COOL warms up with first hearing in House Ag Committee!

Montana Country-of-Origin Labeling (COOL) is the first step to reforming a broken agricultural system that currently allows beef and pork imported from other countries to be labeled “Product of USA” even when it’s only repackaged in the U.S. HB 324, The Country-of-Origin Placarding Act of 2021, sponsored by Rep. Frank Smith (D-Poplar) has strong support with 19 bipartisan co-sponsors. The bill is very straightforward. COOL simply requires grocers to put a sign in their meat case for pork and beef that says either “Born, raised, and processed in the USA” or “Imported-Origin Unlabeled.”

HB 324 had its first hearing in the House Agriculture Committee on Thursday, February 11th. We want to thank all of the Northern Plains members who did an excellent job testifying in support of COOL including Jeanie Alderson, Adela Awner, John Bailey, Jean Dahlman, Peter Mickelsen, Rex Reilly, Linda Roche, and Scott Sweeney!

Northern Plains Chair Jeanie Alderson asked legislators to lead the way in restoring Country-of-Origin Labeling nationally, saying,

“In Montana, we pride ourselves on our independence and our ranching heritage. Agriculture is our number one industry. Let’s show the rest of the country what it means to stand up for ranchers.”

We’re ready to take the bull by the horns to steer COOL out of committee!

We need your help to get COOL passed!

The House Agriculture Committee might be voting on HB 324 when this bulletin lands in your mailbox. You can check our website at northernplains.org/2021-bills/ and look for HB 324 to see its status. If COOL has not been voted on, please take a moment to tell the committee members that we want COOL restored in Montana!

- Call (406) 444-4800 and ask to leave a message for the House Agriculture Committee
- Tell them to VOTE YES on HB 324

(If the bill has already passed out of committee, you can simply leave a message for your representative ahead of the full House floor vote!)
C-PACE gets voted out of committee, and moves on to full Senate!

We did it! Our Commercial Property Assessed Capital Enhancements (C-PACE) bill, SB 147, was passed out of the Senate Energy and Telecommunications Committee on February 11th! Bill sponsor Sen. Mary McNally (D-Billings) did an excellent job presenting the bill and answering questions during its committee hearing (thank you, Mary!) Our strategy to be disciplined in our messaging during the 67th session is working! We have stayed laser-focused on how C-PACE creates jobs, drives economic development, and saves money for small business owners and ag producers. All legislators can get on board with this message, and C-PACE delivers on all counts. Stay tuned as we prepare for a full senate floor vote coming soon!

All the dirt on our soil health bill

SB 180, our soil health bill, was introduced by Sen. Pat Flowers (D-Belgrade) late last week. This bipartisan effort is co-sponsored by Sen. Butch Gillespie (R-Ethridge). If passed, SB 180 will create a state-appointed task force to explore how Montana can promote and support farming and ranching methods that improve the health of our soils, which will increase yields and profitability on Montana’s vast agricultural lands.

This task force will take the form of a subcommittee housed within the Montana Environmental Quality Council. Knowledgeable experts can coordinate research, share information, and provide resources to any producers who voluntarily want to take measures to improve their soil health. The bill takes a big tent approach requiring appointees from conservation districts, universities, government ag agencies, tribal representatives, nonprofit ag groups, and independent ag operations.

This research and coordination is vital for Montana’s agricultural industry to keep up with current trends. Local, state, and federal governments are implementing healthy soil work and research across the nation, and we can’t let Montana’s producers fall behind. We know that healthy soils create more prosperity for Montana farmers and ranchers, so let’s make sure SB 180 gets over the finish line in 2021!

House committee votes to keep monopoly utility interests above the interests of Montana energy customers

We were strong supporters of HB 99, the “Defend energy customers from pre-approval” bill sponsored by Rep. Denise Hayman (D-Bozeman.) HB 99 would have repealed the “pre-approval” process from state law and, in doing so, would have protected consumers by ensuring that power companies like NorthWestern Energy can’t shift all of their business risks and costs onto customers. Unfortunately, the bill was tabled by the House Energy, Technology, and Federal Relations Committee on Monday.

We want to thank Rep. Hayman for introducing a smart and needed bill, thank the members of the committee who voted for the bill, and – most of all – we want to thank everyone for making phone calls and sending emails in support of HB 99. Even though “pre-approval” wasn’t repealed, rest assured that we won’t ever let NorthWestern Energy use this shady process without putting up a fight to protect Montana energy customers!
BILL POSITIONS

BILLS WE SUPPORT

**HB 103 - Make democratic participation easier for Montana's electric co-ops**
Rep. Willis Curdy (D-Missoula)

HB 103 would allow electric co-ops to meet remotely, via online meetings, to change their bylaws and conduct other business. Too often, attending co-op meetings requires that member-owners drive long distances, miss work, or negotiate other impractical inconveniences. HB 103 would remove barriers to participation, making Montana's electric cooperatives more democratic and community-focused!

**HB 324 - Establish mandatory country-of-origin labeling for beef and pork in Montana**
Rep. Frank Smith (D-Poplar)

Currently, beef and pork that are raised outside of the U.S. and only processed in the country can be fraudulently labeled “Product of USA.” HB 324 would require retailers to make a reasonable effort to display a sign or placard indicating if beef or pork are:

1. Born, raised, and processed in the USA, or
2. Imported/origin unlabeled

This is a simple and straightforward bill, and the first step to fixing our broken livestock system. It ensures consumers can confidently choose USA beef and pork at the grocery store and that ranchers have an honest market for their product.

**SB 146 - Establish Indigenous Peoples’ Day**
Sen. Shane A Morigeau (D-Missoula)

SB 146 would replace Columbus Day with Indigenous Peoples’ Day on the list of legal, state-recognized holidays in Montana. Replacing Columbus Day with Indigenous Peoples’ Day would be an easy and meaningful way for our state to honor the original inhabitants of this land and embrace the diversity that makes Montana strong. It also presents an opportunity to learn from our past and tell an accurate story about the experiences of indigenous people in Montana.

**SB 180 - Create a task force to support healthy soils in Montana**
Sen. Pat Flowers (D-Belgrade)

SB 180 would create a state-appointed task force to explore how Montana can promote and support farming and ranching methods that improve the health of our soils, which will increase yields and profitability on Montana’s vast agricultural lands. This task force will take the form of a subcommittee housed within the Montana Environmental Quality Council. Knowledgeable experts can coordinate research, share information, and provide resources to any producers who voluntarily want to take measures to improve their soil health. SB 180 will help Montana’s farmers and ranchers keep up with national soil health trends that generate greater prosperity for ag operations!

BILLS WE OPPOSE

**HB 176 - Diminish Montanans’ democratic right to vote**
Rep. Sharon Greef (R – HD88)

HB 176 would make it harder for Montanans to register to vote, diminishing our democratic right to have a say in who represents us and the decisions made that affect our lives. HB 176 would ban voter registration after 5 p.m. the Friday before an election and ban same-day voter registration. Diminishing these voting rights could disproportionately affect working people, single parents, and other Montanans whose busy lives and work schedules bring challenges to accessing polling places during regular hours. Ensuring citizens have a say in the policies that affect our land, water, and lives is a fundamental value of Northern Plains. Any effort to curtail voting rights is a threat to our core values.

STAY ENGAGED THIS SESSION

Visit the Legislature page of our website to find everything you need to stay informed and take action during the legislature:

NorthernPlains.org/issues/legislature/
HB 245 - Why shouldn’t we let NorthWestern Energy charge Montanans too much for their energy?
Rep. Larry Brewster (R-Billings)

HB 245 would harm energy consumers by distorting the responsibility of the Public Service Commission (PSC) to protect energy customers when utilities apply for new energy sources, such as a new gas-powered plant. Rather than require that NorthWestern Energy’s applications for new power plants illustrate a benefit to consumers, HB 245 would require the PSC to do the legwork and research to prove with evidence that NorthWestern’s plan is harmful to consumers. The bill would also require a compressed timeline for the PSC to fulfill this burden. HB 245 would shift the role of the PSC away from protecting consumers while greasing the skids for NorthWestern Energy to more easily overcharge customers.

HB 359 - Kill solar in Montana
Rep. Larry Brewster (R-Billings)

This bill changes the rate at which solar customers are credited for the energy they put back into the grid. Right now, solar customers are credited 1 kilowatt on their power bill for every 1 kilowatt that they put back on the grid. This one for one rate is considered fair and is a huge part of the affordability of going solar. This bill would reduce that rate by approximately 70%, thereby making it far less affordable to go solar. If passed, this new rate would apply to current solar customers as well as future customers, impacting the 3,000-plus Montanans who already have rooftop solar, but also our libraries, fire stations, non-profits, and small businesses. In 2019, NorthWestern Energy attempted to destroy the solar industry through a rate case in which they proposed the same rate restructuring. Northern Plains won our campaign to get the Public Service Commission to deny NorthWestern Energy’s proposed changes to residential solar. This bill is an attempt by NorthWestern Energy to overturn a decision that didn’t go their way.

TAKE ACTION!
Go to leg.mt.gov/web-messaging/ to email or call (406) 444-4800 and ask to leave a message for the House Energy, Technology, and Federal Relations Committee. Tell them to VOTE NO on HB 359!