50TH ANNUAL MEETING
CELEBRATING HALF A CENTURY
PROTECTING MONTANA

Join us as we examine issues such as energy development, family agriculture, the power of everyday people standing up to corporate control, and the meaning of grassroots organizing.

We can’t wait to see you Nov. 19-20 - be sure to register today!

EASTERN MONTANA RECOVERS FROM COAL SEAM FIRES
An age-old problem in the region hits crisis level during severe summer drought.

ENERGY SUMMIT SHINES A LIGHT ON CLEAN ENERGY FUTURE
Day-long conference explores challenges and opportunities facing Montana’s energy landscape.
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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Greetings from the East Fork of Hanging Woman Creek.

Autumn is a time of both decay and of planting seeds. For me, this time of year brings relief from the heat of summer, anticipation for our annual harvest, and a certain kind of sadness. It seems important to take time to recognize all that we’ve come through and to plan ahead for springtime.

This fall also marks the close of my term as your Chair, and my last chair letter. This, too, brings both relief and sadness. As I reflect on my time as Chair and on all of us living and working during a global pandemic – the challenges, perseverance, and losses – I grieve those who have passed on, all the hardships for our organization, our staff, and our members. I am also incredibly proud of all that we have accomplished together.

As we approach our 50th year as Northern Plains Resource Council, it is such an honor to chair this magnificent organization at this incredible juncture. I was five years old when my parents and many others gathered at Northern Plains’ first Annual Meeting. Now I am serving my 26th year on the Board of Directors. While I’m proud to have spent most of my life involved in one way or another with Northern Plains, it is with humility that I acknowledge all these years don’t really prepare one for chairing this venerable organization, especially during a pandemic and transitioning to two new executive directors after 37 years. In this time, we have also navigated our issue work within a divided country and state; making informing, communicating, and organizing seem almost impossible.

The COVID-19 pandemic brought us difficulties we hadn’t even imagined; it has also shown the best of our creativity and determination. This hard work has been done by drawing from our past and looking toward the future, by thoughtfully moving between them to tackle the very present challenges we face.

At times, the divides feel more daunting and our work more complex than ever. But Northern Plains does not shy away from conflict. In fact, we know how to transform conflict into action and solutions. As our founders showed us 50 years ago: by reaching out, building relationships, and gathering together we can make problems regenerative rather than divisive.

I know we are uniquely prepared for the work ahead because Northern Plains is built around and built by relationships. Our relationships to our places and to each other guide us and allow us a unique ability to bridge divides.

How we gather and organize may have changed, but the truth that we gather to solve problems that we can’t solve alone remains constant. If we are to continue our work to keep our land and water healthy, grow our clean energy future, help ranchers and farmers remain on the land, find solutions to our broken food system, and have an impact on our climate crisis, we will need to keep strong our relationships and our abilities to gather.

With all the change and challenges of the last two years, I have come away with an even bigger love for Northern Plains and all of you. I have a richer and deeper appreciation for our remarkable and talented staff. I am amazed by our leaders; by your courage, intelligence, humor, creativity, and dedication. And I am even more enthralled by and proud of our grassroots and democratic form of governing and guiding ourselves.

Thank you all for teaching me as you have shown up with your energy, your time, your work, your humor, your support, your reverence, and your care.

- Jeanie Alderson
Chair
Joy, connection, positivity motivate the Harris-Petrik family

By Makenna Sellers

Joel and Emily put their community ethic into practice every day as parents, friends, educators, and social activists in Helena. The couple first learned about Northern Plains when they met during graduate school in Billings, after completing undergraduate studies at the University of Montana.

“Some of our dear friends were Northern Plains staff and member-leaders,” Emily recalls about their time in Billings. “For us, it was a no-brainer to become members. Northern Plains uses a truly grassroots model, more so than any other conservation group in Montana. It’s not all about lawyers or ‘experts.’ And [Northern Plains] is effective – we really get stuff done.”

After moving to Helena, Joel first got involved with Northern Plains’ Helena affiliate, Sleeping Giant Citizens Council, through the Sun Run. The Sun Run is an annual fundraiser and 5K race to raise money for solar panel installations around Helena, with a long-term goal of making the city a leader in renewable energy adoption in Montana.

“The Sun Run combined my interests of running, the environment, and clean energy, so I was happy to be a part of the planning the last few years,” said Joel. “I like the member-driven model of our affiliates. In a world where many people feel isolated and disconnected, the way we do our work brings people together and makes us all feel like we’re a part of something bigger than ourselves.”

Growing up in Fort Smith, MT and now a Water Resource Specialist at the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation, Joel thought about his relationship to the land and water around him from an early age. His family ran a successful fishing guide operation on the Bighorn River.

“Although it’s not the same as a rancher’s stewardship and connection to the land, we always knew about the changes in cfs [cubic feet per second] flows and water temperature and how that affected wildlife,” Joel recalls. “We depended on water.”

Emily’s childhood in North Dakota inspired her to be an educator. Now in secondary education as a teacher at Helena High School, Emily exudes passion and aspires to make a positive contribution to her community every day, in all walks of her life.

Joel and Emily’s community and environmental ethic grew even deeper when they had their son, Anders, this past December. The whole family loves where they live and enjoys spending time skiing, running, and hiking. They believe that we all can further our sense of community through nurturing relationships and working toward mutual good. They like Northern Plains’ wide range of issue work including soil health, farming and ranching innovation, renewable energy, and transitioning from a fossil fuel-based economy.

When asked why folks should join Northern Plains, Joel and Emily lifted up the combination of strategic changemaking and our ability to collectively envision a better world for ourselves and future generations. In Emily’s words, “We got a lot done on the battleground!”

Thank you Joel, Emily, and Anders for being such dedicated and inspiring members of Northern Plains and Sleeping Giant Citizens Council!
On a beautiful, late summer afternoon in the Helena Valley, Tim Dusenberry – the owner and operator of XX Bar Farm & Ranch – described the transition that his family operation had undergone in the span of the last ten years. Speaking outdoors to a crowd of around thirty attendees at Northern Plains Resource Council’s last soil crawl of 2021, Dusenberry described how he had transformed the family’s irrigated hay fields into lush, rotationally-grazed paddocks that sustain the livestock he sells directly to consumers.

“We used to sell a lot of hay, but now we prefer keeping the nutrients on the operation. That’s what builds our soil and supports the grass we graze our animals on,” he explained.

The shift towards regenerative production methods was spurred by a workshop Dusenberry attended in 2012 with Gabe Brown, a North Dakota farmer and well-known soil health advocate. The workshop pushed the Dusenberrys to begin looking at the soil beneath their feet, which led them to introduce rotational grazing and reduce chemical inputs on their operation. Dusenberry noted that he now regularly observes dung beetles – evidence of improved soil health - which he had never seen prior to eliminating insecticides five years ago.

The shift also coincided with Tim taking over much of the operation’s management from his father, Jim Dusenberry. Standing alongside his son, the elder Dusenberry reflected on the generational transition.

“I never thought about doing the things [Tim] is now doing”, he observed. “It’s just amazing to see the results.”

The Dusenberrys were joined by Becky Ayre, the Natural Resources Conservation Service District Conservationist for Lewis & Clark County, who performed an infiltration test for excited onlookers. Pouring water over a cross-section of PVC pipe, Ayre simulated a large rainfall on the Dusenberry pasture. During the demonstration, she explained how healthier soil has a capacity to hold water rather than allowing it to run off.

The event drew a mix of attendees from the urban environments of Helena and Great Falls and a handful of producers from Drummond to Townsend. While it marked the end of the summer soil crawl calendar, Northern Plains is preparing for a busy schedule full of soil crawls during the 2022 growing season.
A crisis lurking just below the surface: Coal-seam fires in eastern Montana

By Bronya Lechtman

Since 2000, at least 456,446 acres in southeastern Montana have been devastated by coal-seam fires. As worrying as this statistic is, the problem is even worse. That figure does not include coal-seam fires outside of Department of Natural Resources and Conservation jurisdiction, such as fires that originate on tribal land.

These fires are the burning of an exposed or underground coal-seam, and they have existed for millennia. They can be ignited through natural sources such as lightning or wildfires or via human activity such as mining.

In 2012, an especially intense fire season lit exposed, surface-level coal in eastern Montana that then burned underground throughout the region. The coal continues to smolder through the winter and ignite grassfires in the summer which, in turn, burn until they run out of fuel. Large coal seam fires can then ignite newly exposed coal seams, and the vicious cycle continues.

Northern Plains member and Colstrip area rancher John Bailey describes the disturbing frequency of coal-seam fires:

“There was a big wooden chest sitting by a tree on our property where we’d explore all the time as kids. My dad remembered it being there in the 40s, but it’s probably been there since the homestead days. In 2012, there was a big coal-seam fire that burned that whole area, but we were able to save the chest, and planned to return it. We still have not brought it back, however, because that piece of property has burned at least three times since, even though that chest sat there unharmed for at least 70 years.”

Even though the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and private companies such as Great Northern Properties own the majority of the coal in question, the burden of management falls on local landowners, communities, and county fire personnel who put out the majority of these fires year after year. The high frequency of coal seam fires has become a major expense and a dangerous health risk.

This past August, the Richard Spring Fire (started by a coal seam), burned 171,130 acres in eastern Montana. Fourth generation Colstrip-area rancher and Northern Plains member Clint McRae was deeply impacted by this fire. In an email to members and staff concerned about his well-being during this disaster, Clint recounted the following story:

“We had about 1,000 bales of hay carried over from the last three years and lost nearly all of it. They were in several separate stackyards. Over 90 power poles burned and we had no water for cattle for several days. The scary part is that we nearly lost both houses. If I had not blown a front tire on the county engine and backed off to my folks’ house, we would have lost them both. Fire at my folks’ was burning in the wood pile and throwing heat and

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COAL

Continued from page 6.

sparks. Wood sided house. Broadus Fire Dept showed up and foamed the house twice. It was so damned hot, we nearly backed off... We have had loss from fire in the past and survived, but we have never experienced total loss of all of our grass, every fence, and we never have had our houses and buildings threatened like this.”

Despite these fires happening year after year, and our friends and neighbors increasingly facing enormous losses, there is still no funding available to help prevent these fires, and not nearly enough money to fight them once they ignite. We are working to find solutions to mitigate these fires and ensure that the owners of the culprit coal seams are held accountable. Farmers, ranchers, and all communities in eastern Montana should be able to maintain their way of life without this ever-present threat.

(NOTE: You can also read about how the fires this August impacted the Northern Cheyenne Nation on page 11.)

Thank you for demanding climate accountability in the federal coal program!

By Bronya Lechtman

Northern Plains members have been working to protect our land, water, air, and way of life from industrial-scale coal mining for almost 50 years. A great deal of the coal slated for mining is owned by the federal government and leased to private companies for production. Coal from the Powder River Basin (which stretches across Montana and Wyoming) accounts for the vast majority of all federally-owned coal produced.

The federal government continues to lease this taxpayer-owned coal to companies at dirt cheap rates even though production from this coal is the largest single source of climate pollution in the United States. The Department of Interior (DOI) was the subject of three government investigations over its coal leasing and royalty programs during the last decade. A study from the Institute of Energy Economics and Financial Analysis revealed that the DOI’s inaccurate assessment of the “fair market value” of coal has cheated taxpayers out of almost $30 billion over the last thirty years, a massive subsidy to the coal industry. This pattern continues in the Biden administration, despite their stated commitment to reduce the country’s contribution to climate change.

Following an order from Interior Secretary Haaland to review the federal coal program, the DOI recently accepted public comment on this review as an initial step. Thank you to everyone who participated in this comment period, letting DOI know that scrutinizing coal remains an essential part of the climate conversation, and that it is unacceptable to continue to subsidize coal production. Northern Plains will continue to fight to protect our climate and communities as this process continues.

Coal companies in Montana, which are primarily mining federally owned coal, have been extracting coal from our state at criminally low rates for far too long.
**Cheers to 50 Years!**

By Claire Overholt  
Northern Plains 50th Annual Meeting  
November 19-20, 2021  
Hosted on Zoom

It’s that time of year again – the Annual Meeting is almost here! This year marks the 50th Annual Meeting of the Northern Plains Resource Council, and we can’t wait to see you all November 19-20 as we commemorate the occasion. As always, you can expect informative, engaging sessions, updates on our work across the state, and plenty of ways to celebrate together.

Our bylaws define the Annual Meeting as a time to conduct Northern Plains’ business. It’s your best opportunity to help steer Northern Plains through the coming year and to adopt resolutions on important public policy questions.

It’s also a time to get to know one another better, learn together from our speakers and programs, and toast a year where our people have made a difference for Montana.

It’s hard to know we’ll need to wait a bit longer before enjoying the camaraderie of friends and fellow members in person, but we hope a virtual event will allow more people to attend the meeting – no travel plans needed!

Please join us as we reflect on nearly half a century of organizing Montanans and examine issues that have been core to our identity from the first days of Northern Plains: energy development, family agriculture, the power of everyday people standing up to corporate control, and the meaning of grassroots organizing.

So let’s say “Cheers to 50 Years” as we gather to learn from one another and enjoy the company of fellow Northern Plains members working to make our state stronger and more resilient!

Get your tickets today! You can register for the meeting online at www.northernplains.org/annual-meeting or by calling (406) 248-1154.

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**Keynote Speakers**  
We are pleased to announce two keynote speakers this year: Marshall Ganz and Katharine Hayhoe!

A familiar name in organizing circles, Marshall Ganz teaches, researches, and writes on leadership, narrative, social movements, civic associations, and politics. He joined Cesar Chavez in the mid-60’s in his effort to unionize California farm workers, spent 16 years with the United Farm Workers, and has worked with grassroots organizations on political organizing and strategy. He is currently the Senior Lecturer in Leadership, Organizing, and Civil Society at Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government.

Photo credit: The Harvard Crimson
ANNUAL MEETING

What you need to know

Meeting of the Membership
On Saturday morning, Northern Plains members are invited to come together in the annual “Meeting of the Membership.” Being a member means you have the right to vote on policy resolutions that help guide Northern Plains’ work in the year ahead. Because policy resolutions undergo many changes during the course of debate, you must be present in order to vote. Select “Meeting of the Membership” when you register to receive a Zoom link specific to this meeting. (Information will be sent closer to the event.)

Election Ballot
The slate of candidates put forward by the Nominations Committee will appear on a ballot mailed to each member. If your Northern Plains dues are current, you should have already received your ballot enclosed in the Annual Meeting brochure mailed earlier this month. There is also space for write-ins. The seats you can vote on include officers and at-large delegates. If you have not received your ballot, call (406) 248-1154 to check if your membership is current. Don’t delay! Ballots must be received by November 18.

Online Auction
The Annual Meeting’s traditional silent auction will move to an online auction this year. The auction runs Nov. 1 - Nov. 20, so be sure to check out all the great items and place your bids early and often! You’re guaranteed to find something for every taste or interest with unique items from across the state. Go to northernplains.org/auction to access the auction.

The purpose of our auction is to strengthen Northern Plains’ work in the year ahead. We appreciate your help in making it a success! Bidding will close Saturday, November 20, at 6:00 p.m.

If you have questions about the auction, please contact Claire at (406) 248-1154, or email claire@northernplains.org.

Deadlines
• Nov 4 – Nominations for Bob Tully and Mary Donohoe awards. Contact Caleb at (406) 248-1154 or email caleb@northernplains.org. Please include your reasons for making your nomination.
• Nov 18 – Election ballots must be received at the Northern Plains’ office by 5:30pm, in person or by mail.
• Nov 19 – Deadline for online registration. Please note: registration will close Friday, November 19th at noon in order for us to properly prepare for attendance at all sessions. Register early to secure your seat! To register: Call Northern Plains at (406) 248-1154, email karen@northernplains.org, or register online at northernplains.org/annual-meeting.
• Resolutions - NOTE: The deadline to submit resolutions to the Resolutions Committee has passed. If you wish to introduce a resolution at the Annual Meeting, the members present need to vote to add it to the meeting agenda. You also need to be able to provide digital copies of your draft resolution so that everyone can have one to reference during debate. Please contact Sydney at sydney@northernplains.org with any questions.

Social Hours and Entertainment
Join us for a social hour following Friday night’s keynote! Recap the speech with fellow members and guests. Mix, mingle, and connect with folks from all over the country. Plus, you’ll have a front row seat to our commemorative programming reflecting on nearly half a century of organizing Montanans, the beloved staff skit, and more – making it VIRTUALLY impossible to have a bad time!

Katharine Hayhoe is “one of the nation’s most effective communicators on climate change” (The New York Times). A celebrated climate scientist and professor living in Texas, she is the newly-appointed Chief Scientist for The Nature Conservancy (TNC), a United Nations Champion of the Earth, and a leading expert on the science, impacts, and communication of climate change. Over the past fifteen years she’s found that the most effective way to talk about climate change is not by focusing on the facts, but on shared values and common ground.
ANNUAL MEETING

Schedule

FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 19, 2021

5:15 PM  Chair’s Welcome
5:30 PM - 6:30 PM  KEYNOTE: Katharine Hayhoe
6:30 PM - 7:00 PM  Social Hour
7:00 PM - 8:30 PM  History Programming and Friday Night Fun!

SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 20, 2021

8:00 AM - 12:00 PM  MEETING OF THE MEMBERSHIP and Awards
12:00 PM - 1:00 PM  Lunch
1:00 PM - 2:00 PM  KEYNOTE: Marshall Ganz
2:00 PM - 2:30 PM  Break
2:30 PM - 3:30 PM  BLOCK I: Investor-Owned Utilities and Methane: “Clean Energy for Them, Climate Disaster for Us”
3:30 PM - 3:45 PM  Break
3:45 PM - 4:45 PM  BLOCK II: How Corporate Consolidation of Ag Impacts Producers, Communities, and YOU
4:45 PM - 5:00 PM  FLASH TALK: Will You Plan a Will?
5:00 PM - 5:20 PM  Chrys the Wordsmith: Getting to the Root of “Grassroots”
5:20 PM  Closing Announcements
6:00 PM  Online Auction closes

Schedule is subject to change.
This August, two fires ignited on or near the Northern Cheyenne Reservation. The Richard Spring Fire and the Lame Deer Fire both threatened the communities of Ashland, Lame Deer, Colstrip, and others around them, and turned the tribal government and other key institutions on the reservation into an incident command center.

“The Richard Spring Fire started in Colstrip,” said Northern Plains member Tom Mexicancheyenne, who lives in Lame Deer. “And then it ended up in Lame Deer, which is bizarre.”

The Richard Spring Fire was identified on August 8, about 10 miles southwest of Colstrip. The Lame Deer Fire was identified just two days later, about 5 miles northwest of Lame Deer.

“It was scary having two fires going like that on opposite sides of the community,” added Tom. Both fires were started by coal seams. (Never heard of a coal seam fire? Turn to page 6 to learn more.)

The Richard Spring Fire grew quickly, “so they started evacuating people,” said Tom. “But once they started getting people evacuated, the fire changed directions.”

People living in Lame Deer – plus several communities nearby – were told to evacuate their homes, and head either to Busby or a multipurpose center over on the Crow reservation.

Most of Tom’s family evacuated, but he and two of his sons stayed at their home. “We sat outside and watched everything. You could see the fire on the ridges and the reflection of the fire glowing off the smoke,” he said.

Tom felt afraid. “We’ve had fires come close to Lame Deer before, but it wasn’t this scary.” All the unknowns compounded during the crisis – from “losing lights and losing cell service,” to “sirens going off through the night, and people going around with speakers telling people to evacuate.”

The Northern Cheyenne Boys and Girls Club had already acted as a key distribution center throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, providing aid relief to members of the community. So when the fires hit, the Boys and Girls Club staff sprang into action again – helping evacuate displaced people, setting up temporary camps outside, and providing supplies like food and camping gear.

Community organization Western Native Voice – our own sister organization – also played a critical role in the fire relief. Western Native Voice collected supplies for displaced community members in Billings, and transported them down to Lame Deer.

After two weeks of exhaustive efforts to contain the fire, “we started to get rain,” Tom said. “We got a sprinkle of rain that started to help control the fire.” The next day, it rained again, and the reservation felt cloudy and cooler.

By the time the Richard Spring Fire was considered 100% contained – after blazing for nearly two weeks – it had burned more than 171,000 acres. The Lame Deer Fire burned more than 5,400 acres.

Most challenging, after the fires were contained, was a renewed spike in COVID-19 cases among Northern Cheyenne tribal members. “We’re dealing with a lot,” Tom said. “We are being devastated by death.”

What gives Tom hope, amidst all the loss around him? “We do have a voice,” he said. “Anything we can do to fight climate change – we need to do it. And we need to take the politics out of it.”

We stand with Tom, his community on the Northern Cheyenne reservation, and the community in and around Colstrip as they process the losses of this summer – and we share his urgency to take action on climate. He put it best: “We need to make a change.”
At Northern Plains, we believe that we can create an energy future that works for all of us. We want our communities to transition to clean energy sources and we want to do it now to protect the people and places we love.

But there are big questions facing our state: Where will we source the energy needed to power our communities? What will happen to coal-dependent communities as we transition away from fossil fuels? How can Montana’s power companies step up to lead the way towards a clean energy future?

Northern Plains members set out to start a dialogue about these issues and more. That’s why we decided to convene the first Montana’s Energy Future Summit. We organized the event to bring together experts, innovators, and community leaders to share stories of triumph in a transition to a clean energy future and to explore what policies and systems can be put in place to ensure a clean, affordable, and just energy future right here in Montana.

Over the course of a Friday, attendees from all over the state tuned in to our virtual event to hear from panelists and speakers who outlined a path forward for Montana – an energy future that takes care of workers, a future where customers have a say over the energy choices that impact their lives, a future where our communities are safe from air and water pollution.

We’re excited to dig into the solutions presented at the Energy Summit. We’re just getting started!

(NOTE: We hope to post videos of many of the sessions online. Keep an eye on our website, and we’ll be sure to link to them once they’re ready: NorthernPlains.org/Energy-Summit)

How Community Choice Aggregation energizes people power

By Makenna Sellers

Wildfire smoke is choking our lungs well into October now, yet power companies are still burning climate-disrupting fossil fuels to power our homes, ranches, and businesses. How can Montanans have a greater say in the energy decisions that have severe impacts on the way we live our lives? One answer is a model called Community Choice Aggregation (CCA).

Community Choice Aggregation is a system for providing electricity that places the decision-making power with everyday people rather than within the boardrooms of wealthy corporate executives. Community Choice Aggregation is enabled through legislation at the state level and allows cities and counties to set up their own entities to procure the energy resource mix of their choosing. This also allows communities to keep consumer costs low, rather than remaining beholden to the business calculus of an investor-owned, corporate utility.

CCAs are not-for-profit public agencies that are governed by a board. While existing utilities continue to operate transmission lines, maintain building meters, and manage the billing processes, CCAs have the ability to choose where

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CLEAN ENERGY

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their energy comes from, how rates are structured, and how local energy and efficiency programs are funded. CCAs are legally authorized in eight states: Massachusetts, Ohio, California, Illinois (residential only), New Jersey, New York, Rhode Island, and Virginia. Successful CCAs have opted to invest in greater energy efficiency programs and may even exceed their state’s renewable energy goals with cleaner, cheaper power.

Given the mounting concern over Northwestern Energy’s corporate decisions to build more methane gas plants in Montana with minimal investment in renewable energy, storage technologies, and efficiency measures like C-PACE, it may be time to re-think and reform where the power over these decisions resides.

MEMBER VOICE

Why I care about climate change...

My grandfather spent a good amount of his life in and around water. He was a hired hand of sorts for the Jensen ranch out of Lavina. Most of his weekdays were spent irrigating Jensen farmland. He had all the standard tools — old pickup, waders, shovel, and, of course, a dog. His weekends were spent fishing on the Mussellshell River somewhere between Harlowton and Two-Dot.

On some of those weekend days his grandson tagged along. Days spent fishing and hunting with my grandfather were some of my most cherished childhood experiences. They were primal, essential events that formed my developing passion for the outdoors and rivers — fishing, canoeing, photographing — just appreciating the natural surroundings. But today, my heart aches as I fret about the future of these places that have had such an impact on my life.

A number of years ago, the Mussellshell was so low at one point that the fisheries took a significant hit. Tributaries of the river near Two-Dot have been a favorite jaunt for me over the years, and this past spring I took a trip up to a familiar stream. I stopped to visit the landowner to get permission. His permission was given, but I was distressed and alarmed as he noted that the stream was extremely low for that time of the year. He expected that it would likely be without water very soon.

The fishing was great on that beautiful, blue-sky spring day. I walked among cottonwoods while following the meandering stream, and casting to trout. Pure pleasure.

My fishing days are nearing an end as I get a bit older. But seeing the impacts climate change is having on our watersheds, I worry that my grandchildren and their children’s days fishing a robust, clear-flowing river may be coming to an end soon, too. And, I wonder if the Jensen’s can still easily irrigate their pastureland.

What a heartbreaking loss.

Climate change is roaring down the valley and spreading its vicious tentacles over the plains.

We must act.

Now!

- Edward Barta, Billings
GOOD NEIGHBOR AGREEMENT

The Good Neighbor Agreement helps establish safe mining facility expansions

By Mikindra Morin

The Good Neighbor Agreement (GNA) is a legally-binding contract between Stillwater Mining Company (SMC) and Northern Plains Resource Council, Cottonwood Resource Council, and Stillwater Protective Association. One of the objectives of the GNA is “to provide Councils [Northern Plains members] with the opportunity to Participate in SMC decisions that may impact the local communities, economies, or Environment.” While this is a very broad objective, it provides the basis for our members to review and provide feedback on SMC decisions and designs. This objective has been essential to our work protecting pristine watersheds and local communities near mining operations in Stillwater and Sweet Grass counties for over 20 years.

As far back as 2005, our members (and our independent Technical Advisors) have been reviewing Best Available Technology (BAT) for tailings storage. “Tailings” are the byproduct of mining, the waste material left over once the ore or mineral is extracted and separated for sale and/or industrial use.

Back then, we studied the possibility for what is called “paste” or “filtered” tailings, but our research determined that these were not sufficiently proven technologies and did not provide significant advantages over the current “wet slurry” approach SMC has taken. This is just one example of how the GNA has helped ensure the mine uses the safest technologies since its earliest days.

Several years later, SMC identified that they are running out of tailings storage space and will need to expand Tailing Storage Facilities (TSFs) at both the East Boulder and the Stillwater Mines. As always, we began the hard, diligent, long-term work of evaluating the safest way in which to manage these facilities. This evaluation began in 2015, and the following steps were taken:

• Siting analysis to determine the most stable ground and to reduce surface impacts and water quality concerns
• Involvement of an Independent Review Panel made up of international mining engineers to review all related documents, recommend studies and design changes, and provide additional site investigation
• Good Neighbor Agreement Task Force (Northern Plains members) recommendations adopted by SMC:
  • Real-time stability monitoring
  • Regular updates to the manual guiding Tailing Storage Facility (TSF) maintenance and operation
  • Distribution of community information regarding the presence and risk of TSFs. Specifically, what to do in the highly unlikely event of a TSF failure.
  • Financial assurance adequate to ensure reclamation and closure of the TSFs were SMC to go bankrupt
  • Consideration of landform geomorphic reclamation – planning at the design phase to ensure the best possible reclamation outcome
  • Continual review of Best Available Technologies for tailings processing and storage

All of this together has led to a rigorous technical design and review process that included community awareness and engagement. This is arguably one of the best models for management of tailings facilities. Given the demanding process and continual oversight of the Independent Review Panel, the Agreement’s Technical Advisors, and our dedicated members who have devoted countless hours to this work, the risk of a TSF failure is extremely unlikely. We thank them for their continued work to ensure the safety of our communities!

DO YOU KNOW ALL OF YOUR GIVING OPTIONS?

If you are anticipating a significant financial event, there may be tax implications. Your planned giving strategy can be part of negotiating these tax questions while ensuring that your resources are put to best use protecting Montana. There are several planned giving tools available to meet your needs. If you’d like to learn more, contact Caleb at caleb@northernplains.org or (406) 248-1154.
NorthWestern Energy (NWE) announced in May that it planned to build what it called the Laurel Generating Station in response to the statewide need for more power capacity. The station would be fueled by so-called “natural gas.” This alarmed many environmental groups, including Northern Plains, since natural gas goes by another name – methane – which is one of the leading pollutants driving the climate crisis. Northern Plains members quickly sprang into action, developing a campaign to stop the construction of this methane plant.

Initially, NorthWestern had sought preapproval from the Public Service Commission, meaning that they wanted a guarantee upfront that NWE customers would shoulder the financial burden of a plant that is not only bad for the planet, but bad for public health. While the request was concerning, it allowed the public a chance to speak out and voice their concern.

On September 21, NorthWestern withdrew their preapproval application. While this was initially greeted as good news, NWE quickly announced their plans to build the methane plant on an accelerated schedule. It claimed that the decision came from “the need to make commercial decisions outside of the timelines of the approval docket to ensure that we maintain the most favorable supply and labor prices for this project.” This move effectively prevents the public, the ratepayers, from having a say in whether we want this plant to supply power to our state.

The time to act is now. The public needs to be loud in telling NorthWestern Energy that we won’t pay for a plant that creates financial risks for energy customers while jeopardizing our health and future. Montanans deserve a fair, reliable, and sustainable source of power that protects the people and places we love. Please go to our website at NorthernPlains.org/no-methane-plant and sign our petition telling NorthWestern Energy we won’t pay to harm the planet and ourselves.
“W e are making photographs to understand what our lives mean to us,” said Ralph Hattersley, a celebrated photographer, journalist, educator, and photography critic from Conrad, MT. Indeed, photographs don’t simply document the imagery from a fraction of a second, they capture rich complexities of feeling, emotion, and ambiance. The delicious paradox of photography – that an infinitesimal fragment of time can live forever – is one reason this 19th century technology endures and thrives almost 200 years after its invention.

Hattersley implies that photography captures meaning, and we humans have an innate desire to preserve and document whatever helps us understand the meaning of our lives. This yearning to better understand our lives’ meaning is not only a core motivation of the Northern Plains History Project, in many ways it is the reason the organization itself exists. The work we do to care for our communities – to protect the people and places we love – gives us profound purpose and helps us better understand who we are and the connections we have to the people around us, the people that came before us, and the people who will be here when we are gone. We further this work and honor these connections by preserving our stories, often in the form of photographs.

Recently, a group of Northern Plains members took on the difficult task of choosing a small number of photographs from the tens of thousands we have archived to help us tell the story of Northern Plains’ history since our founding in 1972. The result is an exhibition of 68 photographs that feature diverse images of grit, resolve, humor, strife, creativity, and beauty. These photographs document many of our leaders from the earliest days of the organization until today, as well as the landscapes and locales their efforts served to protect.

This exhibition is currently hanging in our Billings office, Home on the Range. Unfortunately, the office is closed to visitors as we follow safety protocols during this long, exhausting pandemic, but we look forward to hosting a celebratory “gallery reception” in the coming year. We are also finalizing a digital version of the photo exhibition, to be hosted on our website, which will be completed before the Annual Meeting on November 19. Keep an eye on NorthernPlains.org/HistoryProject over the coming weeks for that upcoming launch.

While this exhibition documents our first half-century as an organization, we are inspired every day by Northern Plains members writing new chapters in our history, always providing deeper understanding about the meaning of our work and the meaning of our lives.
Nick Golder is a Colstrip rancher and longtime member-leader of affiliate Rosebud Protective Association. With his knowledge of Montana native grasses and surface and ground water, Nick has held coal mine companies accountable for sustainable reclamation. (Photo © Terrence Moore)

A rancher from the Decker area, Ellen Cotton was a strong leader in the fight to pass Montana and federal strip mine reclamation laws. She was particularly supportive and generous to the early Northern Plains staff. A colorful, articulate, and genuine spokesperson for the organization, she was featured in a major Washington Post story that helped propel the Western strip mining issue to national attention. (Photo © Terrence Moore)

Wally McRae was one of Northern Plains’ earliest leaders, chairing the Council in 1974-75. Nationally recognized as a cowboy poet – and inducted into the Montana Cowboy Hall of Fame in 2020 – his books recount the impacts of mining and industrialization on an old-time ranch community, the landscape, and agriculture. He is a stalwart advocate for holding miners and industry accountable.
Thank you for participating in and supporting the 2021 Montana Local Food Challenge!

The 6th Annual Montana Local Food Challenge concluded on September 1. While we hosted the entire Challenge online this year, we welcomed new participants from across the state. Some highlights from this year’s Challenge:

- Four weekly challenges: buy directly from a producer, ask a business to carry local food, preserve local food for the winter, and submit a local food recipe
- Lots of new recipes submitted
- Over 100 new participants from across the state
- Largest number of participants in Billings, followed by Missoula, Helena, and Red Lodge
- Support from our fantastic sponsors and partners: Wheat Montana, Yellowstone Valley Food Hub, Sand Creek Farm, and Grow Montana

The Yellowstone Valley Food Hub saw another successful Local Food Challenge selling local food, like at the Billings Farmer’s Market.

Recipe for Mock Chile Relleno
Submitted by Donna Rogers (Boulder, MT)

**Ingredients:**
- Trevino’s flour tortillas (made in Billings)
- Fresh Anaheim chile pepper
- Flathead Lake cheese - Hot Shot Gouda

**Instructions:**
- Roast chile pepper and remove skin, clean out seeds, and stuff with cheese. Roll in tortilla, then roll tortilla up with foil. Grill for 20 minutes. Let cool and enjoy a delicious made-in-Montana meal!
Our vision for Montana’s food system

We are caretakers of Montana’s interconnected food chain. We are farmers, ranchers, gardeners. We are cooks, chefs, butchers, and grocers. We appreciate the connection that food creates among friends, families, and neighbors. We are intentional about the food we grow, raise, buy, and eat because our decisions affect the communities our children and grandchildren will inherit.

We believe that when food is properly valued, everyone flourishes. For our food chain to thrive, we need strong rural communities. When people living on the land have agency to make decisions about the policies and practices that protect our water, air, and soil, we create prosperity for all. We know that informed, regenerative agriculture must be part of the climate solution, and we see how caring for land and animals thoughtfully can restore balance to the earth’s ecosystems.

We are creating a world where healthy, local food is available and affordable to all, where animals are treated humanely, and where informed consumers support strong local food systems. We are working toward a future where fair prices are paid and all labor is valued so that workers can thrive alongside family agriculture. The Montana food system we are building inspires the next generation to get involved in local agriculture, continuing the stewardship of our working landscapes.

We must advance this work with urgency as we are losing grasslands, wildlife, water, and family farms and ranches. The pandemic laid bare the vulnerability of a food system in conflict with nature and built for corporations instead of communities. If we act now, with bold reforms and inspired cooperation, we can repair Montana’s damaged food chain and ensure sustained, prosperous, and healthful agriculture for generations to come.

WILL YOU OR WON’T YOU...?

A will is the simplest and most powerful way to make sure your wishes are carried out beyond your lifetime. If you’d like to leave a lasting legacy with Northern Plains, a bequest in your will is one way to do that.

If you are one of the more than 50% of people who don’t have a will, we have a simple checklist that can help you start that process. Join us at the Annual Meeting to learn more about what you should consider when starting your estate planning. Go to NorthernPlains.org/Annual-Meeting/ for meeting details. You can also contact Caleb at (406) 248-1154 or caleb@northernplains.org.
COUNCIL ROUNDUP

SPA holds Summer Gathering, elects new officers

Tai Koester

Stillwater Protective Association celebrated its annual Summer Gathering at the Nye Fire Hall in August. Members gathered for a barbeque and casual social evening, enjoying burgers generously donated by members Frances and Frances Abbott from their ranch in Stillwater County. Members elected Bill Muldoon as SPA's incoming president following the end of outgoing president Van Wood’s term. Edward Barta was elected as secretary. For the Good Neighbor Agreement, SPA elected John Beers to the Stillwater Oversight Committee and Kitty Thomasos to the Technology Committee. Members also appointed Sandra Joys to fill the past president role.

YBCC elects officers, gets ARPA funds

Ava Shearer

Yellowstone Bend Citizens Council had their annual meeting Thursday, October 7. Officers elected were: Sarah Stands and Joanie Kresich as co-chairs, Lauren Dalzell as Secretary, Kathryn Eklund as Treasurer, and Joanie Kresich and John Gayusky as board representatives. Kathryn Eklund is a first-time officer with Yellowstone Bend.

YBCC’s energy equity committee applied for, and was granted, $250,000 in Park County ARPA (American Rescue Plan Act) funds to move forward on four solar projects. The money will go towards rooftop solar for the Sherwood Inn Apartments, Miles Building Apartments, the Park County Fairgrounds and Sleeping Giant Middle School.

BMLA members prompt DEQ to monitor local springs

Bronya Lechtman

On September 22, Bull Mountain Land Alliance members met with hydrologists from Montana Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) to discuss the hydrologic impacts of Signal Peak Energy’s mining activity. This is the first of what will now be quarterly meetings with DEQ hydrologists. During the meeting, DEQ staff agreed that if we identify specific springs that we are concerned about, they will monitor and evaluate them by next quarter’s meeting in January. Our next step is to compile a list of springs of concern identified by folks throughout the Bull Mountains. Protecting water quality and water quantity is essential to preserving agriculture and communities in this region.

BMLA members speaking with concerned landowners in July about the impacts of underground mining and how to protect themselves.
Dawson Resource Council’s Solarize Glendive campaign has been a rip-roaring success. Members held an educational webinar about going solar, put up flyers around town, and collected assessment sign-ups at the Dawson County Fair. By the campaign’s end, they got 40 people to sign up for free solar site assessments – double what members expected! Installations for Solarize participants are underway as we speak.

DRC is also eager to help Dawson County enable and implement C-PACE (Commercial Property Assessed Capital Enhancements), the innovative clean energy bill that Northern Plains passed this legislative session. Campaign planning, here we come!

Thirsty Lake Solar making progress on an installation at Bruce and Sue Peterson’s house in Glendive.

MONTHLY SUSTAINERS – EVERYBODY WINS!

Have you heard about our monthly sustainer program? It’s the way dedicated members like you spread your generosity and support over the course of 12 months. Being a monthly donor helps us all in the following ways...

**Saves time for you:** Set up payment once and know your donation is made throughout the year.

**Saves time for us:** Your monthly gift means time, postage, and paper saved on membership renewals and follow-up. More of your gift is put to work on the issues that mean a lot to you.

**Is helpful for your budgeting:** A little bit every month helps you plan your giving and still makes the same big difference.

**Is helpful for our budgeting:** Your dependable monthly donation helps us plan strategically! When we know what comes in each month, we can plan to have the most impact.

**Means a lot to all of us:** Your support allows us to keep Montana a great place to live, work, and play!

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

Visit northernplains.org/donate to move your membership to a monthly donation or contact Claire at (406) 248-1154 or claire@northernplains.org. If you are already a monthly sustainer – THANK YOU! Your support means a lot.
CCRC weighs new campaigns

Tai Koester

Carbon County Resource Council began weighing new campaigns to address the impacts of development on open land and water in the county. CCRC was motivated by member Dave Arthun's research on water pollution in Rock Creek. Members have noticed a surge in new subdivisions, and Arthun's research exposed the presence of fecal coliform bacteria in Rock Creek, likely originating from faulty or old septic systems. While CCRC has yet to land on a clear objective, members are considering whether a volunteer water monitoring program could help generate support for county water quality protections.

SGCC sprints into autumn with another successful Sun Run

Caitlin Cromwell

In October, Sleeping Giant Citizens Council held yet another successful Sun Run! This popular running event was created to support clean energy and climate solutions, and this year marks the sixth go-round for the annual Helena event. Planned jointly with the Helena Vigilante Runners, this year's Sun Run raised over $4,000 for solar installations at Helena's three, newly rebuilt elementary schools. Great work, Sun Run planners (and runners)!

SGCC is also doing a campaign to Solarize Helena! Thirty people signed up for solar site assessments.

A busy summer season for SGCC also included hosting a Farm Tour and a Soil Crawl. Both were spectacular successes.

In August, SGCC hosted a farm tour of Johnsons Nursery and Gardens in Helena.
COUNCIL ROUNDUP

YVCC members fight Laurel methane plant

Caroline Canarios

While the initial news of NorthWestern Energy rescinding their application for preapproval of a proposed methane plant in Laurel brought joy and celebration, it wasn’t long before the news broke that the monopoly utility plans to move forward with construction anyway (see page 15 for more). In turn, YVCC members are also moving forward with our campaign to stop the plant’s construction. We’re teaming up with a group of Northern Plains members from across the state to plan our strategy and make our voices heard. Stay tuned to learn how you can get involved…!

CMRC’s Solarize Central Montana campaign starts heating up!

Bronya Lechtman

Central Montana Resource Council members have been hard at work planning our Solarize Central Montana campaign, which will officially launch in February. They are now preparing Requests for Proposal from Montana solar installers, hoping to get them out in November.

CMRC also had a booth at the Chokecherry Festival, where they raised funds through a successful gun raffle and signed up 35 people on-the-spot for early-bird solar assessments!

On October 20, CMRC hosted a presentation on solar trends by CMRC member Bud Barta, and the Montana Renewable Energy Association (MREA) Executive Director Andrew Valainis. Even before the Solarize campaign officially launches, CMRC members are doing a great job of shining a bright light on this exciting project!

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.
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!

BE A ROCK... BUY A ROCK!

A team of Northern Plains members and volunteers have been working to bring a new vision to our landscaping at the Home on the Range office in Billings. We recently installed a beautiful, sculptural sound barrier to buffer the noise from 27th Street, which was designed and crafted by Billings-based artist, Terri Porta. Our master plan also includes a variety of raised bed gardens, an expanded patio area with seating for small events, and an ADA accessible walkway to make our space inviting to all.

As we move into the final phase of this project, we have an opportunity for you to show your support and be a rock we can lean on for years to come. **You are invited to sponsor a brick in our new retaining wall!** We are grateful for gifts in any amount, and gifts over $200 are eligible for recognition with a name plate on your brick (you can use your name or the name of someone special). You are also welcome to pool together with your fellow members to recognize a leader or their legacy with Northern Plains!

To learn more visit: [NorthernPlains.org/Landscaping](http://NorthernPlains.org/Landscaping).