MEMBERS RESPOND TO DROUGHT AND CLIMATE IMPACTS BY EXPANDING SOIL HEALTH ACROSS THE STATE

Page 05

IN THE WAKE OF HISTORIC FLOODING, COMMUNITY CONNECTION AIDS RECOVERY EFFORTS

Page 19

BUILDING RESILIENCE AND RECOVERY

IN THIS ISSUE

03. Letter from the Chair
04. People of the Plains: Clay Dunlap
06. Celebrating our history and a look back at 50 years of building relationships
10. What a methane plant would mean for Laurel
11. Montana’s first C-PACE project completes financing in Broadwater County
15. EPA investigates Colstrip cleanup
16. Members on the Move
17. Seeking solutions for Montana’s orphaned and abandoned oil and gas wells
18. New membership recruitment competition
20. Council Roundup

DEFENDING DEMOCRACY

Northern Plains organizes to protect our rights and constitution in the face of growing threats.

Pages 12-13

THE BATTLE OF THE BULLS

Members demand greater accountability as Signal Peak Energy’s chronic criminal misdeeds reach a boiling point in the Bull Mountains.

Page 14
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.

**NORTHERN PLAINS BOARD OF DIRECTORS**

**CHAIR**  
Joanie Kresich, Livingston

**VICE-CHAIR**  
Edward Barta, Billings

**TREASURER**  
Simon Cecil, Billings

**ASSISTANT TREASURER**  
Sue Beug, Red Lodge

**SECRETARY**  
Deb Muth, Red Lodge

**ASSISTANT SECRETARY**  
Rachel Torres, Glendive

**PAST CHAIR**  
Jeanie Alderson, Birney

**AT-LARGE BOARD MEMBERS**

Ita Killeen, Bozeman  
Elle Ross, Hardin  
Tom Mexicancheyenne, Lame Deer

**AFFILIATE BOARD MEMBERS**

Breach Creek Council  
Barbara Ulrich, Gardiner  
Nathan Varley, Gardiner

Beartooth Alliance  
Nellie Israel, Silver Gate/Joliet

Bull Mountain Land Alliance  
Ellen Pfister, Shepherd  
Steve Charter, Shepherd

Carbon County Resource Council  
Jeff DiBenedetto, Red Lodge  
Julie Holzer, Red Lodge

Cottonwood Resource Council  
Charlie French, Big Timber

Central Montana Resource Council  
Ken Siroky, Roy  
Peter Mickelsen, Lewistown

Dawson Resource Council  
June Peterson, Glendive  
Kristin Au, Glendive

Rosebud Protective Association  
Clint McRae, Forsyth

Sleeping Giant Citizens Council  
Norane Freistadt, Helena  
Mic Smith, Helena

Stillwater Protective Association  
Edward Barta, Billings  
Tom Heyneman, Fishtail

Yellowstone Bend Citizens Council  
Joanie Kresich, Livingston

Yellowstone Valley Citizens Council  
Emma Kerr-Carpenter, Billings  
Kris Glenn, Billings

---

**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

---

**Northern Plains Staff**

Community Organizers: Andrew Amrein, Emily Auld, Gusty Catherin-Sauer, Bronya Lechtman  
Sydney Ausen, Director of Organizing & Campaigns  
Paula Berg, Director of Finance & Administration  
Jim Cooper, Facility Manager  
Caroline Canarios, Legislative Organizer  
Caitlin Cromwell, Deputy Director of Organizing & Campaigns  
Maggie Gordon, Executive Director  
Anna Kerr-Schnieder, Design and Communications Strategist  
Caleb Lande, Director of Fundraising  
Effy McEldowney, Grassroots Fundraising Coordinator  
Svein Newman, Political Organizing Director  
Dustin Ogden, Communications Director  
Karen Olson, Office Manager  
Steve Paulson, History Project Coordinator  
Michael Skinner, Community Organizer and GNA Manager  
Melodie Snyder, Data Engagement Specialist

Northern Plains Resource Council  
220 S. 27th Street, Suite A, Billings, MT 59101  
Tel: (406) 248-1154 Fax: (406) 248-2110  
info@northernplains.org • www.northernplains.org
After the Yellowstone River flood, Gardiner fly shop owner, river guide, and longtime Northern Plains member-leader Richard Parks began to take in the damage to his community. He lamented that his guides would have to learn “a whole new river, where to put boats in and take out, even where the fish are now.”

The powerful floodwaters that turned Broadway in Red Lodge into a field of boulders, demolished the road between Gardiner and Mammoth, and damaged the animal shelter in Livingston didn’t spare farm and ranch lands. Records were smashed, yet no one was prepared; the signature of the climate crisis is this absence of warning.

While we couldn’t know this flood was coming, we in the Northern Plains do know we will face the challenges in front of us, together. Wrapped within our identity and history is a commitment to grassroots work. We begin where we are, in the communities and on the land where we are rooted. Our power comes into full view as we join others across our state to work with allies, support good legislation, and confront corporate excesses.

The flood brought one kind of challenge; the recent Supreme Court ruling in West Virginia vs EPA brings another. The decision narrowed the powers the Environmental Protection Agency has to enact protections against carbon pollution under the Clean Air Act. While the coal industry cheered the ruling, their competitiveness is plummeting; 45% of US coal power is set to disappear by 2030 “as more utilities conclude coal fired plants no longer make financial sense to operate” (Bloomberg). For us, the ruling is a painful loss, but we’ll continue to depend on the tools of grassroots activism, tools strong enough to deliver powerful wins.

Democracy can’t thrive as a spectator sport. We’re called on to venture out of the shadows, to become actors. Northern Plains’ culture guides us in this process. We encourage each other to step into democracy’s public arenas, often beginning with the special place where we can be most powerful, in our own community. For many of us, this emerging is not a simple process. While we’ve amassed a wide and varied array of skills in our lifetimes, from mending fences to mending trauma victims, from working in the din of a pub or the quiet of a library, few of us have learned how to speak at a public hearing, or how to create an effective agenda for a meeting, or how to build a plan to win a local campaign. Our emergence often begins with the sense of a rising threat, like radioactive waste coming to a dump nearby, or recently, the frightening swings of the climate, leading us to feel the time has come. The tools Northern Plains has stewarded over decades are there right at that crucial moment.

Northern Plains is full of people who’ve made the transition from public silence to playing an active role. Jess Stiles is one of those. Jess is a pawnbroker and a mother of four daughters who has a new dimension in her life. She’s now the Vice Chair of our newest affiliate, Golden Triangle Resource Council. Jess felt her lack of a college degree disqualified her for certain roles, but staff organizer Caitlin Cromwell saw a leader. With lots of encouragement, Jess agreed to join the organizing committee for the new affiliate and then really launched, speaking publicly and appearing on TV. She’s excited to discover new friends and new perspectives, and to know she is now a role model for her daughters, showing we can take on things that once seemed out of reach.

We’ll continue winning campaigns. And just as important, we’ll continue to support each other to recognize and value our unique skills and talents. Once that light turns on in us, it goes on radiating without pause, falling on others who begin to see they too can be actors in shaping the contours of our communities and our democracy so we all thrive, together.

Our altered rivers are just one of many new challenges, but our commitment to navigate towards a stronger and more resilient Montana never wavers.

- Joanie Kresich
Chair
Clay Dunlap grew up on a ranch in Northern Fergus County, out on Armells Creek. “The land is hard out there; you don’t get a lot of moisture and have to really take care of the soil. Before we ever heard of soil regeneration, my dad was into it. We had to do everything we could to develop and nurture the land.” These are the roots of Clay’s lifelong dedication as an environmental advocate.

In 1972, while Montanans were coming together to form Northern Plains Resource Council in his home state, Clay was working as a professor in Valley City, North Dakota. He was approached by a staffer of Denis Hayes, the legendary environmentalist and coordinator of the first Earth Day, to organize the first ever “Sun Day” in North Dakota, a day to celebrate the possibilities in renewable energy. This was before Jimmy Carter declared it as a national holiday in 1978. Clay said he’d take a stab at it, and this effort was his first time organizing around clean energy.

Flash forward fifty years from that first Sun Day, and the role of solar in our energy system today is skyrocketing. It’s been a long, difficult journey for solar, and “we can get so discouraged because we’re up against strong forces. But if we step back and think about all the gains that we’ve made, we’ve done pretty darn well. The success of Central Montana Resource Council’s (CMRC) 2022 Solarize Central Montana campaign tells us something”. So far, through CMRC’s efforts, over 120 people across Fergus, Judith Basin, and Petroleum counties signed up for solar assessments.

Clay joined Northern Plains and CMRC in 2016 after attending CMRC’s annual meeting and dinner. “When I got to the dinner, I knew I was home,” Clay said about his introduction to the organization. “They were talking about clean air, clean water, soil regeneration, climate change - all of the things that in my opinion are so terribly important if we are to leave this earth to others. Of course I wanted to do whatever I could do in my little way to contribute to Northern Plains and CMRC.”

Clay works with other Northern Plains members passionate about renewables to increase accessibility to clean energy in Montana. Outside of his clean energy work, Clay has devoted countless hours to fighting for mandatory Country of Original Labeling (COOL) for beef, and protecting the Big Spring Creek Watershed. He just retired from his position as CMRC chair after four years of service.

Clay loves everything about Central Montana. “It’s where I grew up… I’ve lived on the coast of Oregon, in Upstate New York, but I love the high plains desert”. Climate change is a major threat in the region that Clay calls home. “We depend on cow-calves in Central Montana; it’s how we make our money. We used to get spring rains, but we rarely get those anymore.” As a coach and teacher for 56 years in communities where climate change was not widely accepted, Clay knows that “all you can do is get in the batter’s box and swing away.” As a teacher, Clay tried to introduce his students slowly to the concept of climate change. When Al Gore’s “An Inconvenient Truth” came out, Clay showed it to his students. “I got some phone calls from parents, and I just explained we’re just trying to expose kids to things.”

Clay believes “we can’t leave our children and grandchildren with an unlivable planet.” While major changes need to happen, Clay feels strongly that “All we can do is all we can do, and all we can do is usually enough. The greatest change in the world starts with a few people, and then it builds and builds.” Clay has planted 300 trees in Brewery Flats, an area just upstream from Lewistown, and every day he waters them. Why does he do this? Because “you never plant trees for your generation, you plant trees for the next.”
Northern Plains is celebrating the success of this year’s soil crawls. We were so grateful to gather in person again and learn alongside our gracious speakers and hosts. A major theme throughout this year’s events was resilience. This includes resilience in the face of challenges like climate change, the pandemic, and economic barriers to implementing regenerative soil health practices.

Our first soil crawl was held in mid-June at Living Soil Farm near Big Timber on the heels of the recent flooding event. Thankfully, the floods did not impact the event, though everyone’s thoughts were with those impacted close by.

The day began with participants enjoying a farm tour led by co-host Cameron Skinner. The first stop was to learn about Skinner’s neighbor, Katherine Galloway, and the rotational gazing schedule she maintains for her cows with the help of her two young daughters. Next the group learned about two composting techniques before ending the tour in the Community Supported Agriculture garden. There, Cameron has utilized many soil health tools and principles like cover crops (to keep the soil covered), soil tests, and living mulch.

Soil crawl participants enjoyed a lunch of Living Soil Farm veggie salad and mouthwatering burgers generously donated by BBar Ranch. Lunch was accompanied by talks from Northern Plains member and soil health expert John Brown, MSU professor Dr. Fabian Menalled, and Kareen Erbe, who runs Broken Ground, a permaculture consulting and education company. Each speaker provided a deeper look into regenerative agriculture principles and possibilities.

The soil crawl continued with speaker Mihail Kennedy of BBar ranch who spoke about scaling up regenerative agriculture practices. Participants were lucky enough to get their hands in some compost and learned about butcher waste composting and bone char. Last, but certainly not least, Tony Hartshorn and two of his students from the MSU soil integration lab led us on a true crawl to four different pits across the farm, each with its own history, story and lesson. The group ended the day back in the garden to share takeaways and lessons learned.

The second soil health event of 2022 was held in early July at the Quinn Farm in Big Sandy, which will serve as a future research center for experimentation on best practices for dryland farming. This event was especially rewarding not only because of the engaging speakers and excellent participants but also because this event had been postponed from last year due to extreme drought conditions and from an increase in grasshopper damage. With this in mind we felt lucky to be able to come together with like-minded folks to learn about farming in arid climates by touring through Bob Quinn’s experimental green house, orchard and vegetable plots, as well as Charley Overbay’s dryland vegetable operation.

At the Big Timber soil crawl, participants learned about regenerative agriculture practices like a living cover throughout the year and different composting techniques.

Continued on page 6.
Participants gained access to the “oil barn,” where a value added product has been created through trial and error. It all started when the farm began to clean safflower seed cooking oil and utilize it as fuel for farming operations. The soil crawl included presentations and dialogue with Northern Plains members Patti Armbrister, who gave participants tangible takeaways on regenerative gardening and greenhouse use, as well as Charlie French and Tony Hartshorn, who brought in the bigger picture of geomorphology, the carbon cycle, and why regenerative agriculture should matter to us all!

Presenters and participants alike left having learned new lessons and deepened connections to community after hearing about the many successes, challenges, and milestones when it comes to dryland farming and working to implement soil health practices in Montana.

More than 200 members gathered at DanWalt Gardens to celebrate the community Northern Plains has built over the last 50 years.
Decades later, we’re still fighting to make sure the coal companies clean up their mess in Colstrip so that the next generation of Rosebud County ranchers and residents can access clean water and preserve part of the legacy that Wally writes about with such poignancy. We play the long game and, more often than not, we win.

Wally, who was one of the earliest members of Northern Plains, was in attendance alongside so many more of the organization’s leaders. Multiple generations of the farm and ranch families who helped found the organization in the early 70s were present. At least a dozen former chairs of Northern Plains were on hand to help celebrate. Folks from every corner of Montana – from cities, towns, and rural spaces alike – came out to honor the undeniable positive influence Northern Plains has had on Montana, the West, and the nation.

Pat Sweeney, the first Staff Director of Northern Plains, described the organization and our community organizing model in his speech to the gathering. “It is simply the art and science of building lasting and trusting relationships,” said Pat. “This gathering and crowd alone is clear testimony to the power of community organizing and the relationships that you all, that we all have built just today and over the last 50 years.”

And these relationships and this trust we’ve established through our bonds to one another have had amazing results. Thanks to this work we all do together, we don’t have a Tongue River Railroad carving up ranchlands and blowing coal dust across the state and region. We don’t have mega-landfills in eastern Montana. We have preserved pristine watersheds in Sweet Grass and Stillwater Counties through the Good Neighbor Agreement with Stillwater Mining Company, which has endured for over 20 years. We have been key drivers of federal legislation that enshrines proper coal reclamation. We recently helped establish the state’s first ever radioactive waste disposal rules. And today, we are watching C-PACE sweep across Montana providing clean energy and energy efficiency opportunities in county after county.

These are just a few of the countless ways we have protected the people and places we love. Teresa Erickson, esteemed Northern Plains Staff Director for over three decades, spoke at the event describing how “the magnet in Northern Plains attracts people who have a strong devotion to community.” Based on the event’s turnout and the camaraderie expressed, that magnet has only grown more powerful over the past 50 years.
HISTORY PROJECT

There was no better way to end the evening than to dance the night away to music by Ellen and the Old School.

LESSONS FROM INDIGENOUS ORGANIZING

In May we kicked off our Lessons from Indigenous Organizing event series as part of Northern Plains’ ongoing efforts around Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion. The Northern Plains membership and leadership have expressed a clear commitment to deepening our understanding of the land we walk on, the history we inherit, and the Native communities working alongside us for a better world.

During May’s event we heard from Clancy Siversten, First Vice Chairman of the Little Shell Tribe of Chippewa Indians of Montana, about the Little Shell Tribe’s Food Sovereignty Program. Launched in 2021, the Food Sovereignty Program was created to confront food shortages that the Little Shell tribal community faced during the pandemic – but the program aims to sustain the Tribe well into the future.

We’re planning our next event on Zoom with Patrick Yawackie from the Flathead Reservation. Patrick and his wife, Regina MadPlume founded the People’s Food Sovereignty Program, a Native led, grassroots organization that promotes food sovereignty and self-determination for the tribal members living on the Flathead Reservation.

Stay tuned to NorthernPlains.org/Events for future Lessons from Indigenous Organizing events in the coming months.

We enjoyed a dinner of local food catered by the Yellowstone Valley Food Hub and Project Lunch.

In his speech, Pat Sweeney, the first Staff Director of Northern Plains, recognized the 50 years of relationships we have nurtured through our community organizing model.
Things of Intrinsic Worth
By Wally McRae

Remember that sandrock on Emmells Crick
Where Dad carved his name in ‘thirteen?
It’s been blasted down into rubble
And interred by their dragline machine.
Where Fadhls lived, at the old Milar Place,
Where us kids stole melons at night?
They ‘dozed it up in a funeral pyre
Then torched it. It’s gone alright.
The “C” on the hill, and the water tanks
Are now classified, “reclaimed land.”
They’re thinking of building a golf course
Out there, so I understand.
The old Egan Homestead’s an ash pond
That they say is eighty feet deep.
The branding corral at the Douglas Camp
Is underneath a spoil heap.
And across the crick is a tipple now,
Where they load coal onto a train,
The Mae West Rock on Hay Coulee?
Just black and white snapshots remain.
There’s a railroad loop and a coal storage shed
Where the bison kill site used to be.
The Guy Place is gone; Ambrose’s too.
Beulah Farley’s a ranch refugee.

But things are booming. We’ve got this new school
That’s envied across the whole state.
When folks up and ask, “How’s things goin’ down there?
I grin like a fool and say “Great!”
Great God, how we’re doin’! We’re rollin’ in dough,
As they tear and they ravage The Earth.
And nobody knows…or nobody cares…
About things of intrinsic worth.
When a methane plant moves in next door

By Sydney Ausen

For Northern Plains member Kasey Felder, opening a vineyard on the banks of the Yellowstone was a dream come to reality. However, that dream did not include an industrial methane plant for a neighbor. Standing among the Felder’s grapevines you can look out across the river to the site where 18 smokestacks, 72 feet tall, will soar above the trees if NorthWestern Energy builds their methane plant in Laurel, Montana.

For residents of Laurel and those living near the site of the plant, their prospective next door neighbor comes with lot of baggage:

- **Significant noise disruption** - It is anticipated that the noise resulting from the NorthWestern Energy methane plant would be the equivalent of having 54 train locomotive engines running 24 hours a day, year round, creating significant noise pollution in an otherwise peaceful neighborhood.
- **Increased air pollution** - According to health experts, air pollution from methane can lead to cancer, heart attacks, respiratory diseases like asthma, greater numbers of emergency room visits and hospital admissions, premature deaths, and more. Yellowstone County already has alarming rates of asthma and emphysema, and this plant will only increase those negative health impacts.
- **Degradation of natural surroundings** - Laurel is blessed with incredibly beautiful natural surroundings. Bird watching, fishing, hiking, horseback riding, and camping along the river are just some of the many attractions Laurel has to offer visitors. The methane plant will permanently scar the beauty of the area and spoil Laurel’s efforts to increase tourism and economic development in our community.

These neighbors share the sentiment that NorthWestern Energy chose Laurel for their plant because the company thought people wouldn’t care. “They thought there is already a refinery there, so who is going to care about a methane plant? Well they were wrong,” said Carol Blades, a Northern Plains member who lives near the site of NorthWestern Energy’s proposed methane plant. “There are many people out here who care about clean air, the beautiful sky, about wildlife. This place between the two rivers is very peaceful and very special. We’re proud of this place and of our community, and we deserve better than a methane plant next door.”

At Northern Plains we’re working to create a clean, affordable, and just energy future that protects the people and places we love. Our members are working to stop NorthWestern Energy’s plans to build a methane plant in Laurel Montana. They have fought the company at every turn, and they are not done fighting yet. This summer, Northern Plains members are educating their neighbors and the people of Laurel about the impacts that having a methane plant as a next door neighbor would have on their community. And they are working to empower elected leaders in Laurel to stand up, take charge, and deny NorthWestern Energy’s ability to build this methane plant in their community. Montana deserves better than methane!
The first C-PACE project financing completed in Broadwater County!

By Emily Auld

Broadwater County arrived at the finish line as the first county this past May to complete financing for a C-PACE project! In addition to being Montana’s first fully funded C-PACE project, Bridger Brewing’s Headwaters Utility Association is also the first C-PACE project in the country that will apply to a private water and sewer district. Over the course of its lifetime, the project will save up to $10 million, while the total cost of the financing will come to $5 million. It will also save about 300 million gallons of water.

Big impacts like this are exactly why Northern Plains members spent almost eight years working to ensure passage of C-PACE through the Montana legislature!

Bridger Brewing created a private water and sewer district to service the intersection of I-90 and Highway 287, where they will also be opening a new location for their brewery. This project will also facilitate new commercial and residential property development in the area.

David Sigler, co-owner of Bridger Brewery, says that “The C-PACE program and working with Adam Gill at the Montana Facility Finance Authority has been a blessing.”

Special thanks to MFFA for facilitating this project and all future C-PACE projects. Quite a few projects in C-PACE enabled counties are also in the works. These counties now include: Park, Missoula, Gallatin, Cascade, Lincoln, Broadwater, and Butte-Silver Bow.

If you are interested in helping get businesses on board in an enabled county or working toward enabling C-PACE in your county, please contact emily@northernplains.org to learn more.

SIGN UP FOR THE 7TH ANNUAL MONTANA LOCAL FOOD CHALLENGE!

The 7th Annual Montana Local Food Challenge commenced on August 1, and we are challenging you to eat local food each day this August! There’s plenty of time left to celebrate Montana’s local farmers, ranchers, and food businesses.

Just by signing up, you will be entered to win a $100 gift card to the local food business of your choice! Sign up at:

NorthernPlains.org/LocalFoodChallenge

Try this local food recipe!

Mock Chile Relleno
Submitted by Donna Rogers, Boulder, MT

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

Instructions:
1. Roast chiles and remove skin, clean out seeds, and stuff with cheese.
2. Roll stuffed chiles in tortillas, then roll tortilla up within foil.
3. Grill for 20 minutes.
4. Let cool and enjoy a delicious made-in-Montana meal!
Northern Plains members organize to protect our democracy

By Svein Newman

This spring, Northern Plains members came together and created a new space to work toward a world where Montanans have a greater say in the decisions that impact our lives: the newly-formed Democracy Committee!

In many ways, Northern Plains has been working on democracy issues since our inception. One of our most basic values has always been that directly impacted people should have a voice in major decisions about their communities, and those values have extended to include things like voting rights for over a decade now.

Still, it feels like our democracy is under unique and additional threats these days, as civil discourse erodes in our society and many start to question the norms and institutions that have (albeit imperfectly) provided a foundation for everyday people to make a difference.

One way that these threats are expressing themselves is through threats to the Montana State Constitution, which one state legislator recently (and infamously) called a “socialist rag.”

Our state’s constitution was written by 100 nonpartisan delegates, who were elected by their communities, and were not allowed to be politicians (so no legislators, etcetera). It was written by ranchers, clergy, homemakers, even a beekeeper – and they were able to work out a document that all 100 of them agreed on and signed, and then the voters of Montana approved. In fact, Montana voters have reapproved the Constitution several times since then, usually by pretty wide margins.

The Montana Constitution has been a common example for other states. Time Magazine called it a “model document.” The federal government even prepared a special film to distribute around the world showcasing the document’s drafting as an example of grassroots democracy in action.

Our state constitution guarantees at least 17 rights that are not protected under the United States Constitution. Notable among these are:

- **Open meetings and the public’s right to participate** – It stipulates that all government meetings and documents shall be public unless the right to individual privacy exceeds the public right to know. Before that, many votes that politicians took were in secret, and their discussions were often secret as well. Now the public has access to their official meetings, as well as to legislative records and government agency records. It also requires that the public be able to participate in government decisions.

- **The right to clean air and water** – The first inalienable right listed in our state’s declaration of rights is “the right to a clean and healthful environment.” Our connection to land and water is arguably the thing that unites us most as Montanans, and our constitution is how we’re able to pass those things on to future generations.

But because our constitution gives us these protections, and limits the power of politicians, some lawmakers want to amend those things away. That’s why the Democracy Committee is working to build awareness and support for our constitution, to stop the legislature from stripping away our rights. If you’d like to get engaged or learn more, contact svein@northernplains.org.
MEMBER VOICE

Climate Matters

I want to talk about self-care and how that relates to the climate. It might seem a bit of a stretch to correlate taking care of yourself to taking care of the Earth. But this planet sustains us, so we need to take care of it like we take care of ourselves.

I like to think about it in a GOOD, BETTER, BEST mindset. For my own self-care, GOOD is getting enough sleep. BETTER is getting enough sleep AND getting some exercise. BEST is getting enough sleep, exercising, AND meditating. That makes me the best person I can be that day. For the Earth, GOOD might be recycling. BETTER is recycling AND composting. BEST is recycling, composting, AND growing our own food or buying from a local farmer. All these actions nourish our bodies, strengthen our communities, AND are good for the Earth.

Whatever your potential is, strive for whatever level you can achieve that day. If you haven’t volunteered for something lately, maybe now is the time. GOOD is sharing a climate-friendly social media post. BETTER is bringing your kids along to that night time meeting to learn about C-PACE. BEST is supporting your high school daughter as she volunteers to help organize a local Northern Plains clean energy webinar.

Some days I don’t make it to GOOD. That is okay. On those days, I give myself GRACE. Self-care is self-love for ourselves, our friends, and the Earth. This is why I joined Northern Plains because we can all carry each other towards BEST. I will carry you when I am at my BEST, and you can carry me.

Caring for the climate is not perfect; it is forgiving and hopeful. The idea is to simply meet whatever your potential for the day might be: GOOD, BETTER, BEST, or GRACE.

- Jennisse Waters
  Highwood
Northern Plains asks for expanded investigations into operations at Bull Mountains Mine

By Bronya Lechtman

Earlier this summer, Northern Plains joined several other organizations in seeking greater accountability for the reckless, illegal actions by the owners of Signal Peak Mine in the Bull Mountains. Alongside Montana Environmental Information Center, Sierra Club, WildEarth Guardians, Western Environmental Law Center, and Earthjustice, Northern Plains sent a letter to the U.S. Attorney’s Office and filed a citizen complaint with the U.S. Office of Surface Mining Reclamation and Enforcement (OSMRE). These letters detailed a long history of criminal activity, corruption, and environmental and public health violations perpetuated by the mine’s owners. A formal request was made for an investigation and provisional halt to operations pending compliance with the law.

In January, as part of a broad corruption investigation into mine management and operations of Signal Peak, the United States Department of Justice convicted the company for multiple counts of health and safety violations, which included a $1 million fine and three years of probation. This accountability was a great first step, and we are now calling for further investigations given the scope of Signal Peak’s transgressions and that of its parent companies. The letters document Signal Peak’s repeated violations of environmental and public health laws for the 14 years it has operated the mine.

“The promise that coal and ranching could coexist has been broken. Instead of making the effort to be good neighbors, Signal Peak finds it more convenient to eliminate their neighbors and take away their livelihoods,” said Steve Charter, longtime Northern Plains member-leader who ranches above the mine. “Since its arrival, this corporation has abused our land, water, and operations. Given the gruesome details that came to light about worker injuries and bribes to silence them, we know the company is treating its employees with the same disregard… Given what our community has at stake, it’s important to know who exactly our neighbor is and who is funding this reckless enterprise.”

At the time of this writing, we have received a weak response from OSMRE kicking the responsibility over to Montana Department of Environmental Quality, and we are refiling the complaint to them. Northern Plains members will continue our work to protect the Bull Mountains and the people who make their homes within this beautiful, rugged landscape.

After 50 years of grassroots organizing, we often hear, “Montana would look a lot different without Northern Plains.” Indeed, we have won many victories over these decades to protect our working landscapes, pristine waterways, and clean air. Underpinning all of this work, however, is our commitment to preserve democracy and the will of the people.

From one generation to the next, these fundamental values require steadfast protection. By including Northern Plains in your estate planning, you can ensure 50 more years of empowering everyday people and protecting democracy in Montana. To learn more about the many ways to structure your bequest, contact Caleb at caleb@northernplains.org.
The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) is investigating the closure plans of over 160 coal ash ponds across the country, according to a list leaked to reporters and first reported by E&E News in June. Ponds are on this list due to concerns about toxic coal ash being in direct contact with groundwater. Four portions of Colstrip’s ash pond complex were included; three cells of Colstrip Units 3 & 4 ponds, as well as the Colstrip 1 and 2 B Fly ash pond. In total, the complex involves nine waste ponds.

While power generation has permanently ceased within Colstrip Units 1 and 2, Units 3 and 4 are still operating and generating electricity – and creating more coal ash waste along the way. Talen estimates there will be over 1 billion gallons of contaminated water in the 3 and 4 ash ponds that need to be treated over the coming decade. In early 2020, Montana DEQ agreed to accept Talen Energy’s proposed remedy that involves capturing contaminated water and injecting clean water to dilute the toxins over time. This system is proposed to be combined with capping (covering with earth) and dewatering the ponds. This alternative has many flaws.

Test runs of this system have shown it does not always work, and it requires decades of pumping despite the fact that no financial assurance exists for pumping beyond 2070. This flawed method differs from excavating coal ash and placing it into a properly lined landfill, which creates a safe and permanent solution.

Northern Plains sent a letter and meeting request to EPA Region 8, which deals with the West, to discuss the implications of these investigations and to reassert the need for adequate cleanup of the Colstrip ash ponds.

Our vision for coal reclamation in Montana

We are people who care about Montana’s coal country. Though we come from different backgrounds, we share deep ties to this land. Some of our families have been here for generations, others since time immemorial. We are farmers, ranchers, workers, tribal members, and business owners who are committed to preserving our home.

We value our working landscapes, clean air and water, as well as the plants, crops, and animals they support. We believe these resources are central to the culture and vitality of this region. We have an obligation to steward what we have inherited so that future generations can prosper in these places we love.

We are building a future where corporations invest in the livelihoods of their workers and care for the communities where they extract resources. We want to see our democratically empowered agencies stand up for the people they’re tasked to represent. If we work together through open and honest communication – with understanding and a commitment to listening – our grasslands can flourish again and clean water will return to our creeks, rivers, lakes, and streams.

Corporations have always known that extraction of any finite resource cannot last forever. Time and again, they fixate on financial gain but fail to meet legal responsibilities to restore the land and make communities whole before leaving town. Decades of restoration work have been lost, so the time to act is now. We owe it to our children and grandchildren to clean up the messes that were made in lifetimes before theirs.
MEMBERS ON THE MOVE

Gilles Stockton takes on meatpacker corruption in D.C. hearing

This past April, Grass Range rancher and Northern Plains member Gilles Stockton testified before the U.S. House Committee on Agriculture about beef industry corruption. Gilles’ fearless testimony described the harm of anti-competitive behavior by the “big four” monopoly meatpackers.

“Monopoly power extracts wealth from rural communities and takes a larger share of the retail dollar away from producers like me,” Gilles told the committee. He went on to describe how businesses in his community have “dried up and blown away like a tumbleweed.”

Gilles was also featured in numerous media outlets at the local, state, and national level. In a Washington Post interview, Gilles explained how meatpacker consolidation has diminished cattle values by almost half since he began ranching in 1975. “Out of every dollar consumers spent on beef, 71.3 cents went to the ranchers or feedlots. Now that is 36.4 cent,” Gilles told the Post.

In his testimony, Gilles pointed to passing the American Beef Labeling Act to restore mandatory Country-of-Origin Labeling and reforming the Packers and Stockyards Act to ensure full market transparency as necessary solutions to repair a corrupt system that harms ranchers, consumers, and rural communities.

After much delay, we are expecting rulemaking for the Packers and Stockyards Act in the coming weeks. Undoubtedly, Gilles will be working alongside other Northern Plains leaders as we continue to lead the national charge to restore fairness and competition to this broken system.

Beth Kaeding testifies on Talen Energy’s bankruptcy

In May, member Beth Kaeding gave public comment on behalf of Northern Plains in front a Montana legislative committee. Beth spoke to the Energy and Telecommunications Interim Committee on Talen Bankruptcy Remediation Impacts. She reinforced the need for the Montana Department of Environmental Quality to not waiver in their selection of excavation as the final cleanup plan for Colstrip 1 and 2 ash ponds, especially in light of Talen’s recent bankruptcy filing. Beth highlighted concerns about the lack of bonding in place for excavation, which prompted productive questions and discussions from the committee about the full cost of reclamation.
Northern Plains formed in 1972 as ranchers and landowners sought to protect their land and livelihoods from coal strip mining and associated industrial development of ranchlands. Our work expanded to include oil and gas development, especially in the late 1990s when large-scale coal bed methane development was proposed for Montana. Many of our members own farms and ranches in coal bed methane country and in oil and gas-producing areas more broadly. Many Montanans live by or own land near abandoned or orphaned oil and gas wells that leak harmful methane pollution that poses environmental and safety hazards. Our members' livelihoods depend entirely on clean air and water, healthy soils and vegetation, and intact working landscapes.

That is why members who have long been working to address this problem are grateful that under the bipartisan infrastructure funding legislation, the Department of Interior has provided funds for orphaned well plugging and remediation through a federal grant program. In particular, Northern Plains members are pleased that the Montana Board of Oil and Gas Conservation (BOGC) submitted an application for these funds.

In their Notice of Intent, the BOGC stated that 279 identified orphaned wells will cost about $14.25 million to plug, which would be fully covered by the $25 million grant if they can meet the timeline detailed in the grant guidance. Northern Plains sees this as an opportunity to fund a needed solution while also creating jobs and supporting a clean and healthful environment. We hope for the opportunity to celebrate soon as the fund award amount is scheduled to be decided within the month. While we hope these federal funds are secured to deal with this problem, we realize we also have work to do ensuring we don't wind up here again in the future.

This moment provides an opportunity to put fresh eyes on how Montana approaches bonding levels for oil and gas drilling moving forward. Under Montana's current permitting and bonding framework, companies are too often allowed to begin production even though they do not have the financial resources necessary for proper cleanup. According to our research, bonding levels in Montana have not been updated in over a decade, and the current bonding amount of fifty thousand dollars for a multiple well bond does not reflect the current costs of proper plugging and remediation.

Many states surrounding Montana have larger bonding amounts or more specific guidelines to ensure responsible cleanup. Additionally, there are thousands of idle oil and gas wells in Montana. These idle wells are not only a source of methane pollution but are also at risk of abandonment and further becoming a liability of the state. Although the most responsible companies pay their bonds and handle their own clean up, Montana landowners and taxpayers deserve reforms that protect us from risky operators.

Northern Plains members have asked that the BOGC review the state's bonding levels and initiate a rulemaking to increase bonding amounts commensurate with the funds needed to responsibly clean up wells once they have stopped producing. Given BOGC has applied for federal funds to help clean up the existing problem, we are hopeful they will continue their leadership to help ensure we don't face this problem again.
It’s a new competition! Which affiliate will recruit the largest percentage of new members this September?
(Hint: the correct answer is your affiliate!)

As a member-led organization, we understand that a long-lasting and powerful movement relies on building and maintaining our membership. With that in mind, we are excited to announce that throughout the month of September, Northern Plains will be hosting its first ever affiliate membership recruitment competition!

Members of participating affiliates will have the opportunity to advance their membership recruitment skills. The winning affiliate will be the one which recruits the most members to their affiliate by percentage of their current membership. The prizes at hand are a choice of a dinner party organized by Northern Plains staff within the winning affiliate’s turf, or a tree planted in the winning affiliate’s name.

We will kick off the competition with two membership recruitment training opportunities. One will be in-person at the Northern Plains Billings office on August 29, and another will be a virtual training on August 30. Both trainings will be 6:00-8:00 pm. This will be an interactive training session where you’ll be able to practice your membership recruitment skills! Members who are not currently part of an affiliate are welcome to attend the trainings as well.

If you’re interested in making it to the in-person training, you can register at NorthernPlains.org/BillingsTraining.

For the virtual training, please register at NorthernPlains.org/VirtualTraining.

WE LOVE MONTHLY SUSTAINERS!

Would paying your membership dues monthly instead of annually make sense for you? Some Northern Plains members find it useful to spread their support over 12 months, and monthly giving helps Northern Plains, too!

Here’s how:

1. Your gift can go right to work on important issues
   When you give a little each month, it means funds are available when timely issues need immediate attention. From an important federal ruling, to a hearing on short notice, your gift is ready to go to the most urgent need.

2. Stable, predictable giving
   Your structured giving allows us to plan! In all that we do, we plan strategically. When we know what comes in each month, we can plan to have the most impact. Giving monthly also helps you plan and spread out your giving over the year rather than paying an annual amount all at once.

3. Reduced overhead
   Your monthly gift means that Northern Plains doesn’t have to use staff time, printing, envelopes, and postage to send out membership renewals. More of your gift is put to work on the issues that mean a lot to you.

Become a monthly sustainer today! 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 NorthernPlains.org and clicking the red “donate” button in the top right corner or contact Caleb to set up your monthly giving. Just call (406) 248-1154 or email caleb@northernplains.org.

If you are already a monthly sustainer – THANK YOU! Your support means a lot.
Flooding revealed resiliency; recovery will take time

The flooding that swept through so much of Montana earlier this summer devastated many towns and changed many lives. But it also revealed the solidarity shared between Montanans and the resiliency of so many of these affected communities. The unprecedented mid-June floods in Park, Sweetgrass, Stillwater, Carbon, and Yellowstone counties broke old flow records, destroyed bridges and properties, and left many stranded or homeless without essential services. In many of those counties and communities folks are just beginning to glimpse a return to normal.

Efforts to save lives and properties began even before floodwaters hit in many communities, with emergency services in Stillwater, Carbon, and Park counties setting out to warn residents of the upcoming disaster as soon as it was recognized. Volunteer work began almost immediately and included widespread sandbagging of structures, evacuations of livestock, and deployment of private heavy equipment to shore up bridge embankments or clear debris dams.

Once the floods hit and the damage was apparent, folks across the region stepped up to help those impacted. Newspapers and community forums have documented story after story of the countless volunteers – including many Northern Plains members - who helped neighbors clean out basements and rip out molding drywall; of donations of food and clothing and time; and of people in surrounding communities and states bringing in supplies, doing clean-up work, and helping feed folks who lost kitchens and freshwater and food. Organizations like the American Red Cross and Habitat for Humanity showed up swiftly and began helping to coordinate volunteer efforts, and relief funds popped up almost immediately in the stricken counties.

Now, weeks after the initial flooding, the process of rebuilding and returning to normal has begun, but for many of those affected this will be a long process. In many areas critical infrastructure like bridges and roads are still out or are in the process of repair, and flood debris removal and dumping is also still a major problem in some communities. Folks are now able to apply for Individual Assistance and Small Business Administration loans through the Federal Emergency Management Agency, but the process to actually receive those loans can be lengthy and the many flooded farms and ranches in these areas don’t qualify for FEMA SBA loans.

Sibanye-Stillwater’s mine sites, especially the Stillwater Mine, were amongst the infrastructure heavily affected by the flooding, and of particular interest to Northern Plains members of Stillwater Protective Association and Cottonwood Resource Council, as signatories to the Good Neighbor Agreement with the mining company. Over the past weeks, Northern Plains members from both affiliates have been in conversation with the mine and provided input on its efforts to restore access and operations to the Stillwater Mine. As of now, full operations have resumed but remediation efforts where the flooding affected the banks of the Stillwater River are still in progress.

Amidst the challenges of these ongoing processes, it is more important than ever that all of us at Northern Plains continue to support each other and be good neighbors to the rest of the folks in our communities. As always, we will get through this challenge together.
DRC celebrates solar success and another year!

DRC held their Annual Meeting in May at the beautiful Makoshika State Park. Close to 40 people gathered for a potluck to celebrate the success of our Solarize campaign and to elect new officers for the year ahead.

DRC continues to work to enable C-PACE in Dawson County. Members are meeting with businesses in the community to educate them about the program and generate their support in addition to meeting with the Dawson County Commission to introduce them to the program. DRC will also be tabling at the Dawson County fair to engage residents about C-PACE and its many benefits for the community!
Welcoming GTRC to the Northern Plains family!

Golden Triangle Resource Council, the 13th and latest affiliate of Northern Plains, held their first membership meeting on May 16th, 2022. Twenty one folks attended to officially affiliate GTRC, draft bylaws, and discuss first campaigns. The group has decided on C-PACE as their first campaign, followed by a Solarize campaign. Members planned for the campaign at their July membership meeting and are working to make C-PACE available to farmers, ranchers, and businesses in the affiliate range of Cascade, Teton, Choteau, and Pondera counties.

GTRC is also focused on having a presence at nearby summer events, and drafting language for a new brochure, logo, web page, and Facebook page. While they are choosing to begin with two energy campaigns, there is also an interest from many members in the group for supporting local food efforts and local producers. Stay tuned for more from Northern Plains’ newest affiliate!

Community coalesces support during historic summer flooding

Park County was heavily impacted by the historic flooding that occurred in early June. Fortunately the community came together by filling sand bags, cleaning basements, and gathering funds and donations for the residents and places hit hardest. Yellowstone Bend Citizens Council members will continue their work to mitigate climate change (and, therefore, help limit disasters like this flood) by working to speed up our local transition to clean energy.

On that front, we are celebrating the completion of the solar project at Winans Elementary School! Our first annual community resilience award was also presented to Park County Commissioners for instituting C-PACE.

The affiliate welcomes all to join our work to address the climate crisis by attending our upcoming “less is more workshops” on sustainability. The topics include composting, and backyard chickens for food waste disposal.

Finally YBCC is in the middle of a candidate search for the Park Electric Co-op board of trustees. If you live in the Paradise Valley or on the outskirts of Big Timber, this could be you! Please reach out to gusty@northernplains.org for more information.

On a rainy Sunday, June 5th, we celebrated the launch of our Park County C-PACE district, and honored our county commissioners with the first annual Community Resilience Award. Lauren Dalzell’s children, Maya and Crosby, did a great job presenting the award.

The Plains Truth Summer 2022 Page 21
COUNCIL ROUNDUP

BCC organizes to protect Yellowstone wolves

Sydney Ausen

This year’s decimation of the Yellowstone wolf population after a change in hunting regulations has hit Bear Creek Council members especially hard, many of whom make a living from the wildlife tourism industry in and around the Park. BCC is organizing to ensure that the Fish and Wildlife Commission’s 2023 hunting regulations reflect sound ecological practices and reflect the economic impact that wildlife tourism brings to the Park County area. BCC members will be heading to Helena to testify before the commission in late August about this important issue.

Sleeping Giant’s summer of energy!

Emily Auld

SGCC has transitioned back into their energy work with plans to expand C-PACE campaign in the three counties in the affiliate range: Lewis and Clark, Jefferson, and Broadwater. Members are conducting outreach to businesses and possible users of C-PACE in the counties, while also discussing other ways to expand local clean energy opportunities.

Members have also begun a series of meetings focused on building community resilience and intergenerational relationships. These meetings occur informally, rotating between members’ homes where folks gather to discuss local food production, stronger communities, and everything in between. All Sleeping Giant members and guests are welcome to come, bring food, and propose a topic to talk through and act upon.

The membership also had their in-person Annual Meeting on August 4 at Spring Meadow Lake State Park with great turnout, food, and speeches from community members. The group is excited to see where the next year takes them!

In the face of flooding, CCRC remains resilient

Andrew Amrein

Even while negotiating the impacts from the terrible flooding in early June that swept through Carbon County communities along Rock Creek and the Clark’s Fork of the Yellowstone, members of Carbon County Resource Council have stayed focused on their projects and campaigns.

Membership remains engaged in the Custer Gallatin National Forest’s Red Lodge Mountain Fuels project, which is a fuels reduction project proposed by the Forest Service in the areas of Nichols, Red Lodge, and Willow Creeks. CCRC members maintain a seat at the table in the project working group.

Members also continue their water monitoring program along Rock Creek, and it will be interesting to see how the flooding might have affected water quality conditions. Even with all of these activities, CCRC continues enthusiastic planning for the Council’s 25th Anniversary Celebration later this summer!
COUNCIL ROUNDUP

YVCC gains local business support for C-PACE

Yellowstone Valley Citizens Council members have spent the last several months reaching out to local businesses in Billings and Yellowstone County to gain support for C-PACE as we work to enable C-PACE in Yellowstone County. Despite gaining support of local businesses and working with Big Sky Economic Development Association, Yellowstone County Commissioners have declined to voice their support. We are continuing to press forward and are exploring other avenues, like enabling C-PACE at the city level. YVCC members remain committed to bringing C-PACE to businesses and organizations in our community!

BMLA members protect water and engage the community

Bull Mountain Land Alliance members have continued to work closely with Montana Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) to ensure that Signal Peak Energy is held responsible for reclamation of their Bull Mountain coal mine. Members are working with a hydrologist to develop a process for folks in the Bull Mountains to collect baseline data on their wells and springs in the event of damage from mining activity. There will be a training on August 10 in the Bull Mountains.

BMLA has also been collecting testimonials from folks in the Bulls about mining impacts on water to publish on a webpage alongside further resources for community members. Members will distribute postcards to neighbors of the mine with the webpage link.

We are also excited to announce Bull Mountain Land alliance's new officers; Pat Thiele (Chair), Boyd Charter (Vice-Chair), Tom Baratta (Treasurer), and Phil Richmond (Secretary).

Despite recent challenges, SPA drives onward

A number of Stillwater Protective Association members are still cleaning up after the flooding in mid-June swept through large swathes of Stillwater County, taking out bridges and roads and engulfing the floodplains along several drainages in the area. Beyond taking care of just their own and neighbors’ properties, members have been actively engaged through the Good Neighbor Agreement in the efforts of Stillwater Mine to rebuild its damaged infrastructure.

Later this month members will return to their planning for new projects and campaigns for SPA to tackle in the months ahead. The Nominations Committee has also been hard at work finding an exciting slate of new officer nominees to be voted on in August.
WE'VE MADE SOME CHANGES AROUND HERE...

Have you seen our new website yet? We’ve made some changes around here, and we’re so excited to share them with you!

Back in early 2021, we began the process of giving our website a major update. We wanted to better showcase our work and members, bring you more tools to take action, and spruce up the visual design. The updated interface will help us build our power and provide new opportunities to share our work with a wider audience.

Feel free to take a look around and get to know the new site! There will be more updates to come, but for now, we hope you enjoy the new look at NorthernPlains.org.

If you have any questions about how to use the new site, reach out to anna@northernplains.org.