C-PACE HEADS TO GOVERNOR’S DESK!
A LONG AWAITED VICTORY

Six years ago, Northern Plains began the campaign to bring C-PACE to Montana. Now we celebrate this important victory for Montana’s clean energy future!

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FIGHTING FOR MONTANA’S FUTURE

This legislative session saw many setbacks, but even more members turning out in high numbers to protect Montana.

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A YEAR INTO THE PANDEMIC...

March marked one year into the pandemic. With this anniversary came the reminder of all we have accomplished during this sobering time.

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Northern Plains Resource Council is a grassroots conservation and family agriculture group. Northern Plains organizes Montana citizens to protect our water quality, family farms and ranches, and unique quality of life.

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$1200+ Rider of the Big Sky
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Endowment
The Northern Plains Endowment is a permanent fund established to help sustain Northern Plains’ work into the future. If you want to make a donation, a memorial gift, or a bequest to this fund, please contact the Northern Plains office.

Western Organization of Resource Councils
Northern Plains is a founding member of the Western Organization of Resource Councils. WORC is a regional network of eight grassroots community organizations that include 15,200 members in seven Western states. WORC helps its member groups succeed by providing training and coordinating regional issue campaigns. Visit www.worc.org

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“What Northern Plains teaches us is that an organized people with heart and grit can stand up to any Goliath and win.”

- Pat Sweeney, Standing Together, The Origin Story of Northern Plains Resource Council

Being your Chair has given me a bird’s eye view of some of Northern Plains’ amazing heart and grit in action. On top of a hard year, it has been a really hard couple of months. The challenges and losses from both a global pandemic and the Montana legislature could lead one to think that the Goliaths have gained in numbers and are greedier and meaner than ever. We have watched things we hold dear like a democratic process in governing, the right of all of us to speak up and cast our vote, our air, land and water, and rights to health and safety, all be threatened. It could be easy to lose heart and be really fearful for our communities and our future.

But thankfully, we belong to a team, to Northern Plains. You – the staff, members, and leaders of this organization have inspired me and I have felt in awe of not just the work we do, but of how we do it. We don’t simply work together on issues, we respect, trust, and care for each other.

It’s impossible to share all the ways we work as a team but here a few examples that have inspired me with their grit this legislative session:

1. Our Legislative Executive Committee is the front line of our legislative work. This committee is made up of our leaders from across the state and meets every week during the session to discuss and strategize around our legislative priorities. They must balance direction from the board and our task forces as they take on a huge number of bills and decide how to address them.

2. Our Country-of-Origin Labeling committee. They met weekly leading up to and during the legislative session, bringing together members from all over our state, working with other allied organizations and our very energetic Central Montana Resource Council. Even though the bill failed, the power this team built will have more important long term consequences for our work moving forward.

3. Our Clean Energy Task Force and Coal Task Force. They came together to stop the very terrible SB 379, NorthWestern Energy’s billion-dollar boondoggle bill, which - if passed - would change the course of both Task Force’s campaign work.

4. Folks ranching with coal. When all of our years of work on reclamation would be erased in one bill, members from our Coal Task Force and staff came up with workable amendments to make the bill less damaging. They combined their energy with wisdom, and creativity with healthy pragmatism to get vital amendments included in this really bad bill.

These are just a few examples. Each of our Task Forces could tell stories of the Goliaths they have faced and the wins they have had this session, with your help. And the legislative session is only a fraction of the work that Northern Plains, all of you, have been a team on over the last couple months.

Often when we think of the big movements in our history, we think only of individuals; but we really should be talking about communities and teams of people that make the difference. Leadership is not simply about one person; it is about a team. It is about relationships and the love of our place and its peoples. And in recent weeks I have seen that a great team is not just about the leaders or the people on a team at one particular time, a truly great team is built over many years by many great people.

To all of you who continue to support Northern Plains and who show up with heart and grit, with humor and care: thank you. I am so very proud to be on this amazing team with you.

- Jeanie Alderson
Chair
Simon Cecil on taking care of the place we call home

By Caroline Canarios

Simon Cecil’s work with Northern Plains Resource Council and his local affiliate, Yellowstone Valley Citizens Council, began in 2017 when he met an organizer on a trip to the now closed Billings grocery, Good Earth Market. Simon and his spouse Ali had just relocated from Minnesota where he had worked with (and founded) social and racial justice organizations. Joining Northern Plains not only allowed Simon to build a better future for Montana, but also to find a network of people that became his close friends. He says, “Northern Plains is an amazing organization. I’ve gained skills and made friends in ways that I couldn’t have imagined when I moved to Billings.”

Simon immediately became involved in Yellowstone Valley Citizens Council, jumping into YVCC’s Better Billings Sustainability Committee to work on a Climate Action Plan and urban sustainability issues. Only a few months later, Simon became YVCC’s treasurer, applying his business management knowledge to keeping our books. He also shared his philosophy that YVCC’s funds are best spent in carrying out our organizing work.

Over just three years, Simon has taken on increasing leadership with Northern Plains, and soon became one of YVCC’s representatives on the Northern Plains board.

The new board position provided an opportunity to join Northern Plains’ diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) board team. Throughout his work with YVCC and Northern Plains, Simon has exemplified member commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion. He has prompted our organization to consider how we can better support Montana’s tribal communities and communities of color. As a member of the DEI team, Simon also helped craft the Northern Plains statement supporting the Black Lives Matter and Native Lives Matter movements and has helped plan and facilitate DEI trainings for our board, staff, and membership.

Simon’s leadership has also expanded to his current role as Northern Plains’ treasurer, where his business experience helps us manage our fiscal affairs. And along with dedicating himself to our DEI work and board, Simon also somehow finds time to serve on Northern Plains’ legislative executive committee, the member body that guides our positions on legislative bills, good and bad.

Simon has a passion for keeping companies and legislators accountable, “It’s so clear that without us standing up for our friends, our families, and our communities, we would see the executives at NorthWestern Energy and the powerbrokers at the Stockgrowers Association run our communities into the ground without a second thought, if it made them a profit. We are the force pushing back and taking care of all the places we call home.”

Leaders like Simon are critical to Northern Plains’ growth as an organization and to creating a Montana where true prosperity begins with healthy air, land, and water.

“I love knowing that I work alongside folks who have decades of experience as well as people like me who are newer to this work,” he says. “The experience and care that have gone into building Northern Plains is remarkable. And I love that all of us with our different experiences are shoulder-to-shoulder, fighting for our communities and our families, day-in and day-out.”
Montana's 67th legislative session is set to conclude by the end of April, with the exception of some final decisions in May about how to spend the $2.7 billion in federal COVID relief funds.

From the start in January, Northern Plains members made contacting legislators a top priority...and it shows! THANK YOU for showing up to protect Montana. Here’s a look at the cumulative comments as reported by the Legislative Services Division. They are the nice folks who collect your contact info and bill positions when you call 444-4800. For more snapshots of public engagement at the 2021 legislature, visit leg.mt.gov/bills/2021/reports/.

Establishing Country of Origin Labeling (COOL) for beef and pork in Montana (HB 324 and SB 210). Both tabled in committee: 466 messages in support. 9 messages against.

Criminalize free speech and intimidate the right to protest (HB 481). Passed by both chambers, headed to the Governor’s desk at the time of this writing: 20 messages in support. 486 messages against.

Kill rooftop solar in Montana and change net metering rates (HB 359). Withdrawn from consideration by the sponsor (thanks to your messages!): 264 messages in support. 1372 messages against.


REMEMBER that your senator and representative need to hear your perspective. Give them a call or send them an email when the session is over to thank them for a good vote, hold them accountable for a bad vote, or both! Northern Plains will publish a Voting Record scorecard this summer, so you can have our major legislative priorities and results at your fingertips. To find out more about your legislators, visit leg.mt.gov/map/ or contact Makenna, our Legislative Organizer, at makenna@northernplains.org.

Phone canvass shares hope in hard times

Northern Plains’ legislative phone canvass team is talking to all kinds of Montanans about all kinds of bills. Some of our conversations are easy; others, not so much!

Plenty of the people we talk to are happy to take action. They are enthusiastic about our values and relieved to hear that we are standing up for them. We often hear: “Thank you for the work you’re doing! We need it now!”

Some people outright disagree with us. The canvass team agrees, however, that those aren’t the worst conversations. The worst conversations are with those who think their voice doesn’t matter, or that their effort isn’t worth it.

One of the best conversations I’ve had started this way. “Oh it won’t matter if I call him. I tell you what, he’s just going to vote the party line,” she said, resigned and certain. I pointed out that we only needed one vote in committee to kill the bill. “Really?” She perked up. “I’ll get my pen.”

We talked for a while after that. She was more than twice my age, and worn out from all that time watching politics that didn’t go her way.

Yet, our conversation spurred her to take action. Even more important, I reminded her that she’s not alone, and that there are others out there learning how to continue the fight for the values we share. This kind of conversation is the most meaningful, on both sides of the phone call.
In talking with senior lobbyists, longtime government officials, and founding members alike, we hear a resounding phrase: “Montana’s natural resource policy landscape would look a lot different if it weren’t for Northern Plains.” This statement rings especially true when reflecting on the 2021 legislative session as a whole.

You wrote letters to the editor, engaged in our phone trees, fearlessly learned new platforms, rolled up your sleeves, and got to work even when the odds were stacked against us. You fought for a say in local decision-making processes (Rep. Gunderson’s HB 498 and Rep. Nave’s HB 527) and amended a bill to ensure that industry didn’t receive a free pass to pollute our land and waterways (Sen. Ankney’s SB 328). You got innovative clean energy financing solutions further in the legislative process than ever before (Sen. McNally’s SB 147) and stopped bad solar bills in their tracks (Rep. Brewster’s HB 359) while also expanding markets for Montana producers (Rep. Ler’s HB 336 and Rep. Kassmier’s HB 660).

This legislature was filled with gains and losses for our work, much of which will continue long after legislators return home this spring. But before we pack our bags, take a look at the top 5 “worst of the worst” bills we saw this session:

1. SB 379 - Northwestern Energy’s billion dollar boondoggle that would increase customer bills and legislate monopoly profits.
2. HB 481 - Criminalize protest and intimidate free speech.
3. SB 358 - Undermine Montana’s water quality standards and threaten river health with more lenient nitrogen and phosphorous limits.
4. HB 176 - Diminish Montanan’s right to vote by ending same-day voter registration.
5. HB 527 - Curtail citizen participation in local zoning laws.

As of this writing, we’re still not sure how some of these bills will shake out, but we are sure of one thing… Northern Plains members don’t back down from a fight. We will keep fighting to protect our air, land, water, and communities from these bad ideas no matter the outcome. It’s who we are, and it’s how we’ve earned our reputation for shaping the history of Montana.

THROW THIS DOCUMENT IN THE DIRT, PLEASE

From now on, after you read up on all the dirt about happenings in Montana, you can turn the Plains Truth into dirt for your flower beds and gardens. We have moved to a printing process that uses vegetable-based inks on 100% recycled paper. As a result, this newsletter is safe for residential or commercial composting, helping us build a more sustainable future for Montana and beyond!

(Remember to remove the staples before throwing it in your compost!)
From the corporate board room to the state House: The bill to scare us all out of protesting

By Caitlin Cromwell

The American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) is a lobbying group that connects state legislators with corporations in order to – jointly – draft and vote on “model bills” that corporations would like to see enacted into law. In 2017, ALEC developed and voted on just such a “model bill” called the “Critical Infrastructure Protection Act.” This particular bill was inspired by similar legislation already passed in Oklahoma designed to thwart the growing power and success of protests against oil and gas pipelines around the country.

What exactly is ALEC? The Center for Media and Democracy describes ALEC as a “corporate bill mill,” through which “corporations hand state legislators their wishlists to benefit their bottom line.” Corporations that have served on ALEC’s advisory board in the last five years include Peabody Energy, ExxonMobil, Koch Industries, Pfizer and a whole host of other insurance, pharmaceutical, and energy companies.

ALEC is effective and powerful, and this legislative session, they succeeded in getting their corporate-funded fingers into Montana state law. ALEC’s “Critical Infrastructure Protection Act” became Montana House Bill 481, introduced and carried by Representative Steve Gunderson (R-Libby). When it was introduced, HB 481 looked nearly identical to ALEC’s model language.

Between many rounds of amendments and the misleading claims of corporate lobbying groups like the Montana Petroleum Association, it was hard to figure out what this bill actually did. Here’s the skinny.

House Bill 481:

• Creates a new protected category for “critical infrastructure,” most of which are forms of energy infrastructure like pipelines or transmission lines
• Automatically makes trespassing on property containing critical infrastructure a felony and dramatically increases the fines and jail time you can receive for this act
• Automatically makes damaging, destroying, vandalizing, defacing, or tampering with equipment in a critical infrastructure facility a felony, and again, dramatically increases the fines and jail time one can receive for this act
• Makes organizations who are “conspirators” with someone who ultimately trespasses or causes damage liable for a fine of up to $1.5 million
• Makes individuals who give money to someone who ultimately trespasses or causes damage “vicariously liable” for those damages

Gunderson and corporate lobbying groups like the Montana Petroleum Association claimed that HB 481 “only criminalized trespassing and damage to property.” But trespassing and property damage were already illegal under existing Montana law – and already punishable by significant fines and jail time.

So what is this bill really about? HB 481 puts organizations and individuals who were not themselves involved in the acts of trespassing or damage at risk of felony charges for crimes they didn’t commit. By introducing potential penalties for people and organizations who had no role in a crime, HB 481 dramatically widens the circle of liability, scaring regular people out of participating in protests at all. Protesting already comes with certain risks – HB 481 has only made the choice to peacefully push back against a corporate project that much more challenging.

Lastly, by creating a special set of laws for energy infrastructure, HB 481 also codifies a sad truth: that fossil fuel companies too often reign supreme, and that our government, meant to serve the people, serves corporate power most of all – unless we demand otherwise.
Power through testimony: Shaping the legislature through our stories

By Mikindra Morin

Time and again, Northern Plains members made their voices heard at the legislature this session – literally. Personal stories and individual perspectives from everyday Montanans have the power to shape legislation and affect the votes of legislators. Even during a pandemic year when we couldn’t safely show up in person, members provided important testimony on bills that could have a big impact on Montana. Here are some excerpts:

“Establishing state support for farm-to-school programs not only benefits students, but also helps expand the market for Montana’s producers, helping to keep us in business and keep Montana’s dollars circulating in our state.”
- Tom Tschida, Bridger, on HB 642, a bill to support a statewide farm-to-school program

“We know, statistically, that much of the violence and trafficking on reservations specifically is committed by non-native people. In other words, this is our problem. We all need to play a part in addressing this crisis and working towards a solution.”
- Joan Kresich, Livingston, on HB 98, a bill to extend the Montana Missing Indigenous Persons Task Force

“Why are Big Energy and fossil fuels singled out as ‘critical infrastructure?’ What about wind towers and solar arrays? After all, they are replacing fossil fuels at a rapid pace. As a third generation cattle rancher, I consider agriculture to be the consistent backbone of Montana’s economy. Over the years I have had locks shot off heavy metal gates, I have had aluminum irrigation pipes driven over deliberately by trespassers, and I have had farm machinery vandalized. Yet no one tried to carve out a special place in the law to punish these vandals. Why are fossil fuels and telecommunications equipment considered more critical than agriculture? What is more important than food? I oppose HB 481.”
- Pat Wilson, Trout Creek, on HB 481, a bill to criminalize protests and diminish free speech

“Montana has a sad history of powerful monopolistic corporations working their will on workers, consumers, and our politics. They seek to privatize profits and socialize risks; this bill is just another ploy from the same old playbook.”
- Mary Fitzpatrick, Billings, on SB 379, NorthWestern Energy’s billion dollar boondoggle bill

“Why are fossil fuels and telecommunications equipment considered more critical than agriculture? What is more important than food?”
- Pat Wilson
As a farmer, the problem with climate change is that nothing is normal anymore. Not the temperatures, not the rainfall, and not even the direction of the wind. To develop best practices, farmers depend on each year being like the last. Whatever the variations from year to year, so long as the climate reverts to a norm the next, farmers can continue as they always have, knowing when to plant, what to plant, and how to plant. But each year in eastern Montana is less and less like the last, and now past experience is no guide to future success.

I used to think climate change was something that would happen slowly, perhaps not even perceptibly, with gradually changing records providing the only proof that change was happening. But that has not been my recent experience. Instead, I’ve been struck by how extreme weather events have been becoming both more frequent and more severe, including droughts, floods, heatwaves, hail storms, and tornadoes.

We’ve got a choice to make, here, this moment in Montana. Do we want to continue on this fossil fuel path that threatens our food supply, or can we work to transition to a clean energy future that allows our children and grandchildren to thrive? Working together, community by community, we can protect future generations. But we must act now, before the disruption to farms like mine reaches a point of no return.

- Wade Sikorski, Baker, MT
C-PACE heads to the Governor’s desk!

By Sydney Ausen

At Northern Plains, we are committed to removing barriers to renewable energy and energy efficiency. One of the biggest barriers continues to be the costs associated with putting solar on your home or business, and installing energy efficiency upgrades. Too often, these upgrades are simply out of reach for many Montanans. But we learned about a solution: Commercial Property Assessed Capital Enhancements (C-PACE).

This program was developed to give homeowners an innovative and affordable way to make their homes more energy efficient, comfortable, and secure. It allows property owners to secure upfront financing from local banks to make these upgrades while paying back the cost of the upgrades as an assessment on their property tax bill over several years. Today, PACE is being used all across the country to empower business owners, non-profits, farmers, and ranchers to make upgrades that save them money and save the environment.

Six years ago, Northern Plains set out to bring PACE to Montana. We knew it would be an uphill battle to pass this important legislation, but we also knew that it was necessary to bring about the clean, affordable, and just energy future that we know is possible.

Over the years we’ve had hundreds of one-on-one meetings with stakeholders, we’ve written and edited more testimony than we can count, and we’ve made hundreds of phone calls to legislators. We’ve written countless LTE’s, met with editorial boards of statewide papers, and held numerous lobby days and rallies. We have worked nearly every day for 6 years to bring PACE to Montana, and, finally, victory is only one signature away!

SB 147 (the C-PACE bill) sailed through the Senate in February. On April 12th, the House Energy committee passed SB147 unanimously, by a vote of 12-0! But not without a last minute attempt by Rep. Larry Brewster (R-Billings) to bring an amendment to the bill (on behalf of NorthWestern Energy we believe) that would have disallowed C-PACE financing to be used for solar installations. We learned of this amendment only an hour before the hearing, but members of our MT PACE Jobs coalition sprung to action and texted Rep. Brewster to drop the amendment. It worked! Rep. Brewster did not bring forward his amendment on SB 147.

Once out of committee, the bill passed through the full House and is now heading to the Governor’s desk! Provided the Governor signs this bill (and we expect he will), Montana will finally have a program to save money, create jobs, and help fight climate change!

But C-PACE is so much more than a financing program for clean energy upgrades; it’s about creating a better energy future in Montana. A future where people have more say in the energy decisions that impact their lives.

Thank you to everyone for all of your hard work in setting the PACE for Montana’s clean energy future!

Northern Plains members rally at the Capitol to pass C-PACE in 2019.
CLEAN ENERGY

Retire and reinvest: A newer, cleaner energy future for rural co-ops

By Ava Shearer

As the effects of climate change become more of a reality, opportunities arise to retool the way that power is generated and distributed in this country. This is especially true of rural areas, where electricity is largely controlled by rural electric co-ops. Montana is home to 26 such co-ops.

Many of our state’s co-ops are owned by larger electricity Generation and Transmission co-ops, or G&Ts, which service multiple states. These large co-ops currently get most of that power from coal, which is twice as expensive as other sources. In addition, G&Ts have large amounts of coal asset debt, as well as other debt to pay off. This means more expensive electricity bills for everyday Montanans, the member-owners in the smaller co-ops.

In an effort to move rural power in America forward, Northern Plains has joined the Rural Power Coalition (RPC) and their Retire and Reinvest Campaign. This campaign aims to get co-ops to retire and decommission expensive coal plants, and reinvest in things co-op member-owners actually want, such as wind, solar, and rural broadband. The RPC is currently working at the national level to get language in the Biden Administration’s forthcoming infrastructure bill that would set aside as much as 100 billion dollars for forgivable hardship loans with retirement and reinvestment conditions. Not only would this mean lower bills for co-op member-owners, it would also be a good step towards a return to the equitable and democratic principles on which these co-ops were founded.

MEMBER VOICE

Why I am a Monthly Sustainer...

“I first became involved with Northern Plains through YVCC (Yellowstone Valley Citizen’s Council) about 25 years ago around the air quality issues in Billings. As a Naturopathic Doctor, I care about nature and found the Northern Plains members are the people I appreciate so much in town – all the committed folks that really care about, not just quality of air, but also quality of life.

I feel really proud to be involved and find it easy to support Northern Plains by giving monthly. It’s convenient to have it taken from my account every month: it’s not a whole lot so it doesn’t have a large impact, and it’s an easy way to provide ongoing, consistent support.”

- Maggi Beeson, Billings, MT

WANT TO BECOME A MONTHLY SUSTAINER?

It’s easy to become a monthly sustainer, and monthly giving makes it easier to keep your membership current.

You can sign up by going to www.northernplains.org and clicking the red “Donate” button in the top right corner or contact Claire to set up your monthly giving. Just call 406-248-1154 or email claire@northernplains.org.

If you are already a monthly sustainer – THANK YOU! Your support means a lot.
Montana’s ranchers testify to legislature on need for Montana Country-of-Origin Labeling

By Caroline Canarios

At the 2021 legislative session, Montana ran two Country-of-Origin Labeling bills to bring back COOL for beef and pork at Montana retailers. Unfortunately, both bills were tabled in committee. Nevertheless, Northern Plains’ member ranchers made an impact by telling their stories, detailing how big meatpackers harm their livelihoods while describing the need for Montana to take action:

“If an animal is imported from Nicaragua, processed in Mexico, and placed in a package in this country, it can bear the ‘Product of the USA’ label… Please support the Montana Country-of-Origin Placarding Act to keep ranchers as stewards of our land, and for a chance for my son to be a sixth generation Montana rancher.”

- John Bailey, Forsyth rancher

“My father began working on this ranch in 1919, and he bought it in 1941. He brought me out to the ranch from Connecticut in 1942. I was six years old. In 1942, the ranch was three ranches providing a living for four families. Today the ranch struggles to cover its operating expenses, but not a single family earns a living from it. The cause is not bad management. It is bad agricultural policy that over the years that has eroded a fair marketplace for farmers and ranchers.”

- Peter Mickelsen, Lewistown rancher

“We love this life and would never consider doing anything else… We want to pass it on to our daughter. That said, our work does not guarantee a fair return for our investment in time, money, and labor. We ranchers are at the mercy of the weather and the market, neither of which can we control… Fortunately for cattlemen and women, there are state policy changes we can take to at least make information more transparent and fair to everybody—not just the producer, but the consumer and the retailer as well.”

- Jean Dahlman, Forsyth rancher

“As ranchers, we work hard and raise great beef in Montana and in the USA. Yet, Montana and US cattle ranchers are quietly going out of business by the thousands every year. Our industry is quietly dying. While ranchers are going out of business, Brazilian-owned meatpacker JBS reported third quarter profits for 2020 that grew by 770%. Something is very wrong.”

- Jeanie Alderson, Birney rancher

“The other night when I was packing a calf to the barn in a storm, I thought about my most recent visit to Albertsons. There were all these giant signs in the beef section advertising local beef from Washington Oregon, Idaho, Nevada, and Montana. Initially, this gave me a feeling of pride. My long nights of calving to produce a quality product for Montanans was paying off at the grocery store. However, we all know this is not true because of the misleading label.”

- Rex Reilly, Stanford rancher

“The supply chain of beef from Nicaragua is anything but clean… Americans do not even realize they are eating Nicaraguan beef. Country-of-origin labeling to identify foreign beef is not a partisan issue. All Montana consumers deserve the right to choose the safety of USA beef and pork.”

- Linda Roche, Lewistown rancher and consumer
Northern Plains’ strategy for restoring Country-of-Origin Labeling (COOL) for beef and pork at the federal level was to start right here in Montana. Our vision was to pass a bill at the state legislature asking retailers to place a sign or placard detailing the origin of beef and pork to Montana’s consumers. State bills can signal to the federal government that when they fail to take action, we will work to craft our own laws reflecting Montana’s support for our family ranchers and consumer transparency.

Unfortunately, the COOL bills we ran this session in partnership with Montana Farmer’s Union and Montana Cattlemen’s Association were tabled in their respective committees. But the fight for COOL isn’t over, and with a new administration and new Congress, we see some opportunities for COOL at the federal level. We are especially encouraged by members of Congress raising COOL as an issue during cabinet position confirmation hearings.

Senator Deb Fischer (R – NE) asked Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack at his confirmation hearing if he feels the current labeling adequately informs consumers, to which he replied, “If it’s the same policy as it was four years ago when I left, the answer is no.” Additionally, the newly-confirmed U.S. Trade Representative Katherine Tai also expressed her commitment to COOL by working with trade partners to ensure any new policy would survive a WTO challenge.

Northern Plains is committed to restoring COOL at the federal level and keeping the newly-appointed officials accountable to their commitments and statements on COOL.

To learn more about our work to support federal COOL, contact Caroline at caroline@northernplains.org.

Join us for the 2021 Montana Local Food Challenge and commit to eating local food every day this August!

For more information or to sponsor this year’s challenge, email Caroline at caroline@northernplains.org
When Sen. Duane Ankney (R--Colstrip) introduced SB 328, a bill to revise bond release standards for coal companies in Montana, Northern Plains members were alarmed. The bill had potential to jeopardize Montana’s reclamation standards and make it easier for coal companies to take their money and run. Ranchers Steve Charter, Ellen Pfister, and Clint McRae stepped up to lead the fight against this bill and ensure that coal-impacted ranchers and communities receive the cleanup they were promised. What’s more, SB 328 was an attack on the strong reclamation laws that early Northern Plains members, including Ellen, Steve, and Clint’s parents, worked to enact.

During the early days of Northern Plains, members realized some mines simply couldn’t be defeated, so they got to work to ensure those mines cleaned up their messes. After extensive organizing and research, these tenacious members were movers and shakers in passing strong legislation. These laws include the Montana Strip and Underground Mine Reclamation Act of 1973 (MSUMRA) -- often considered the toughest strip-mine reclamation law in the nation -- and the Federal Surface Mining Control and Reclamation Act of 1977 (SMCRA), which was largely modeled after MSUMRA.

Despite these strong reclamation laws, our members still have to fight tooth and nail to hold coal companies accountable to adhere to these protections, particularly related to water. SB 328 tried to simply toss out the protections altogether.

At first, our chances of taking on this bill felt slim. There was rhetoric in the legislature that this bill would give “environmentalists what they wanted” by giving property owners their land back earlier. Rhetoric excluded what had to be cut to expedite cleanup.

SB 328 passed the Senate, and was headed for the House. Clint, Ellen and Steve all testified during the House committee hearing. After addressing the legal issues and impacts of this bill on mine-adjacent land owners, the atmosphere in the room shifted. Legislators with minds made up to support the bill had to pause and reconsider.

After the hearing, a Westmoreland Mining Company lobbyist proceeded to call members in an attempt to ease their concerns. As the committee vote was repeatedly delayed, members seized the opportunity. After countless phone calls, texts, and emails with legislators, it became clear that this bill would still pass, but some representatives were unexpectedly open to amendments. Members worked rapidly to identify amendments that could be most strategically woven into the bill.

With the help of Representatives Willis Curdy (D—Missoula), Tom France (D—Missoula), and Steve Gist (R—Cascade), we were successful in getting important amendments finalized and passed after a nerve-rackingly close vote of 8-7. The amendments help protect water quality and water replacement provisions while strengthening some of the state's discretion to retain bond money. While the amendments didn't solve all of SB 328’s problems, improving this bill with protections for coal-impacted landowners and communities was a major success. It serves as a reminder that even if it feels like there’s no hope, everyday Montanans with grit and determination can make one hell of a difference.

Former Northern Plains staffer Tom France, and Helen Waller, two of many members instrumental in enacting SMCRA, with President Carter in the White House Rose Garden after he signed the Surface Mining Control and Reclamation Act into law, 1977.
Responsible coal ash clean-up in jeopardy

Talen Energy continues to fight responsible clean-up of the leaking coal ash ponds in Colstrip. Last November, the Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) issued an order requiring that the ponds associated with Colstrip Generating Station Units 1 & 2 be fully excavated, with the ash dug up and deposited in a lined landfill away from groundwater.

Talen contested DEQ's order in December, invoking a dispute resolution clause that allows the company to attempt to negotiate the order with DEQ to get them to change it. That process is ongoing, but should wrap up around the time this Plains Truth arrives in mailboxes.

In case DEQ stands strong for good clean-up, Talen has also appealed the Agency’s order to the Board of Environmental Review (BER), a quasi-judicial panel that is appointed by the Governor and has oversight over many DEQ decisions. Northern Plains plans to intervene in that case, bringing legal and scientific expertise to defend DEQ’s order.

Collectively, the ponds cover 830 acres and leak 400,000 gallons of contaminated water daily. Responsible cleanup is crucial to protecting groundwater and sustaining ranches that depend on it. Good remediation would create up to 218 full-time jobs sustained for a decade, in addition to saving taxpayers hundreds of millions of dollars in long-term environmental liability.

Photo by Chris Boyer.

Mine reclamation protected, coal exports abandoned in Lighthouse Resources bankruptcy

Corporate hopes to export coal from the Pacific Northwest were dashed in January when Lighthouse Resources, the company hoping to build the Millennium Bulk Terminals coal export facility in Longview, WA, filed for bankruptcy and failed to find an interested buyer for the project.

Through the bankruptcy process, Lighthouse abandoned its leases in Longview and announced that it is ceasing federal litigation that sought to force Washington to permit the coal port against the state’s wishes. The Montana and Wyoming Attorneys General continue to ask the U.S. Supreme Court to intervene, but that seems unlikely as the proposed project no longer has an owner.

In addition to the proposed port, Lighthouse was also the owner of the Decker coal mine, which the company closed in late January. Lighthouse proposed transferring their cleanup obligations for the 12,000-acre mine to a “reclamation trust”, a new legal structure in the coal industry.

Reclamation trusts were first proposed by Blackjewel Coal in their bankruptcy last year. Under the Blackjewel model, the trust would have been a vehicle for the company to shirk its reclamation obligations, leaving an underfunded shell exempt from many clean-up rules, and ultimately shifting the costs to taxpayers.

Northern Plains Resource Council and Powder River Basin Resource Council in Wyoming worked with the Western Organization of Resource Councils (WORC) and a team of bankruptcy lawyers to prevent that from happening here. We ultimately succeeded in keeping the company on the hook. The victory preserves reclamation funding and keeps standards in place for the restoration of land and water, which, in turn, protects the jobs associated with that work.
Soil health bill falls short, but our work takes a leap forward

By Tai Koester

After a long, hard-fought campaign that spanned just shy of a year, SB 180, the Soil Health Task Force Bill, was narrowly defeated. The bill passed through the Senate Natural Resources Committee, but failed second reading by the full Senate on a 23-27 vote. The legislation would have established a 15-member task force charged with assessing the viability of a healthy soils program for the state and produced recommendations for such a program’s purpose and objectives to the 2023 legislature. Although the bill fell short, we have a lot to be proud of.

Our members helped formulate the bill concept, drafted language, introduced the bill at the 2020 Northern Plains Soil Summit, lobbied legislators, and testified before the Senate Natural Resources Committee (some snippets of which you can find on page 9 and below!)

We helped coordinate a nascent state-wide soil health coalition representing diverse groups including the Montana Association of Conservation Districts, the Montana Organic Association, Montana Farmers Union, Montana Stockgrowers Association, and others. The conversations that began here have brought even more groups to the table, and some work has begun to convene a new statewide soil stakeholders group, which Northern Plains will participate in.

SB 180 may not have passed, but it grabbed the attention of legislators, producers, state and federal agencies, and local conservation districts, exposing the need for a consensus-driven roadmap on soil health in Montana. This is certainly not the end!

Thank you to every member who fought so hard for SB 180 this session. We also extend a special thank you to the legislators who spoke in support of soil health -- our sponsors, Sen. Bruce Gillespie (R- Ethridge) and Sen. Pat Flowers (D- Belgrade).

And thank you to the 23 senators who voted “Yes” to expanding soil health in Montana. To learn more about how you can support healthy soil in Montana, contact Tai at tai@northernplains.org or call (406) 248-1154.

Like a root web, a growing network of soil stakeholders has emerged from our SB 180 efforts.

SB 180 MEMBER TESTIMONY SPOTLIGHT:

““Agriculture is a very big part of our Montana economy. The future prosperity of agriculture here will depend on keeping and building our soil. The big windstorms during the earlier part of this winter gave us a wakeup call of how vulnerable our soils are. Why do we need to act on soil health? The answer, my friend, is blowing in the wind.”

– Steve Charter, Northern Plains member and rancher based out of Shepherd, MT

“If we are not training future stewards of the land, we will be ill-equipped to steward the land. SB 180 specifically tasks a soil health task force with studying existing soil health conservation programs and their effectiveness. I know self-driving cars are in our future, but Montana farming and ranching is going to require farmers and ranchers, not robots.”

– Tony Hartshorn, Northern Plains member and Montana State University Professor and soil scientist

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“Long hours, hard work, and total dedication”
Our decades-long history of engaging with the legislature

From the organization’s earliest days in the 1970s, Northern Plains members understood the power of everyday people making their voices heard in the legislature. The following are excerpts from Standing Together, the origin story of Northern Plains as written by retired Staff Director, Teresa Erickson. Teresa describes how Northern Plains built a foundation of engaged citizen participation in Helena (and beyond) that still supports our work today, nearly fifty years later:

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.

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 on 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...

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.

While our work at the legislature looks much different in 2021, especially during a pandemic, much remains the same. The long hours, hard work, and total dedication by people who love Montana, love their communities, and won’t give up is the same today as it was decades ago.

To read more from Standing Together and learn about Northern Plains’ history, visit: NorthernPlains.org/HistoryProject.
On Monday, March 15, the U.S. Senate confirmed New Mexico Congresswoman Deb Haaland as Secretary of Interior. This historic confirmation makes Secretary Haaland the first Native American appointed to lead a Cabinet agency in United States history.

As Secretary of Interior, Haaland will chart out our country’s energy future against the backdrop of a looming climate crisis – a crisis she calls “the challenge of our lifetime.” She’ll also lead an agency tasked with upholding the federal government’s responsibilities to 574 Native American tribes and Alaska Native villages across the United States.

Haaland isn’t your typical administrator of a 70,000 person agency. An enrolled member of the Pueblo of Laguna tribe in New Mexico, Haaland spent four days cooking for members of the Standing Rock Sioux tribe and others protesting the Dakota Access Pipeline. She made them green chile and tortillas.

Northern Plains is proud to have supported Secretary Haaland’s nomination, and we are grateful to the powerful grassroots work of indigenous leaders, organizers, and communities who made it happen.

After more than ten years of organizing, we killed the Keystone XL pipeline! At least for now, the tides have turned in our favor.

We have final radioactive oil waste disposal rules! After more than six years of organizing, Montana’s first ever rules guiding the disposal of radioactive oil waste were finalized last summer.

Robust cleanup for Colstrip was approved! In November, the DEQ approved “high and dry” cleanup requiring excavation of coal ash ponds that have contaminated local groundwater for decades.

The Yellowstone Valley Food Hub showed the resiliency of a strong local food system, especially during stockpiling and panic-buying grocery shortages.

Last, but definitely not least, our members gained new technological skills with tenacity and plenty of patience as we all navigated unfamiliar, virtual spaces.

May we never forget: If we can win on our issues amidst unparalleled uncertainty, from behind masks and computer screens, we can win anytime!
ONLINE AUCTION

Summer Online Auction runs July 1-31!

Mark your calendars: our annual summer online auction returns this July with impressive items from across Montana!

The online auction is a great way to support Northern Plains’ work while also finding unique items for yourself, family, and friends. You can expect a selection of goods, services, and experiences up for bid from July 1-31.

Because the auction is online, you don’t have to be in Montana to get in on the goods. You can participate from anywhere! All proceeds go to furthering our shared mission of protecting Montana’s water quality, family farms and ranches, and unique quality of life.

Call for items: We are looking for generous donations from members and businesses throughout the Northern Plains community.

Maybe you have a vacation home that could welcome a guest for a week? Or maybe you’ve found some collector’s items in a bout of spring cleaning. Do you have an item that would be a good fit for the auction? If so, please consider donating!

Your donation can help make a big difference for Montana. Possible items include:

- vacation stays and cabin getaways
- original art (paintings, pottery, quilts, and more)
- hand-crafted or heirloom jewelry
- food items, like Montana-raised meats
- services, experiences, workshops, and special tours
- the sky’s the limit!

If you have any questions or would like to donate an item of value, please contact Claire (claire@northernplains.org) or call our office during business hours at (406) 248-1154.

Fabulous past items have included Omega Wagyu beef, cabin stays, original art, and more!

BE PART OF THE NORTHERN PLAINS LEGACY FOREVER

If you wish you could do more to continue our mission, and fight for justice, YOU CAN! Include Northern Plains in your will. Your bequest will ensure that we can continue our work for the long haul.

So much in this issue of the Plains Truth is dedicated to the leadership and teamwork of Northern Plains members across the state and country. Northern Plains is made up of all types of people who give so much to this organization in so many ways – including those no longer with us.

Leaving Northern Plains in your will – or as a beneficiary on your IRA, insurance, or other accounts – is one easy, but meaningful way to be a part of the Northern Plains team forever. Many of us haven’t given a second thought to our legacies, even though we know they will outlive us all.

Join Northern Plains’ legacy by leaving Northern Plains in your will. Contact maggie@northernplains.org for more information.
YBCC on a Solarize roll!

Yellowstone Bend Citizens Council hasn’t let COVID slow down its “Solarize” campaign. Solar panels went up on the Livingston Head Start building at the end of March! YBCC helped fundraise for these panels and was able to meet its goal through grants and individual donations. Next up will be the Winans school building. YBCC is also creating a map of all the solar panels in Livingston, both commercial and residential. It will be a great way to showcase all the work YBCC has done for its community!

Ava Shearer

BCC hosts successful Living with Wildlife events

Being confined to Zoom for its popular Living With Wildlife series hasn’t slowed Bear Creek Council down one bit and didn’t slow enthusiasm either. Over 200 people have attended three webinars featuring presentations about wildlife safety by six different experts from Yellowstone National Park and Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks.

Like many of you, Bear Creek Council has also been following the legislative session closely. Several members have submitted written comments, provided letters to the editor, contacted local legislators, circulated petitions, and called the Legislature Information Desk to make their voices heard. Members remain resolute in tracking wildlife-related bills and other issues that directly impact Gardiner and the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem.

BCC’s Living with Wildlife series covers safety, behavior and management of wolves, cougars and bears. Recordings can be found at northernplains.org/living-with-wildlife.
Central Montana Resource Council members played a critical role in the Northern Plains Country-of-Origin Labeling (COOL) legislative campaign. Seven CMRC members gave testimony as proponents, and many other members called and emailed their legislators. Letters of support from grocery stores in Grass Range and Winnett collected by CMRC members were also submitted to the legislature.

CMRC also recently held a Stockwater Quality Webinar, attended by almost 50 people from across Montana. Continuing their work on local agricultural issues, CMRC submitted a second round of public comments on a proposed Confined Animal Feeding Operation (CAFO) near the town of Buffalo, following the release of a concerning field map and nutrient budget sheet.

CMRC voted to launch a Solarize campaign in early 2022! Stay tuned for events and seminars related to clean energy in the meantime.

Stillwater Protective Association members have been busy reviewing the Stillwater Mine’s plans for the Benbow Portal, an access shaft on the east side of the Mine facilitating its underground expansion. The schedule of Portal construction has been a moving target as the project has been delayed by over three years. While the Portal is now near completion, some discussion remains over the project’s end date, its final surface footprint, and future vehicle access. SPA members have continued to press the Mine to hold up its commitments pursuant to the Benbow Mitigation Plan, a section of the Good Neighbor Agreement.

Cottonwood Resource Council had a guest from Greater Yellowstone Coalition attend their last meeting to learn more about the Montana Headwaters Legacy Act. This Act would designate portions of multiple rivers across Montana as Wild and Scenic, providing special protections with that designation. One of the rivers impacted would be the Boulder River. CRC is considering whether to sign on in support of the Act. CRC is also excited to start meeting in person! They are hoping to hold their annual summer picnic and finally celebrate the installation of the solar array at the Sweet Grass County High School sometime late this summer.
DRC launches campaign to Solarize Glendive!

Dawson Resource Council has launched a new campaign! Following in the footsteps of affiliates like Yellowstone Bend Citizens Council and Yellowstone Valley Citizens Council, DRC members are embarking on an effort to “Solarize Glendive.”

For those unfamiliar with Solarize efforts – the first Solarize campaign began in Portland, where local residents organized a group of neighbors to “go solar” together. In doing so, they had more power to collectively make an informed purchase and negotiate a volume discount. The neighborhood “collective purchase concept” has spread ever since!

If you live in Dawson County or the surrounding area and are curious about going solar, go ahead and sign up for a free solar assessment through Solarize Glendive at: northernplains.org/solarizeglendive/

YVCC’s Solarize Billings campaign shines bright

YVCC has officially launched its 2021 Solarize Billings campaign! We held our kick off webinar in early April, and have already helped over 35 Yellowstone County homeowners sign up for site assessments to determine if their home is fit for a solar installation. Harvest Solar and Bozeman Green Build, are the installers we selected to work with these homeowners. We will sign up participants for assessments through mid-June with the goal of wrapping up the campaign by the end of that month. If you live in Yellowstone County and would like to sign up for a site assessment from one of our qualified installers, fill out the form at northernplains.org/solarize-billings.
BMLA members fight for water

As Signal Peak Energy’s underground coal mine continues to expand, Bull Mountain Land Alliance members have been helping area landowners in or near the growing footprint of the mine get informed and take steps to protect their water from mining impacts.

Members also continue to fight to ensure that mine-damaged water sources are replaced with resources that can support the future of agriculture in the area, holding the company accountable to its promises and the requirements of the law.

SGCC launches local foods, Solarize committees

Helena’s Sleeping Giant Citizens Council recently launched two new campaign teams. The Local Foods Committee has been meeting since December and considering over twenty projects or initiatives the group could tackle to strengthen the food system in the Helena Valley. They have narrowed it to four front-runners (soil crawls, composting, getting more people gardening, and a geothermal greenhouse).

SGCC also kicked off its Solarize Campaign in March. Fifteen members gathered to help more Helena households install rooftop solar this year by connecting interested homeowners with a solar contractor and financing tools to make the process easier and more affordable.

CCRC holds virtual Annual Meeting, elects officers

In late February, Carbon County Resource Council held its first ever virtual Annual Meeting. The event featured CCRC’s own Jeff DiBenedetto who spoke on the ecology and conservation of the endangered whitebark pine. Jeff walked attendees through the basics of identifying whitebark pines, a species found in the nearby Beartooth Mountains, and detailed how a warming climate has exacerbated threats to these trees. Following Jeff’s excellent presentation, CCRC elected new officers for 2021. Sue Beug (chair), Tom Tschida (vice-chair), Betsy Scanlin (treasurer), Karen Walmley (secretary), Julie Holzer (Northern Plains board representative), Jeff DiBenedetto (Northern Plains board representative), and Katya Koepsel (board representative alternate) comprise CCRC’s new officer roster.
Check the date at the upper right of your address label to see when your membership is due for renewal. Your membership pays for all the work you read about here!

**SAVE THE DATE FOR NORTHERN PLAINS’ 50TH ANNUAL MEETING**

Mark your calendars: Northern Plains’ 50th Annual Meeting will be held November 19-20th at the DoubleTree Hotel in downtown Billings. Come celebrate with us for a weekend of fun, fellowship, and learning! We are already hard at work lining up brilliant speakers and planning informative, engaging sessions, not to mention fun ways to commemorate and enjoy this landmark occasion. The 50th Annual Meeting also serves to kick off a celebratory year (2022) marking 50 years of grassroots organizing across Montana. We look forward to seeing everyone again this November – in person!

Sponsorship opportunities: If you or your business would like to help make this Annual Meeting the best one yet, contact Claire (claire@northernplains.org) to learn more about the benefits and advertising available to sponsors.