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SOIL CRAWLS ARE BACK!
Despite an especially severe drought season, members gather in Conrad to further practices and principles that cultivate healthy soil and prospering crops.

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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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**THE PLAINS TRUTH**
The Plains Truth is published by Northern Plains Resource Council. Northern Plains members receive The Plains Truth as one of the benefits of membership.

**Membership Dues**
$1200+ Rider of the Big Sky
$600 - $1199 Bottom Line Rider
$51 - $599 Rider
$50 General Member

**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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The Plains Truth Summer 2021 Page 2
“Whether we and our politicians know it or not, Nature is party to all our deals and decisions, and she has more votes, a longer memory, and a sterner sense of justice than we do.”

- Wendell Berry

Greetings from the East Fork of Hanging Woman Creek.

June is always busy for both Omega Beef and Bones Bros Ranch, the two sides of our family ranch in Birney! Usually, June is a lush, green, and special time of year on the Northern Plains. It’s a time of blooming wild roses and green grass… But these are not usual times. This summer has coincided with a crushing and ongoing heat wave. Coal seam fires are raging in southeast Montana. For days now, our alarms have been set for 4:00 AM knowing that we have to get our cattle moved in the brief hours of relative cool.

The day-to-day realities of climate change force us to face the truth, and we can no longer just push this problem to the back of our mind like so many other overwhelming global, social, and economic challenges. When your livelihood comes from the land, you are haunted by questions like: Will we have enough hay? Will we have fall grass? Will the springs and wells keep running? Will grasshoppers and fire take their toll? What is the window of time we have with climate change that will allow us to keep growing food? What choices are best for our animals, our pastures, our children?

It all feels out of our hands. We can’t make it rain.

We watch the skies, we call around to ask about hay for sale, we move our cattle, and yes, we pray for rain. We hope things will get better. But in the early morning when the breeze is already warm and it isn’t even daylight, I hear my friend and mentor, Teresa Erickson’s words, “Hope is not a strategy.” Yes, we have to keep hopeful, but we need to act.

I am grateful for our action at Northern Plains. I am inspired by the Solarize efforts in our affiliate communities across Montana to increase residential solar. And we all should celebrate our work at the Montana Legislature to get real policy like C-PACE enacted! Our soil health events bring communities together to demonstrate how to enhance, protect, and grow our soil to be resilient to drought and floods. These are just a few of our actions that are manifesting true change to address our climate crisis.

Still, we see Signal Peak Energy expanding their coal mine in the Bull Mountains, and NorthWestern Energy proposing the first of eight new methane plants to fill Montana’s energy demands for the next 30 years. We don’t have 30 years.

For the work we do at Northern Plains to make a real difference for our climate, our communities, and our children, we need more members, more voices. We will need to mobilize more friends and neighbors, and those who suffer the worst impacts of climate change. We recognize that their voices hold the wisdom we will need to win. As we have done for the last 50 years, we must stand up for our collective futures, because no one else will do it for us.

Thank you for stepping up and showing up at every chance. Thank you for supporting our online auction, for bringing in friends and family members to join Northern Plains. This is how we grow, this is how we survive.

- Jeanie Alderson
  Chair
Maggie Gordon takes lead as Northern Plains Executive Director

By Dustin Ogdin

We are proud and excited to announce that Maggie Gordon will be leading Northern Plains as our Executive Director, officially assuming these duties August 7.

Olivia Stockman, our outgoing Director, is moving to St. Louis to be closer to her family. Olivia started working for Northern Plains in 2008, and took the helm in 2019 when longtime Director Teresa Erickson retired.

“My 13 years on staff have been incredibly rewarding, and I am full of gratitude for the opportunity to have served this organization and work alongside so many incredible people across the state,” said Olivia. “At the same time, I am excited that my friend and longtime colleague, Maggie, will be leading this organization I love so much. Northern Plains is in good hands!”

Maggie was an active member of Northern Plains before being hired as a community organizer. In her eight years working for Northern Plains, Maggie has served as the Director of Organizing and Campaigns and, most recently, as the Director of Mission Engagement.

“I am humbled and grateful to take over Northern Plains knowing we are so well-positioned for continued success,” said Maggie. “I will be standing on the shoulders of amazing leaders who held this role before me, and I’m excited by the challenge of meeting the high bar they have set. With an unrivaled group of incredible, dedicated members across Montana and a hardworking staff of talented professionals to work alongside, I couldn’t be more excited to further the mission that Northern Plains has been advancing for almost 50 years.”

“We are thrilled to see Maggie take over as Executive Director and look forward to seeing Northern Plains continue to grow and flourish under her leadership,” said Northern Plains Board Chair, Jeanie Alderson. “Maggie understands our core issues, brings years of organizing and fundraising experience, and has developed strong relationships with members, funders, and allies.”

As Maggie assumes her duties as Executive Director, she looks forward to seeing and connecting with everyone over the summer and fall as more and more opportunities arise to safely gather in-person.

We hope you will all join us at our 50th Annual Meeting (see back page of this edition for details) where we can raise a glass to Maggie and Olivia at the same time we say “Cheers to 50 Years,” celebrating all of you – our members – for making Northern Plains such a great organization since 1972.

Maggie (left) and Olivia (right) have been friends and colleagues for close to a decade, working side-by-side with our members to protect this place we all call home.
Betsy Baxter: Resolving conflicts through collaborative organizing

I first became aware of Northern Plains in the mid-70’s when my grandmother, Mary White, joined the fight against Colstrip Units 3 and 4 and the associated powerline which was to bisect our ranch west of Two Dot. My grandmother had taught me to fish in the tiny trout streams on the ranch, to gather gooseberries and chokecherries, to learn the names of the wildflowers in the pastures, and to love the sound of prairie birds. Most importantly, my grandmother was never one to back down from a fight, and would proudly share her views regarding any subject, but particularly conservation. Her hand-painted “No Hunting, Wildlife Shelter” signs raised more than a few eyebrows and ruffled some feathers in our community when they appeared in the ’60’s.

Her fight against that huge transmission line ended the day the representative from Montana Power sat at the dining room table and laid out the meager compensation being offered for the easement. The threat of condemnation under eminent domain hung in the air, accompanied with knowledge that any legal action would be decided in the local court by a jury pool overwhelmingly in favor of the development. Facing the overwhelming odds in play, my grandfather signed the easement for the transmission lines as my grandmother walked out of the room. That was my first real introduction to the complex interplay of resource development, land conservation and preservation, and community needs. I felt a deep sense of helplessness coupled by a sense of alienation from my community.

Years later, I worried that history would repeat itself when I was ranching in Fallon County during the coalbed methane frenzy. Our ranch had a split estate (mineral rights had been separated from surface rights in the 1930’s), and I feared the call from the oil and gas company that would inform me that our place was next in line for development, or for the next pipeline easement. I confess that as a resident of the county I had experienced the benefits of oil and gas development – roads that were passable in all weather, schools that had good facilities and that were able to put together a decent compensation package for their teachers, a decent healthcare facility. There is real power in the economic development argument in counties that are desperate for enough tax revenue to fund even basic services.

Ultimately, our ranch never saw coalbed development, but I continued to be unsettled by the sense that the deck was stacked and that there was no chance for my voice to be heard. It seemed to me that there should be some way for more voices to be heard, particularly the voices calling for compromise.

I was drawn back to Northern Plains through the Good Neighbor Agreement (GNA) in 2017. The GNA is a legally binding contract with stated objectives to minimize adverse impacts of development, to establish and maintain lines of communication between the developer and the residents of the community, and to provide for early participation in decisions regarding further development. This provided a way to resolve those conflicts of values that had long disturbed me.

The collaborative model that is fundamental to the Good Neighbor Agreement is the mechanism that gives my voice the power to be heard. The GNA allows the conservation values my grandmother instilled in me to be heard and respected alongside the values more easily quantified by job growth and tax revenue. Both views need to be acknowledged and acted upon for the health and vibrancy of our communities. The strength of Northern Plains and the GNA stems from this collaborative approach that encourages everyday people to get involved, look beyond their fences, and find creative solutions to address local challenges.

- Betsy Baxter
Northern Plains Member
Northern Plains member-leaders from across Montana who work on clean energy and oil and gas issues joined members from Yellowstone County-based affiliate Yellowstone Valley Citizens Council to vote unanimously to oppose the proposed building of a new methane plant in Laurel. NorthWestern Energy's (NWE) latest project, a $250 million dollar methane plant along the Yellowstone River, would add 175 megawatts of fossil fuel-based dispatchable energy to the company's portfolio. In addition, NWE would build a 50 megawatt battery storage facility. If pre-approved by the Public Service Commission, NWE expects the new methane plant to be online by the beginning of 2024 and employ 10 people total. The full costs and risks to NWE customers have not been fully determined nor made public.

Members voted to oppose the plant citing several urgent concerns:

- **Air quality**: when emitted, nitrous oxides (NOx) can produce acid rain and hazy air
- **Leaks**: when released, methane is up to 80 times more potent as a climate pollutant than carbon dioxide
- **Water Quality**: building the plant requires drilling pipelines under the Yellowstone River
- **Renewable Energy**: NWE continues to overlook cleaner, cheaper energy sources like solar, wind, and storage
- **Potential Stranded Costs**: the proposed plant has a lifespan of approximately 30 years, and NWE has offered no plan for how it will clean up the area once it's obsolete. There is also a risk that customers will be stuck footing the bill if the plant closes earlier than expected.
- **Preapproval is undemocratic**: you may recall that Northern Plains members were actively opposed to NWE's recent attempt to put ratepayers on the hook for unknown future liabilities related to buying more of Colstrip Unit 4 in 2019-2020. The company’s attempt was ultimately unsuccessful (we won!), yet we still believe that pre-approval is bad policy that puts Northwestern Energy’s customers at risk while lining their shareholders’ pockets.

Northern Plains members are gearing up and making plans to oppose the new methane plant through the coming months. Public hearings on NWE’s proposal are expected to take place through the fall/winter of 2021. Stay tuned for opportunities to get involved!

### CALL FOR SPONSORSHIPS (ANNUAL MEETING)

Help us put on Northern Plains’ biggest celebration of the year: our Annual Meeting! This is the time of year when the entire membership is invited to come together for a weekend of education, inspiration, and fellowship. We host hundreds of people from across Montana and sponsoring as a businesses or individual helps make the following possible: serving locally-sourced meals, providing childcare, providing scholarship assistance for fellow members, two days of first-rate speakers, homegrown entertainment, and more.

Become a sponsor today to receive ad space in our event program, publicity via social media and our website, inclusion in our slide shows and digital signage, plus tabling space and even verbal shout-outs at the event. Learn more at NorthernPlains.org/Annual-Meeting-Sponsorship or contact Claire at Claire@northernplains.org or (406) 248-1154.
Members lobby EPA to enforce stronger methane rules

In May, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) announced a public engagement process as it begins to craft new rules to tackle methane and associated pollution from new and existing oil and gas operations. Through the rule-making process, the EPA has the ability to limit methane pollution by upwards of 65%. And, Northern Plains members were there to voice their support for stronger protections. Nearly half a dozen members commented during the virtual listening sessions, including Sue Beug, Chair of Northern Plains affiliate Carbon County Resource Council.

“I participated in the EPA methane rule-making for oil and gas development under the Obama administration,” said Sue. “Since then, there has been increasing evidence of the harmful effects of methane on the warming of the planet as well as the health effects of gases related to methane release. All of the reasons for putting those rules in place then still remain today and are multiplied by weather events caused by climate disruption occurring almost daily. It is becoming even more vital to curb the release of methane into the atmosphere by the industry. The cost to the oil and gas industry of mitigating methane release is dwarfed by the cost in both dollars and lives of doing nothing. We cannot afford to continue down the same road and expect to come to a different destination.”

The written comment deadline closed on July 30, and nearly a dozen Northern Plains members submitted comments supporting stronger methane pollution protections. The EPA is expected to issue its final rulemaking in early fall.

MEMBER VOICE

Why I am a Monthly Sustainer...

I was introduced to Northern Plains when their office, the Home on the Range building in Billings, had just been built. I got a tour and learned about all the sustainable building strategies used. To me it said, “let’s not just talk about it, let’s do something” and that really energized me. Environmental responsibility is a key value both in my own work (as an architect) and in my company’s work – I like to build things that have a low impact on resources and try to solve similar problems for my clients. And when I see an organizing group that’s based locally and doing good work, I’ve got to support it.

Why monthly? I started for a couple years donating $10/month – just donating smaller because that’s all I had – but as I’ve gotten older I’ve been able to give a little more. It’s kind of an ‘out of sight out of mind’ thing for me – I want to give so I try to make it easy to do and with this setup I don’t have to remember. I just want to make sure you all are supported as best as I can. Now, you guys keep doing what you’re doing and I’ll keep doing what I’m doing!

- Joel Anderson, Billings, MT

CAN YOU GIVE US A RIDE?

Our organizing work depends on a small fleet of vehicles that carry our staff along the highways and ranch roads of rural Montana, through all kinds of weather, but we are currently short on cars! If you have a roadworthy car you are no longer using, please consider donating it to us! (Because your car would be put to use instead of being sold, you would be able to deduct the car’s fair market value when you itemize your taxes.)

To donate a car, contact Caleb at (406) 248-1154 or caleb@northernplains.org.
Conrad Summer Soil Crawl overcomes heat and grasshoppers, features bale grazing

By Tai Koester

After a long pandemic-induced hiatus, Northern Plains hosted its first soil crawl of 2021 at the Graham Ranch, just west of Conrad. Unfazed by the hot, smoky weather, around 30 participants turned out for rancher Lisa Schmidt’s tour and presentation of the management practices that sustain her vast grass-fed beef and lamb operation.

Schmidt shared her approach to managing the ranch, explaining, “I really like to stop and observe every once in a while and then think about how to improve [the land]. That’s the overall theme of today – to observe and experiment.”

Crawl participants viewed the effects of Schmidt’s bale grazing experimentation on portions of the ranch where cheatgrass had taken hold. Using the natural slope of the landscape, Schmidt rolls hay bales downhill and carefully spreads the hay in a thin layer. When combined with manure from grazing animals, this thin layer retains moisture and offers a suitable environment for native grasses. Across the hillside, participants could see bands of native grass in an area that had been previously occupied by cheatgrass.

This summer’s unusual heat and dry conditions have taken a toll on producers across the state, and Schmidt acknowledged her ranch was no exception. “All the stuff I wanted to brag about was eaten by the grasshoppers in the last couple weeks,” she said. Nevertheless, Schmidt took the challenging conditions as an opportunity to encourage state-level policy efforts on soil health. “We need to build off the work at the legislature and think about how to improve the health of soils across the state,” she said, referencing SB 180, a bill that Northern Plains helped bring to the state legislature. Schmidt gave a nod to state Senator Bruce “Butch” Gillespie (R – Ethridge), who co-sponsored the bill and attended the event. The bill would have appointed a task force and assessed the need for a state healthy soils program.

The crawl also featured additional speakers, including Bureau of Mines geologist Ginette Abdo, MSU soil scientist Tony Hartshorn, and Montana Salinity Control Association director Scott Brown. Abdo provided geologic context and tied it to the characteristics of the ranch’s soil. Hartshorn walked participants through a soil profile on a cut bank and discussed the importance of plant root structure. Brown spoke to the management of saline seeps at a natural seep below one of the ranch’s many springs.

Northern Plains will be hosting its next soil crawl on August 11 in the Helena Valley at XX Bar Ranch. Go to northernplains.org/soil-crawls/ for more information!
Chances are coming to the livestock industry, and after enduring the previous administration’s refusal to prioritize ranchers over big meatpacking corporations, we are pleased to see improvements we support. This year’s change in federal administration personnel, mounting grassroots pressure for fair prices, and “black swan” events like the cyberattack on meatpacker JBS, have all created the perfect storm for the recently announced federal legislation and agency rulemakings. We rejoice in the recent announcement of:

- Senator Tester’s Meat Packing Special Investigator Act,
- USDA review of agency loopholes that allow the “Product of USA” label to be used fraudulently,
- USDA’s rulemakings to update the 1921 Packers and Stockyards Act,
- USDA’s announcement of $500 million to fund small and mid-size meat processing
- and President Biden’s executive order to restore competition to monopolistic industries, including the livestock industry

The proposed changes address problems in the livestock industry from all sides: fraudulent labeling, monopoly control of pricing, consumer transparency, funding for regional meat processing infrastructure, enforcement through new inspectors and offices, and executive branch support. However, the proposed rules and legislation will require grassroots support from organizations like ours to ensure they reflect the needs of independent ranchers, rather than groveling to the interests of the well-funded meatpacking lobby.

What might this organizing look like and what are we pushing for? Northern Plains and our regional network, Western Organization of Resource Councils (WORC), have long fought for livestock market reforms to help solve the financial crisis that harms consumers and is an existential threat to ranchers, even as corporate meatpackers rake in millions in profits. This long history includes building the movement to restore Country-of-Origin Labeling for beef and pork, but also includes the broader work to reform the livestock industry beyond the label.

Northern Plains’ decades-long organizing for livestock reform centers on the “WORC Rule” which, if included in the upcoming rules, would prevent and prohibit manipulative, anti-competitive practices by the meatpackers. While the WORC Rule is not yet proposed in the upcoming rulemakings, we are striving to have those provisions included in the proposed updates to USDA rules for the Packers and Stockyards Act. Northern Plains is committed to taking action to keep Montana ranchlands active and healthy, and to keep our ranchers on the land.

To learn more about the proposed legislation and rulemakings, and how you can take action, contact Caroline at caroline@northernplains.org or (406) 248-1154.
GOOD NEIGHBOR AGREEMENT

The Good Neighbor Agreement
Benbow Mitigation Plan in action

By Mikindra Morin

Back in 2011, Stillwater Mining Company (SMC) approached Northern Plains’ Good Neighbor Agreement (GNA) representatives to let them know that they were planning an expansion at the Stillwater Mine. This became known as the “Blitz project.” The company would need more ventilation and an escape route to support this project. Their plan was to set up new surface facilities on Forest Service land north of existing operations and drill their way back toward where the mine was actively mining ore – effectively creating the potential for a third mine which was opposed by Northern Plains and our GNA representatives. And so, the Benbow discussions began.

We were kept up to speed on SMC’s plans, but we had to decide what to recommend to ensure that the environment and local community were protected from mining impacts as much as possible. The two options were to advocate that SMC get an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) or to try to mitigate the impacts through the GNA. After much deliberation and back-and-forth, both internally and with the mine, we decided not to advocate for an EIS and instead to negotiate directly with SMC for a Benbow Mitigation Plan (BMP) that would be based on the objectives of the GNA. The BMP was incorporated into the GNA in 2016. Originally, SMC set 2018 as the target date to finish their Benbow work. Unforeseen setbacks and some business decisions delayed that schedule, and SMC is still working to finish the Benbow portal. In December of 2020, we were alerted that SMC wanted to expand the scope of their work at Benbow to expedite the overall expansion plans that have also fallen behind. Given the surface disturbance, water quality impacts, stress on the community (traffic, noise, etc), and the fact that we felt strongly that this larger scope violated the terms and spirit of the BMP, we decided not to support the larger scope. Instead we worked to get SMC to live up to their existing commitments and begin reclaiming Benbow as soon as possible.

After six months of meetings and conversations, SMC agreed to stick to the original scope of the project. This means SMC will begin demobilizing and reclaiming the Benbow area at least two years earlier than if they had broadened their scope of work in the area. Congratulations to our dedicated members who worked so hard to ensure the values of the Good Neighbor Agreement were upheld!

Nutrient water quality standards taking a hit in Montana

By Mikindra Morin

Some of you may remember Senate Bill 358 from the Legislative Session, a bill that will roll back nutrient water quality standards in Montana. The bill removes numeric nutrient standards, which are based on years of science, in favor of narrative standards, which are not. It also mandates Adaptive Management Plans (AMPs) for all watersheds across the state. You may be thinking, I thought we like AMPs? Didn’t we just celebrate the great work of Northern Plains members who expanded the protections in the Good Neighbor Agreement by approving AMPs at the Stillwater and East Boulder Mines? The answer is yes, we do like AMPs – when you have the data and resources to do them right. The Stillwater and East Boulder AMPs were based on 20 years of water quality data, were well-funded, had countless hours of member participation, and still took four years to craft – and that was for one permit holder in one watershed. The Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) is trying to come up with an AMP for every watershed in Montana without consistent baseline data and only one additional staff person. This severely under-staffed and under-budgeted project will inevitably result in the degradation of rivers across the state.

The saga is not over, though. SB 358 requires DEQ to go through a rulemaking process that reflects the mandates in the bill. This rulemaking process is happening right now, Continued on page 11.
Tenacious together, a thirteen-year campaign ends in victory

By Caitlin Cromwell

A after nearly thirteen years of grassroots pressure, on June 9, TC Energy (formerly TransCanada) announced that they were officially cancelling the Keystone XL pipeline project.

TC Energy released a statement saying that after “a comprehensive review of its options, and in consultation with its partner, the Government of Alberta, it has terminated the Keystone XL Pipeline Project.” The Keystone XL pipeline would have carried more than 800,000 barrels of dirty, climate-polluting tar sands oil each day through Montana, its route stretching from Alberta to Steele City, Nebraska. From there, the pipeline would have connected with existing pipeline networks to deliver tar sands to oil refineries on the Gulf Coast.

The company also stated that they’ll work with regulators and others to safely terminate the project. This purportedly means removing pipe in places where it’s already been installed and equipment that’s been sitting around in anticipation of construction beginning.

“The Keystone XL pipeline posed a direct threat to our water system,” said Northern Plains member Bill Whitehead. Whitehead is chairman of the Assiniboine and Sioux Rural Water Supply System on the Fort Peck Reservation.

Now, thanks to years of dogged, collective organizing by Whitehead and so many Northern Plains members – plus the power built by this movement – that threat is no more. This victory is a testament to the hard work of Northern Plains members across the state, our allies at Fort Peck and the Assiniboine & Sioux tribes, our sister organization Dakota Rural Action, and so many more.

It’s reminiscent of that old proverb:

“If you want to go quickly, go alone.
If you want to go far, go together.

Thanks for going far together with us.
After a six-year campaign led by Northern Plains members, Commercial Property Assessed Capital Enhancements (C-PACE) is finally the law of the land in Montana. Commercial property owners now have a proven financing tool to increase their buildings’ energy efficiency while saving money from the start. Since C-PACE’s passage during the 2021 legislative session, members and key stakeholders have been working alongside the Montana Facility Finance Authority (MFFA) to set up a program and standardized process that is effective and protective of C-PACE customers. The MFFA will serve as the program’s administrator and will be convening select contractors, municipalities, small businesses, and financing institutions to make sure Montana’s C-PACE program is a good fit for everyone. We anticipate the rules will be complete and the program can be used by January 2022.

In the meantime, Northern Plains members are working with interested affiliates throughout the state to educate county commissioners, inform local businesses of the efficiency and cost savings opportunities of C-PACE, and give counties the tools they need to create C-PACE special districts by the start of next year. If your affiliate would like a presentation on how to get your county on board with C-PACE, contact Makenna at: makenna@northernplains.org.

Screenshot from the PACENation conference in June. PACENation brings hundreds of C-PACE experts together from financing, consumer protections, government, advocacy, and business development to talk about the future of the industry.

The best way to find the answer to the question above is to check out our legislative scorecard – now available online! Head over to the Legislative page of the Northern Plains website and find out how your legislator stacks up when it comes to protecting clean air, clean water, and democratic principles. Legislators need to hear from YOU – their constituents – in order to be held accountable for their good or bad actions!

Go to NorthernPlains.org/Legislature to download our 2021 Voting Record and scorecard.
Northern Plains to host Montana’s Energy Future Summit

At Northern Plains, we are working to create a clean, affordable, and just energy future for everyone. Achieving that future will take innovation, collaboration, and wrestling with hard questions. That’s why we’re hosting Montana’s Energy Future Summit – a day-long event to envision what is possible for Montana’s energy future, to discuss challenges to achieving the clean, affordable, and just energy future we want to see, and to hear from leading experts in the field about energy innovation. We hope you’ll join us!

Montana’s Energy Future Summit
Friday, October 1, 2021
Billings, MT

Mark your calendars now!
Stay tuned for registration information closer to the event.

Questions? Contact Sydney at sydney@northernplains.org or (406) 248-1154.

MEMBER VOICE

Why I care about climate change...

Climate change is a warning that we humans are losing our way and losing our connection to the earth upon which all life depends. Too often, our economic and social systems set us up to exploit our power over others, creating takers and consumers rather than stewards of this planet.

My quality of life and identity is tied to being outside, and I know the effects of a changing climate will impact all I do. Skiing, backcountry expeditions, running, gardening, and exploring will become more volatile as fire, wind, rain, and drought expose us to new trials and challenges. But I know my privilege protects me from the worst of it and I am not as susceptible as others.

The expansive natural beauty, biodiversity and diverse cultures throughout the world are under threat as entire populations, ecosystems, and wildlife habitats are robbed of clean water, access to food, and other means of basic survival.

However, climate change can be a catalyst. It can provide an opportunity for us to rethink our relationship to the land, its resources, and our place in it. We can look towards the indigenous knowledge that still thrives and to let go of destructive, colonial delusions of dominance. Our response to the climate crisis can become the golden thread that weaves our social and environmental fabric back together, creating a canvas to reimagine our place in the world.

Perhaps we still have time to realize the great responsibility we have to protect future generations and all other creatures who seek to thrive on this one earth. Using our human potential to create a better world is what gets me up every day and keeps me awake at night. I have hope that the climate’s warning will be heard, inspiring us all to recognize our connection to one another and our obligation to protect and regenerate rather than destroy and degrade.

- Sarah Stands, Livingston, MT
Together again! Opportunities arise to gather in-person

By Dustin Ogdin

We remain awe-inspired by the grit and resilience of Northern Plains members who continued the tireless work of protecting communities across the state despite the challenges, losses, and grief resulting from the Coronavirus pandemic. As we keep a close eye on maintaining safety for members and staff alike, we are overjoyed by recent opportunities to gather again, face-to-face, enjoying the company and camaraderie of amazing people doing great work for Montana!

Below are a few photos from the field. We hope these opportunities to gather safely will only grow in the coming weeks and months. We cannot wait to see all of you very soon!

1. Beartooth Alliance members meet at their Annual Summer Meeting on July 15 in Silver Gate, MT.

2. Staff member Olivia celebrates with Don Brown, Darrell Garoutte, Brant Quick, Donna Quick, and Helen Waller, members of McCone Agriculture Protection Organization (MAPO), at their final meeting on June 25.

3. Jean Setter meets with staff member Caitlin in Great Falls. Jean recently celebrated her 99th birthday!

4. Jerry Iverson and Paul Hawks being interviewed at Paul and Elli Hawk’s house in Melville on July 13 for a documentary about responsible mining.

5. Tony Hartshorn demonstrating to Sen. Bruce Gillespie and Ginette Abdo at the Conrad Soil Crawl on July 15.

Surface owner consent in jeopardy once again

By Bronya Lechtman

Northern Plains continues to fight for landowner protections in coal country. In the final days of the Obama administration, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) issued a temporary order called an Instructional Memorandum (IM) to ensure that if the federal government ever traded federal coal to private owners, surface owners living over that federal coal would continue to enjoy the right to consent (or not consent) to surface mining operations. This IM was finally issued after years of work by our members.

The Federal Surface Mining Control and Reclamation Act (SMCRA) prohibits the federal government from entering into a coal lease involving federal coal rights that underlie private surface lands “until the surface owner has given written consent to enter and commence surface mining operations…” The clear intent of this law is to protect surface owner consent over federal coal. However, when the federal government trades coal to a private entity, those landowner rights are no longer protected by the letter of the law. Therefore, before the IM was issued, coal companies were able to exploit this by proposing federal coal exchanges for the very purpose of avoiding the requirement to obtain surface owner consent.

In September of 2020, the clarifying IM expired, leaving surface owners living over federal coal again at risk. We are working to get the IM reissued, asking the BLM to protect surface owner consent once and for all by taking additional steps to make this order permanent. Northern Plains was founded by everyday people working together to protect their property against coal development, and – five decades later – we will not let up one bit to ensure these rights remain respected.

DEQ upholds excavation at Colstrip (for now), creates path for company appeal in two years

By Svein Newman

On June 29, the Montana Department of Environmental Quality released the terms of a proposed settlement with Talen Energy (the operating owner of the Colstrip power plant) over the clean-up of the ash ponds associated with Colstrip Generating Station Units 1 & 2.

Last November, DEQ issued an order requiring that the 1 & 2 ash ponds be fully excavated, with the ash dug up and deposited in a lined landfill away from groundwater. In December, Talen contested DEQ’s order, invoking a dispute resolution clause that allowed the company to attempt to negotiate a settlement with DEQ.

Here’s the good news: Under the terms of the proposed settlement, good clean-up (excavation) remains DEQ’s order. As a testament to years of organizing work by Northern Plains, DEQ has affirmed that excavation is the only sure way to clean-up Colstrip’s water and provide the community with a future. DEQ is requiring them to plan for excavation in-full.

Continued on page 15.
Here's the bad news: DEQ has agreed that Talen can also simultaneously design a weaker clean-up plan and, in two years, is allowed to request that DEQ accept their proposal in place of the strong remediation order. This creates potential for the ultimate bait-and-switch.

DEQ’s settlement gives us some momentum moving forward, but it is absolutely critical that we double down our efforts to maintain strong support for excavation over the next few years, and start saving up for the almost-inevitable challenges that will come with DEQ’s final 2023 decision to either stick with excavation or turn about-face at the last possible second. Landowners and agricultural water users in the Colstrip area have been waiting decades for this problem to be dealt with. Adding additional years of uncertainty is a heavy blow.

**Supreme Court puts final nail in coal export coffin**

On June 28, the United States Supreme Court dismissed the last remaining legal appeal of Washington State’s 2017 decision to deny permits for the proposed Millennium Bulk Terminals (MBT) coal export facility, in Longview, Washington. Their decision marks the official end of the eleven-year Pacific Northwest coal export saga, in which Northern Plains was heavily engaged.

MBT was the first of seven proposed coal export facilities in the Northwest, and became the last remaining proposal as others were denied or abandoned by their proposed developers. The State of Washington denied water quality permits for MBT four years ago, but the terminal stayed alive in the courts through a variety of state and federal appeals. Most recently, the Attorneys General of Montana and Wyoming sought to bring a suit against the State of Washington, alleging that WA was constitutionally required to permit the coal port. The Supreme Court rejected this argument, ending the last of the coal export legal appeals.

If built, MBT would have sent up to 44 million metric tons of Powder River Basin coal to Asian markets per year, adding up to 16 additional coal trains per day traveling through Montana communities. In addition to worsening climate change, coal exports would have increased air pollution from diesel exhaust and coal dust, slowed response times for emergency responders waiting to cross occupied train tracks before addressing fires and medical crises, and increased impacts to land and water from coal mining.

**2021 MONTANA LOCAL FOOD CHALLENGE**

Join us in celebrating Montana’s farmers, ranchers, gardeners, and local food businesses by signing up to eat local food this August!

During the month, we challenge you to eat local food every day, plus take our weekly challenges to try delicious new recipes, connect to your community, eat local specialties, and take action for local food. By participating, you’re already entered in the drawing for a $250 gift card to your favorite local food market, restaurant, or producer!

You can sign up today at NorthernPlains.org/LocalFoodChallenge.
MEMBERS ON THE MOVE

Members meet with newly appointed DEQ Director Dorrington

By Makenna Sellers

Northern Plains members Clint McRae (Forsyth) and Seth Newton (Glendive) met with Dept. of Environmental Quality Director Chris Dorrington this summer to hold the agency accountable to their decisions on Colstrip ash pond cleanup and radioactive oil waste disposal rules. We appreciate that our longstanding relationship with DEQ directors past and present helps get things done to protect Montana. A mutually respectful working relationship is only possible through time, dedication, and a fair amount of grit. Thank you to Clint and Seth for putting so much of all of the above into this work!

Livingston members address city waste, run for co-op leadership

By Ava Shearer

Yellowstone Bend Citizens Council members Amanda Murphy and Katherine Dunlap met with Livingston's Public Works Director on behalf of the Food and Planetary Health Committee (F&PHC) to discuss what the city does with its waste. While the city provides many services and is building solid infrastructure for a town its size, the F&PHC committee has lots of ideas of how Livingston can streamline its operations even further.

Yellowstone Bend Citizens Council member Sam Francis is running for Park Electric Co-Op’s Board of Trustees. If elected, Sam has pledged to bring innovative ideas that prioritize clean energy to the table while improving the co-op’s governance and commitment to community solar projects. Elections will take place in October.

Members appeal to Sen. Tester on restoring mandatory COOL

By Caroline Canarios

Members Jeanie Alderson, Tom Tschida, Jean Dahlman, and Dena Hoff met with Senator Jon Tester’s Legislative Director and Legislative Correspondent to discuss Country-of-Origin Labeling (COOL) and determine the Senator’s interest in restoring mandatory COOL for beef and pork. Through that meeting, our members were able to share their story of why we need COOL in Montana, and how restoring mandatory COOL can solve both fair pricing and consumer transparency issues. We are encouraged by the Senator’s commitment to restoring COOL!

Montana CAFOs addressed in meeting with DEQ

By Bronya Lechtman

Deborah and Ken Biehl, Linda Roche, Marita Valencia, Clay Dunlap, and Laurie Lohrer – all members of Northern Plains’ Lewistown-based affiliate, Central Montana Resource Council – met with staff of the Department of Environmental Quality's Water Protection Bureau to ask questions about protections related to Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations (CAFO’s) in

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!)
With the help of member volunteers, we are currently scanning and digitizing all of our Plains Truth newsletters, dating back to our founding in 1972. These documents provide a treasure trove of wisdom, humor, strategy, and inspiration. Even the logo – and its many iterations over the decades – provides a visual metaphor for the larger expansion and growth of the organization, and the power that flows from our dedicated membership.

Before the Plains Truth had a name, founding members Ellen Pfister and Anne Charter composed and hand-typed the very first Northern Plains newsletter in Anne’s living room in the summer of 1972.

The earliest designs illustrate (quite literally) our grit and grassroots resourcefulness. Later designs spotlight the evolution of an organization that has stayed true to its roots while embracing opportunities to use more modern and sophisticated communication tools. Whether looking at hand-typed, hand-drawn newsletters from the 1970s, or the digitally rendered newsletter you’re holding in your hands today, one characteristic of the Plains Truth remains consistent: We share trustworthy information and tell inspiring stories about everyday people rolling up their sleeves to protect the communities and places they love!
COUNCIL ROUNDUP

Sleeping Giant brings local food resiliency, solar to Helena

Makenna Sellers

Since the last issue of the Plains Truth, Sleeping Giant Citizens Council’s Solarize and Local Food campaigns have taken shape for the summer. On July 28, SGCC partnered with Terry Johnson of Johnson’s Nursery and Garden for a garden tour and discussion on the barriers to local food livelihoods for producers. On August 11, Sleeping Giant Citizens Council will team up with Northern Plains members focused on soil health to put on a soil crawl with the help and expertise of Tim Dusenberry of XX Bar Farm & Ranch in Helena. SGCC’s local food campaign is excited to learn from these tours as their work continues.

SGCC members have also spent the summer helping friends and neighbors go solar with our first ever Solarize Campaign. Site assessment signups will be open through the end of August for anyone in the Helena area interested or wanting to learn more about going solar.

BMLA informs Bull Mountain landowners of their rights

Bronya Lechtman

In February, Signal Peak Energy (SPE) sent letters to landowners around the Bull Mountains asking to access their properties to conduct environmental surveys. SPE is likely sending these letters as an initial step to explore expansion of their Bull Mountain coal mine. Bull Mountain Land Alliance members held an informational meeting on July 25 with letter recipients to express the importance of letting SPE access their properties for the pre-mining survey, so that landowners can prove damage from mining if SPE expands. BMLA members noted, however, that landowners should consider an access agreement with terms that would ensure accurate surveying.

BMLA members have also been working to hold SPE accountable for trying to evade their legal responsibility to replace mine-damaged water sources as ordered by the Department of Environmental Quality.

YVCC conducts successful 2021 Solarize Billings campaign

Caroline Canarios

YVCC has accomplished our goal of connecting over 50 Billings residents to our selected solar installers, Harvest Solar and Bozeman Green Build. The campaign has resulted in at least 8 installations and counting, and we have also helped two Billings businesses consider solar to improve efficiency and lower utility costs. We’re thrilled with the progress and are looking forward to hosting a celebration event in August!
COUNCIL ROUNDUP

SPA hosts Montana FWP for presentation on Stillwater River fisheries

Tai Koester

Following a survey last fall by Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife & Parks on the status of the Upper Stillwater River’s fishery, Stillwater Protective Association hosted three technicians from the agency to present the preliminary results. Through the Good Neighbor Agreement with the Stillwater Mine, SPA and the mine requested FWP survey the Upper Stillwater fishery. The preliminary results suggest that the Upper Stillwater fits with a broader pattern seen across southwest Montana—fewer young trout, more large trout, and fewer fish per river mile. While the exact reasons for the trend are not yet clear, FWP plans to continue surveying in the coming years.

BA Gathers for Annual Meeting

Sydney Ausen

Beartooth Alliance members gathered at the Range Rider Lodge in July for their Annual Meeting. Guest speaker Dr. Jane Mangold discussed the impacts of noxious weeds on our local environment. Attendees also heard about the emerging “Dark Skies” initiative to address light pollution in local communities, and the importance of catch and release fishing on Soda Butte Creek. Marcia Woolman was elected as Chair of BA, Christy Gerrits as Secretary, Ted Drass as Treasurer, and Nellie Israel to serve as BA’s representative to the Northern Plains Board of Directors. Congratulations to our officers!

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.
CCRC holds first in-person meeting since pandemic onset

Sixteen months after the pandemic arrived in Montana, Carbon County Resource Council members resumed in-person activities at their June membership meeting. The event almost did not happen—less than 24 hours earlier, the Robertson Draw Fire swept over Red Lodge’s iconic Mt. Maurice and appeared as though it would engulf the town. Fortunately, the wind shifted and plans for the meeting went on. The membership discussed fundraising for its campaign to solarize the Roberts School. The school embraced the project after CCRC members pitched the idea to install solar on the building. CCRC is looking forward to getting the project underway in the coming months!

Tai Koester

YBCC highlights clean energy achievements

Yellowstone Bend Citizen’s Council has continued to meet virtually this summer, though an in-person meeting is planned for August. YBCC’s Energy Equity Committee is putting the finishing touches on its ‘solar map’, which shows all the solar arrays installed in Livingston. It will be an inspiring visualization of all the work YBCC has done to solarize the city. The Food & Planetary Health Committee continues its work finding solutions to improve Livingston’s waste stream. Members have already met with the city’s Public Works Director to see what is currently being done. Finally, YBCC member Sam Francis is running for a seat on Park Electric Co-Op’s board of trustees.

Ava Shearer

BCC teams up with The Absaroka-Beartooth Wilderness Foundation

This summer, Bear Creek Council members are out and about on local trails promoting responsible use and good stewardship practices. In conjunction with the US Forest Service, the Absaroka-Beartooth Wilderness Foundation (ABWF) identified the Bear Creek trailhead/campground and the outgoing trail to Knox Lake as an area of interest. ABWF provided training for interested members to hone their skills as Trail Ambassadors. On a typical day fulfilling this role, members spend some time at the trailhead and the rest of their time on the trail, making friendly conversation with hikers and offering information and tools to help them care for their surroundings. BCC members will serve as Trail Ambassador volunteers on weekend mornings from June through August.

Mat Willey
COUNCIL ROUNDUP

MAPO rides into sunset after years of great work protecting McCones County

McCones Agricultural Protective Association members gathered for one last meeting and potluck in June at Helen Waller’s farm near Circle. They are shutting the books on a long and successful legacy, protecting the area’s land, water, and agricultural viability from threats such as a proposed coal mine, a tar sands pipeline, genetically modified wheat, and hyper consolidation in the ag industry. Job well done, MAPO! We hope to see a few of you at this year’s Annual Meeting.

MAPO members gather for one last potluck to toast the end of a successful era of organizing. From L to R: Darrell Garoutte, Don Brown, Donna Quick, Helen Waller, and Brant Quick.

Olivia Stockman

DRC’s Solarize Glendive campaign is rocking and rolling

Dawson Resource Council’s campaign to Solarize Glendive is off and running! After months of behind-the-scenes work, DRC members launched the campaign publicly on July 1.

By “going solar” at the same time as other neighbors, Solarize Glendive makes it easier and more cost-effective for property owners in Dawson County to install solar. After a competitive selection process, DRC members chose Thirsty Lake Solar from Bozeman to provide site assessments and installations for the campaign!

“We really want to help people understand solar and make it more available to our rural community,” says Melissa Mittelstaed, vice chair of DRC. “It can be a complex process.”

Curious to learn more? Head to northernplains.org/solarizeglendive for more details or to sign up for a free solar site assessment.

Caitlin Cromwell

CMRC holds virtual annual dinner and meeting

Central Montana Resource Council members gathered virtually in May for their annual dinner and meeting! Members sent out some of their favorite recipes beforehand, cooked from their own homes prior to the meeting, and ate together via Zoom. We celebrated a successful year, despite organizing remotely during the pandemic, and CMRC member and soil consultant Patti Armbrister presented on the bioactive world of soil. We are excited to resume in-person meetings (with a Zoom option) in August, and CMRC will have a booth at the Chokecherry Festival on September 11.

In other news, the Green Share Project community garden is thriving in Lewistown! Volunteers are donating food to the Community Cupboard and holding Tuesday night garden giveaways.

Bronya Lechtman
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 A HISTORY-MAKING ANNUAL MEETING

Cheers to 50 Years
Northern Plains’ 50th Annual Meeting
November 19-20, 2021
DoubleTree Hotel, Billings

Join us as we say “Cheers to 50 Years” and celebrate almost a half-century of standing shoulder-to-shoulder to protect Montana. We are hard at work lining up informative, engaging sessions, locally-sourced meals, and plenty of ways to celebrate together. We look forward to seeing you all again in-person! Stay tuned for updates, registration, and more information coming soon.

Amy Myran (left) and Dena Hoff (right), in character as “Goldie and Gilda, satirized politicians and polluters at many Annual Meetings.

CALL FOR RESOLUTIONS

The Annual Meeting of the Membership provides the time each year for Northern Plains members to debate and adopt proposed policy resolutions. Being a member means you have the right to vote on policy resolutions that help guide Northern Plains’ work in the year ahead.

Please submit resolutions to the Resolutions Committee via email by October 12th for consideration at this year’s annual meeting. Resolutions and any questions can be directed to Makenna@northernplains.org.