Grassroots democracy is back in action

The 2021 Legislative Session has officially begun! Throughout our history, Northern Plains members have had a major and lasting influence on Montana’s laws and policies. We’ve secured the right to a clean and healthful environment for all Montanans, crafted bedrock environmental protections and community input for all major energy projects, and always stood strong to keep Montana’s air, land, and water clean. Some of our best work over the years has been to prevent truly horrible bills from polluting our law books, and we know we’ll be doing a great deal of that in 2021.

We anticipate attacks on water quality standards and the radioactive oil waste disposal rules you fought so hard to gain. We know the usual suspects will work to avoid accountability to the people of Montana who value our unspoiled landscapes, pristine waterways, and family farms and ranches above all else. For almost 50 years, we’ve gone toe-to-toe with these forces, and we’ve always proved that the power of grassroots democracy will rise to the occasion. Despite the challenges of today, we will do the same during Montana’s 67th legislative session.

The first challenge we have to overcome is ensuring that we can safely and meaningfully participate in hearings and citizen lobbying efforts during the ongoing pandemic. Unfortunately, the majority bodies in the legislature have crafted rules that do not follow CDC guidelines. Masks are not required in the Capitol building, for instance. At Northern Plains, safety is our first priority. We will never ask and do not want any of our members to risk their health by participating in any in-person hearings or other events that fail to follow recommended public health guidelines.

The good news is that Montanans can testify and participate in all hearings via the Zoom video conferencing platform. While the process is far from perfect, we’re relieved to know that folks have some method to safely engage with the democratic process. We look forward to seeing you on zoom soon!

What we know so far about virtual hearings

As the second week of the session winds down, we have a better sense of how virtual hearings work. While the loss of face-to-face interaction with legislators presents drawbacks, hearings have gone smoothly for Northern Plains’ members thus far. Virtual hearings have their upside, too. Livingston-based member Joan Kresich gave testimony in a recent hearing, and had this to say about the experience:

“The ease of access for virtual testimony really opens doors to our democracy,” said Joan. “I found the process extremely easy to navigate. Friends and neighbors who normally wouldn’t have the time to drive to Helena have told me that they will be testifying in upcoming hearings given the virtual format. It’s inspiring to know that, despite the obvious challenges of the day, Montanans are finding new ways to make their voices heard!”

Montana’s energy future at a crossroads

The 2021 legislative session finds Montana at a crossroads. Will we rise to the occasion, meeting the demands of a 21st century powered by clean energy? Or will we cling to the past as long as possible, burdening upcoming generations with fewer jobs, lost revenue, an unhealthy climate, and polluted air, water, and land? Will we opt for a more democratic energy future where Montanans have a greater say in how they power their homes and businesses, or will we continue down the path of sweetheart deals for privately owned monopoly utilities? Bills introduced thus far address these issues with differing visions.

We are excited about bills like HB 17 and SB 7 that would make tax credits for renewable energy home upgrades refundable, helping lower and middle income families go solar. We also like HB 99, which would remove the mechanism (“pre-approval”) that allows NorthWestern Energy to shift its business risks and financial burdens onto customers.

Unfortunately, we also saw SB 85 introduced this week, a bill that would double the tax burden on wind energy development, effectively killing a golden opportunity for Montana to use our existing infrastructure to power the Northwest region with renewables for generations to come. We are watching closely as other bills are prepped that seek to prop up the aging Colstrip power plant, while placing more unreasonable roadblocks in front of clean energy opportunities.

Stay tuned for details in the coming days and weeks about how you can lend your voice to support a clean, 21st-century energy agenda for Montana!

BILLS WE SUPPORT

HB 17 - Extend alternative energy tax credits to all income levels
Rep. Jim Hamilton (D-Bozeman)

HB 17 would revise the state alternative energy system tax credit (currently up to $500) to be fully refunded if the tax credit amount exceeds the tax liability of an individual. (In other words, if an individual only owes $100 in state income taxes, they could receive the remaining $400 of this tax credit as a refund.) Currently, the tax credit is lost for those who are required to pay little or no state income taxes, meaning this financial tool is reserved for the most affluent Montanans. This bill removes barriers to clean energy.

HB 94 - Expand support for Montana’s next generation of ag producers
Rep. Kenneth Walsh (R-Twin Bridges)

HB 94 would expand the Montana Agriculture Student Loan Assistance Program. If passed, the program would include assistance for student loans from private lenders beyond current law, which only provides assistance for federal student loans. College-educated farmers and ranchers who are Montana residents can apply for loan assistance from the state for up to 5 years at a rate of $5,000 per year (up to $25,000), with a sum not to exceed...
50% of the total loan amount. This bill would give young farmers and ranchers a leg up as they begin their careers, extending Montana's ag traditions into the next generation!

HB 99 - Defend Montana energy customers from pre-approval
Rep. Denise Hayman (D-Bozeman)

HB 99 would repeal the “pre-approval” process from state law. Pre-approval allows Montana's largest monopoly energy utility, NorthWestern Energy, to get permission from the Public Service Commission to shift the costs of operating and maintaining power generation facilities to customers. This creates a dynamic where captive ratepayers assume the financial risks of these acquisitions while executives and shareholders enjoy the profits. NorthWestern tried to use this scheme in 2020 to buy a larger share of the aging Colstrip Power Plant. HB 99 would protect consumers by ensuring power companies can't shift all of their business risks and costs onto customers for generations to come.

SB 4 - Keep Montana's Indigenous Communities Safe
Sen. Jason Small (R – Busby)

In Montana, indigenous peoples are four times more likely to go missing than non-indigenous people. SB 4 would extend the Montana Missing Indigenous Persons Task Force until 2023 in order to improve cooperation and accountability between federal, state, local, and tribal law enforcement while addressing jurisdictional barriers. The disproportionate threat to indigenous peoples' health and safety must be addressed before we can meaningfully tackle conservation issues. Personal safety for all is a prerequisite for accomplishing any other work.

SB 7 - Expand and extend alternative energy tax credits for all
Sen. Jill Cohenour (D - East Helena)

Similar to HB 17, SB 7 would revise the state alternative energy system tax credit to be refunded if the tax credit amount exceeds the tax liability of an individual. SB 7 would also increase the tax credit from $500 to as much as $800 per individual. As an example, if an individual only owes $100 in state income taxes, they would receive the remaining $700 of this tax credit as a refund. This bill increases incentives and expands access to clean energy to all income levels!
Next week we expect Sen. Mary McNally (D-Billings) to introduce a C-PACE bill. C-PACE (Commercial Property Assessed Capital Enhancements) may be familiar to many of you, as we’ve worked to introduce this program in sessions past. We’ve come right to the edge of the finish line in previous years and learned a lot along the way. We’re ready to pull out all of the stops in 2021! Here are some details about C-PACE:

Commercial Property Assessed Capital Enhancements (C-PACE)

Montana’s business owners could save big money on their utility bills by improving their buildings with energy-saving upgrades. However, the upfront costs are an expensive barrier to most property owners. C-PACE removes that financial barrier, allowing Montana businesses to save money while conserving energy and creating jobs!

C-PACE is a financing tool that allows property owners to secure 100% upfront financing for energy efficiency, water conservation, and renewable energy upgrades to commercial properties. The cost of these upgrades is repaid as a small assessment on the property’s annual tax bill. C-PACE financing is designed so that the annual energy savings from these upgrades is greater than the assessment on the annual property tax bill.

The program is completely voluntary for those interested and is so successful that it has been enabled in 37 other states. Let’s make Montana the 38th state to enable C-PACE!

Northern Plains member and Miles City rancher, Mark Fix with his solar panel.

To learn more about C-PACE, visit: mtpace.com