

# STANDING TOGETHER:

PROTECTING LAND, AIR, WATER, AND PEOPLE

The History of Northern Plains Resource Council, Part I

NATIONAL SACRIFICE AREA

THE U.S. GOVT. RECOMMENDS

STRIP MINING

THE DIVIDE NORTH OF HERE

WE LANDOWNERS ARE OPPOSED!

ELLEN COTTON MRS. DAN WILSON

JIM & RUTH BENEDICT

CANYON CREEK CATTLE CO. RUTH JORDAN

CHARLES E. JORDAN BOB & EULA EBELING

LET FUTURE GENERATIONS

JUDGE

*By Teresa Erickson*

*Edited by Steve Paulson*

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# 1

## STANDING TOGETHER: A HISTORY OF NORTHERN PLAINS PROTECTING LAND, AIR, WATER, AND PEOPLE

If there is one word to describe what the Northern Plains Resource Council has done, that word would be “**protect.**” This is the story of a group of people who banded together and have stayed together for 50 years to fight for rural Montana.

Driven by love of the land and a willingness to fight for it, Northern Plains Resource Council people have often been the only force standing between the destruction of family farms and ranches – as well as natural resources – and industrial development in rural Montana. This brief history is but a quick skim through a compelling saga that has played across the plains of Big Sky Country. It’s a story of big moneyed interests encountering a well-organized and determined group of people willing to take on long odds and fight for their future.

Montana ranch families are the people who initially built Northern Plains into a conservation group with deep roots in family farming and ranching. They built it on a foundation of community organizing to make sure members would have a voice in shaping policies that affect their lives and livelihoods.

They used (and still use) multi-pronged strategies: researching the issues, educating the public, forging coalitions, shaping and moving public policy, watchdogging state and federal agencies, and building strong citizen leaders. If pushed far enough, they would go to court.

It was critical to those early Northern Plains people that they establish a reputation for producing reliable and credible information. Members of Northern Plains came to know that they could have confidence in this information, and that confidence helped them become an effective voice in the Montana Legislature. That reputation became known as well to reporters, agency people, and politicians.

## 2

## THE SPARKS THAT STARTED THE PRAIRIE FIRE

The main trigger that moved these ranch families to act was the issuance of the North Central Power Study in 1971, a document that has been described as an industrial development fantasy for the West. 35 major private and public electric power suppliers in 15 states – along with the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation – collaborated in the study. Ironically, the sudden interest in Western coal was spurred by an environmental law – the Clean Air Act – which spurred demand for lower sulfur coal found in the West.

The numbers found in the text and the maps of the North Central Power Study shook residents of the region:

- 42 coal-fired power plants would be built, 21 of them clustered between Colstrip, Montana, and Gillette, Wyoming.
- Thirteen of those plants would each generate 10,000 megawatts of power.
- During the 35-year planned life of the project, a land surface half the size of Rhode Island would be destroyed.
- 2.6 million acre-feet of water would be used annually from the Yellowstone, Big Horn, Tongue, Powder, and North Platte Rivers to cool all those coal plants. In dry years, the flow of the Yellowstone would almost be dried up.

Carolyn Walker, Birney rancher and founding member of Northern Plains tells how the North Central Power Study affected her:

*It was a very ambitious study. It's one for the history books now, but I think that some of that's thanks to us. Because we took some exception to those plans. It seemed to me there were quite a lot of people that were concerned and worried and things like that, but it also seemed to me that there were people who just shrugged and said "It's inevitable".*

*I just hated that inevitability statement because it seemed, in a polite way, lazy. There's something can be done, if you don't want it to be done you better figure out what to do. I was really full of a lot of energy then. My*

*children were little and I didn't want to think of the ranch being torn up or the community being torn up. The possibilities of what coal development would bring were really alarming. That North Central Power Study was actually a galvanizing tool for us I think. You could show neighbors and friends, "Look this is what they'd like to do us, to the land." People who draw up things like the North Central Power Study are probably clueless about what effect their work has on people in the area.*

That development fantasy was a nightmare for the people who lived in the area, people who loved their land and whose livelihoods depended on good land and good water. The real-world impacts of such a plan – land destruction, depletion of water resources, massive air pollution, roads, reservoirs, a maze of high-tension lines taking electricity from the region, high crime, social upset, and immense local expenditures for mushrooming infrastructure needs – would have been devastating for people trying to earn a living by farming or ranching. The plan portrayed the region as a colony – eastern Montana as part of a national sacrifice zone for energy production. It should have been no surprise that it was people who lived in the region who rose up against this plan.

Tom Tully explains the beauty of coal country:

*All this country that's seen coal development in Montana is some of the prettiest country in the state, in my mind. It's more subtle, but these shale and pine hills interspersed with layers of sandstone and so forth are truly beautiful. It is truly beautiful country in a different way.*

The plan also alarmed Montanans living on the other side of the state. A charismatic professor of history at the University of Montana – K. Ross Toole – lectured on what could happen to Montana's land, water, and people unless people got involved. Toole described Montana's unfortunate history with large mining companies in Butte and Anaconda that pursued mineral wealth, and poisoned the air and water while they did it. He warned that we should learn from history and not simply trust that the companies would do any different now. Toole reached his students deeply and many of them joined in the effort to protect eastern Montana.

Connie Keogh grew up in the Stillwater Valley, and recalled how her views evolved:

*When we would go in the mountains, I came to streams and little glaciers that fed the river that went by our house, which ultimately went into the ditch that we irrigated the land, that grew the hay, that fed the cattle. I mean, it's all connected, and I've always felt part of that, and as time went on, I realized the importance of needing to protect, preserve, support those environments. Because it's not just about being up in the mountains, it's about that water that ends up downstream, and it's not just about us getting to breathe pretty good air up there, but everybody needs to breathe good air, everywhere.*

For those pursuing riches from coal, the first step to make the North Central Power Study a reality was to secure and consolidate the minerals. A mineral grabbing frenzy ensued. County courthouses became beehives of activity from landmen researching ownership of mineral rights. These “lease hounds” would visit ranchers and try to convince them to sell their land or lease their mineral rights.

Ranchers were further rankled by the methodology of the federal Bureau of Land Management in determining where to lease. An anonymous individual could “nominate” federally owned coal beneath his/her neighbor’s property to be leased for strip mining without disclosing their identity to that neighbor. Only because of a sympathetic BLM employee did Northern Plains members learn who had been nominating their property, a realization that created lifelong bad blood with neighbors who were so blindly pro-coal that they would be so underhanded and duplicitous that they would try to ruin other people’s ranch operations in order to promote coal mining. At the time, the BLM even refused to release information about how much acreage had already been leased.

One of Northern Plains’ early victories was a rule requiring disclosure of who nominates minerals in a split-estate situation.

# 3

## POLITE MEETS RUTHLESS

Landmen seeking the mineral rights (and therefore the right to mine coal) flocked to the region. Landmen were experienced in how to convince property owners to sign contracts to allow mining. They weren't truthful, and they used ruthless tactics that revealed how they saw the rural people. They ran roughshod over people (or tried to).

Anne Charter, one of Northern Plains' founders, explained what she had to learn about life on a ranch:

*There were many things I had to learn about living on a ranch...Always have several weeks of groceries on hand in addition to the home canned variety and your staples; always be polite and hospitable to anyone who passes by or stops in, and if it's meal time, feed them; any other time a cup of coffee will suffice.*

This practical and friendly way of looking at the world made it easier for the landmen to take advantage of rural politeness. But polite people expect others to be polite as well and, when the right-of-way agents and lease hounds came round, they were anything but polite. Using the threat of condemnation, the company men threatened, harassed, and lied to people. Some folks were not intimidated by this and instead were empowered enough to break a longstanding taboo – they reached out to their neighbors to compare notes about what the landmen were saying.

Rancher Steve Charter describes what it was like:

*In the beginning, it was pretty neutral, but pretty quickly it became adversarial. And I guess the tone of the coal companies was, "It really doesn't matter what you think about this. We're coming in. We're going to mine." And the model is they just buy people out. And that's what they wanted to do. The coal companies' message was all your neighbors have*

*sold out and you should, too... So at that point, my folks decided they better actually talk to their neighbors and see what was going on.*

*When they did, they found that the neighbors were thinking the same thing we were. They didn't think much of the whole idea, and they didn't want to move, didn't want to sell out, didn't want a mine coming in. And so right from the beginning, the Consolidation people weren't being truthful.*

Living atop coal was a strong motivator to some to become involved. A little-known fact is that twenty-five percent of the all the coal in the United States is in Montana. Located in some of the most sparsely populated areas of the state, the people living above the coal – alarmed about what they were learning – began getting together with neighbors and teaching themselves about what was being planned. No public officials, no agency, no organization, and no elected body was informing the most impacted people what was coming, so they decided to work together, form an organization, inform themselves, and find others who shared their concerns.

# 4

## THE STARS WERE ALIGNING

Many white-hot political debates were taking place in Montana and around the country on the subject of natural resource management and the health of America's environment.

In the in the late 60s and early 70s, the nation was trying to fix the pollution mess that had been piling up in America. Landmark laws enacted during that period include:

- Clean Air Act (enacted 1963, amended several times in following years);
- National Environmental Policy Act (that requires environmental impact statements) (enacted 1969, became law in 1970);
- Clean Water Act (enacted in 1970);
- Endangered Species Act (1973);
- Safe Drinking Water Act (1974);
- Resource Conservation and Recovery Act (1976);
- Federal Land Policy Management Act (1976); and
- Surface Mining Control and Reclamation Act (1977).

At the same time environmental awareness was driving protections for land, water, public health, and the right of people to have a voice, the search for low-sulfur coal was driving mining companies to the West. On top of that, the Middle East oil embargo of 1973-74 scared many Americans about the prospect of running out of energy. Energy companies took full advantage of that fear.

# 5

## AN ORGANIZATION IS BORN

The first organized pockets of discontent surfaced near the Bull Mountains, just north of Billings, as well as the Birney area, Sarpy Creek, and near Colstrip. None of these groups knew about the others at first. But word was soon out that landowners in the areas targeted by coal speculators were starting to talk to each other. In April of 1972, a coal symposium was held in Billings, supposedly to present all sides in the coal controversy. However, the speaker chosen to represent the environmental perspective was from the Knife River Coal Company. This further outraged the ranchers and – a few evenings before the conference – eleven people gathered together and decided to form the Northern Plains Resource Council.

Later on, Northern Plains proclaimed its intentions in a leaflet:

*The Council is committed to maintaining a viable agricultural economy, and protecting land upon which agriculture depends, and our way of life, recognizing that all of us draw our livelihood from the land, and that we have an obligation to insure a viable and self-sustaining homeland for future generations.*

Formally incorporated in September of 1972, Northern Plains was created to prepare for the planned industrial onslaught. Steve Charter recalls the first organizing meeting at his parent's house,

*And at that meeting, they decided that they should have a group. Ellen Pfister's mom, Louise, came up with the name Northern Plains Resource Council, and it was a lot of foresight at the time because she said, 'Well, if we don't call it something coal or something, we don't want to restrict ourselves here.' So right from the beginning, I think people were thinking a little broader. And I guess also at the beginning, initially it was, of course in these local groups, it was just ranchers, but pretty soon, it was other people, too. And as ranchers, I think we realized right from the beginning that we didn't have enough political power because we didn't even have all the ranchers on our side.*

Earlier that same year, Montanans ratified a new constitution. Its preamble declared:

*We the people of Montana, grateful to God for the quiet beauty of our state, the grandeur of our mountains, the vastness of our rolling plains, and desiring to improve the quality of life, equality of opportunity and to secure the blessings of liberty for this and future generations do ordain and establish this constitution.*

The document recognized “certain inalienable rights,” and the first one listed is “the right to a clean and healthful environment.” The stars were aligning in Montana to make it possible for citizens to stand up to the energy companies.

# 6

## DEPENDS ON WHAT YOU MEAN BY WEALTH

*As I grew older, I got more and more proud of Northern Plains, and my mom and dad, too. I realized how brave she was. Really brave. But how much the people of Northern Plains were our family. Because it really, the whole coal mining issue, those families that were for it, those people that, you know, they owned the coal rights, they wanted to make money. That was what they thought their inheritance was. We always wanted to ranch and take care of our land and water, and that's what we felt like was ours to have and to hold and to protect. So it divided us as a community and that was hard. But the community of Northern Plains was always kind of a family, too. So it's been more than just an organization to me.*

Jeanie Alderson; Birney, Montana  
2<sup>nd</sup> generation Northern Plains member

Love of the land, reverence for clean water, and a commitment to family-based agriculture were the ties that bound together the founders of Northern Plains. Many had been baited by the coal companies with promises of wealth and modernization – but the bait didn't work on them. Perhaps it was the well-known history of copper mining in Montana that engendered a suspicion of big mining companies. Maybe it was natural skepticism. But likely it was a strong belief that their true wealth is their land, water, and way of life.

Northern Plains member Wally McRae said,

*This is my heritage, and the land and livestock are no less important to me than they were to my grandfather. I can assure you that I and others like me will not allow our land to be destroyed merely because it is convenient for the coal company to tear it up.*

# 7

## FIGHTING FOR JUSTICE

By the beginning of the 1970s, most Montanans were well aware of the pollution legacy left behind by Anaconda Copper. They understood the way Anaconda had abused the land, water, and people where they operated, and they saw how the company had literally owned most of state's news outlets and many of its politicians.

When rural Montanans began looking at the effects of coal mining in other places – famously Appalachia – it became clear that people in the path of coal mining were suffering great injustice (not unlike the Anaconda legacy). Those people bore the costs that made it possible for coal companies to generate enormous profits.

They saw the poverty that was endemic to coal country. They saw the wrecked land, the polluted streams, and the crippled communities. It all added up to colossal exploitation, and they determined not to allow such injustice to be inflicted upon Montana's people or upon the health and beauty of eastern Montana's land, water, and communities.

The specific issues changed over time, but injustice cut across those issues broadly. Northern Plains would combat the externalized costs of coal and other natural resource development. The organization would go on to challenge “captured” agencies and bureaucrats and a corrupted political process by building collective power.

Early members understood that democratic processes would be their greatest strength and they put all kinds of people into leadership positions in the organization. They were committed to grassroots control and to helping people develop their own power as citizens.

They knew that rural people – farmers, ranchers, and Native people – are often seen as the path of least resistance for speculative development. But they also learned that all sorts of Montanans – not just those living above coal – cared

about justice, and cared what happened to eastern Montana. They learned they were not alone.

In a 1991 speech, Northern Plains Chair Paul Hawks – a rancher from Melville – laid out how justice figured in to Northern Plains’ work:

*We believe in responsibility and fairness and justice and in treating our neighbors as our own. We take on issues because we think individuals and corporations should pay their fair share. We believe taxes and environmental and social costs should not be shoved off on someone else for a profit. We believe it is unjust to dump garbage on our neighbor’s land. We believe misusing power to shove costs or pollution onto someone else is fundamentally unjust. For the same reason, we fight misuse of monopoly power—by utilities and meatpackers—because monopolies are unjust and unfair.*

# 8

## DIVIDE AND CONQUER

Knowing that coal companies rely on a “divide and conquer” strategy, Northern Plains responded in its first newsletter with a list of “battle tactics” for how individuals could respond to that “divide and conquer” strategy. These tactics included:

- When a coal company shows you a contract, ask them if your land can be reclaimed to its original productivity. What will happen to your springs and subsurface water table? Will they replace wells they ruin? Who will replace your land if the coal company decides simply to forfeit its bond?
- If the coal company knows more about the habits of your lawyer than you do, get another lawyer.
- Don’t talk to them alone... get witnesses to your conversation. If they won’t allow you to have witnesses, tell them to leave.
- If the coal company threatens to condemn your land, don’t panic. You have more rights and power than the coal company wants you to think.
- Understand that coal companies may use a neighbor or acquaintance to soften you up.
- When the coal company tells you of neighbors who have leased, don’t take their word for it... ask your neighbors directly.
- Do not let anyone rush you into signing anything.
- Consider the effects of your actions today on your grandchildren.

# 9

## SPLIT ESTATE

The story of Northern Plains’ beginning requires a short explanation of what is meant by “split estate.” Many farmers and ranchers in eastern Montana – and many across the West – have split-estate title to their land. It means that the surface of the land is owned by one party and the minerals and pore space, underneath is owned by another party.

That other party in much of the West is the federal government, along with railroad companies who were granted land and minerals as an incentive to develop railroads from the Missouri to the Pacific. What split estate meant (and still means) to farmers and ranchers is that someone else can extract minerals from beneath their property, even without the landowner’s permission. It means the other party will derive the vast majority of wealth from the sale and development of the mineral that underlie the surface owner. It can mean that the surface owner gets the negatives and the mineral owner and the lessee derive the financial benefit.

The history of split estate is directly tied to the development of the railroads. Congress was very eager to penetrate the western lands, and handsomely rewarded railroad companies for opening up travel and commerce in areas previously thought of as frontiers. Mining companies in search of the minerals beneath the surface – like the railroad companies – had enormous power in Congress and sought title to the subsurface rights.

As an illustration of split estate... Birney rancher and Northern Plains leader Jeanie Alderson called the BLM office in Miles City to ask about mineral leasing beneath her family’s ranch in the Tongue River valley. The ranch had been in the family more than 120 years at that point. But that day, she discovered that federally owned mineral deposits (likely coal bed methane) beneath three-quarters of the ranch had been leased to five different companies and individuals. The BLM had never informed her family, who own and live on the land, about this lease.

Alderson said that, in her family’s experience:

*While this ranch has been in my family since the late 1800s, the minerals—we've put the ranch together over the last 130 or whatever years—but the minerals we only own about a quarter of the minerals that we are on top of. The rest are mostly federal minerals. And even the ones that we own, that's owned with my dad and his cousins and family, so the whole federal mineral split-estate situation is such a big part of how we started at Northern Plains.*

# 10

## CITIZEN RESEARCH

Northern Plains members determined right off the bat that they needed to know where coal was leased for mining and who owned it. To get a picture of how individuals and communities would be affected, they needed to see the whole picture for themselves. So they sought out people who were going to be directly affected and talked to them. There was no easy way to get this information because the BLM kept secret who had coal beneath their property and whether it was leased.

Helen Waller, a farmer in McCone County, became a citizen expert about coal mining that would affect her land. She recalled, “The EIS on the strip mine that was proposed for our area was, oh, about two and a half inches thick. I read it all and made notes enough that I knew what was going on.”

And it’s a good thing she did. Her knowledge came in handy.

*One of the things that amused me was how unprepared and lack of knowledge by the people who put the Environmental Impact Statement together. Probably one of the most ridiculous statements they made in there was in this area there was unoccupied agricultural land. Now all they needed to do was go set up a tent where they thought it was unoccupied and they’d find out soon who actually owned the land and they had no right to be there, but to call this area or to say that there was unoccupied agricultural land, I don’t know what they meant by it and I don’t think they did either. The EIS was done by people that really were not qualified in their knowledge of what actually goes on, so we could pick holes in their EIS all over the place. It got to the point that we knew the federal program better than the people who were trying to shove it down our throats.*

A team of young eastern Montanans, just out of college and some of them from ranches, volunteered full-time when Northern Plains first formed. Task

number one was to go to all the courthouses in the counties targeted by the North Central Power Study to find and record the county records for leasing. The work was tedious, but it was vital and it surfaced names of people to whom Northern Plains served an early warning (to those who would listen) that they'd better pay attention or they would be run over by the coal companies. These volunteers assembled maps and factsheets and, most important, a list of landowners to contact. Conducting original research that was tied to a strategy became a Northern Plains hallmark.

The early leaders and staff understood that, to be successful, they needed to find and organize impacted people and delve into the technicalities of an issue. They needed to demonstrate a high level of expertise to public agencies, and to provide useful and actionable information to members and other citizens. Northern Plains newsletters and files are filled with detailed information about permits, comment periods, studies, and anecdotal reports. Tom Tully, one of the first staff and from a family threatened by coal mining in the Bull Mountains describes some of his early work:

*Probably one of my bigger ventures as a volunteer staff was to travel around eastern Montana and parts of northeastern Wyoming going to all the different county courthouses to try to basically ascertain the amount of coal that had been leased on private land, on private surface I should say.*

*At that time that the federal government, the BLM, was looking at leasing more coal and the idea ... was to try to quantify how much coal had already been leased with an eye to telling the BLM that we did not need to lease any more coal at this point, that we need to back off, take another look at it. Similar to today, it's no different than today, essentially.*

# 11

## EARLY VICTORIES

Early victories for Northern Plains emboldened the group. Prior to 1973, strip mines weren't required to reclaim the land. Northern Plains played a major role in passing the Montana Strip and Underground Mine Reclamation Act which required that strip mines reclaim. The new Montana law served as a model for the federal strip mine bill that was signed into law four years later.

The passage of the federal Surface Mining Control and Reclamation Act of 1977 was one of the most important early victories for Northern Plains. It took five years of work and was vetoed by President Ford twice before being signed into law by President Carter. Helen Waller, who attended the signing ceremony at the White House recalls:

*We had a state law before the federal law was passed. In fact, a lot of the federal law was patterned after the work we had done in Montana. Eventually a strip mine reclamation law was passed that basically said to the coal companies: "If you want to mine coal, you have to reclaim the land." That was a major win for us. In fact, Gordy [Waller] and I were both in the Rose Garden when President Carter signed the Strip Mine Reclamation Law, so it was just a reward for a lot of hard work.*

Northern Plains' first foray into the legislature in 1973 saw the state preparing for the changes that massive strip mining would bring. The Utility Siting Act passed with substantial lobbying by Northern Plains members. In the next several sessions, it morphed into what is now known as the Major Facility Siting Act, passed in 1985. The Montana Water Use Act of 1973 created a permit system for new "beneficial uses" of water. The Montana Coal Severance Tax was enacted in 1975.

In addition to lobbying, Northern Plains also made headway on the regulatory level. Diving deep into technicalities of issues and providing input to the agencies, Northern Plains' involvement considerably slowed the rush to lease coal. Members dove into all manner of permits, regulations, environmental impact

statements, resource management plans, and forest plans. Landowners became informed of their rights and got better prepared to negotiate protective measures. They challenged speculative lease proposals that would never have penciled out economically.

Nevertheless, coal speculators were motivated by the prospect of big payoffs – not thousands of dollars, but millions. Often crafty and cold-blooded, they created projects primarily to attract investors and pay themselves handsomely, regardless of whether the project was ultimately developed or not. Many investors were financially burned in these speculative ventures.

Circle area farmer Helen Waller led the opposition that eventually stopped the proposed Circle West coal project:

*We just learned as we went along what needed to be done and I think it was a surprise to the opposition to realize that we, as member organizations, have the power to overcome whatever it was that they wanted to do to us. Ultimately, I can look out to the west and not even think about there being a strip mine over the hill. I don't have to worry about they're cutting our aquifers so it damages our water supply. It was really a reward to win.*

# 12

## SPIGOTS OF POWER

Early on, Northern Plains members adopted a structure still used today – a neighborhood organizational model divided up into little (and not so little) spigots of power called affiliates. An affiliate group is semi-autonomous from Northern Plains, with its own leadership, finances, and decision-making power. To be a Northern Plains affiliate, however, the affiliate must:

- Operate under democratic principles with strong membership controls
- Be in accord and not in conflict with the overall goals of Northern Plains
- Pay dues and help raise money for both the affiliate and Northern Plains to do the work
- Be willing to be public about its association with Northern Plains
- Commit to multi-issue work so that the group doesn't fizzle when a formerly hot issue cools down
- Elect representatives who serve on the board of Northern Plains.

In Northern Plains' first few years, forming new affiliates was a priority and the organization expanded rapidly. When the staff wasn't conducting research, combing the courthouse records, or plotting strategy, they were in the small towns located above coal deposits, meeting people who had a self-interest in whether coal would be developed.

**Within two years of the first meeting, Northern Plains had eight affiliate groups. By year seven, there were twelve. By 1982, Northern Plains had launched 18 affiliates.** Of the 13 affiliates operating in 2020, some have been at it since the group's earliest days. Second and third generations have taken the mantle from their parents and continued to be active in Northern Plains and in fighting for justice.

The board of Northern Plains was large even in the beginning as the affiliates each had two slots on the board. Board meetings were events in and of themselves drawing 20-30 people each time replete with food and comradery.

# 13

## THE COMPANIES WERE ALWAYS \$4.60 SHORT

The late Boyd Charter, Montana rancher and co-founder of Northern Plains, described his contact with a coal company land man this way:

*I told that son-of-a-bitch with a briefcase that I knew he represented one of the biggest coal companies and he was backed by one of the richest industries in the world, but no matter how much money they came up with, they would always be \$4.60 short of the price of my ranch... Some people cannot understand that money is not everything...*

Boyd later recalled the end of that conversation:

*This Del Adams (coal company executive) walked out that door, he got ahold of the doorknob and he said, "You get as hard-boiled as you want to, but in the long run, we're going to get you. We are bigger than you and we can last longer."*

*Those were his very words: "We're going to get you."*

# 14

## NO PROBLEM WITHOUT A SOLUTION

A trademark of Northern Plains since its inception is the drive to find solutions. The solutions were not always readily apparent. Pat Sweeney, one of Northern Plains' original staffers (and later the first Staff Director), recalled: "...there was this huge debate in those days, too, about could we ban strip mining completely and just stop it altogether, or do we have to regulate it? We pushed to get as much as we could on the reclamation."

In looking back at the dozens of natural resource conflicts Northern Plains people encountered, always there was an attempt to arrive at a solution. In some cases the organization invested heavily in developing methods, procedures, and public policy that protected water and air quality – as well as the people living on the surface above coal, oil, and gas. Whether it was finding ways to restore a coal seam aquifer, reclaiming the fragile soils of eastern Montana, or installing pollution control devices in smokestacks, Northern Plains put intellectual and political muscle behind coming up with solutions to the activities that threatened them and the natural resources they relied on.

On several occasions, leaders asked themselves if they were doing the job of the regulatory agencies. Over the years, Northern Plains often brought renowned experts, reports, witnesses, directly-affected people, studies, polls, and draft language to the decision-making process. Leaders and staff mapped out the "rabbit warren" of agencies charged with protecting the citizens of Montana and approached them all.

Mark Fix, a Miles City rancher and Northern Plains leader, observed:

*For me, I've always said that Northern Plains has kind of been a godsend, because it seemed like they're the only folks out there that tend to help us as landowners, and try to find ways to make things work... It seems like Northern Plains has always been there, helping us find out information and getting the truth out.*

## *RENEWABLE ENERGY AS A SOLUTION FROM THE BEGINNING*

From Northern Plains' earliest days, the search for solutions always included significant attention to developing renewable energy and using energy wisely. Energy efficiency, still the lowest-hanging fruit of all energy, was highlighted along with wind, solar, and passive solar building.

In 1974, one of Northern Plains' affiliates, the Alternative Energy Resources Organization (or AERO) was spun off into an independent organization was dedicated to fighting for clean energy. AERO and Northern Plains continue collaborating to advance renewable energy in Montana.

The *Billings Gazette* editorialized in 1981 that, "The Northern Plains Resource Council is playing an important role in the way Montana is developing."

Mary Fitzpatrick, longtime leader in Northern Plains' Clean Energy Task Force described how she felt working on renewable energy. "This is what we want. As opposed to, this is what we want to stop. It feels better."

Mary recalled what the late Jeanne Charter, who was on the board at the time said:

*Let's remember what we're talking about is not just energy that isn't produced... it's produced without fossil fuels. It's clean that way and it's clean in the sense that there's no blood on it." Of course, she meant war as well as the dangers of mining. Mostly war because we were still in the middle of Iraq and everything. We all know those wars in the Middle East, for years, have been about oil and water and still are. That made a big impression on me, too. So we started the Clean Energy Task Force.*

# 15

## CITIZEN LOBBYISTS

It soon became clear that many of the most important decisions about how energy development would unfold in Montana were going to be made by the Montana Legislature and Congress.

A particular quirk of the times was that the 1972 Constitution called for annual legislative sessions, until an amendment passed in 1974 re-instituted biennial legislative sessions. This meant that Montana had three legislative sessions in three years, from 1973 through 1975.

Pat Sweeney remembers what it was like:

*There was an annual session that started in 1973. There was a session in 1974. For three years in a row, '73, four and five, we had 60-day sessions.*

*We had opportunities to run legislation. Right off the bat, we had a whole new group of people. And the election of '74 really changed the nature of the legislature. So the '75 legislature was even more pro-conservation than '74 was, in terms of the election.*

And this meant that Northern Plains members quickly became accustomed to working the legislature at a key time in Montana's (and the organization's) history.

A team of citizen lobbyists made up of landowners, tribal members, and Northern Plains staff frequented the legislature. According to the Plains Truth first edition reporting the legislature, Paul Hawks, Pat Sweeney, Bob Tully, Ellen Pfister, Anne Charter, Carolyn Alderson, and Teddy Rising Sun, formed an effective team. Many others joined the fun and took turns going to Helena in the dead of winter.

They sought measures like "surface owner consent," granting landowners the power to say "no" to their land being strip mined. They lobbied for the Utility

Siting Act (which later become the Major Facility Siting Act). These citizen lobbyists grappled with a host of bills, both good and bad, that dealt with energy development.

The work didn't end at the Legislature, though. Much of the biggest action was taking place in Congress. And Northern Plains wasn't alone... a coalition of citizen organizations from coalfield states joined forces to make the case that coal strip mines needed to be required to reclaim mined land.

Working with Senator Lee Metcalf (D - Montana) and Senator Henry "Scoop" Jackson (D - Washington), Northern Plains sent Pat Sweeney, as a full-time staffer to the nation's capital to lobby for passage of a federal strip mine bill. It was passed in 1974, then vetoed by President Ford, so the citizens took another run at it in 1975. It passed again, and was vetoed again.

In 1977, Representative Morris Udall (D - Arizona), with help from most of the Montana delegation (Senators John Melcher and Lee Metcalf, Representative Max Baucus) successfully passed a veto-proof bill (with 18 more votes than the 2/3 majority needed to override a veto). President Jimmy Carter signed the Surface Mining Control and Reclamation Act into law on August 3, 1977, and several Northern Plains staff and members were invited to the White House ceremony.

The law was never perfect, but it made major changes on the ground and would make a big difference to semi-arid Western lands that were being (or would be) strip mined.

It was not widely recognized that this reclamation law, as well as pollution prevention laws (like requiring scrubbers in power plant smokestacks) would create large numbers of new jobs in the coal industry. Pretty much overnight, native grass seed had enormous value as a crop, the higher education institutions created disciplines about reclamation, and mining jobs essentially doubled because it takes workers to put the land back, just like it did to tear it apart.

Northern Plains became known for being able to mount a vigorous lobby effort, with testimony led by members who traveled to the state capitol to make their concerns heard. Jack Heyneman, rancher and former chair of Northern Plains

wrote in the Chair's column of the newsletter about the 1987 legislative session, "I can't tell you how good it feels to be part of a group that takes on hard, sometimes unpopular issues and stands up for to be counted. No small measure of success is due to long hours, hard work, and total dedication."

Over the years, many Northern Plains members have been elected to the Montana legislature and, in many cases, their first political experience came through those citizen lobby efforts. Today, with a field office in Helena, Northern Plains members know that one of the real opportunities in being a member is to join in the citizen lobby efforts. Members appreciate, perhaps more than anything else, the power of motivated citizens who simply won't give up.

# 16

## STRATEGY AND DISCIPLINE

The archives of Northern Plains reveal a 50-year history of strategic thinking and calculating. Memos, papers, meeting agendas, campaign plans, outreach plans, and setting clear legislative priorities have guided the organization.

Written campaign plans for individual issues are developed in a group setting, establishing goals and objectives and answering other key questions in order to build a plan that is specific and agreed-upon.

Most campaign plans are multi-pronged, combining public education, organizing people to act together, building coalitions, developing public policy, lobbying, and, as a last resort, litigation.

One of the longstanding disciplines of organizing work is called “action/reflection.” All meetings, campaigns, events, and other activities of the organization are evaluated based on whether we got what we wanted, what we did well, what we want to do better or differently, and how should we follow up? Asking these questions is integral to Northern Plains’ process.

Other disciplines include well-run meetings, announced in advance, with written agendas, and resulting in action. Democratic decision-making is critical, and the expectation of accountability is understood and followed.

*You can't do it alone. You need a team. One of the things about Northern Plains that's been such a learning experience is the power of being organized. The power of having a plan. I attended the Principles of Community Organizing (POCO) training, and it was like, "Wow, this is what you need to do if you want to make a difference." It's one of the best organized groups that I could ever imagine. The group knows its stuff, they know how to get a campaign going. The organizers are top notch...I love being on that kind of a team, when they know how to go about it.*

*I don't want to be messing around here. I want to make sure if I'm going to put some time and effort into something, that that something's going to happen. I know that it will with Northern Plains. Does it all happen overnight? No. Does it take time? Yes. Have we lost things and lost battles? Yes, but we have made so many baby steps and big leaps. I can't imagine life without it – without Northern Plains Resource Council. I'm always really proud when I say, I'm a member of Northern Plains. I'm always really proud of that.*

Connie Keogh; Missoula, Montana  
Former Northern Plains board member

Working with the Dakota Resource Council in North Dakota, and the Powder River Basin Resource Council in Wyoming (a former Northern Plains affiliate), Northern Plains co-founded the Western Organization of Resource Councils (WORC) in 1979. The WORC network now includes member-based organizations in seven Western states.

Through WORC, the art and science of community organizing began to be documented in training manuals and disseminated through in-person trainings attended by people from all over the United States. WORC now holds semi-annual “Principles of Community Organizing” trainings, and Northern Plains staff often step in as trainers when the event is held in Montana.

WORC also maintains a field office in Washington, DC, which gives Northern Plains access to timely reconnaissance and citizen lobbying opportunities on relevant national issues, and helps Montanans and other Westerners to connect with decision-makers on those issues through congressional testimony, lobby trips, meetings with key agency staffers, and outreach to members for generating public pressure.

# 17

## THE MECHANICS OF POWER IN NORTHERN PLAINS

A grassroots, democratically controlled organization needs a set of rules to govern it. One of those rules is that the members are the spokespeople for the organization. Another is that members make policy. This model needs local people to step up, learn how to communicate, learn how to work together, and speak up.

The organization has a diverse funding base. Believing that all ecosystems are healthier when diverse, even the sources of money follow this rule. Money comes from membership dues and donations, events, and private foundation grants. The fundraising strategy is based on the principle that, should a source go away, the organization will continue to operate because it has other sources.

### *MEMBERS ARE PARAMOUNT*

Membership gives each member the right to vote for leaders and take part in setting organizational policy. Members carry out the work of the organization, giving testimony, writing letters to the editor, speaking to the news media, and holding other members and staff accountable. “When I became a member of Northern Plains,” one member recounted, “I signed up to do a lot of work, and it’s some of the best work I ever did, and I wasn’t paid money for it.”

One of the reasons Northern Plains wins at the legislature or other arenas is because directly affected people are engaged. Such direct self-interest often taps into a collective passion from folks whose land, livelihoods, health, or community is under threat. Such dedication often makes up for lack of money or political power. People described their experience with Northern Plains as the first time they had been politically involved and how Northern Plains changed them ever after.

*And the ranchers, the Northern Plains constituencies, and the Northern Cheyenne, they made the Major Facility Siting Act happen, so that Colstrip Units Three and Four were going to be analyzed by the state of Montana,*

*and determined what the impacts were going to be. And I think the fact that Colstrip right now is a decent little community is because of the insistence of the people who lived there- primarily the Northern Plains Resource Council members. The McRaes, the Gillins, people up and down Rosebud Creek who said, “We don’t want our kids going to a high school that is upside down. And we don’t want the experiences of boom and bust,” as in Gillette, Wyoming, for example. Or the more recent adaptations of that cycle in the Bakken.*

Steve Doherty, Missoula, Montana  
early organizer and then Montana state senator

Northern Plains members have always faced off against huge and well financed corporations, generally from other states and – later on – from other nations. These opponents have had stables of lawyers and have been able to build cozy relationships with many elected officials and government agencies.

Being out-resourced leaves little room for error or wasteful uses of money, and requires careful planning and execution. Northern Plains built a small but tough army to protect land, air, water, and community. Any strong army is made up of capable, motivated warriors fighting for a cause larger than themselves.

*They’ve squared off against some of the world’s largest multinationals, this interesting amalgam of young environmental activists, farmers, ranchers and citizens concerned about mineral and other developments in the Northern Great Plains.*

John A. Alwin  
*Eastern Montana: A Portrait of the Land and its People* (1982)

Members help out in many different ways. Many individuals testified in Helena and Washington, DC, or at their county commission offices or tribal governments. Others felt most comfortable helping organize the myriad of community fundraisers that were held perennially across the state. Still others took on the role of guiding the organization and finding the funds it took to keep going.

Thousands of Montanans have become better citizens because of their experience with Northern Plains. More than 90% of members vote consistently in elections. Dozens have gone on to serve as elected officials and hold appointed positions in their communities and at the state level.

### *LEADERS ARE EXALTED*

Hundreds of people have held leadership positions within Northern Plains, positions that require good judgment, fortitude and, often, courage.

Northern Plains staff know that most of their work is directed at developing leaders within the organization. An art and a science, Northern Plains has honed its leadership development methods over the years. Giving members experiences that gradually – or sometimes quickly – transform them into leaders is deliberate. Members are asked to do things often outside of their realm of experience or comfort. Standing before an audience or speaking to a reporter is among the most challenging leadership tasks.

Northern Plains, and then WORC, pioneered a refined and disciplined set of principles of community organizing. While it isn't the quickest way to move people to action, community organizing is thorough, detailed, and purposeful.

*Jack never wanted to belong to anything....When Jack got involved in Northern Plains, it was like a rebirth. It's the only thing he ever wanted to be involved in. And it helped give meaning or gave a way for him to act out his environmental values.*

Susan Heyneman, Fishtail, Montana  
talking about her late husband Jack Heyneman in 2018

Northern Plains provides leadership opportunities and training, both in formal and informal settings. The organization is known for having leaders who are closely engaged in the governance of the organization, a strong contrast with many organizations. It is leaders, not staff, who act as spokespersons for the organization and who run meetings. Northern Plains' leaders are never strangers to the policy process.

Most leaders understand that taking on a leadership position is more a matter of taking your turn rather than of being popular. People take many different paths to leadership, they come with different strengths and weaknesses, and they often have to be encouraged to engage at that level.

“Northern Plains made me an honest-to-goodness activist for the first time in my life,” recalled the late Eileen Morris of Billings. “The strange partnership between urban and rural has been exciting and productive. My horizons have been considerably widened since I became involved.”

The array of leadership roles includes:

- Running meetings – Northern Plains emphasizes well-run meetings that respect people’s time and help members channel their energy into a productive outcome.
- Speaking to the press – Northern Plains leaders have expressed strong messages that exude passion and hope.
- Chairing an affiliate, a committee, or a task force – This responsible position requires planning and vision, the ability to think strategically, running good meetings, making campaign plans, holding others accountable, and the ability to speak to the news media.
- Serving on the Northern Plains board – Board members expand their horizons by learning the nuts and bolts of the organization, becoming familiar with the broad mix of Northern Plains issues, ensuring our financial health, and making important decisions how to proceed with key issues.
- Raising funds – This leadership role can include organizing events (which can be logistically complicated), recruiting members, contacting donors to make a person-to-person request, and sometimes meeting with foundation funders to represent Northern Plains and the work it does.
- Testifying before a decision-making body – Many members who became leaders said that going to Helena to testify was one of the most memorable and rewarding experiences they’ve had.

Leadership means being accountable for keeping commitments, and being willing to hold others accountable. It means developing positive relationships and doing work.

The dedication to leadership is one reason why Northern Plains has lasted so long. By contrast, the National Center of Charitable Statistics reports that 30% of all US non-profits won't exist beyond 10 years. Most die from leadership problems, losing a prominent leader or staff or experiencing unmanageable infighting. Northern Plains adopted a neighborhood chapter organizing model and has endured and flourished since 1972. The very nature of Northern Plains' governance structure has provided an inoculation against personality cults. It shares the work and the recognition of leading the organization.

### *RURAL ORGANIZERS, A RARE BREED*

Northern Plains' staff, meanwhile, play a vital role behind the scenes, nurturing leaders and carrying out the campaigns that leaders approve. The staff of community organizers focus on face-to-face organizing, developing the kind of relationships that lead to a more intense involvement by our member-leaders than with most organizations. Northern Plains achieves important successes by involving people when it really matters.

The organizers are backed by a team of support staff who conduct communications work, raise funds, keep accurate records, and perform the many other tasks it takes to keep a grassroots organization running smoothly.

Back in the early 1970s, University of Montana professor K. Ross Toole inspired and motivated students preparing to go out into the world. He delivered compelling lectures on how Montana had been abused by big companies. He warned that it could happen again with massive coal development. Toole lit many young adults on fire with his documented, convincing, and passionate lectures, which drew young eastern Montana recent graduates to go back home and fight for it.

These dedicated young people pooled their money, some held other part-time jobs, some still worked on their folks' ranches, and some were full time as their careers began in this work. Before anyone ever received a paycheck doing this work, they lived together in one big house which was dubbed "Bozo Villa." After a few months, they approached the Northern Plains board and asked to be paid \$100 a month for their work. The board voted to pay them \$200 a month.

The staff took up the manner of organizing that we know today – not just researching, not just public education, but deeply reaching out to people to get involved and speak for themselves when it concerned their land and community.

The staff team was on the road to the edges of Montana and into North Dakota and Wyoming. Many a strategy was hatched over a kitchen table or while riding in the cab of a pickup. Members appreciated the hard-working, low-paid staffers and provided them with lodging and meals when they traveled. Strong bonds formed between them.

Former Staff Director and Organizer, Margie MacDonald explains what it was like to be an organizer out of the Glendive office,

*We lived on the largess and hospitality and generosity of our members. You would never go anywhere, whether it was Circle or Scobey or the Bull Mountains or Birney, without coming back with loads of meat and jams and fresh produce from a garden if it was in season, a tank full of gas. So we were treated very well. We loved it when they (members) came to the office. We had a little office in Glendive. Our members would come in and we'd immediately quit work and start trading stories about mainly the issues and the fights that we were in.*

Organizers were serious and disciplined communicators as to what they found in their research, who they met with, their analyses of solutions, and the best ways to move forward. Members and staff worked together in all sorts of ways.

A distinguishing characteristic of Northern Plains is the delineation of roles between members, leaders, staff, and experts. In many organizations, board members merely have an advisory role, and are not the ones who make real decisions. In many organizations, staff members speak on behalf of the group.

At Northern Plains, staff members are invaluable, but they don't run meetings, they don't make policy decisions, and they don't speak to the press on behalf of the organization. Those are roles performed by leaders.

As a testament to the strength of the Northern Plains family style, some staff

have stayed for decades. Pat Sweeney, part of the original staff, went on to organize the Western Organization of Resource Councils. WORC is an association now made up of 8 community-based organizations in 7 states. WORC works constantly with Northern Plains and therefore Pat has been with this work for nearly 50 years. Margie MacDonald organized for several years and then became the staff director 1983-1986. John Smillie, Margie's husband, started as an organizer out of the Glendive Field office and became the research coordinator for Northern Plains. In 1986 he went to work for WORC is now the executive director of WORC. Steve Paulson has worked for Northern Plains since 1992 and as of this writing is still on staff as one of the top fundraisers. Teresa Erickson, recently retired staff director and the author of this history, worked for 33 of the 49 years of Northern Plains. When coupled with long time members who are still at it, the institutional memory is very strong.

Many early staffers formed lifelong friendships and other relationships. Members married members, staff married staff, and members married staff. At the 20<sup>th</sup> annual meeting of Northern Plains back in 1991, the group tabulated 25 marriages among staff and members.

A long list of Northern Plains staff alumni are still members, donors, leaders, and staff. Those who went on to become legislators have excellent voting records with Northern Plains. Many went on to work for ally organizations. Northern Plains is proud of spawning such a power base of staff who are leaders in their own right.

### *AFFILIATE GROUPS*

Northern Plains' first local groups existed before Northern Plains was founded – the Bull Mountain Landowners Association in the Shepherd area, and the Rosebud Protective Association near Colstrip. They set a precedent for the affiliates that came later – community-based, semi-autonomous groups that elected their own leaders, managed their own finances, and worked on their own local issues.

At the same time, though, they collaborated, and continue to collaborate, with one another. Relationships with other affiliate groups allow each of the local groups to amplify their power.

Each Northern Plains affiliate is entitled to representation on the Northern Plains Board of Directors.

Board meetings – and the relationships developed there – provided a vehicle for these individuals from different parts of Montana to learn about one another’s situations and help the affiliates to join forces in their fight against pollution, land destruction, and the potential loss of their livelihoods to coal companies. This collaboration continues today, and enables small local groups to take on powers far bigger and more powerful than they are.

This approach enhances the power of individual affiliates by providing allies, and strengthens Northern Plains by surfacing new leaders and building strength in the communities where affiliate are located.

### *BOARD AND TASK FORCES*

**Task forces:** While affiliate groups were organized around the geography of Montana communities, the need arose for organizing around issues that extend beyond local communities. Task forces develop the detailed campaign plans that advance Northern Plains’ work on those issues. Members from affiliates and the membership at large serve on these task forces and carry out much of the work.

Task forces report to the Board of Directors and submit policy recommendations for Board action.

**Board:** The whole of the organization is governed by the Board. Some of its members are affiliate representatives, others (including officers) are elected by the full membership prior to the annual meeting each fall. Officers and at-large representatives are term-limited in their respective positions.

Board members are legally, fiscally, and morally responsible for the organization. They approve funding and spending plans and participate in raising

money to meet the budget. They also bring their personal expertise to bear on issues before the Board. They work with other Board members from diverse backgrounds and perspectives, and develop relationships that allow them to debate and collaborate on issues.

Northern Plains Board members are a hard-working group. They have to digest a large amount of information for each meeting and many of them travel long distances to meetings.

Each active affiliate group is entitled to two seats on the Northern Plains Board of Directors. The six yearly Board meetings are large gatherings, often with nearly 25 member/leaders attending.

### *OUTREACH*

When Northern Plains began, so did a monthly newsletter – members called it the *Plains Truth*. Working with a scant budget, the first issues were multi-page, legal-sized “ditto” copies printed by an old Gestetner Mimeo machine. Dense with information about strip mining and other energy development plans, movement of legislation, and renewable energy, the *Plains Truth* was also sprinkled with cartoons and quotes. Nearly every issue for the first couple of years featured a statement or speech from a Native American, both contemporary and historic.

In an era when rural members depended on weekly newspapers, when no internet existed and many rural people had no TV, the *Plains Truth* became an important resource for people who lived on the land and folks all across the state who cared about those places. (Until the advent of satellite TV, most rural areas couldn’t get channels with antennae, while cable was only offered in the bigger towns.)

The information printed in the *Plains Truth* not only informed members, it disseminated that information to reporters and public officials. It also gave Northern Plains a reputation for credibility that continues today – a group which provides the true facts of important issues.

Within a year of forming, Northern Plains had reached out to individuals in neighboring states. The United Plainsmen Association in North Dakota and Powder River Basin Resource Council in Wyoming formed in the two years after Northern Plains formed. Powder River began as a Northern Plains affiliate. The three groups worked to pass federal strip mine legislation and to get a grip on how much federal coal has been and was being leased for development.

The three groups worked together –until they formed the Western Organization of Resource Councils in 1979. United Plainsmen evolved into the Dakota Resource Council. WORC opened up an office in Washington, D.C., and a Northern Plains staff person transferred to that office and began as the first employee of WORC.

WORC later expanded into Colorado, South Dakota, Idaho, and Oregon. Eight organizations make up WORC:

- Northern Plains Resource Council
- Powder River Basin Resource Council (in Wyoming)
- Dakota Resource Council (in North Dakota, formerly United Plainsmen)
- Western Colorado Alliance (originally Western Colorado Congress)
- Dakota Rural Action (in South Dakota)
- Idaho Organization of Resource Councils
- Oregon Rural Action
- Western Native Voice (in Montana).

WORC played a key role that continues today in training staff and leaders, researching issues, and coordinating work that the member groups undertake in common. This includes keeping member groups apprised of federal legislation or agency action that affects our work, and helping the groups to find key points of contact where the voices of citizens can make a difference.

As of 2020, WORC member groups have a total of 15,000 members and 37 local chapters. Since 1979, WORC has built a grassroots base of concerned and informed citizens working for stewardship and conservation of the land, water, and energy resources; family farms and sustainable agriculture; and the right of citizens to take part in public policy-making decisions.

Together, the WORC network groups have shaped policies at the local, state, and national levels.

In the 1980s, WORC addressed energy policy and family farm agriculture issues, challenging the farm lending practices of private banks and the federal government. WORC helped table the ill-conceived Synthetic Fuels Corporation and to craft farm credit reforms at the state and national levels.

In the decades since then, WORC has addressed issues like the burden that giant agribusiness monopolies have placed on the back of family agriculture, genetically modified crops and the hurt they inflict on family farms, reform of hard rock mining law, oil and gas development and fracking, and strengthening financial bonding for coal companies.

Perhaps WORC's greatest achievement is its trainings and workshops specifically for rural organizers. In 1986, WORC initiated its well-known training workshop, Principles of Community Organizing (POCO), which (as of 2020) has trained more than 2,000 member leaders and community organizers, mostly from the West but also from the rest of the United States.

Northern Plains' history is often intertwined with WORC. Northern Plains and WORC have shared office space through most of their history, first in the historic Stapleton Building in downtown Billings and, since 2006, in an old neighborhood grocery building that the two groups renovated. That building became "Home of the Range," an energy-efficient structure that was honored as Montana's very first LEED Platinum building. It serves as the headquarters for Northern Plains and WORC, and it spawned a heightened awareness of green building in the Billings community, where other LEED-certified building projects followed.

# 19

## ALLIES SOUGHT, COALITIONS FORMED

Operating in sparsely populated areas, it was natural that a big part of the Northern Plains' experience involved participating in coalitions outside the WORC network. Jeanie Alderson describes bringing people together to defeat the Tongue River Railroad:

*We had an amazing legal strategy, but we also ... I think through our fundraisers, our Birney barbecues, which we did for about 19 or 20 years, those brought together the community in a way, and people from outside the state. I'm always amazed that people would come from all over to this valley, and cared so much about it. We would always work with the Northern Cheyenne and with others. I took a trip to Washington DC in 1998, really fighting the Otter Creek coal tracts swap, which was a long story. But that trip was, you know, we had members from the Northern Cheyenne Tribe, we had railroad union folks from two railroads, the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and the United Transportation Union, I think. We had ranchers, and we all went to Washington DC to say, "This whole package of this mine and this railroad is just bad for all of us."*

Northern Plains sought out and worked in alliance with citizen organizations from other coalfield states in Appalachia and in the West to get Congress to pass – and the President to sign – a federal strip mine law.

It was a long journey. Pat Sweeney, the first Staff Director of Northern Plains, moved to Washington, D.C. for three years to lobby full time for the strip mine bill. Members from the coalfields took countless trips to the capitol to testify before congress and lobby for its passage.

President Jimmy Carter signed the Surface Mining Control and Reclamation Act on August 3, 1977. The US Office of Surface Mining presented Northern Plains a Citizens Award on SMCRA's 20th anniversary for work in creating the law and persistent efforts on coal issues since.

## *NATIVE AMERICAN ALLIES*

From the start, Northern Plains banded together with many Northern Cheyenne individuals, tribal organizations, and tribal government. Early on many people from the Crow tribe also participated in efforts to slow down coal mining. For many years, Northern Plains worked side-by-side with Native Action, a nonprofit on the Northern Cheyenne Reservation.

Northern Plains did substantial legal and organizing work with the Northern Cheyenne Tribal Council in order to establish the Class I Air Standard (approved by the Environmental Protection Agency August 5, 1977, for the Reservation. This significant and enduring victory demanded strict (at the time) air pollution controls on the smokestacks of Units 3 and 4 of the Colstrip power plants.

Between 2000 and 2010, Northern Plains and the Northern Cheyenne joined forces to oversee coal bed methane development – a method of natural gas extraction that drained aquifers and produced large volumes of salty wastewater. By partnering in legal cases and exerting public pressure on the Montana Department of Environmental Quality, we were able – together – to prevent methane development from doing substantial harm to area aquifers (as it did in Wyoming).

The 38-year campaign to kill the Tongue River Railroad involved much collaboration between Northern Plains and the Northern Cheyenne, as well as other allies. For a time, labor unions of railroad workers (primarily the United Transportation Union and the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers) helped fight the Tongue River Railroad because it would force relocation of workers from their existing stations. But when the TRR proposal later changed those plans, the railroad unions then sided with the speculators backing the project.

The final version of the Tongue River Railroad envisioned transporting Montana coal to the Northwest Coast for export to customers in Asia. That export plans would have impacted towns across Montana, Idaho, and Washington, and would have had a major effects on the small Lummi Reservation that borders Puget Sound. The Lummi and other residents of the Pacific Northwest came to oppose

the Tongue River Railroad because they saw its potential for damaging the places where they live as well as its gigantic contribution to climate change.

Since 2016, Northern Plains has provided a home for a totem pole that the Lummi Tribe of Puget Sound gave to the Northern Cheyenne as a gesture of solidarity in fighting against coal industry schemes to ship Montana coal to Asia on the now-dead Tongue River Railroad.

Despite daunting odds, Northern Plains' history tells us that when we stand together to protect our land and communities, we make Montana a better place. Though rich in coal, oil, gas, minerals and other extractive resources, Montana (and eastern Montana especially) has been spared much of the devastation experienced by other places that also are "resource-rich." This protection came from the heart and work of people who banded together, got organized, and fought to protect their homeland. The ability to endure controversy, try new things, and work with people different from themselves was necessary to have an effective voice in the decisions that affect their lives.

The victories won by Northern Plains have often boiled down to never giving up – fighting back for what they cherished. Ellen Pfister offers this advice to other who face struggles of injustice: "Well, if you're up against a big fight, I'd say join together and be prepared for it to take your life over. Because if you don't do it, you'll be run over. But if you back off, they've already won, and I don't like to let them win without a fight."

The late Randy Udall, an energy expert, keynoted the 2008 Northern Plains annual meeting. In his speech, he told Northern Plains members: "I am stunned by the courage you've had collectively, by your endurance over the past 37 years. You have always fought long odds."

A set of core beliefs have guided Northern Plains for nearly a half-century, beliefs that include:

- Democracy (for society at large, and for our organization as well)
- Fairness
- Participation in Public Life
- Environmental Ethics
- Building Bridges between People
- Family-Based Agriculture
- Homegrown Prosperity
- Decentralized Renewable Energy.

The ranch families who formed the Northern Plains Resource Council probably didn't anticipate how long their creation would last, and how many big issues it would take on. But, in his 1991 speech to fellow members, outgoing Northern Plains Chair Paul Hawks left them with this view ahead:

*So, go from here knowing that there is a strong organization behind you, that you are part of a family. Know that as we organize around issues that we care deeply about, these values bind us together. And that makes the battle worth fighting and renews our determination to win. We can pass on a land, a community that enriches our children's souls.*