We’re built for this!

The 68th Montana Legislature is well underway! Since our founding in 1972, Northern Plains members have had a strong influence on Montana’s laws and policies. We have crafted and passed bedrock environmental protections. We have defended the right of everyday people to have a say in decisions that affect our communities. We have always stood up to protect Montana’s air, land, water, and people.

Some of our most important legislative work has been to prevent reckless bills that cater to polluters and profiteers who care more about bloated corporate bank accounts than the shared prosperity of all Montanans. We are seeing some of those fights in 2023, and we are ready. We have something much more powerful than big money and corporate lobbyists. We have people power.

We have a love for Montana, a love for our communities, and a love for one another. We have integrity. We are tenacious and courageous. We are organized. We are built for this!

Stay informed this session

There are a variety of ways to stay informed on the bills we are tracking this Legislative Session and how you can take action:

- The Legislature page of our website (NorthernPlains.org/Legislature) provides links to our print bulletins and past scorecards, information about watching online meetings and hearings, and more.
- Our online Bill Tracker and Legislative Directory (NorthernPlains.org/Bill-Tracker) highlights bills important to our work that we are supporting or opposing and offers a directory of both federal and state lawmakers.

The bill tracker provides an overview of proposed legislation with up-to-date information about a bill’s progress through its chamber, hearing dates, and opportunities to take action. To use the legislator directory you can search for lawmakers using your address or by their last name. You can also see all members of each chamber, and the committees they serve on. This software is new and improved for 2023, making it easier to contact legislators and make your voice heard!
Northern Plains’ 2023 legislative priorities

During this new legislative session, we know many challenges are upon us. We also have new opportunities to create and influence legislation to make Montana stronger, more just, and more resilient. Here are some of our key priorities for the 2023 legislative session:

- Protect our democracy and the Montana Constitution
- Protect Montana energy customers from bad deals that benefit monopoly utility providers
- Advance and expand Montana's clean energy future
- Support family farmers and ranchers
- Advance and expand soil health
- Protect our water quality, clean air, working landscapes, and climate
- Stand in solidarity with our Indigenous allies

When we stand shoulder-to-shoulder, with courage and commitment to our values, we accomplish extraordinary things.

Advancing our values from the sun to the soil

This organization was founded on the idea that everyday people can make a big difference when we band together with common purpose to embody our shared values. Of the many ways that Northern Plains members affect change in the world, few of them are more thrilling than crafting new laws that Northern Plains members affect change in the world, few of them are more thrilling than crafting new laws.

This session, we have worked with legislators and allies to bring forward two new bills that advance Montana’s clean energy future and healthier soils across the state. Here is an overview of each bill:

Plug into energy savings with Community Solar

This bill would give Montanans the freedom to purchase affordable clean energy by enabling community solar access. The idea is that multiple households, buildings, or businesses could share a single solar array. Customers could individually plug into the array, and their electricity bills would reflect their ownership level. For instance, if one customer purchased a 15% share of the array, their energy bill would reflect a credit equal to 15% of the energy generated from the array.

This bill would also allow Montanans to access low cost solar energy when buying power from NorthWestern Energy or Montana Dakota Utilities. The bill will also allow third party developers to own and operate community solar facilities, providing even more opportunities for savings outside of the utility system. Given the ever-increasing rise in Montanans’ energy bills, it’s time we expand consumer options by plugging into energy savings!

A week celebrating and promoting soil health in Montana

This resolution would declare the first week of April as “Montana Soil Health Week.” Northern Plains members have been leaders in our state (and beyond) highlighting the profound benefits that improved soil health can have on our environment and our agricultural economy. Farms and ranches that prioritize soil stewardship see increased yields and profitability while making their land more resilient. Increased soil health also benefits our food security, water quality, and nutrition.

This resolution would provide an opportunity to raise awareness about the importance of soil health by dedicating a week-long celebration inviting producers, state agencies, and everyday people to explore and promote the key principles and core benefits of regenerative agriculture. It is an important stepping stone to further healthy soil policy in the future.

Our soil health bill was just introduced as this bulletin goes to print! It is SJ 9, sponsored by Sen. Butch Gillespie (R-Erath). Our solar bill will be introduced soon - maybe even by the time you receive this mailing. Visit NorthernPlains.org/Bill-Tracker for the latest status.

Fighting for energy democracy amidst “Helena handbasket”

We’ve fought this battle before, and we’ve won. It’s time to stand up, once again, for consumer rights. NorthWestern Energy has tried to force the Montana Legislature to be its own group of Helena handmaidens, and, sadly, some newly introduced legislation fits the bill.

You may remember the “pre-approval” process that Northern Plains members fought for years. This is the scheme whereby monopoly utility companies like NorthWestern can seek permission from the Public Service Commission to raise rates forcing energy customers to cover all of the upfront costs and financial risks associated with building new power plants, even before construction begins.

Well, Montana’s preapproval statute was ruled unconstitutional in 2022, but a new bill, HB 284, would remove the portion of the statute deemed unconstitutional, thereby reviving pre-approval. We’ll continue to keep you up-to-date on ways to take action on this bill.

Your actions are already making a BIG IMPACT! Many of you took action on SB 97 – the Tax Clean, Affordable Energy to Death bill. In fact, Northern Plains members were responsible for over 600 emails and phone calls to committee members. Today, that bill was tabled by the Senate Taxation Committee!

Keep up the great work! We will never leave ratepayers out in the cold while corporate lobbyists get cozy in the Capitol.
As we send this bulletin to print, we are preparing for our big Helena Capitol rally to celebrate and defend the Montana Constitution. We have an impressive lineup of speakers including former Montana Governor Marc Racicot, and Dorothy Bradley, who served for 16 years in the Montana Legislature, including before and after the 1972 Constitution was adopted, giving her a special perspective as the document celebrates its 50th birthday. The event will also feature the Montana Logging and Ballet Co., a nationally-celebrated satirical comedy group who were frequent contributors to National Public Radio’s Sunday Weekend Edition. The comedy crooners are making a special appearance, coming out of retirement for this event to unveil a new song.

We also want to give a big shout out to Northern Plains members Erika Wilson of The Windy Mill Press in Billings and Tom Tschida of Nash Farms in Bridger. Erika and Tom have been devoting their time, talent, and creativity to craft handmade works of letterpress art to celebrate and uplift our pride in the Montana Constitution. Their latest collaboration takes the form of “Don’t Mess With It!” rally signs which we’ll distribute at the rally to let legislators know to keep their hands off our Constitutional rights and freedoms!

Look for a full recap of rally details in your next bulletin – we’re ready to raise Helena!

Raising Helena to defend our Constitution!

Since Northern Plains’ founding in 1972, our members have had a big impact at the legislature, speaking up for our values and priorities. This year is no different! Here are some recent examples of the courage and leadership shown by Northern Plains members engaging with our legislative issues:

Jeanie Alderson, Birney rancher, testifying in support of HB 276, a bill to establish a farm to food bank program:

“This bill creates a new market for Montana’s producers, and helps us to reach more Montanans with our homegrown beef that has a superior taste and nutritional value… This is an excellent bill to open a needed market, while also bringing locally-grown food to low-income Montanans.”

Tom Mexicanche, Lame Deer, testifying in support of HB 18, a bill to establish a missing persons response team training program:

“I know from watching these searches in our own communities that the response is quick but also very difficult because of jurisdictional issues… Everyone has something to contribute to this effort; if we can get them to work together and take some of those barriers down through this training, I think we can be very successful.”

Mary Fitzpatrick, Billings, testifying in opposition to HB 284, the “Bring Pre-Approval Back from the Dead” bill:

“Montana’s utilities have every right to purchase generation assets. But in doing so, they should be responsible for assuming the business risks and future costs associated with those purchases. This bill would allow Montana’s utilities to seek advance permission from the Public Service Commission to pass untold costs onto customers for years to come… This bill opens the door for the utility to gamble with ratepayer money, and for that reason, we ask that you vote no on this bill.”

Joanie Kresich, Livingston, in a Billings Gazette guest column defending our Constitutional rights in the face of proposed legislative threats:

“Montana is stronger, safer, more just, and more independent because of our Constitution. We have leveled the playing field so that wealthy individuals and large corporations can’t co-opt our legislators behind our backs.”

Members show courage and leadership in Helena
How a bill becomes law

“Committee hearings,” “2nd Reading,” “Transmittal.” Navigating legislative lingo and tracking important bills can be a daunting prospect! As the 68th Legislative Session kicks high gear, it’s important to know how bills move through the legislature, so you can follow the twists and turns at the Capitol every step of the way. Follow this diagram to learn how a bill moves through the Legislature to become law.

Bill Drafts: Before a bill is introduced, the bill drafting process starts. This is when the Legislative Services Division (a.k.a. analysts and attorneys) edit and hone a bill’s language to follow legal compliance. During this time, a bill is given a bill draft number starting with “LC,” for example “LC 3567.”

1. Bill Introduction: Once the bill language is finalized, the bill is introduced by a sponsor and receives an official bill number. All bills need a sponsor (a.k.a. a legislator to carry the bill). If the sponsor of the bill is a Senator, then the bill is introduced into the Senate Chamber (or “floor”), and the bill number will start with “SB” (Senate Bill). If the sponsor of the bill is a Representative then the bill is introduced into the House Chamber and the bill number will start with “HB” (House Bill).

NOTE: Legislators can also introduce Resolutions in either chamber or jointly. “HR” stands for House Resolution, “SR” denotes Senate Resolutions and HJ or SJ which are House or Senate Joint Resolutions. Resolutions do not become laws, instead they are expressions of the legislature’s sentiments or positions on issues. An example is Northern Plains’ resolution SJ 9, to create a “Healthy Soils Week” in Montana.

2. Committee Hearings: Every bill is referred to a committee and goes through at least one committee hearing before it’s voted on by the whole chamber. Committee hearings are important because it’s the only time that non-legislators can testify for or against a bill. This means it’s the only time you can speak directly to legislators telling them why a bill matters to you. Some examples of committees are the House Judiciary Committee, the Senate Natural Resources Committee, etc.

3. Passed, Tabled, or Killed: After its hearing, the committee then takes a vote on the bill. It can either get passed, tabled, or killed. Tabled a bill means it will be reconsidered for another day. However, “tabled” often means the bill will die, because there usually isn’t enough time in the session to bring a bill back.

4. 2nd Reading: If a bill passes out of committee, it goes back to the whole chamber - the House or the Senate - for “2nd Reading,” where legislators can debate and discuss the bill before it is voted on by the chamber in a floor vote. The bill is heard and voted on twice on the chamber floor. The days and hours before floor votes are cast are important times to lobby our lawmakers in-person at the Capitol, or through letters, phone calls, emails, and other creative actions to persuade them to vote in our favor.

5. 3rd Reading: “Third Reading” is the final vote to move the bill up or down in its chamber.

6. Transmittal: If a bill survives 3rd Reading, it gets transmitted to the other chamber. This happens during the period of the legislative session known as “transmittal.” When a bill moves to the other chamber, the process starts all over again. There is another committee hearing, another series of floor votes, and more opportunities to testify and lobby on bills that are important to us!

7. Conference Committee: If the second chamber passes a bill with amendments, the bill needs to go back to its original chamber to get approved. If it doesn’t get easy approval, the bill goes to a “Conference Committee” for further consideration.

8. Governor’s Desk: Once a bill is passed by both chambers, it goes to the Governor’s desk. The Governor can then sign it into law, veto it, or sit on the bill. If the Governor takes no action after 10 days, the bill becomes law.

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BILL POSITIONS

BILLS WE SUPPORT

HB 18: Establish missing persons response team training program
This bill, sponsored by Rep. Tyson Running Wolf (D-Browning) would invest in training for community-based teams who will respond quickly to instances of missing indigenous people. We support this bill because we are concerned about the crisis of missing and murdered Indigenous people and recognize the urgent need for funds and resources to respond.

HB 276: Establish a farm to food bank program
This bill, sponsored by Rep. Marty Malone (R-Pray) would establish a $1 million grant account from Montana’s general fund, allowing regional food bank centers to purchase food from local producers. We support this bill because we believe in supporting Montana’s family farmers and ranchers while also supporting Montanans facing food insecurity.

SB 141: Create Indigenous People’s Day
This bill, sponsored by Sen. Shane Morigeau (D-Missoula), would create Indigenous People’s Day on the second Monday in October, replacing Columbus Day. We support this bill because we stand in solidarity with our Indigenous allies and support efforts to recognize and honor Indigenous communities and Indigenous history.

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Northern Plains Resource Council

LEGISLATIVE BULLETIN

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