In barrage of new bills, democracy takes a beating

The frenzied 67th Legislative Session saw almost twice as many bills heard in the two weeks before transmittal compared to sessions past. This is simply more legislation than can be properly digested by the body politic.

We saw floor sessions drone on well past midnight, and several dozen bills scheduled for hearings in one sitting. We also witnessed huge numbers of bills get both second and third readings in the same day. The volume and pace of this legislative binge meant that bills couldn’t be adequately reviewed and debated, and citizen participation took a big hit. We can’t participate if we don’t know a bill is getting a hearing. The attitude of too many legislators seemed to be, “Let’s get as many of these bills passed as possible -- no matter the flaws and no matter the broken process -- and we’ll try to fix them later…”

SB 358, a bill that seeks to repeal numeric nutrient standards for Montana’s water quality, is a perfect example. This bill was assigned a hearing late in the day, after the deadline for the public to sign up to testify via Zoom. Northern Plains staff and members raised a ruckus to make sure we could testify on that particular bill, but it still got rammed through with the sponsor, Sen. John Esp (R- Big Timber), admitting it needed later changes. How many other rushed hearings shut out participation during this feeding frenzy? We may not know until the tables are cleared and the crumbs are all swept away.

Despite these strains on our democratic system, Northern Plains members are finding ways to step up and make a big difference. This is an extraordinary challenge, but you are still rising to the occasion!

The worst bills still polluting the halls of Helena

While some thoughtful legislation has been proposed and advanced during this session’s legislative frenzy, entirely too much political pollution is still stinking up the Capitol. Dozens of bills seem drafted with the perverse intent to make Montana less safe, less inclusive, less democratic, and less protective of our clean air and water. As we move towards the second half of the session, we have identified five bills as top priorities for defeat. Please take some time to let legislators know that these bills are a step backwards for Montana!

1. HB 481 – Criminalize free speech and penalize farmers and ranchers

This dangerous bill has so many problems, it’s hard to list them all. The bill’s purported aim is to “protect energy infrastructure” but it’s written with vague language that threatens farmers, non-profit organizations, and everyday Montanans with excessive fines and long prison sentences for innocent acts that could be misconstrued as vandalism, trespassing, or “conspiring” to do damage to energy infrastructure. This authoritarian-style overreach has no place in a free and democratic society.

2. SB 328 – Allow coal companies to shirk their responsibility to fully clean up their messes

This bill is especially insulting to the hard work and legacy of Northern Plains’ historic victories establishing strong

TAKE ACTION

Visit our website at: northernplains.org/2021-bills/ to see the status of these bills. Then call (406) 444-4800 to leave a message for the relevant committee members, your senator, or representative.

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standards for coal mine reclamation. SB 328 would make it easier for coal companies to get financial bonds returned to them before fully reclaiming mining lands, threatening to leave behind degraded land and polluted water.

3. *HB 176 – Diminish Montanans’ democratic right to vote*

This bill would ban same-day voter registration as well as registration after 5 p.m. the Friday before an election. Single parents and working people with busy lives and demanding job schedules would be targets for voter disenfranchisement should this anti-democratic bill pass.

4. *SB 323 – Put politics above state agency expertise*

This bill is a blatant power grab by the legislative branch that would allow politicians to micromanage and undercut career professional experts at state agencies. SB 323 would require legislative approval of state agency rule-making if the projected cost to business resulting from the rule-making was more than $1 million dollars. This price tag means that rule-making in almost every area of government would have to be approved by the legislature, including rules governing environment and health issues. This takes the power out of the hands of the experts who determine how best to achieve clean air, clean water, and strong public health and safety measures in Montana. SB 323 could result in a more polluted state with less safe drinking water and dirtier air, in addition to countless other threats to Montanans’ health and safety.

5. *HB 498 & HB 527 – Terrible twosome destroying citizen-initiated zoning rights*

We’re lumping these two bills together because they use different strategies to accomplish the same goal of curtailing citizen-initiated zoning (CIZ) rights. CIZs give local landowners the opportunity to guide future development in their communities. HB 498 carves out oil and gas development as legally immune from restrictions or prohibitions through CIZs. HB 527 allows counties to include mineral owners as a special category for required signatures for CIZs, making the threshold for signature gathering much higher and more onerous.

As you’ve proven throughout our history and throughout this session – your voice makes a difference. Thank you for taking the time to contact legislators about these bills and for standing up to protect Montana’s irreplaceable resources!

A cause for clean energy celebration!

Despite the many dangerous bills we’ve seen slithering their way along the legislative fast track, we’re encouraged to see some great bills standing tall and (hopefully) striding toward the finish line. SB 7, introduced by Sen. Jill Cohenour (D – East Helena) would expand and extend alternative energy tax credits for all income levels. This would make going solar more viable for more Montanans! SB 7 passed the full senate and is currently in the House Taxation Committee.

HB 103, introduced by Rep. Willis Curdy (D – Missoula) would allow electric co-ops to meet remotely, via online meetings, to change their bylaws and conduct other business. We know that some of the biggest barriers to seeing co-ops
SB 180 goes down after a hard fight, but our soil health work advances

Northern Plains members really dug deep to advance SB 180, our soil health bill. SB 180 passed out of the Senate Natural Resources Committee, but didn’t get past the senate floor vote, despite a lengthy and spirited debate that raised the profile of this issue. Thank you to primary sponsor Sen. Pat Flowers (D – Belgrade) and co-sponsor Sen. Burch Gillespie (R – Ethridge). Even though we came up short legislatively, we built strong and lasting coalitions for our soil work, and we have no doubt these efforts will bear fruit in the weeks, months, and years to come.

Legislator Spotlight: Representative Connie Keough

Rep. Connie Keough (D – Missoula) has a long history fighting for clean air, land, and water. Her work as both a Northern Plains member and a legislator has always centered on keeping Montana’s communities safe and thriving. Connie was active in the early days of the Stillwater Protective Association. Since then, she has made big contributions to our clean energy work and served as an officer on the Northern Plains Board.

Connie is one of Northern Plains’ most tenacious membership recruiters. She’s comfortable fundraising and enjoys connecting with people, so asking people to join is a no-brainer. “It’s different than any other organization I’ve ever been a part of,” she says. “Northern Plains people are a family. It’s the connection to the land and to community values.”

When asked how people can be effective at the legislature, Connie offers this advice:

- Take time to learn the legislature’s website (mt.leg.gov). This year, you have to sign up a day in advance to testify in a committee (note: Northern Plains staff can help you with this).
- Legislators value short, simple, and specific communication, with good facts or talking points they can use. It also helps messages stand out to personalize them with why you care or who you are.

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It’s important to celebrate these milestones and remember that our work in Helena can always result in positive change for Montana!
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- Be timely. Legislators track hundreds of bills, so the closer communication is to a vote or hearing, the more memorable it is.
- Find out what individual legislators care about, and your shared values. If you can get to know your legislator (or others around the state), do so. People pay extra attention to messages from people they know and trust.

We appreciate all of Connie’s great work as both a legislator and member. We are especially grateful for her support of HB 324, our Country-of-Origin Labeling bill. She has also voted in favor of other bills that support ag producers like HB 235, which helps farmers and ranchers get their food to Montanans at all income levels. A stalwart champion of democratic participation, Connie also supported HB 103, the bill expanding electric co-op participation opportunities, and she has voted against bills that diminish voting rights and citizen-initiated zoning rights.

Connie says her goal at the legislature is to make Montana a better place for her grandkids and their generation.

Please check out our legislature page to stay up-to-date on everything happening at the legislature, and to see all of the bills we are currently tracking. Plus, we have resources for how YOU can participate remotely, and make your voice heard this session!

Go to: northernplains.org/issues/legislature.