HUNDREDS RALLY IN HELENA TO TELL LAWMAKERS: “DON’T MESS WITH OUR MONTANA CONSTITUTION”

Speakers included youth organizer Lucy Hochschartner, former Representative Dorothy Bradley, and former Governor Marc Racicot.

The Capitol rotunda was packed from floor to ceiling on February 1st for our “We the People” Constitution Rally.

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A Faked Kidnapping and Cocaine: A Montana Mine’s Descent Into Chaos

The Signal Peak Mine was shut down by a web of criminal activity. Now, a powerful group wants to start it up.

Image from NYTimes.com. Photograph by Louise Johns.

SIGNAL PEAK’S WIDESPREAD CORRUPTION CHRONICLED IN THE NEW YORK TIMES

Ahead of the mine’s permit renewal, Bull Mountain members’ battle for their land and water gets national spotlight.
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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Jennise Waters, Highwood
Jasmine Krotkov, Neihart

**Rosebud Protective Association**
Clint McRae, Forsyth

**The Plains Truth**

_The Plains Truth_ is published by Northern Plains Resource Council. Northern Plains members receive _The Plains Truth_ as one of the benefits of membership.

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

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

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

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The much awaited 2023 legislative session is in full swing, and our Northern Plains members are in full swing too! We knew there would be legislative challenges to the deep values that sustain us, and some of those challenges have revealed their sharp thorns. We can be proud we’re not frantically swatting about with anything we can grab; we have honed the tools needed to give our Northern Plains community pathways to understand and weigh in on bills that will affect us all.

Our legislature is the government branch closest to we the people. Gathered in the Helena statehouse, legislators are now crafting laws that shape every nook and cranny of our lives. John Adams envisioned good government as an empire of laws. Yet as individuals we simply don’t have the time to wade through the often confounding text in hundreds of bills, and we quickly lose our best chance to have a voice in emerging laws. Enter Northern Plains Legislative Executive Committee (LEC), stage right!

The committee is a group of Northern Plains members who meet weekly to make recommendations for responses to bills after hearing from Northern Plains’ legislative organizer Caroline Canarios, as well as member leaders tracking specific issue priorities. In a kind of alchemy, their guidance turns into legislative alerts sent to our broad membership, which in turn catalyzes phone calls or testimony (in support or opposition to bills) - now the pathway for citizen input is open!

Scott Sweeney, a Central Montana Resource Council member, has joined the LEC. He finds using a group effort to prioritize bills valuable, with each person offering slightly different input so a fuller picture comes into view. While there is definitely a struggle to settle on decisions about bills, the result has the sturdiness of many minds. Mark Fix, a Miles City area rancher, has served on the LEC several times and appreciates that it gives common people a voice. When we testify, we are speaking from our lives and not through the smudged filter of a highly paid lobbyist, and he thinks legislators know that.

Glendive resident and Dawson Resource Council member Brenda Freisi is part of the Northern Plains “Phone Tree” structure. The Phone Tree harnesses the power of grassroots organizing with speed and efficiency. Members sign up to receive alerts with information about key bills that will soon be voted on; they then call legislators with details about why they should or shouldn’t vote for a bill; and finally they call a list of fellow members passing on the same information, person to person, encouraging direct action. Brenda says: “Since being a part of Northern Plains, I have written more letters to congressmen and women than ever before because I feel more informed. I carefully read what is sent regarding certain bills, and if I agree with the opinion of Northern Plains, it is easy to respond to the right person.”

When a legislative alert arrives in my inbox, I know the recommendation is standing on the shoulders of a whole line of Northern Plains members and staff, and I can take action with a deep sense of confidence.

Northern Plains has created pathways of reciprocity for us to interact with our legislators. Without those pathways, the “people’s house” would tilt off its axis and the very balance that creates good laws that work for everyone would be lost. Our democracy is as useful and powerful as it is reciprocal! We in Northern Plains are determined to keep that reciprocity strong, using one of democracy’s most sacred tools, our voices.

- Joanie Kresich
Chair
PEOPLE OF THE PLAINS

How Pat Thiele found himself in the Battle of the Bulls

By Bronya Lechtman

Pat Thiele first became a Northern Plains member in 2016 when he heard about our “soil crawl” workshops focused on regenerative agriculture practices. He was glad to “support a good cause and be peripherally involved.” Pat knew that he and his wife, Maureen, lived right outside of the permit boundary of the Bull Mountains Mine No. 1, an underground coal mine operated by Signal Peak Energy. Given the global decline of coal, Pat figured that the mine wouldn’t last long enough to impact him or his neighbors. He had heard rumblings about Signal Peak impacting a handful of wells and springs but didn’t know many specifics.

That changed in February 2021, when Pat received a letter from Signal Peak seeking access to his property to conduct environmental surveys. Pat got in touch with his neighbors, including Bull Mountain Land Alliance (BMLA) members, and realized they received similar letters. (BMLA is Northern Plains’ Bull Mountain affiliate.) After investigation, they found that Signal Peak’s letters were the first steps toward seeking a mine expansion permit. The mine had no plans of going away any time soon.

Shortly thereafter, Pat found himself at member Ellen Pfister’s kitchen table with a small group of longtime BMLA members. They were developing an outreach strategy to the 49 landowners who received these letters. As Pat learned more about his neighbors’ experiences with Signal Peak, he was appalled by the stories of damaged water and lack of accountability. “My philosophy of life is in direct opposition of the philosophy of resource extraction at the expense of the environment.” From then on, Pat knew he was going to be more than “peripherally involved.”

Pat was born and raised on Oahu, Hawaii, growing up in the mountains and the ocean. After serving in the U.S. Army for twenty-two years, Pat worked for the Hawaii Division of Forestry and Wildlife, where he spent his time in the woods building fences and trails, planting trees, and fighting forest fires. As Pat and Maureen saw their Oahu home become increasingly overdeveloped by the tourism industry, they wanted to move somewhere with the quiet, open spaces that they loved about their island growing up. So they moved to the Bull Mountains, where they “found solitude, beauty, wildlife, and good neighbors” twenty-plus years ago. They have a small ranch, and Pat has worked at several of his neighbors’ ranches. “I think of myself as someone who wants to be a good steward of the land and be able to say I left it better than I found it.”

Pat is now the chair of BMLA. During his time as chair, BMLA’s membership has doubled, local landowners have developed a robust water monitoring program, and the group has gained national recognition in The New York Times for their fight to hold Signal Peak - a profoundly corrupt, reckless coal company - accountable to the local community. He has poured countless hours into essential research and outreach to neighbors. If you bring this up with Pat, he’ll wave away the credit and point to all of the other members who’ve been important to the campaign as well. But at Northern Plains we know that successful movements are not possible without determined, strategic grassroots leaders.

There’s still a long road ahead in the fight for the Bull Mountains, and Pat will not back down. “I’m obstinate. I hope to be patient and persistent and ultimately successful.”

Pat and Maureen Thiele at the October 2022 fundraiser to support the Charter family’s fight against Signal Peak to keep their land.
ANNUAL MEETING

51st Annual Meeting focuses on the importance of our democracy

After much anticipation, Northern Plains members reunited in Billings for our first in-person Annual Meeting in two years! Not only was this a joyous return to a face-to-face gathering, but 2022 also marked our first ever hybrid Annual Meeting allowing folks to attend part of the event online. Attendees from near and far, both on screens and face-to-face, were able to come together under shared values and a shared vision for Montana’s future. Together, we celebrated our successes and imagined what a better Montana could look like. The weekend was full of reconnecting with our friends, learning about pressing issues, and festivities galore – we truly brought democracy home!

Our first session explored the complicated relationship between the mining of critical minerals and the clean energy transformation. As the use of electric vehicles, solar panels, advanced battery technology, and other components of clean energy technology increases, so will the demand for critical minerals that must be mined from our Earth. Climate change is a wicked problem, and there are no easy answers or catch-all solutions. We are fortunate to start this critical dialogue on such a complex and nuanced topic together.

During this session, we explored how Northern Plains can center justice and equity in our work to create a true community-centered energy transformation that prioritizes the health, safety, and well-being of all peoples and places.

In a later session we celebrated our strong history of women’s leadership and the tremendous impact these super-leaders have had on both Northern Plains and Montana. Panelists Joanie Kresich, Teresa Erickson, and Jeanie Alderson shared powerful stories and answered questions about the role of women leaders in our organization’s history. No one left this session without feeling deeply inspired and full of pride for their hard work through the years.

The final session focused on the impact of corporate monopolies on agriculture and how we can transform the system to better protect family farmers and ranchers. We heard both personal stories and the hard data on how corporate control of the livestock industry harms ranchers, feeders, and consumers alike. Panelists spoke to how policy changes, such as updating and enforcing the Packers and Stockyards Act and passing mandatory federal COOL legislation, can create the transformative and lasting change that individual consumer actions cannot accomplish alone.

Panelists Jeanie Alderson, Teresa Erickson, and Joanie Kresich speak to Northern Plains’ legacy of women’s leadership.

Bill Bullard, CEO of R-Calf speaks during the Corporate Monopolies in Agriculture Session.

By Effy McEldowney

Continued on page 6.
Continued from page 5.

Attendees were also given the opportunity to sign a petition to the White House asking President Biden to keep his promise to reform a rigged cattle market system.

In addition to our inspiring informational sessions, we also welcomed two renowned keynotes: Farmer, civil rights activist, and President of the National Black Farmers Association John Boyd and former Montana Supreme Court Justice Jim Nelson.

Due to the death of his father the week of the meeting, John Boyd was unable to travel to Billings, but he was able to join us via Zoom. Boyd told moving stories of his father’s influence and dedicated his speech to his dad’s memory. He also discussed the immensely important role agriculture plays in all of our lives.

“Everything good comes from the farm. Clean drinking water. Healthy foods that you can grow on your farm. Timber to build houses with. Cotton for clothing. Every great thing comes from the farm,” he said. Boyd reminded us that public policy reform is needed if we wish to keep family farming and ranching alive. Not only is this way of life threatened by the seed and meat packing monopolies, but many farmers and ranchers are also aging out of the industry without a new generation to take the helm. To Boyd, farming is the love of the land and the love of a skillset, and no matter where you are, he reminded us we all need a farmer every single day. And that is why Northern Plains fights for our family farms and ranches!

Jim Nelson also joined us virtually to discuss the immense importance of protecting the Montana Constitution. Attendees learned more about this remarkable document, its origins, uniqueness, and why we need to defend its original form. Jim outlined the threats facing our democracy at the legislature this session, and more importantly, how we can fight back. Democracy is not a spectator sport and it will take all of us working together to defend the rights we hold most dear. Particularly, Montanans’ right to a clean and healthy environment is at stake. This right is critical to us and future generations, and we need to spread the word: The Montana Constitution, don’t mess with it!

Our presenters throughout the weekend were inspiring and thought-provoking. While our communities face many complex challenges, Northern Plains continues to tackle them head on. The history of this organization is full of courageous fighters and uplifting wins, and we won’t be stopping anytime soon!

Whether in-person or virtual, thank you to everyone who attended our first ever hybrid Annual Meeting! We hope you enjoyed reuniting with friends and learning more about our immediate issues. If you missed any of our sessions or keynotes or want to revisit our programming, you can view the recordings on our YouTube channel at NorthernPlains.org/Annual-Meeting-Recordings.
Annual meeting

Annual honors awarded members who “brought democracy home”

Bob Tully Spirit Award - Edward Barta

The Bob Tully Spirit Award recognizes a member who has demonstrated outstanding leadership abilities, creativity in the face of obstacles, and unwavering courage.

This year, Deb Muth presented the award to Stillwater Protective Association member and Billings resident Edward Barta.

Edward is the current Vice-Chair of the Northern Plains Board. Edward is heavily involved with Northern Plains oil and gas work and has been a stalwart leader on our campaign to stop NorthWestern Energy’s proposed methane-fired power plant in Laurel. In November, he participated in a fly-in to Washington D.C. to advocate on behalf of Northern Plains for the modernization of oil and gas well bonding levels. He spoke with the Director of the Bureau of Land Management, staffers from the US House & Senate National Resources Committees, and Senator Daines’ office. He is also the head of our Racial Justice Book Club and is deeply engaged in our legislative work. Through years of service and hard work, Edward has shown us he is extremely versatile and can truly do it all!

As members say, “He brings a great deal of thoughtful passion to everything he does at Northern Plains.”

Thank you for your perseverance, courage, and sense of humor, Edward!

Mary Donohoe Tell It Like It Is Award – Kit Nilson

The Mary Donohoe Tell It Like It Is Award is presented to a Northern Plains member that isn’t afraid to speak up and doesn’t shy away from “telling it like it is”. Over the past year, Bull Mountain Land Alliance (BMLA) member Kit Nilson has shown us what it looks like to stand tall in the face of adversity and remain true to her values.

Kit is a longtime Northern Plains member, and she gave everything she had last year to the fight against Signal Peak Energy, the criminally-convicted coal company that is trying to force her family off of their Bull Mountain Ranch. Kit had the courage to share her family’s story with *The New York Times* and KTVQ television. She has played a major role in increasing community engagement in the Bull Mountains.

Signal Peak is no match for her:

“When she believes in something and is on a mission she’ll scratch every last surface to make sure as many people hear what they need to hear as possible. She knows how to communicate our issues in a digestible way. She’s hilarious and kind, so people trust her immediately and want to be part of whatever she’s a part of,” said BMLA organizer Bronya Lechtman.

Emma Kerr-Carpenter who received the award last year, presented the Mary Donohoe Tell It Like It Is Award to Kit Nilson this year.

Continued on page 8.
Affiliate Awards
Golden Triangle Resource Council (GTRC) was presented with the award for “Largest Percentage of New Members”. Yellowstone Valley Citizens Council (YVCC) was presented with the “Most New Members” award. Congratulations GTRC and YVCC!

2023 resolutions resolve to support our democracy, clean, affordable energy

By Sydney Ausen

Northern Plains members gathered at the Meeting of the Membership to discuss and debate two proposed resolutions. Northern Plains resolutions are an opportunity for the organization to determine our position and direction on issues of relevance to our members. Resolutions can be brought forward by any Northern Plains member, or body of members, for consideration at the Annual Meeting. Discussion and debate around resolutions are always lively and inspiring, showcasing the depth of knowledge of our members and our commitment to democratic processes.

The two resolutions before the membership in November were:
• A resolution to establish our organizational support for the Montana Constitution;
• A resolution to establish Northern Plains support for a series of affordable and accessible clean energy technologies that contribute to a rapid reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2030.

Both resolutions were passed and adopted by the members gathered at the 2023 Annual Meeting. Final text for each resolution follows below.

Questions about resolutions? Call Sydney at (406) 248-1154 or email sydney@northernplains.org.

RESOLUTION NO. 2022-02
INTRODUCED BY THE NORTHERN PLAINS DEMOCRACY COMMITTEE

A RESOLUTION OF THE MEMBERS OF NORTHERN PLAINS RESOURCE COUNCIL TO CELEBRATE, PROMOTE, PROTECT, AND DEFEND THE 1972 CONSTITUTION OF THE STATE OF MONTANA.

WHEREAS, Montana voters elected 100 fellow Montana citizens to convene to draft a new state constitution in 1972 in order to protect citizens’ rights, open state government to public participation, and rectify absent elements and provisions in the 1889 constitution; and

WHEREAS, Montana voters elected 100 fellow Montana citizens to convene to draft a new state constitution in 1972 in order to protect citizens’ rights, open state government to public participation, and rectify absent elements and provisions in the 1889 constitution; and

WHEREAS, constitutional convention delegates worked in open, collegial, and bipartisan committees in 1972 to draft the fourteen articles in the document; and

WHEREAS, the Constitution of the State of Montana was then ratified by a vote of citizenry of the state on June 6, 1972; and

WHEREAS, the extraordinary protections afforded Montanans by the 1972 Constitution of the State of Montana as regards the right to a clean and healthy environment, government transparency and accountability, honoring the cultural heritage of Montana’s indigenous peoples, and other important rights within the Montana Constitution that are under threat by special interests;

NOW THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED BY THE MEMBERS OF NORTHERN PLAINS RESOURCE COUNCIL IN ANNUAL MEETING ASSEMBLED:

That members of Northern Plains Resource Council commit to celebrate, promote, protect, and defend the 1972 Constitution of the State of Montana as it is currently written.
ANNUAL MEETING

RESOLUTION 2022-01
INTRODUCED BY THE NORTHERN PLAINS
CLEAN ENERGY TASK FORCE

A RESOLUTION OF THE MEMBERS OF NORTHERN
PLAINS RESOURCE COUNCIL TO EXPAND
CLEAN RENEWABLE ENERGY TECHNOLOGY
TO SIGNIFICANTLY REDUCE MONTANA’S
GREENHOUSE-GAS EMISSIONS BY 2030.

WHEREAS, the United Nations Paris Climate Agreement
specifies that worldwide greenhouse-gas emissions must be
reduced by 45% by 2030 in order to keep global warming
below the critical 1.5-degree-Celsius limit; and

WHEREAS, Northern Plains Resource Council’s vision
for Montana’s energy future is based on individual and
corporate access to forward-thinking, innovative, clean
ergy solutions which reduce U.S. dependence on foreign
sources of energy and bring true prosperity and strength to
Montana’s rural communities; and

WHEREAS, Northern Plains Resource Council resolution 2007-02 addressed the impacts of climate change
and established support for legislation promoting those
technologies and designs best able to reduce greenhouse gas emissions as demonstrated by life cycle accounting which includes all fossil fuel inputs and outputs in calculating the contributions to climate change; and

WHEREAS, Northern Plains Resource Council Resolution
2013-1 Northern Plains calls upon electric utilities — both investor-owned and cooperative — to plan for and implement changes to their business models and energy
distribution infrastructure in order to integrate community generated, distributed generation and “smart” demand-response technologies on a large scale by 2030; and

WHEREAS, Northern Plains resolution 2021-1 expressed
our opposition to the creation or expansion of any fossil fuel plants, projects, or pipelines in Montana, as we work
develop an affordable, just, and clean energy future for
Montana that meets the demands and challenges of the
21st century; and

WHEREAS, Northern Plains Resource Council wants to
ensure that our energy future is clean and affordable for
Montanans, thereby creating prosperity in our rural and
urban communities and alleviating the energy burden felt
by Montana’s communities; and

WHEREAS, small modular reactors, a type of nuclear power
discussed in the 2021-22 Energy and Telecommunications
Interim Committee of the legislature as an option to
replace the coal fired power generation at Colstrip, do not
yet exist and will not be available or financially feasible to
contribute to eliminating carbon emissions by 2030; and

WHEREAS, the issue of nuclear waste disposal has still
not been resolved in a manner that is either technologically
feasible or acceptable to Montana citizens; and

WHEREAS, the urgency of the clean energy transition has
increased with shifting global energy markets and decreased
availability of nonrenewable resources; and

WHEREAS, there is enough clean and renewable energy
capacity ready for development — and with favorable
economic attributes in comparison to fossil fuel energy
sources — to reach a 45% emissions reduction by 2030 if
robust investment and adoption of those technologies were
to take place.

NOW THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED BY THE
MEMBERS OF NORTHERN PLAINS RESOURCE
COUNCIL, IN ANNUAL MEETING ASSEMBLED:

(1) That Northern Plains Resource Council supports
the immediate advancement and installation of energy-efficient technologies and clean renewable energy sources
across Montana, including but not limited to solar, wind,
heat pump, geothermal and storage technology, including
pumped hydropower.

(2) That Northern Plains Resource Council — in
recognition of the need for a robust clean renewable
energy transition to mitigate the climate emergency in
Montana, nationally, and globally — will communicate to
our members, communities, and public officials the urgent
need to reduce emissions by 45% by the year 2030.
Two thousand and twenty-two was another year of building power and making history at Northern Plains! Last year brought the return of in-person gatherings and face-to-face fellowship with our members. As we continued to adapt to the new normal, Northern Plains members showed a dedication and willingness to learn new strategies to help move the dial on our issues.

Northern Plains continues to grow, evolve, and gain strength thanks to the courage, love, wisdom, and tenacity of our member-leaders. Below are just a few of the big achievements you made possible in 2022.

AGRICULTURE AND SOIL

• A front page *New York Times* story featured Northern Plains ranching members recounting their work to reform the rigged cattle market system (technically published the last days of December 2021). This dramatically amplified the power of Northern Plains members and our grassroots organizing. A month after the print article was published, *The New York Times* released an hour-long episode of its most popular podcast, “The Daily,” which provided an expansive overview of cattle market corruption framed within the family history of Northern Plains’ founding ranch family, the Charters.

• 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.

• We petitioned the USDA to enact two provisions that would restore fairness into the predatory meat packing industry

• Along with other organizations, we launched the Montana Soil Outreach Initiative to ask producers, “What more might be done to better support farmers and ranchers in managing soils in Montana?” Then we developed four recommendations to advance soil health in Montana.

• We hosted Soil Crawls in Big Sandy and Big Timber, expanding our soil health network.

• We held the 7th Annual Montana Local Food Challenge to raise support for local food.

BUILDING OUR STRENGTH

• Our newest affiliate, Golden Triangle Resource Council, celebrated its launch in downtown Great Falls on April 28, 2022, to great fanfare with a standing-room-only crowd. Over 85 people (including the mayor) attended.

• We hosted our first ever membership recruitment competition, and the winner, Bull Mountain Land Alliance, recruited a whopping 21% of its membership!

• We recruited 350 new members to Northern Plains!

• We hosted two Lessons from Indigenous Organizing sessions where 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. We also heard from 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.

• We launched a book club that fosters critical thought and discussion on the topics of systemic racism, privilege, and building community.
• We formed a Democracy Committee to help raise awareness and support for the Montana Constitution, and to stop the state legislature from stripping away our rights.
• Last summer, we executed a successful canvas that raised awareness for the Montana Constitution. We knocked on over 8,000 doors, made over 3,500 phone calls, and had over 2,000 conversations.
• We celebrated 50 years of organizing Montanans in June with our first major in-person gathering since the beginning of the pandemic. Our 50th Anniversary Celebration highlighted Northern Plains’ history, celebrated our success, and looked forward to a prosperous future.

CLEAN ENERGY
• We worked together with local affiliates to expand support for Commercial Property-Assessed Capital Enhancements (C-PACE) at the county level. C-PACE is the innovative financing tool to help property owners make energy-saving upgrades that Northern Plains was instrumental in passing during the 2021 Legislative Session. The advancement of C-PACE will allow businesses to make significant cuts to their energy usage, thus reducing overall demand for fossil fuels.
• The first C-PACE project was completed in Broadwater County. In addition to being Montana’s first fully funded C-PACE project, Bridger Brewing’s Headwaters will save up to $10 million over the course of its lifetime, while the total cost of the financing will come to $5 million. It will also save about 300 million gallons of water.
• We created a toolkit to help members and affiliates run local campaigns to enable C-PACE, and Yellowstone Bend Citizen’s Council created a toolkit for counties to utilize C-PACE.
• Central Montana Resource Council’s Solarize Central Montana campaign resulted in a whopping 124 residents signed up to receive solar assessments for local homes and businesses in Fergus, Judith Basin, and Petroleum Counties. Bozeman Green Build, the preferred solar installer chosen by members, has already completed eight installations with many more to go.
• We met regularly with rural electric co-op members, as well as connected with managers and board members, to help them move forward on policies to promote democracy within their co-ops and to incorporate renewable energy and energy efficiency.
• We continued conducting outreach around potential rural electric co-op reform at McCone Electric Co-op.

COAL
• Alongside several allies, Northern Plains spelled out concerns to the U.S. Attorney’s Office and filed a citizen’s complaint with the U.S. Office of Surface Mining Reclamation and Enforcement (OSMRE) about Signal Peak Energy. We detailed a long history of criminal activity, corruption, and environmental and public health violations perpetuated by Signal Peak at their Bull Mountain mine. A formal request was made for an investigation and provisional halt to operations pending compliance with the law.
Northern Plains and a coalition of allies won a major legal battle for the climate, human health, and the responsible use of our public lands and minerals. A federal judge struck down the Bureau of Land Management’s Trump era Resource Management Plans for Eastern Montana and Northeastern Wyoming. Collectively, these plans governed tens of thousands of acres of land and billions of tons of coal, all of which are owned by taxpayers. The court ruled that BLM must consider the public health impacts of burning coal and related pollutants.

We defended and organized ranchers and community members in the Bull Mountains to stand up for their land and water rights as Signal Peak’s mine continues to expand.

GOOD NEIGHBOR AGREEMENT

We continued to watchdog mine expansion activities, ensuring traffic safety and minimizing the mine’s footprint wherever possible in the Stillwater and Boulder valleys.

We pressured the Mine to commit to minimizing noise impacts near their Benbow Portal and to conduct additional noise monitoring studies.

We coordinated with the Mine to respond rapidly but responsibly to the effects of the June 13 flooding.

Northern Plains and GNA members conducted our first annual review of the newly implemented Adaptive Management Plan water monitoring system.

We engaged in and led agency visits to the Mine and inter-agency working groups including rule-making surrounding Montana’s new (bad) water quality standards.

OIL AND GAS

Northern Plains combated NorthWestern Energy’s proposal to build a methane-fired power plant in Laurel. The campaign inspired members to take action against the plant, step into new leadership roles, and build our power in the community.

Nearly 100 people gathered on the Yellowstone County Courthouse lawn in February for a people’s hearing opposing the Laurel methane-fired plant. The event gave local residents an opportunity to raise their voice against NorthWestern Energy’s proposed methane-fired plant and pipeline, given the recurring theme of NorthWestern skirting public input as they steamroll this reckless project forward.

We pushed the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to ensure regular monitoring of methane at all small wells, end routine flaring, and enact standards that would address small leaks in abandoned wells.

Member Sue Beug testified during an EPA hearing on new rules to limit methane pollution during oil and gas production

We continued working to address orphaned and abandoned oil and gas wells in Montana. Northern Plains members asked that the Board of Oil and Gas Conservation (BOGC) to review the state’s bonding levels and initiate a rule-making to increase bonding amounts commensurate with the funds needed to responsibly clean up wells once they have stopped producing. Thanks to pressure from our members, BOGC applied for (and received) federal funds to help clean up existing orphaned wells in Montana.

The Inflation Reduction Act was signed into law. This act may help transform Montana’s energy future and environmental health outlook by incentivizing clean energy options and directing EPA to discourage waste and pollution within fossil fuel production.

THANK YOU for everything you did to help build this list of accomplishments.
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!

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 during 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.

There are a variety of ways to stay informed on the bills we are tracking this legislative session and how you can take action. Below are the tools we offer to keep you informed and engaged:

**The Legislature page of our website** provides links to our print bulletins and past scorecards, information about watching online meetings and hearings, and more. You can access it here: NorthernPlains.org/Legislature.

**Our online Bill Tracker and Legislative Directory** 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 the legislator’s last name. You can also see all members of each chamber, and the committee they serve on.

This software is new and improved for 2023, making it easier to contact legislators and make your voice heard! You can access it here: NorthernPlains.org/Bill-Tracker.

If you have questions about how to navigate any of these tools, contact anna@northernplains.org.
CLEAN ENERGY

Community Solar Bill makes affordable solar energy accessible for all!

By Emily Auld

Montanans are feeling the impacts of rising energy costs. And right now, we don’t have the freedom to choose the energy we want because we’re stuck with twentieth century regulations for twenty-first century technology. However, there is a tried and tested solution called community solar that can help provide relief.

Northern Plains is working with allies and legislators during this session to give Montanans the freedom to choose affordable, solar energy through a Community Solar Bill! Here’s how it works:

Community solar allows multiple households, buildings, or businesses to share a single solar array. Participating customers could individually plug into the array, and each month they would receive a credit on their power bill equal to their share of the energy generated. This program is 100% voluntary, on the part of the utility providers and energy customers. Montana’s utilities can choose to operate a program, and customers can choose whether or not they would like to participate.

Everyone deserves the freedom to choose low cost energy. Enabling community solar gives Montanans that freedom! Current state government regulations prevent people from accessing low cost energy. This bill will update Montana’s law so that community solar is available to everyone: businesses, homeowners, and renters.

Montana would be the 23rd state to enable community solar and provide affordable, 21st energy solutions for our state if this bill passes the legislature.

Community solar is a tried and tested program. It is already enabled in 22 states, and Montana would be the 23rd. Additionally, nine Montana rural electric co-ops already enjoy the benefit of community solar.

As of the time of this writing, the bill has been drafted and we are gearing up for its introduction. Check out our legislative bill tracker for the latest updates and opportunities to take action in support of community solar: NorthernPlains.org/Bill-Tracker

IRA offers tremendous clean energy opportunities for Montana electric co-ops

By Jackson Newman

Imagine driving through the stunning Montana countryside and seeing the landscape dotted with solar panels, weatherized homes, and electric heating systems. That vision of a fair and self-sufficient clean energy future is much closer with the passage of the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) in August 2022.

Electric co-ops across the country received a massive boost when Congress passed the IRA. The IRA specifically targets electric co-ops for bold renewable energy improvements. However, Montana co-ops often have limited capacity to research the new opportunities available to them, so they will need members’ voices to guide them towards a brighter future.

Continued on page 15.
The Act contains several specific benefits for electric co-ops. First, co-ops are now eligible for an investment tax credit for building renewable energy generation with a baseline of 30% and potential for as much as a 70% credit! That means that co-ops will receive federal funds for at least 30% of the project cost when building facilities like solar installations.

Second, Congress appropriated $9.7 billion toward construction costs for co-ops to build renewable energy generation. This is not a tax credit, this money goes directly to project construction, covering 25% of project costs, in the form of grants. However, it can be added to the investment tax credit, giving co-ops multiple financial incentives to expand renewable energy. Combined with the decreasing costs of devices like solar panels, a cooperative clean energy future is closer than ever.

Undoubtedly, the biggest barrier to Montana co-ops accessing the money is education. Cooperative members all over the state will have to help their boards and staff recognize and understand the exciting opportunities on their doorsteps. Let’s get started!

NorthWestern Energy wants to raise our rates (again)

As Montanans face ever-increasing power bills, NorthWestern Energy has proposed raising prices for energy customers yet again. The monopoly utility corporation seeks to increase electricity rates by 25% and gas rates by 11% in a “rate case” before the Public Service Commission (PSC) initiated this August.

Included in the case is a “reliability rider” proposed by NorthWestern, which would put Montana energy customers on the hook for all of the costs associated with the building and maintenance of NorthWestern’s proposed methane-fired gas plant in Laurel. The monopoly utility is currently plowing forward with construction of that Laurel plant even without proper zoning in place.

In late September, the PSC unanimously approved an interim rate increase from Northwestern for $90.5 million, increasing monthly electricity bills for customers by about $120 a year. If NorthWestern is granted the permanent expanded rate increase they seek, it would result in an average customer increase of roughly $275 a year for electricity, and almost $100 a year for gas.

The Inflation Reduction Act promises to make clean, affordable energy more accessible to rural electric co-ops through tax credits. Now it’s up to co-op boards to start implementing the new financial incentives.

NorthWestern’s application for a rate increase is available on the PSC website. Those who would like to submit comments can do so in one of three ways:

- By emailing pschelp@mt.gov
- Through the PSC website (select “Documents and Proceedings,” click “Comment on a Proceeding,” select “Continue as a Guest,” complete the form, and click “Submit”) 
- By sending a letter to the PSC office at 1701 Prospect Ave, P.O. Box 202601, Helena, MT 59620

Tell the PSC that Montana energy customers should not have to pay increased costs due to poor business decisions by a monopoly utility corporation that continues to procure expensive, outdated energy sources.

Please reach out to emily@northernplains.org with any questions.
Braving the snow on a chilly December day, Northern Plains members gathered to stand up for a clean, affordable, and just energy future. The setting was our Rally to Stop the Greedy Grinch organized to tell NorthWestern Energy, once again, that its methane-fired power plant is not welcome in the community of Laurel.

“The citizens of Laurel have been caught between a rock and a hard place without a way to prevent NorthWestern Energy from coming in and doing what they want, when they want, and where they want, and it is just not right!”, said Barb Emineth, a Northern Plains member who spoke at the rally. The event was held in downtown Laurel, organized to raise awareness for local residents, many of whom are still unaware that NorthWestern Energy is unlawfully constructing a methane plant in their backyard. The rally turned out a crowd of nearly 50, despite frigid temperatures, demonstrating their opposition to the plant’s construction on a busy intersection.

Nearly two years after Northern Plains members first learned of NorthWestern’s plans to build a polluting and expensive methane-fired power plant in Yellowstone County, the monopoly utility is barreling forward with construction, ignoring the concerns of local residents and ignoring zoning laws that prohibit industrial construction on the plant’s site. But Northern Plains members aren’t ready to give up the fight. This rally is just the first in a series of upcoming tactics we’ll use to fight this polluting methane-fired power plant.

To learn more about this issue visit NorthernPlains.org/WeDeserveBetter or contact Sydney at sydney@northernplains.org.

Board Vice-Chair Edward Barta from Billings emceed the rally in Laurel.

Construction of the plant as seen from the Yellowstone River. The land to the right is zoned exclusively for agricultural use.

LOWER YOUR TAX OBLIGATION WHILE EXPANDING YOUR LEGACY!

This tax season is a perfect time to learn more about Northern Plains’ legacy program. There are a number of options that allow you to decrease your tax obligations today while making a lasting contribution to the health and protection of Montana’s water, air, land, and communities. To learn more, contact Caleb at (406) 248-1154 or caleb@northernplains.org.
Montana’s most populated county has finally enabled C-PACE (Commercial Property Assessed Capital Enhancements), creating immense opportunity for businesses in Yellowstone County – including non-profits and farms – to invest in energy efficiency upgrades.

The Yellowstone County Commission voted to enable C-PACE in late December, after a long effort by local organizations and businesses. This coalition of supporters showed grit and perseverance to get C-PACE over the finish line, refusing to give up after commissioners voted to table it back in October. Members of Yellowstone Valley Citizens Council, our local affiliate in Yellowstone County, played a key role in this effort, as did Big Sky Economic Development Association, the Downtown Billings Alliance, former Senator Mary McNally, and the Montana Facility Finance Authority.

C-PACE has already been enacted in nine counties across Montana. As former Senator McNally pointed out, “The first project [financed by C-PACE] was a loan for a water treatment system that will result in $10 million savings for Bridger Brewing Headwaters near Three Forks, and conservation of some 300 million gallons of water.”

“Many projects are more modest,” she added, “but the potential is clear.”

YVCC chair Kris Glenn wrote in a letter to the Billings Gazette, “Whether using C-PACE to replace an HVAC system, upgrade lighting, install solar or something else, it’s a great option for helping local businesses reduce their energy costs.” Thank you, Yellowstone County Commissioners, and way to go, YVCC!

Do you own a local business in Yellowstone County that would benefit from cutting your energy costs? You can apply for C-PACE financing now at LastBestPace.org, or contact our Yellowstone County organizer, Caitlin, at caitlin@northernplains.org or (406) 248-1154 for more info.

The fast facts on C-PACE

C-PACE (Commercial Property Assessed Capital Enhancements) is a statewide program passed into law in the 2021 legislative session that allows businesses, farms, ranches, and other commercial property owners to secure funding from private lenders to make energy efficient upgrades at no upfront cost. The upgrades are paid off slowly over time via property taxes through an agreement with a lender, and the program is designed so that the utility savings outweigh the costs of the upgrades. This allows commercial property owners to more easily make major building improvements such as new lighting, insulation, boiler and HVAC systems, solar panels, and more.

Northern Plains members were the primary drivers in getting C-PACE passed by the legislature, a hard won campaign that took seven years of tenacious organizing. From here, C-PACE must be enabled on a county-by-county basis, and our members continue to be the driving force in that effort across Montana!
New York Times features Northern Plains’ fight against Signal Peak Energy

Mine’s criminal history gets national spotlight ahead of permit renewal

By Bronya Lechtman

The New York Times wasted no time highlighting the outrageous criminal activity of Signal Peak Energy in a January 13 article with the headline “A Faked Kidnapping and Cocaine: A Montana Mine’s Descent Into Chaos.” Signal Peak Energy is the operator of the Bull Mountains Mine No.1, one of the largest underground coal mines in Montana. As the Times lays out in great detail, the company’s audacious criminal activity, failure to reclaim damaged land and water, and harassment of local residents is jaw-dropping when absorbed in it full totality. Equally stunning is the courage, grit, and determination of Northern Plains’ Bull Mountain members, whose tireless organizing to hold Signal Peak accountable is a prominent storyline within the article.

Besides the outlandish details of drugs, guns, and Russian connections reported in The New York Times, Signal Peak has also damaged virtually all of the Bull Mountain water sources used by ranchers, their cattle, and surrounding wildlife. Water is a precious resource in the Bulls. The damage to local water from mining activity is widespread, ongoing, and unacceptable. These damaged water sources have not been properly reclaimed (and not cleaned up at all in many cases). If we wait years into the future until Signal Peak has completed its mining to enforce reclamation standards before releasing bonds, it will be too late. These water sources will be permanently damaged and depleted. The Bull Mountains will no longer be a place where family agriculture and the community that lives there can survive.

BMLA member and neighbor of Signal Peak, Maureen Thiele, tells the Times, “It’s marching towards us… It’s coming close, and damage to our land and aquifer is becoming more likely.”

While members directed DEQ not to renew the permit, we outlined significant and stringent new permit requirements that would be necessary if DEQ did renew it. This includes a timely and effective plan for permanent water replacement in the event of damage from mining activity and expanded water monitoring and modeling.

Roughly 500 individuals also submitted comments organized via Northern Plains’ email action alerts. (Thank you!) Additionally, 14 Montana legislators signed onto comments articulating the need for substantial permit revisions and increased bonding given the legal risks presented by Signal Peak’s history of reckless criminal behavior. Thank you to Representatives France, Mathews, Stafman, Baum, Bishop, Carter, Karlen, Marler, Kortum, Tuss, Sullivan, and Smith; and Senators Curdy and Ellis; for your support.

It’s time that DEQ finally rise to the occasion and ensure that the Bull Mountains, the local community, and Montanans are given the full consideration that they deserve, and the full consideration that state and federal laws demand. The Bull Mountains are worth protecting, and we will never stop fighting for this special place and the people who call it home.

If you are interested in learning more or taking action on Signal Peak, you can contact Bronya at 406-248-1154 or bronya@northernplains.org.

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) recently announced proposed federal rule changes impacting methane pollution from the oil and gas industry. Northern Plains immediately harnessed this opportunity – which included a public comment period - to make our voices heard! We stood up to demand strong protections for our health and our climate.

“Having personally experienced some of the effects of climate change this past summer, I am hopeful the new EPA methane rules will be a big step forward in controlling the release of methane into the atmosphere,” said Sue Beug, a Red Lodge member who saw the devastating impacts of climate-fueled flooding in her community last year.

Cutting methane pollution from the oil and gas industry is the quickest, most cost effective way to slow the rate of climate change and protect our health. Methane is 80 times more potent a climate pollutant compared to carbon dioxide over the first 20 years of its life in the atmosphere. Northern Plains believes that EPA has an obligation to strengthen health and climate protections with rules that leave no loopholes for methane pollution from oil and gas production.

Frontline communities who live near oil and gas production bear the greatest burden of pollution with serious impacts to their health, air, and water. Thank you to everyone who submitted a comment to EPA during this recent comment period and for all the work members have done to stand up for our communities and our neighbors!

On a related note, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) is also updating rules to prevent oil and gas companies from deliberate flaring of methane, the process whereby polluting gas is simply burned as waste instead of being captured for use. Flaring on public lands not only creates more pollution, it also prevents taxpayers from getting proper revenue from these publicly-owned minerals. BLM’s draft “waste prevention rule” takes steps to reduce methane pollution but falls short of President Biden’s commitment to phase out routine flaring by 2030 and Interior Secretary Haaland’s duty to ensure a fair return to taxpayers given the needless waste of public and tribal resources.

Additionally the Montana BLM office is moving forward with new oil and gas leasing across the state, proposing to lease up to 52 parcels totaling 20,951 acres located in Montana and North Dakota public and private land. Strong protections for our health, climate, and wallets must be in place before any discussion of opening new leases in our region. Northern Plains members have stood up as community leaders and submitted comments on this issue.

To learn more about how to get involved in protecting our communities against methane pollution, email Gusty at gusty@northernplains.org.
Montanans pack the Capitol to defend our state’s Constitution

By Svein Newman

On February 1st, hundreds of people braved winter roads and highway closures to rally in support of the Montana Constitution. Attendees packed the Capitol rotunda to celebrate the document and ask the legislature to leave it alone. Northern Plains organized the rally, which featured over a dozen co-sponsoring organizations from across the state.

“For more than half a century, Montana’s Constitution has faithfully protected our freedoms, rights, and people. It secures what makes Montana special,” were the opening remarks of Kris Glenn, the Northern Plains board member who emceed the event. “It has protected us, and now it is our turn to protect it.”

The Montana Constitution was written by 100 everyday Montanans who gathered from every corner of the state and all walks of life – ranchers, teachers, homemakers, and even a beekeeper from Lewistown. These delegates were elected by their communities, and shared a common desire to replace the dominance of the Copper Kings (and the rule of the wealthy few) with a new era of grassroots democracy. The document that they created, and unanimously signed, guarantees Montanans at least 17 more rights than the federal Constitution. It serves as a national model, but has come under severe threat this legislative session.

A handful of lawmakers have already proposed 56 constitutional amendments – including proposals to roll back our right to a clean and healthful environment, attempts to end the independence of our judiciary, efforts to weaken the pillars of our democracy, and more.

Former Montana Governor Mark Racicot, one of the rally’s keynote speakers, noted how unprecedented these attacks are, with no past legislative session seeing more than five amendment proposals. (More amendments have been proposed this session than have been referred to voters in the entire combined history of our constitution.)

Racicot encouraged attendees to look past the forces that foment division with a plea for Montanans to work together in defense of our shared rights and freedoms. “We should begin our constitutional vigil in the same way the delegates to the convention over 50 years ago began their historic work: by presuming the best of one another and remembering that a people who cannot talk or listen to each other, who will not sincerely consider the thoughts of each other, who do not trust each other and who cannot reason with each other, cannot long live in freedom,” he said.

Another rally speaker, Dorothy Bradley, who served in the Montana Legislature both before and after the 1972 Constitution was adopted, put it well: “What we are learning today is that neither our heartland nor our Constitution can be taken for granted. It is ever more apparent that if we fail to come together, we may squander both our Constitutional heritage and our environmental heritage.”

Use your voice. Speak up – talk to your friends, talk to your neighbors. Write a letter to the editor. And as amendment proposals move forward during our legislative session, please take action to let our legislators know that you want them to preserve our Constitution and pass it on – intact – to future generations.
NOTES FROM THE FIELD

MDU wants to blast even more rate increases for eastern Montana

Hardworking eastern Montanans could be in for a big surprise when they open their electric bills later this year if Montana Dakota Utilities (MDU) gets its way. Despite increasing rates over 15% in 2019 and 2020, MDU wants to hike rates yet again. The corporation is blaming inflation for its move to saddle us with higher bills, but its proposed rate increase is dramatically higher than the rate of inflation. Either this is an opportunistic and predatory move by MDU or the company is managing its business negligently. Here are the details.

In November 2022, MDU filed for a rate hike with the Public Service Commission (PSC). This proposal would increase rates for residential customers by 19.2% and commercial customers by an average of 14%. If accepted, it would drain millions of dollars out of eastern Montana communities and $200 a year from the average household.

However, the PSC still has a chance to do its job of serving the interests of everyday Montanans instead of bowing to corporate demands. The PSC has the power to deny the rate increase and will make a decision in the coming months. This is where we come in.

We can and will, make our voices heard! The PSC is accepting comments from the public right now. Dawson Resource Council, Northern Plains’ Glendive-based affiliate, has put together a plan to fight the rate increase and will need the support of all of eastern Montanans. To learn how you can leave a comment and get involved, email jackson@northernplains.org.

AGRICULTURE

Mandatory COOL bill comes back to Congress

Efforts to restore mandatory County-of-Origin Labeling (COOL) are back in the U.S. Senate with the reintroduction of the American Beef Labeling Act. The bipartisan bill is jointly sponsored by Montana’s own Senator Tester alongside Senators Cory Booker (D-New Jersey), Mike Rounds (R-South Dakota), and John Thune (R-South Dakota).

Northern Plains members have been fighting for years to reform the current labeling system for beef which allows imported beef to be fraudulently advertised as “Product of USA” simply if it is packaged in the U.S. This rigged system prevents Montana ranchers from distinguishing their products from those of the “big four” international monopoly meatpacking conglomerates who continue to manipulate markets, and steal wealth from our rural economies. Consumers deserve to know where their beef comes from, and ranchers deserve an honest market.

Restoring mandatory COOL is just one plank of the larger effort Northern Plains is working on to fix a broken cattle market system that threatens the viability of family ranching. Our members were national leaders on this issue in 2022, and we will build on that momentum in 2023!

We urge all Northern Plains members to call Senator Tester, and thank him for sponsoring the bill, and to call Senator Daines and ask him to co-sponsor the bill.

TAKE ACTION

Call Senator Daines and ask him to co-sponsor the American Beef Labeling Act: (202) 224-2651

Call Senator Tester and thank him for sponsoring the American Beef Labeling Act: (202) 224-2644
On a frozen Montana evening in mid-December a few dozen individuals gathered around a virtual “fireside chat” with the aim of digging deeper and cultivating new ideas for the health of Montana’s soils and communities. This gathering of Northern Plains members and other stakeholders from all across the state interested in the stuff beneath our feet represented a range of perspectives. The attendees included soil scientists, land managers, farm land leasing agents, educators, outreach coordinators, and a diverse group of agricultural producers or business owners. Participants reflected on the past eight years of soil health events Northern Plains has hosted and took stock of the impact we’ve had thus far.

Some important reflections surfaced that will help guide Northern Plains’ future soil crawl events. Together we learned that basic regenerative agriculture education is still needed. The group reflected that an individual producer’s context matters, and a community approach to learning is integral.

Attendees encouraged each other with a reminder that the most important thing to do is begin, and there are many introductory and affordable soil tests. Even though attendees recognized the gap in resources that presents challenges for some folks interested in monitoring and improving their soil health, the participants also stressed the importance of reaching out for help to educational institutions and others in their local communities.

This event also served as a “soft launch” for our community soil health resources web page! Visitors can learn more about the six principles of soil health, watch our soil summit, find a helpful reading list and more. You can visit that page at: NorthernPlains.org/Soil-Health-Resources.

We are also excited to be working with Senator Butch Gillespie (R-Ethridge) on SJ 9: A Joint Resolution establishing Montana Soil Health Week & Day! This resolution provides an opportunity to raise awareness about the importance and benefits of soil health as well as celebrate the producers and businesses who are doing innovative work to foster healthy soils. We want to ensure that our agricultural lands and the people who care for them can thrive for generations to come.

Soil is the foundation of Montana’s leading industry – agriculture. Celebrating, honoring, and protecting one of our most valuable natural resources helps ensure that agriculture can continue to be an economic driver for the state for future generations. The vitality of Montana’s food, water, economy, and environment are rooted in the health of Montana soils. These soils, and the people who steward them, have the ability to grow nutritious food for our communities and keep our waterways clean. Yet every year our soils are lost or degraded because their value is overlooked. Everyone in Montana is impacted by the health of our soils and stands to benefit from the strong climate and food security that healthy soil provides.

This Resolution would allow a diverse group of soil health advocates to gather together to celebrate, educate, build capacity and raise awareness about why protecting soil is important to human, environmental, and economic health. We hope that you’ll join us in supporting Montana’s agricultural communities by asking your legislator to vote YES on SJ 9, the Montana Soil Health Joint Resolution! To learn more about how to support the Montana Soil Health Week Resolution, our soil crawls, or to access our soil health resources web page, email Gusty at gusty@northernplains.org.
Members meet with BLM Director Stone-Manning

In early November Northern Plains member Edward Barta traveled to Capitol Hill, where he spoke with Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Director Tracy Stone-Manning, staffers from the US House & Senate National Resources Committees, and Senator Daines’ office. Edward told officials about the problem of pollution from thousands of idle and orphaned oil and gas wells across Montana and the nation. The Washington DC meetings were followed up with a formal petition submitted to the Department of the Interior and BLM urging prompt action to finally ensure oil and gas corporations pay fair bonding amounts for federal leasing and development. This is important to ensure the health, safety, and livelihoods of those living and working near oil and gas development.

Members to EPA: “More work to be done” to address methane pollution

In mid-January, Northern Plains members Robert “Pat” Wilson and Kirk Panasuk testified before the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) at a public hearing regarding the agency’s new proposed rules to limit methane pollution across the country. Both Pat and Kirk are ranchers from Northeastern Montana and have firsthand experience with the health impacts associated with oil & gas flaring and venting. Pat and Kirk encouraged EPA to strengthen these new rules to protect our health and climate against methane pollution.

BECOME A MONTHLY SUSTAINER TODAY!

Have you ever wondered if there was both an impactful and easy way to make a difference at Northern Plains? Become a monthly sustainer to protect our clean and healthful environment today! You can help, with as little as $5, to grow our list of monthly member donors and keep Northern Plains’ power growing for years to come. Taking on greedy corporations who want to pollute Montana and dismantle our Constitution (not to mention the enabling politicians all too happy to help) can sometimes seem too big a task for ordinary people. Lucky for us, we have lots of “ordinary” people committed to putting their time, energy, and money together to grow true grassroots power.

Becoming a monthly sustainer grows this power and is easier than maintaining a Netflix subscription. What could be better than a “subscription” that protects Montana? A monthly transfer from your bank account or credit card keeps your membership current and provides Northern Plains with predictable resources to sustain our work. We could not continue protecting our water, air, family farms and ranches, and Constitutional rights without supporters like you!
CMRC celebrates Solarize Central Montana

Central Montana Resource Council wrapped up its smashingly successful Solarize Central Montana campaign. Twenty solar contracts were signed as result of the project, and the majority of these systems are now installed and online. In October, CMRC held a Solarize Celebration, which began with a tour of three of the new installations around Lewistown. Everyone reconvened at the Lewistown Library for a presentation and Q&A with John Palm from Bozeman Green Build, followed by a toast for a successful campaign, and the drawing for CMRC’s 2022 Central Montana Business Gift Card Raffle.

Due to tremendous interest in our Solarize campaign, CMRC is now planning a second phase of the Solarize Central Montana campaign for 2023.
**COUNCIL ROUNDUP**

**YBCC members rally for the climate, organize community efforts**

Yellowstone Bend Citizen Council is a group of citizens in and around Livingston who hold themselves and the government accountable to leave vibrant and healthy natural surroundings and communities to the generations that will follow. In that spirit, members participated in the recent “Montanans for a Livable Climate” rally at the state capital. Montana is ready and the time is now for a just transition to clean energy!

A new and continuing slate of affiliate officers have also been hard at work to ensure YBCC’s bright future. Our officers include Jo Devries & Clayton Birkes (Board Representatives), Kathryn Eklund (Treasurer), Lauren Dalzell (Secretary), Sarah Stands & Joan Kresich (Co-Chairs).

Members have organized locally on community health and safety, waste reduction, and energy savings programs. In the year ahead, YBCC will be working to ensure the completion of C-PACE (Commercial Property-Assessed Capital Enhancement) projects, sharing information about energy savings programs, partnering with local businesses to limit the use of single use plastic, and planning a community safety meeting. Reach out to gusty@northernplains.org to learn more!

**Gusty Catherin-Sauer**

**MEMBER VOICE**

As a regenerative vegetable farmer and advisor concentrating on growing nutrient dense produce, I find the more I work with nature the more resilient my farming system is. Regenerative agricultural principals are just that: an easier way to work with nature. These principles include minimizing soil disturbance, increasing above and below ground diversity, always having living roots in the soil, keeping the soil covered, and knowing your context. The soil then holds more water, is more nutrient dense, and increases crop growth. Through these practices, we improve the health of our plants, animals, and people, and the ecosystem flourishes.

The massive floods, fires, longer growing seasons, and more sporadic weather events we see today are a result of not working with nature, but instead overwhelming it. The biggest thing I’ve learned from climate change is that we all have a relationship to everything, and those relationships only work when we work together – with nature and each other. Promoting this mentality in the world would not only stop the negative feedback loop of climate change, but also create a positive relationship between us and the planet.

- Cameron Skinner, Big Timber

**Climate Matters**

Cameron Skinner on his farm, Living Soil Farm, in Big Timber.
BMLA water monitoring program commences

Bronya Lechtman

Bull Mountain Land Alliance members officially commenced a program to monitor and collect data about water levels in area wells. The program was created to ensure that landowners have the baseline data they need in the event of damage from underground coal mining activity by Signal Peak Energy. So far, nine households are participating in the program. This data will be publicly available on the Ground Water Information Center (GWIC).

In November, BMLA members presented their top demands to the Montana Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) on permit revisions for Signal Peak. Their demands included ensuring that water replacement occurs in a timely, effective manner in the event of damage from mining activity, with active landowner consultation in the process. These demands were also submitted in formal comments to DEQ as part of Signal Peak’s permit renewal. If DEQ again refuses to act as a responsible protective agency in holding Signal Peak accountable, we’re ready to turn up the heat to force the agency to do its job.

Golden Triangle sets out to solarize the four county region

Emily Auld

Golden Triangle Resource Council is gearing up to solarize Cascade, Teton, Choteau, and Pondera counties! GTRC is building on the successful solarize campaigns implemented by several other Northern Plains affiliates, which provide local home and business owners with all of the information and coordination needed to go solar. Members have finalized the criteria to solicit competitive proposals from potential solar installers, and will choose their installer in late February. Through the spring, members will plan outreach events to find all the local folks ready to learn more about going solar.

GTRC is also staying engaged in the legislative process by posting analyses of bills on their Facebook page to keep followers informed. The group encourages members to like and follow their Facebook page to read these posts and help keep legislators accountable!

YVCC stands up for energy democracy across the county

Caitlin Cromwell

Yellowstone Valley Citizens Council (YVCC) members are proud to share that Yellowstone County has enabled C-PACE! Victory on this campaign took tenacity, and despite two previous “no” votes from the County Commission, YVCC members never gave up. Head over to page 17 to hear more about this effort and about the benefits C-PACE will bring to Yellowstone County.

In December, YVCC members turned out in force to rally in Laurel in opposition to NorthWestern Energy’s proposed methane plant.

YVCC continues to participate in the Phillips 66 Refinery’s Citizens Advisory Council, and works hard to uphold our long legacy of fighting for clean air in Billings and Yellowstone County.
**BCC organizes to protect wildlife**

While the federal government weighs whether or not to remove grizzly bears from the endangered species list, wildlife officials in Montana are laying the groundwork for a time when bears are delisted. Bear Creek Council is working to ensure that the Montana Fish and Wildlife Commission’s recently released grizzly bear management plan takes into account the health of the Greater Yellowstone ecosystem and the livelihoods of communities dependent on wildlife tourism. BCC is also defending Montana’s wildlife from attacks by state legislatures. Members are keeping a watchful eye on bills as they are introduced, always ready to spring to action when threats arise!

**DRC watchdogs water quality**

Dawson Resource Council members have gotten off to a running start fighting a proposed rate hike by Montana Dakota Utilities… head over to page 21 to read more about it.

In other news, DRC members continue to watchdog water quality reports from the Oaks radioactive oil waste disposal facility. With the help of a hydrologist, DRC has ensured that there is no new groundwater contamination. In addition, DRC’s watchful eye has forced the Montana DEQ and Buckhorn Energy to improve their safety and monitoring practices. The public can rest assured that DRC will not be taking its eyes off of this waste facility anytime soon!

**SPA coordinates with community organizations in local flood recovery**

Stillwater Protective Association is donating funds to support a newly formed River Access Triage Team (or RATT) tasked with evaluating the effects of the June 2022 flood on the Stillwater River watershed. The team is comprised of experts, locals, and state officials. This work is intended to fill in the gaps left by local, state, and federal agencies in assessing the physical and hydrological impacts of the flood, as well as in providing answers to landowners.

The RATT was formed and is run by Stillwater Valley Watershed Council, and SPA is one of many local organizations committed to the team’s funding and success.

**CRC celebrates with local food, supports legislative efforts**

Cottonwood Resource Council enjoyed its annual meeting and potluck on January 11th. Members shared stories about food they raise and everyone enjoyed a meal made by Sweet Grass County residents and producers. The excellent local food was just the start to what will be an exciting year for CRC.

CRC members are eager to support Northern Plains in efforts to protect the Montana Constitution, with plans to make their voices heard in Helena through citizen-lobby efforts and hearing testimony. Members are also hard at work supporting the Montana Soil Week resolution (SJ 9) and legislative efforts to restore numeric nutrient water quality standards in Montana.
JOIN THE RACIAL JUSTICE READING GROUP!

We’re proud to share an exciting opportunity to grow with other members of the Northern Plains community!

Thanks to the leadership of board member Edward Barta, Northern Plains started a Racial Justice Reading Group for members. The Reading Group is a space for members to have deeper discussions about race, racial justice, and related topics in a more relaxed and conversational setting. This group has already read a number of books over the course of the past year!

The Racial Justice Reading Group meets over Zoom on the first Monday of each month, from 5:00 to 6:30 PM.

Upcoming books and discussions:

- Monday, March 6 – the group will discuss the second half of Slavery by Another Name: The Re-Enslavement of Black Americans from the Civil War to World War II by Douglas A. Blackmon
- Monday, April 3 and Monday, May 1 – The Bluest Eye by Toni Morrison
- Monday, June 5 and Monday, July 3 – the book choice is to be determined!

All Northern Plains members are welcome and invited to participate. This can mean joining the group for every book and discussion, or just hopping in for one book that you’re particularly interested in. If you’d like to participate, please email Caitlin at caitlin@northernplains.org to RSVP and receive the Zoom link.

If you plan on purchasing any of these books to participate, we encourage you to find a local bookstore to buy them from or order them through. Support local!

Note: Some of the dates may be subject to change as they get closer – please confirm with Caitlin if you plan to attend by emailing caitlin@northernplains.org.