Annual Meeting goes online this year

Making the most of a challenging year, this year’s Annual Meeting has an expanded schedule and the opportunity to participate from anywhere! (Page 12)

Get ready for the 2021 Legislature

We’re gearing up for next year’s Legislative Session. We’ll be working to expand clean energy opportunities, promote family ranch-raised beef, increase soil health, protect rules on radioactive oil waste, and more! (Page 19)

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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

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To the Members

Today’s challenges call us to invite friends and neighbors to join our work

“Enjoy every second of the beauty of this world because it’s as good as it’s going to be unless we work really hard…”

- Bill McKibben, Turning the Corner on Climate Change: A conversation hosted by Northern Plains

The warmth and brilliance of these fall days are impossibly beautiful – as good as it gets. Yet, winter is coming, my Dad is in his 90th year, and we are in the midst of a global pandemic. Skies are still smoky from fires across the West, and the country is as dry as I’ve seen it. I have the keen sense of how fragile everything is.

We will get by this year. But we won’t make it through years of drought. It has to rain. As ranchers, we are on the front lines of this climate crisis; a truth we cannot afford to ignore.

And, like climate change, COVID-19 has brought truth to our families and communities, highlighting old, deep fractures in our food system, our healthcare system, and our democracy.

It’s clear that – whether we’re selling in the commercial market or directly to our neighbors – the loss of a fair and open market has created bottlenecks that put our survival as ranchers in question and has forced consumers to rely on foreign beef. I know people would choose our USA beef if they could.

In finding our way to a climate solution, we need to work with others. Fixing our food system will require the same thing. We will not survive if we don’t gather with others beyond our own communities and cultures.

We all know people – ranchers, farmers, and outdoor people whose lives are lived around and on working landscapes – who have a deep affection for the outdoors, yet are not at all engaged in the day-to-day work of protecting one another or our land and water. We need to invite these friends and neighbors to join us and put their care into action.

As we seek solutions to both our climate crisis and fairness and health in our beef industry, we will need these people to join us. We will need to listen to their concerns as we move to cleaner energy and a food system that is just and fair.

Facing these challenges, I am so very grateful to share this good work with all of you.

-Jeanie Alderson

Chair

The Plains Truth Fall 2020 Page 3
The pandemic hasn’t stopped our leaders and staff from gathering and doing the work that matters most! The Western Organization of Resource Council’s annual Principles of Community Organizing (POCO) training was held over Zoom this year, and a banner crop of Northern Plains members participated: Melissa Mittelestaed (Glendive), Kirk Panasuk (Bainville), Laurie Lohrer ( Lewistown), Clay Dunlap ( Lewistown), Josh Wright ( Lewistown), Sarah Stands ( Livingston), Heather Sheffield ( Livingston), and Kris Glenn ( Billings). We can’t wait to see what these leaders make happen across Montana!

Stillwater Protective Association members Sandra Joys and Franny Abbott collect samples on the Stillwater River for the annual biological monitoring event required in the Good Neighbor Agreement. Other volunteers included Jerry Iverson, Betsy Baxter, and Mary Byron. Thank you for all your help!
Coal

Northern Plains members have shown up in force for public comment periods on the Colstrip cleanup for the last two years. Together, we’ve built a movement against the exploitive model that energy and other extractive companies have long used in our state to privatize the profits of mining while socializing the costs of cleanup.

It’s been EIGHT full years since the State of Montana issued an enforcement order on the Colstrip Power Plant owners to address the over 500,000 gallons of contaminated water that leak every day from the plant’s coal ash ponds.

In the final months of Governor Bullock’s Dept. of Environmental Quality (DEQ), we are expecting a decision this November on the Units 1&2 ponds. For reference, the 1&2 ponds store about a third of the total coal ash at Colstrip.

While the biggest battle for responsible cleanup remains ahead with the eventual closure of the Units 3&4 ash ponds, a DEQ plan approved in November to dig out and re-line the 12.2 million tons of waste in the 1&2 ponds would be the West’s first major coal ash excavation project. It will set a strong precedent for coal plant cleanup in the region.

A responsible dig-out of the 1&2 ponds will also demonstrate that protecting our environment goes hand in hand with economic development in rural communities.

-Alex Cunha

Keystone XL

Canada’s TC Energy has filed for new permits with the Army Corps of Engineers (Permit 404) and the Montana DEQ (Permit 401). The permits are for water crossing construction, of which there are more than 180 in Montana alone. Construction has been stopped for most of the pipeline since Federal Judge Brian Morris vacated the “streamlined” Nationwide Permit 12 in April, deeming it unlawful. That ruling is currently under appeal before the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals.

In September, the Army Corps of Engineers held a comment period for this new 404 federal permit application. The permit spans the three states along the route and the comment period closed October 13th. This federal permit also requires each state to issue its own separate state-level permit - the 401 permits. (It’s confusing. Just know that a 401 permit will be decided on by the Montana DEQ, and that’s the permit we will be working to have denied!)

Right now, TC Energy’s 401 permit in Montana has entered a public comment phase. The comment period will run through November 30th. There is a public hearing on the permit on November 16th. Northern Plains members have begun work on a campaign to deny the permit application. If Montana denies the permit to TC Energy it compromises the issuance of the larger federal 404 permit because that permit requires all state permits be approved to be valid. In essence we have the power in Montana to continue to block this dangerous tar sands pipeline!

In other news, the Trump Administration is attempting to completely disrupt the aforementioned Nationwide 12 permit lawsuit we won in April (currently in front of the Ninth Circuit). In essence, they are seeking to negate the prior permit and give themselves a “do over” to reissue the same permit in a new form. We’ve seen these legal shenanigans from the Trump Administration before, and we’ve managed to block their shady tactics by asserting the rule of law every time. We’ll do so this time, too.

-Tirza Asbell

Why we’re monthly sustainers

“We have a long history with Northern Plains that began in the late ’70s while attending U of M, then continued through the formation and work of the Bear Creek Council, and beyond. We are avid outdoorspeople, conservationists, involved in agriculture and local foods, and are small-town lifers. We believe that Northern Plains is the most effective grassroots organization in Montana for all the issues we care about.

“We while attending a conference on local foods, we ended up sitting with several Northern Plains Board members who asked us, during the course of conversation, why we weren’t monthly donors. The answer was that no one had asked, and it hadn’t occurred to us, so we changed how we contribute – and so should you!”

-Louise Bruce and Jim Roscoe, Dillon, MT

Learn more at NorthernPlains.org/donate

GET INVOLVED

• Visit NorthernPlains.org/ProtectOurWater to learn more and submit a comment to the Montana Department of Environmental Quality.

• Contact Tirza at tirza@northernplains.org to learn more about testifying at the online hearing on November 16.
**Agriculture**

**Pandemic creates more challenges as ranchers haul cattle to process**

What has been a problem in years past – major shortages in local meat processing – has ballooned during the pandemic, leaving ranchers scrambling. Montana used to have meat processors and specialty butchers in many communities across the state but, as corporate meatpackers expanded control of the industry, locally-owned processors were squeezed out.

We currently have five USDA-inspected processing plants and approximately 25 state-inspected plants in Montana. USDA-inspected plants can process meat for producers to ship across state lines while state-inspected meat cannot cross state lines. The demand for smaller-scale meat processing is stretched among a small number of processors with limited capacity.

To add to the stress, some of these processors have started processing only beef from out of state or from their own operations, closing the doors to ranchers who’ve relied on them for years. Some Northern Plains ranchers are facing this new challenge as they try to bring their product to your plate. When processing dates are canceled or pushed back, ranchers have to push back their sale date or haul cattle farther to the next-closest processor with open dates.

Northern Plains is no stranger to meat processing issues. We dove into these before, contacting processors themselves to try and identify solutions to serve both ranchers and processing facilities. It’s time we revisit that work because, while the problem is clear, the solution is not.

The Governor released COVID-relief funds specifically for meat processors. Several planned facilities received funding to establish their processing business, and existing facilities received funding to expand. This is a great step forward, but funding alone won’t solve this problem.

An increase in the number of facilities will require more inspectors, and approval of the needed funds requires a trip to the legislature. In addition, processors often have trouble finding and retaining a skilled labor force. And last, attaining certifications that comply with processing regulations are costly and complex.

The processing system is a tangled one. Some solutions are on the horizon, like establishing mobile slaughter units. But we also need processors to finish mobile slaughter products. It’s clear no single solution will fix our system, but that doesn’t mean we stop organizing for a local food future where processors, ranchers, and consumers all benefit.

If you are a rancher or consumer and you have thoughts on the processing problems or possible solutions, contact Caroline at caroline@northernplains.org or 406-248-1154.

- Caroline Canarios

**Local Food Challenge completes fifth year**

Event successfully transitions 100% online during pandemic

Thanks to all of you who participated in and supported the Montana Local Food Challenge! The 5th Annual Montana Local Food Challenge concluded September 1st. While we hosted the entire Challenge online this year, we welcomed new participants from across the state. Some highlights from this year’s Challenge:

- Four weekly challenges: 1) Ask a business to carry local food, 2) buy directly from a producer, 3) preserve local food for the winter, and 4) submit a local food recipe.
- 70 participants from across the state.
- Largest number of participants in Billings, followed by Missoula, Helena, and Red Lodge.
- Two new partners this year: Montana Department of Commerce (Made in Montana, Grown in Montana, and Taste Our Place) and the Bozeman Open and Local Coalition.

-The Plains Truth Fall 2020 Page 9

**Member voice**

**Why I care about climate change**

Climate change forces us to make choices. For us the choice is whether we want to give up or keep trying to support actions that promote the health and well-being of our ecosystems and communities. In choosing to keep trying, we have the ability to support the restoration of our local ecology and climate.

Working with livestock and unpredictable seasons teaches us that stagnation often becomes death. Just like moving animals to new pasture, life requires movement and effort. It can be as simple as learning a new plant around your home and asking, “How can I support its well-being as well as mine? How can we make changes together for the betterment of all life?”

-Ivan Thrane, Red Lodge
Montana’s orphaned well problem

We’re all familiar with what new oil and gas drilling — and the impacts it brings — can mean for a community. But what about when drilling ends? When companies leave — or worse, when they go bankrupt and dissolve?

Ask any Montanans who live around an orphaned well, or wells that are no longer producing, haven’t been plugged, and don’t have a known owner or operator. Montana has at least 200 orphaned wells, and likely hundreds more. To officially label a well as “orphaned” requires the Montana Board of Oil & Gas Conservation to verify that a given company no longer exists. That takes time, bureaucracy, and many an unreturned certified letter.

In the meantime, orphaned wells do more than just take up space and get in the way of farmers. Orphaned wells across the country leak thousands of metric tons of greenhouse gases into the air each year, according to data from the Environmental Protection Agency.

In 2018, orphaned oil and gas wells leaked 281 kilotons of methane, again according to EPA’s calculations. As Reuters put it, that’s the “climate-damage equivalent of consuming about 16 million barrels of crude oil,” or as much oil as the entire United States uses in a typical day.

In short — if we want to stop the climate crisis, we need to get busy plugging and cleaning up orphaned wells.

If you have questions or want to learn how you can take action on this issue, contact Caitlin at caitlin@northernplains.org.

-Caitlin Cromwell

Big Oil is betting on plastic

With oil prices tanking and much of the world calling for a shift away from fossil fuels, Big Oil is in big trouble. The industry’s answer? Make more plastic — and find markets for it. Fast.

In August, the New York Times reported that the American Chemistry Council (an industry group that represents some of the world’s largest chemical and oil corporations) has attempted to influence trade negotiations between the United States and Kenya. The Chemistry Council has pressed hard for a reversal of Kenya’s strict plastic-bag ban and for the country to continue accepting plastic garbage from other countries.

Kenya adopted what many consider the “world’s toughest plastic bag ban” in 2017, after plastic pollution overwhelmed the country. Kenya has also pledged to limit the amount of plastic waste it accepts from other countries.

Trade talks remain ongoing, and it’s not yet clear how much sway the American Chemistry Council will be able to exert on the trade negotiations.

But two things are certain. First, ramping up plastic production to protect the oil industry’s profits is an activity that exacerbates the climate crisis. And, second, dumping our plastic garbage onto developing nations is not just bad for our climate — it’s also just plain wrong.

All of us know that there’s too much plastic in our lives. Its impacts on the climate, as well as our land and water, will haunt us for many generations, no matter where we live.

-Caitlin Cromwell

Something wicked this way comes....

In June, you — Northern Plains members — made sure that Montana’s first-ever rules for radioactive oil waste became state policy.

But some politicians just can’t give up a fight. Even when they’ve already lost.

Last spring, Rep. Steve Gunderson (R-Libby) made a stink about the radioactive oil waste rules when they came before the Environmental Quality Council (EQC), an interim legislative committee on which he serves.

For those who forget: the EQC swooped in at the 11th hour of a six-year rulemaking process and passed an “informal objection” that halted the rules in their tracks. The EQC then reversed course after being flooded by support for the rules from hundreds of Montanans, including enough technical experts to make a nuclear physicist swoon. Thankfully, nearly every legislator on the EQC changed their vote, and the rules sailed on to become Montana law.

But not Gunderson. He and Rep. Kerry White (R-Bozeman) dug in their heels and voted “no” to lifting the informal objection. Since then, Gunderson has made rumblings about pursuing “legislative solutions” for the already-final radioactive oil waste rules.

According to the Bismarck Tribune, Gunderson and North Dakota Senator Dale Patten “are collaborating to get a group of lawmakers in their respective states on a video call so they can share ideas.”

Never mind that six years of conversations, hearings, written comments, and negotiations resulted in final rules that represent compromise on all sides. The rules are a long-fought consensus that does right by the people of Montana without harming the oil and gas industry.

We’ve got our eyes out for suspicious bill drafts. And if a bill does appear that aims to repeal or change these rules in any way, Representative Gunderson can rest assured — Northern Plains will be ready.

-Caitlin Cromwell

Did you know...?

The Plains Truth can be added to your home compost alongside your food scraps and other compostable paper products.

Make your garden more beautiful and sustainable after you’re done reading stories about Northern Plains members doing the same for all of Montana!
Annual Meeting

Northern Plains 2020 Annual Meeting

November 19-21

Hosted online this year
(Join us from your kitchen table!)

NorthernPlains.org/2020-annual-meeting

What you need to know

It’s that time of year again – the Annual Meeting is here! We encourage you to join us November 19-21 as we come together for a weekend of fun, fellowship, and learning.

From the beginning, Northern Plains has built power when everyday people met where they were: in their homes, and at their kitchen tables. Our work hasn’t slowed down at all this year and, in fact, the critical need for democracy, community, and action for justice has become exceptionally clear in 2020. So pull up a chair, and let’s continue to build power from wherever we are!

Our bylaws define the Annual Meeting as a time to conduct Northern Plains’ business. It’s your best opportunity to help steer Northern Plains through the coming year, and to adopt resolutions on important public policy questions. It’s also a time to get to know one another better, learn together from our speakers and programs, and toast a year where our people have made a difference for Montana.

While we’ll miss the camaraderie of seeing friends and fellow members in person, we do look forward to the potential for those of you who otherwise might not be able to travel to the meeting to attend virtually this year.

So let’s band together, learn from one another, and enjoy the company of fellow Northern Plains members working to make our state stronger and more resilient!

Meeting of the Membership

On Saturday morning, Northern Plains members are invited to come together in the annual “Meeting of the Membership.” Being a member means you have the right to vote on policy resolutions that help guide Northern Plains’ work in the year ahead. Because policy resolutions undergo many changes during the course of debate, you must be present in order to vote. Select “Meeting of the Membership” when you register to receive the joining information closer to the meeting.

Election Ballot

The slate of candidates put forward by the Nominations Committee will appear on a ballot mailed to each member. If your Northern Plains dues are current, you should have already received your ballot enclosed in the Annual Meeting brochure. There is also space for write-ins. The seats you can vote on include officers and at-large delegates. If you have not received your ballot, call (406) 248-1154 to check if your membership is current. Don’t delay! Ballots must be received at the Northern Plains office by November 19.

Silent Auction Moves Online

This year, the Annual Meeting silent auction will move to an online auction. The auction runs Nov. 1- Nov. 21, so be sure to check out all the great items and place your bid today! You’re guaranteed to find something for every taste or interest. Go to www.northernplains.org/2020-annual-meeting to access the auction.

Remember that the purpose of our auction is to strengthen Northern Plains’ work in the year ahead. We all appreciate your help in making it a success! Bidding will close Saturday, November 21, at 5:30pm.

Place your bid for uniquely Montana experiences, art, jewelry, and more from makers and small businesses across the state!

If you have questions about the auction, please contact Caleb at (406) 248-1154, or email caleb@northernplains.org.

Be sure to check on your bids from time to time before the auction closes at 5:30 on Saturday, Nov. 21!

Deadlines

• Nov 16 – Deadline for online registration. Please note: registration will close Monday, November 16th at 11 pm in order for us to properly prepare for attendance at all sessions. Register early to secure your seat!
• Nov 19 – Election ballots must be received at the Northern Plains’ office by 5:30 pm, in person or by mail.
• Resolutions - NOTE: The deadline to submit resolutions to the Resolutions Committee has passed. If you wish to introduce a resolution at the Annual Meeting, the members present need to vote to add it to the meeting agenda. You also need to be able to provide digital copies of your draft resolution so that everyone can have one to reference during debate. Please contact Makenna at makenna@northernplains.org with any questions.

Social Hours and Entertainment

Social hours are planned for Thursday and Friday nights for attendees to mix, mingle, and connect from anywhere. We’ve also added “Campaign Coffee Hours” Friday morning to provide opportunities to learn more and discuss campaigns that matter to you. Plus, you’ll have a front row seat Saturday night to the staff skit, our limerick contest, and traditional sing-alongs – making it VIRTUALLY impossible to have a bad time

- Claire Overholt

Members Kate French and Alaina Buffalo Spirit connect at a past Annual Meeting.
We are pleased that this year’s keynote speaker will be Josh Slotnick! A writer and a poet, Josh also has a long history with farming and education.

Josh moved to Montana from Grand Forks, ND, to study philosophy at the University of Montana. Upon graduating in 1988, he served with the Peace Corps, establishing farms and teaching English in Thailand, then earned a certificate in Ecological Horticulture through a residency apprenticeship course at the University of California at Santa Cruz and a Masters from Cornell in student farming.

In 1996, he co-founded Garden City Harvest and the University of Montana’s PEAS farm (Program in Ecological Agriculture and Society) in the Environmental Studies program and served as an EVST lecturer and PEAS Farm Director. After 22 years with U of M, Josh now holds one of three seats as a Missoula County Commissioner and also runs Clark Fork Organics, a family farm outside Missoula which he and his wife started in 1992. In a year where many of us have been cooking at home more and realizing the value of local restaurants and producers, we are looking forward to meeting Josh and learning from his dedication to agriculture and community! Please join us for the keynote speech Friday, November 20, at 5:30pm.

— Claire Overholt

How will it work? Technology info for our online gathering

This year, the Annual Meeting will be hosted virtually on Whova, an online conference platform. You can register for the meeting through the paper form that was mailed to you with your brochure, or you can register online through Whova. Then, you can log in to Whova (all you need is an email address!) to access the agenda, Zoom links, opportunities to connect with fellow members, and more. Whova also comes as a mobile app you can download on your smartphone! (Note that you don’t need to use the app on your smartphone - doing so is optional.)

Pre-Event Technology Workshops

The technology part of the Annual Meeting isn’t scary. Many of you have probably already used “Zoom” video conferencing this year. But if you’d like a little prep, Northern Plains will be offering two workshops on November 12th and 13th. At these workshops, you’ll be able to go over the basics of Zoom and our virtual event platform (Whova) and get your questions answered. A group training will be offered each day, and we’ll also offer opportunities for one-on-one consultations to help you make the most of the virtual Annual Meeting. Watch for more information in your email (and on the Northern Plains website).

“Zoomers & Boomers”

We’re also launching “Zoomers and Boomers” – an opportunity for more tech-savvy members and volunteers to be paired with anyone who would like a more personalized way to get familiar with Zoom video conferencing. Think of this as a digital ‘buddy system’ for navigating the Annual Meeting! Please contact claire@northernplains.org or (406) 248-1154 or fill out the form on the Annual Meeting page of the website if you’d be interested in providing or receiving such support: NorthernPlains.org/2020-annual-meeting.

— Claire Overholt

Annual Meeting

NEW THIS YEAR! Concurrent sessions will be offered in an effort to include as many updates about our current work as possible.

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 19, 2020

6:00 - 8:00 PM Workshop: Exploring Systemic Power
8:30 PM (Optional) Social Hour

FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 20, 2020

10:30 - 11:30 AM Campaign Coffee Hours: Short programming followed by discussion on three concurrent topics (choose your favorite!):
Option 1) How Northern Plains is Working to Expand Soil Health in Montana
Option 2) C-PACE: Save Money, Create Jobs, and Fight Climate Change
Option 3) Move Your Ash: short film and discussion

11:30 - 12:00 PM Lunch
12:00 PM - 1:15 PM Session: Indigenous Land Acknowledgment, and the Next Steps to Work With Native Americans
1:15 PM - 5:15 PM Extended Break
5:15 PM - 5:30 PM Chair’s Address
5:30 PM - 6:30 PM Keynote Speech: Josh Slotnick
7:00 PM - 7:30 PM Social Hour
7:30 PM - 8:30 PM Friday Night Entertainment

SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 21, 2020

8:00 AM - 12:00 PM MEETING OF THE MEMBERSHIP
12:00 PM - 1:00 PM Lunch
1:00 PM - 2:00 PM Concurrent Sessions - Option 1: Montana’s Changing Climate
Concurrent Sessions - Option 2: The State of our Food System (Pandemic and Beyond)

2:00 PM - 2:15 PM Flash Talk: Soil Practitioners’ Stories: Charter Beef
2:15 PM - 2:30 PM Break
2:30 PM - 3:00 PM Session: Ranching Atop the Signal Peak Coal Mine
3:00 PM - 3:15 PM Flash Talk: The Radioactive Oil Waste Success Story
3:15 PM - 3:45 PM Break
3:45 PM - 4:00 PM Awards
4:00 PM - 4:15 PM Concurrent Flash Talks - Option 1: From Corporate Cash to Bundy Blowups
Concurrent Flash Talks - Option 2: Can Biochar Revive Soil Health on Degraded Land?

4:15 PM - 4:25 PM Flash Talk: Bequests: “Leave Your Mark”
4:25 PM - 4:55 PM Film: Sparks That Started the Prairie Fire
4:55 PM Closing Announcements
The power behind the power

If you’re like most, every month you get an electricity bill, pay, and never give it another thought. Until recently that was certainly the case for me. Turns out I’m a rural electric cooperative (co-op) member in Montana. As the bills trickled in over time I began to consider the significance of the word “co-op,” which is an organization or business that is owned by and operated for the benefit of those using its services. This means if you get your electricity bill from a co-op that you are a member, that you have a vote, and thus a voice in the operation of your energy provider.

If we look at the spectrum of suppliers across the US, it’s apparent very few electricity customers have this opportunity. However, many customers wish they could actively participate in decisions concerning their operations - think of the controversy surrounding PG&E in California or NorthWestern Energy in Montana. No doubt this stems in part from a lack of cooperative decision making.

The reality is, over the last few decades, rural electric co-ops have become less innovative with less member participation. Without engaged customers, co-ops stagnate and can’t embrace the next frontier of technologies which benefit members the most.

Get engaged! That means attending annual meetings, participating in elections, running for the board, advocating for widespread member participation by ensuring voting-by-mail, pushing for transparency through publishing of by-laws and board meeting minutes online, and electing leadership poised to harness clean energy innovations that drive affordable rates.

So, if you’re a co-op member, remember YOU ARE the power behind the power.

-Lara Birkes
Member

Family first, charity second.

That’s an important thing to remember if you’re writing a will.

If you decide to include Northern Plains in your will, we can send you a lawyer-reviewed brochure with solid information on how to put your values to work in the world. Just call (406) 248-1154 and we’ll mail you a copy. Or you can email maggie@northernplains.org.

Northern Plains member and Park Electric Co-op member-owner, Lara Birkes.

Lara Birkes is a Northern Plains member in Park County. You can read her full piece “Power Behind the Power” in Ground in Common here: www.groundincommon.com/post/the-power-behind-the-power

C-PACE: Saving money, conserving energy, fighting climate change

Nearly 20% of energy used in this country is used by commercial buildings. If we want to fight climate change, more efficient buildings need to be part of the solution.

Energy efficiency upgrades have a quick payback time, but the upfront costs pose a barrier for many of Montana’s businesses. At Northern Plains, we have a solution to overcome this gap so that we can conserve energy, save money, and fight climate change - Commercial Property-Assessed Clean Energy (C-PACE).

C-PACE gives businesses, nonprofits, agricultural operations, and more a way past that upfront cost barrier. Enacting C-PACE in Montana would allow businesses to finance up to 100% of the upfront cost for clean energy upgrades like new HVAC systems, LED lighting retrofits, and solar installations!

In addition to saving money for Montana businesses, C-PACE will conserve energy, fight climate change, and generate economic activity across the state. But to bring C-PACE to Montana, we must first pass C-PACE enabling legislation through the 2021 Montana Legislature. And we’ll need your help to get this legislation over the finish line.

Join us to learn more about C-PACE at our upcoming webinar – Thursday, November 12th, at 6:00 pm. We’ll be sending out an email with information. If you have questions, contact Sydney at sydney@northernplains.org or call (406) 248-1154.

-Sydney Ausen

Keeping public watch over the Public Service Commission

When energy choices are reliant on the actions of a monopoly utility, the place we can influence change is through the public’s voice in government. In this case, that part of government is the Public Service Commission (PSC). Members of Northern Plains are on a mission to press the PSC to listen to the views of Montana ratepayers, and not just the regulated utilities.

The PSC is currently considering a deal between NorthWestern Energy and Puget Sound Energy. Puget Sound wants to shed its ownership share of Colstrip Unit 4 and NorthWestern wants to buy that share of the plant and the transmission lines. Because Colstrip 4 is an aging power plant near the end of its anticipated operating life, the deal would pass unknown costs and risks onto Montana ratepayers.

Northern Plains members have made their opposition to the deal very clear to PSC Commissioners, giving comment at every listening session through the month of October.

Joanie Kretsch of Livingston said it best in a recent newspaper op-ed, “NorthWestern and their shareholders can make a handsome profit if the PSC lets them get away with this. Our energy bills will go up, and we’ll find ourselves struggling along a rutted dirt road while the rest of the West speeds along towards a clean, affordable energy future.”

There’s still one more chance for public comment at the end of the year. Mark your calendars for the week of December 14th when the Public Service Commission holds their evidentiary hearings. Stay up to date by visiting www.northernplains.org/passthebuck.

-Makenna Sellers

When Northern Plains purchased our office building – Home on the Range – in 2003, it was in bad need of repairs. Now, our LEED platinum building is powered with energy efficiency and solar!
2020 Soil Summit Recap

After a year's worth of planning, preparation, and adjusting to the curveball of COVID-19, Northern Plains held our 2020 Soil Summit on October 7th! The event drew more than 120 participants on Zoom from three different continents, possibly making this Northern Plains' first international event! Northern Plains member Steve Charter served as moderator and framed why the task force chose to focus the summit on soil health policy and financing (as opposed to soil health practices). “If we are to realize the scale of the change that’s needed, we must have major policy reform and have the avenues to help finance this transformation. Our current conventional practices and economic systems did not just naturally evolve. They are the result of deliberate government policy, and harmful practices will remain the dominant ones until these policies change,” he said.

Following Steve’s opening, Wayne Honeycutt of the Soil Health Institute and Duane Howorka of the Izaak Walton League of America outlined the need for a national comprehensive strategy for soil health. They identified how states could leverage federal dollars currently available in order to implement soil health. The program then zoomed into state-level policies, with specific examples from California, New Mexico, and Illinois: Brian Shobe of the California Agriculture and Climate Network discussed California’s Healthy Soils Program, which has made over $50 million in soil health investments on farmland in the state; Isabelle Jenniches of the New Mexico Healthy Soil Working Group detailed how they passed a bill establishing a healthy soil program in the state with unanimous support; and Liz Moran Stelk of the Illinois Stewardship Alliance shared how the soil health successes of a small group of farmers were scaled up even during a state budget crisis.

After the morning sessions on policy, Robyn O’Brien, the Soil Summit’s keynote speaker, opened the financing portion of the summit and delivered a passionate call to end investment in the conventional, chemical-intensive agriculture system. Speaking of an existing food system that prioritizes the production of cheap, low quality food at the expense of people and the environment, she said, “We are at a point where we need to ask, are the ag systems that we inherited from the twentieth century serving us in the twenty-first century?” Jennifer O’Connor complemented Robyn’s keynote with a detailed analysis of the financial obstacles for implementing soil health, along with possible solutions. During the Q&A, Jennifer was even able to begin answering a producer’s question about his specific struggles in funding soil health!

Legislative leadership is waiting until mid-November to make a decision on the format (virtual, in-person, limited people in Capitol, or a mix of everything). The GOOD NEWS is, Northern Plains members have been meeting almost the whole year on zoom and virtual platforms, so we are already familiar with virtual meetings.

And a hybrid session may very well open up our democracy in new ways – someone from towns as far away as Fortyse, Plentywood, or Choteau could provide testimony at a hearing without driving the hours it takes to get to Helena. Just as with every session, personal relationships with senators and representatives are crucial. No matter what format the session takes, it’s always worth engaging in the Montana Legislature as a grassroots organization. Engaging with the legislature is what democracy is all about. We hold decision-makers accountable, make sure that industry lobbyists aren’t the only ones setting the law, and our presence and testimony demonstrates that citizens understand complex issues. When we show up we can get good things done, like establishing Montana’s Strip and Underground Mine Reclamation Act (circa 1973-1977). With member presence in every corner of the state, we have the power to make positive change while protecting what we love.

If you’d like to help build the Northern Plains grassroots legislative network by meeting with your legislator virtually or on the phone, contact Makenna at makenna@northernplains.org.

The Northern Plains Board of Directors has laid out our focus areas this year:

- C-PACE (Commercial Property-Assessed Clean Energy)
- Country-of-Origin Labeling
- Radioactive Oilfield Waste
- Farm to School Grant Pilot Program
- Soil Health

In addition to our main priorities, we anticipate seeing bills that propose to change solar and energy efficiency tax credits, make changes to the structure of the Public Service Commission, and undermine environmental regulatory processes that protect clean air, clean water, and public transparency. No matter what bills come our way, Northern Plains is ready to go to bat for policies that defend Montana.

Here are a few ways you can help before the end of 2020:

- Sign up for Northern Plains’ Legislative Phone Tree! Through grassroots power, we can turn 1 phone call to the legislature into 100. Contact Sydney at sydney@northernplains.org to sign up.
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We’re Built for This: 2021 Legislative Edition

Just as Chair Jeanie Alderson said at the beginning of the pandemic, Northern Plains members have found creative solutions to solve difficult problems for almost fifty years. The 2021 Legislative Session is no exception! Although we don’t have all the answers, here is what you can expect for Northern Plains’ engagement in the legislature and how we’ll show up for our democracy.

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**Climate Change**

Climate rock star Bill McKibben speaks to Northern Plains

Few individuals have done more to educate the public and raise awareness about climate change than Bill McKibben. His 1989 book, *The End of Nature*, is considered to be the first book about climate change written for a general audience. He has since written 16 more books and regularly contributes to periodicals including *The New Yorker* and *Rolling Stone*.

McKibben is a professor of Environmental Studies at Middlebury College, with honorary degrees from 19 colleges and universities. He co-founded 350.org, the first global grassroots climate campaign which has organized for climate action on every continent (yes, including Antarctica). He has been interviewed by everyone from 60 Minutes to Stephen Colbert, tirelessly advocating and organizing. In short, McKibben is an environmental expert, able to distill his ideas and the sense of urgency they demand into easily understandable narratives.

That presentation, “Turning the Corner on Climate Change: A Conversation with Bill McKibben,” was attended by hundreds of people – mostly from Montana, but from 22 other states as well! He is a straightforward and plainspoken expert, able to distill his ideas and the sense of urgency they demand into easily understandable narratives.

After an introduction from Billings member and event emcee Emma Kerr-Carpenter, McKibben spoke about his love for the beauty of Montana. He transitioned to describe how heat-trapping carbon dioxide pollution is fundamentally changing the way that water moves around our climate, resulting in more frequent and intense wildfires, longer droughts, greater floods, stronger storms, and the profound disruption of agriculture, engineering, and all major human endeavors. After clarifying the dire stakes, McKibben offered reasons for hope.

Citing numerous examples of people successfully organizing in opposition to fossil fuel interests – including Northern Plains’ work to block the Keystone XL pipeline – McKibben emphasized the need to work collectively. “The most important thing an individual can do is be less of an individual – join together with others…” From there, two Northern Plains members spoke about exactly that – how our work as a grassroots organization is addressing the climate crisis on multiple fronts.

Shepherd rancher Steve Charter spoke about our groundbreaking efforts to increase carbon sequestration by improving soil health. Joan Kresich of Livingston described our success in preventing the carbon-intensive tar sands of Keystone XL from sluudging through Montana while noting our work to expand clean energy opportunities through community-based Solarize campaigns and our legislative work to advance renewable energy bills.

McKibben then took several questions from attendees. When asked what gives him hope, McKibben says, “This is a battle we’re more or less won… We’re at 70% of Americans now who understand more or less what the problem is and how it works… The numbers are even higher when you ask people ‘Should the government be doing more to promote solar energy?’ 80% of Republicans, Democrats, and independents say ‘Yes’ Get to work on this now!”

We agree! But we also know that the real work happens one community at a time, so let’s heed that advice for all of our climate efforts and band together to “get to work on this now!”

-Dustin Ogdin

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**Council Roundup**

CMRC assists solar project, gets grocer support for COOL

Central Montana Resource Council members are reaching out to central Montana grocery stores and agricultural organizations to ask their support for Country-of-Origin Labeling in the upcoming legislative session. So far, we’ve helped earn support for COOL from grocery stores in Grass Range and Winnett!

Fergus County Fairgrounds has gone solar! The new array was funded by a NorthWestern Energy grant, county funds, and a donation from CMRC, and will provide roughly half of the Fairgrounds Trade Center’s power.

CMRC member Alan Shammel serves on the Fair Board and championed this project from start to finish. Go Alan!

-Bear Creek Council is continuing to meet remotely, but members are still looking forward to an exciting fall and winter! BCC will be hosting three “Living with Wildlife” series throughout the fall and into the winter. These will be hosted virtually, so we hope to see some of you there! Bear Creek Council has also decided to host the EnvironMINT film festival online in January… more details to come! Outside of events, BCC continues to follow mining and bison issues in the Gardiner area.

-Becky Brookman

BCC readies for wildlife events and winter film fest

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-Mikindra Morin

CCRC files objection to Custer Gallatin Forest Plan

After reviewing the Custer Gallatin National Forest’s long-awaited Forest Plan Revision, Carbon County Resource Council filed an objection to the plan, citing inadequacies on issues pertaining to climate change, recreation pressures, soil health, and extractive industry. The plan will direct management of the forest, which sprawls from southwestern Montana to South Dakota, for decades to come. An objection is a big step – CCRC will now meet with USFS officials in a virtual face-to-face objection meeting to further discuss their concerns and how those concerns may be resolved.

-Central Montana Resource Council

CCRC seeks stronger protections in forest plan.

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-Tai Koester
Council Roundup

BA elects new officers

This summer, Beartooth Alliance members gathered for a socially distanced Annual Meeting in Cooke City to elect officers for the year ahead and talk about how members could participate in a noxious weed removal program. BA was successful in spreading the word about the program to local members and many took advantage of the opportunity for free weed removal on their property! Congratulations to BA’s elected Officers for 2021: Marcia Woolman (Chair), Christy Gerrits (Secretary), Ted Drau (Treasurer), and Nellie Israel (Board Representative).

-Sydney Ausen

Helena affiliate organizes for clean energy, local food future

Sleeping Giant Citizens Council and the Montana Renewable Energy Association made the prudent decision to cancel the 2020 Sun Run and Clean Energy Expo in Helena this October. Members are assessing a Solarize campaign as an alternative to the Sun Run that will advance the City of Helena’s commitment to 100% renewable energy by 2030.

The Farm-to-Table online auction was a success with the four donated dining experiences raising a total of $1,250. In September, SGCC voted to form a year-round Local Food Committee to explore some of the ways we can improve Helena’s access to local, sustainably sourced foods.

SGCC members are keeping a watchful eye on the Colstrip Unit 4 pre-approval purchase before the PSC, and took part in hearings throughout October.

-Makenna Sellers

YVCC is bringing back general membership meetings

YVCC members gathered for their Annual Meeting (on Zoom this year!) to elect officers, make decisions for the organization, and take action on both YVCC and Northern Plains campaigns.

The Annual Meeting served as the launch of their general membership meetings. For the past several years, YVCC has been organizing through committees, rather than general membership meetings. Members decided to bring back general membership meetings to involve more members in their work: deciding the issues to work on, determining strategy on campaigns, building power in Yellowstone County, and celebrating community! Meetings will be held every other month, with the next meeting scheduled for mid-December.

-Caroline Canarios

YBCC sets course for 2021

YBCC held its annual meeting October 1st and, despite lasting only ninety minutes, it set a course for another exciting new year. Officers Joan Kresich, Lauren Dalzell, and Donna Onstott were re-elected as Co-Chair, Secretary, and Treasurer respectively.

The new Co-Chair is Sarah Stands, and board representative John Gayuski will take over for Ken Decker. Ken will remain close at hand as he transitions from leadership into an active affiliate member in 2021. In addition to electing new leadership, Yellowstone Bend’s strategic planning committee introduced an exciting list of priorities for the group to work on over the next five years.

-Tirza Asbell

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DRC explores solar support for Glendive

In September, DRC began exploring doing a “Solarize” campaign in Glendive. This is a way for people in a community to save money on solar by getting a small group of neighbors together to install solar systems on their homes, all at the same time. Our members have been working hard to research the basics of solar and learn more about Solarize campaigns in other communities.

DRC member Melissa Mittelstaed attended the Principles of Community Organizing (POCO) training this August and September over Zoom, learning how to build power, how to plan campaigns, and more!

-Caitlin Cromwell

CRC kicks carbon pollution with solar success

The solar array at Sweet Grass County High School is officially a success! So far the array has kept 48,151 pounds of CO2 out of the air, which is the equivalent of planting 363 trees! CRC continues to look for creative ways to promote solar in Sweet Grass County. This year, they are working to power the Big Timber Christmas tree with solar.

-Mikindra Morin

Council Roundup

SPA Elects Officers at Annual Meeting

Stillwater Protective Association held its annual meeting in August, electing Kaite Howes as an alternate on the Good Neighbor Agreement’s (GNA) technology committee and re-electing Hank Lischer as vice president, Van Wood as a representative on the GNA’s Stillwater Oversight Committee, Cindy Merriam as treasurer, Charles Sangmeister as an Oversight Committee alternate, and Bill Muldoon as a representative on the technology committee. SPA also saw the departure of longtime SPA and GNA Task Force member Bill Hand, who has moved to Wyoming. The membership thanks Bill for his years of service. Bill Muldoon has replaced Bill Hand as an Oversight Committee alternate.

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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!

Phone a friend and help protect Montana!

*Turn one call into dozens during the 2021 Legislative Session... Join the phone tree!*

We all know that true prosperity begins with healthy land, water, and air. You can help get this message to lawmakers during the 2021 legislative session by participating in a phone tree!

**How it works:** Our phone trees make it easy for you to be involved in the democratic process. When an important issue is up for a vote in the legislature, we’ll call and let you know (and share some background about the issue). Then you’ll call your legislators to talk about it, and if you choose, you’ll call a few more folks on your “branch” of the phone tree! In this way, one phone call can generate many, many more calls to key legislators and their constituents.

Phone trees are one of the most powerful ways to urge your elected representatives to make the right decisions!

**To learn more or sign up, contact Sydney at sydney@northernplains.org or (406) 248-1154.**