting the Wild and Scenic Film Festival in Billings in 2009 in partnership with the South Yuba River Citizens League (SYRCL), a California-based non-profit who organizes the festival nationwide.

This year, Northern Plains has decided to partner exclusively with local non-profit MINT – the Montana International Film Festival – to host our film festivals. In a nod to both our purpose and our partner, we are pleased to announce a new venture: the environMINT Film Festival – presented by Northern Plains Resource Council.

MINT derives its name from Montana INTernational, and was launched in 2018 by a group of filmmakers and film enthusiasts out of Billings. Their mission is to connect Montana through film and education from around the world. The festival, now a five-day event with a clear presence in downtown Billings, has pulled off two knockout years in Billings, expanded to Red Lodge in 2019, and has eyes on taking events on tour around more of Montana.

Last year, Northern Plains hosted the Billings Wild and Scenic film fest as a featured night of MINT’s festival and saw the highest turnout of any festival night in our 11 years. We are looking forward to working with a local group of dedicated cinephiles. This should help us simplify our film fests while maintaining professional-quality film programming.

We were excited to be planning a “mini-festival” for June in Billings, with traveling showings of the same short films later in the year in Gardiner and Miles City. But, like many initiatives that are being rethought in light of COVID-19, we have decided to pivot the Billings event to an online event showcasing one feature-length film. This way everyone can watch the same film, from the comfort of their own homes, together.

That feature film will be MOTHERLOAD: an award-winning, crowdsourced documentary about a new mother’s quest to understand the increasing isolation and disconnection of the digital age, its planetary impact, and how cargo bikes could be an antidote. This showing is scheduled for the afternoon of Mother’s Day: Sunday, May 10th at 2:00pm. We have some creative ideas up our sleeve to make this an event with audience engagement – stay tuned.

We have hopes that the fall film festivals that have become a tradition in recent years in Miles City and Gardiner can take place with our friends in the audience next to us, but we are ready to re-evaluate if that becomes necessary. While our film fest has always been about reaching new audiences and growing Northern Plains’ membership, this year the focus will turn even more toward celebrating the community we have and bringing people together through film and story.

No matter how the year shakes out, we are thrilled about this newly MINTed partnership! Whether you find environMINT on the big screen or your own small screen this year, we hope you’ll join us for these shared times of inspiration and community.

To learn more and buy tickets for MOTHERLOAD, visit: NorthernPlains.org/FilmFest

-Claire Overholt
CMRC stands up against NorthWestern plan

This winter, Central Montana Resource Council took major strides into the conversation about Montana’s energy future.

In January, CMRC members dominated a public hearing held by the Public Service Commission on NorthWestern Energy’s 20-year plan for procuring energy sources. “It is beyond belief that NorthWestern Energy has no wind, solar, or storage techniques,” CMRC chair Clay Dunlap told the audience. “From the looks of this plan, NorthWestern Energy has not even begun to think creatively what Montana’s energy future could look like.”

CMRC also designed and printed their own cow-calf record books featuring a message about country-of-origin labeling for beef. These “COOL” books have been distributed to ranchers and livestock yards all over central Montana!

-Caitlin Cromwell

Another Jardine Ski Run in the books for BCC!

Bear Creek Council hosted a successful Jardine Ski Run in February. This marks the 33rd year of the event – making the ski run one of Gardiner’s longest standing community get-togethers! In February, BCC also supplied organizing power and public comment to the Montana Fish and Wildlife Committee on wolf hunting quotas around Gardiner and the north entrance of Yellowstone National Park. BCC is pleased to announce that the two hunting units closest to Gardiner are maintaining a wolf hunt quota of 1 in each unit.

COVID-19 caused BCC’s meeting plans to be postponed this spring, but the group still plans to host the film festival and other outreach events this fall.

-Makenna Sellers
Council Roundup

Bull Mountain ranchers dig in to protect water

Members of the Bull Mountain Land Alliance have been poring over spring and well monitoring reports submitted to the DEQ by Signal Peak Energy. They are working to hold Signal Peak accountable as it continues to expand its “longwall” coal mine near Shepherd and Roundup. Longwall underground mining leads to cracks in the ground above mining, which can cause surface subsidence and disrupt water sources that area ranchers depend on. BMLA members continue to watchdog the mine and pressure the state to safeguard the area’s land and water, and maintain the long-term viability of family agriculture and their homes.

-Svein Newman

SGCC stays connected during shelter-in-place

In February, Sleeping Giant Citizens Council organized with allies in Helena to successfully pass a 100% renewable energy resolution at the city commission. It commits all of Helena (within city limits) to entirely clean, renewable electricity by 2030.

SGCC’s quarterly meeting covered important topics like collaborating with Helena Public Schools on this year’s Sun Run and LED city lighting conversations with the City of Helena’s new sustainability coordinator Patrick Judge. We discussed our role as ratepayers in the NorthWestern Energy Colstrip pre-approval before the PSC, as well as the importance of open civic data with longtime member and guest speaker Jim Kammerer.

This spring, SGCC members are finding creative ways to stay connected and keep their work going during the COVID-19 pandemic. Our leaders started “Waking Giant” coffee meetups on Fridays, where members meet on video conference to update our campaigns.

-Makenna Sellers

YBCC gears up for Solarize 2.0

Yellowstone Bend Citizens Council has been preparing to launch a Solarize Livingston 2020 campaign, even amid the pandemic! While our 2020 campaign will not feature in-person outreach and education events, our Solarize Committee has been working to create a fun digital outreach strategy that’s sure to grab the attention of Livingston residents.

Meanwhile, our Park Electric Co-op committee continues to pressure the co-op to implement more democratic measures, like mail-in ballot voting. If you’re a member-owner of Park Electric, be sure to email the co-op at info@parkelectric.com and tell them you want mail-in ballot voting!

-Sydney Ausen
Council Roundup

CCRC shapes local growth plans

Last year, Carbon County began updating its Growth Policy, outlining the County’s development and land protection plans. Carbon County Resource Council members worked to ensure that the updates prioritized protecting people and the environment. CCRC was the only group to provide comment throughout the Growth Policy revision process, and the planning board accepted all of our suggestions.

In early March, the Carbon County Commissioners finally heard the County planning board’s recommendations for updates to the Growth Policy. In a testament to CCRC’s organizing effectiveness, the Commissioners accepted all of the planning board’s revisions, containing CCRC’s comments, without any changes. This was a big win for our members as well as the health of the land, air and water in the community!

-Tai Koester

DRC works hard on rad waste

This winter, Dawson Resource Council members pushed forward on their campaign to protect their community from radioactive oil waste.

Members wrote letters, made calls to the Governor, and escalated their efforts to achieve strong state-level rules for radioactive oil waste. They were stunned – and relieved – to learn that those efforts worked. After hearing from DRC and Northern Plains members across Montana, the Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) reversed course and lowered Montana’s radioactivity limit back to match North Dakota’s.

DRC also continues to push the state to address ongoing water quality issues at Oaks Disposal, a landfill near Glendive that accepts radioactive oil waste.

-Caitlin Cromwell
Council Roundup

Busy spring for CRC

Two very exciting milestones for CRC are coming up. First, Sweet Grass High School is getting solar! The project is currently under construction and is scheduled to be completed by the end of April. Once we are all allowed to gather again, we will be throwing a celebration to commemorate the years of work that went into getting this project approved and online!

Second, we will be celebrating the 20th Anniversary of signing the GNA on May 8. The Agreement is still going strong, and CRC members have contributed extensively to that success.

- Mikindra Morin

SPA Plans for 45th Anniversary

Stillwater Protective Association has a lot to celebrate this year. The Good Neighbor Agreement will hit the 20-year benchmark this May, and SPA will hit its 45th anniversary this year.

SPA originally organized in 1975 in response to the 24-hour-a-day chromite trucks coming from the old mines, barreling down local roads that were also school routes.

-Maggie Gordon

SPA will celebrate the 20th Anniversary of the Good Neighbor Agreement, which protects the water quality of the Stillwater River in addition to numerous quality-of-life issues for the community.

YVCC Continues to work for a brighter future

Despite the many unknowns facing our community, YVCC members continue working to make clean energy and local food more easily available. Our Sustainability Committee continues its project of increasing access to solar energy. Committee members are researching installers who are available to work with consumers and ready to install an array.

The Community Food Committee has been busy, too! The group has researched best practices in local food procurement. They have also started communications with School District 2 about how they can work with area food producers to make sure local food is available to students throughout the year.

-Tirza Asbell
Check the date at the upper right of your address label to see when your membership is due for renewal. Your membership pays for all the work you read about here!

May 8, 2020 is the official 20th Anniversary of the Good Neighbor Agreement!

For two decades, local volunteers have worked together to protect the land, water, and rural communities for residents who live and work near the Stillwater Mine.

The Good Neighbor Agreement is sustained by a love for pristine water, scenic beauty, night skies, and safe roads. The Agreement has proven it is possible to protect our natural landscapes and rural quality of life while allowing responsible mineral development.

This legally binding contract between Stillwater Mining Company and local community organizations has been sustained through five different mine owners and has only become stronger over the past twenty years. It is an extraordinary example of what everyday people can accomplish when they come together and get creative!

Congratulations to Cottonwood Resource Council, Stillwater Protective Association, and all who work to support and sustain the GNA! Thank you, and Happy Anniversary!