HOLDING THE LINE IN HELENA

MEMBERS PROTECT MT CONSTITUTION, DEFEND OUR RESOURCES

We witnessed the power of everyday people standing up for our communities.

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We beat back attacks on fundamental rights and fair, impartial courts.

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SHINING A LIGHT ON THE MMIP CRISIS IN BILLINGS

Hundreds turn out in Billings for screening of Murder in Bighorn docuseries examining the epidemic of Missing and Murdered Indigenous People.

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STOPPING NORTHWESTERN’S POLLUTING LAUREL PLANT

Billings member Larry Bean pens a guest newspaper column outlining NorthWestern’s corrupt plan for more pollution and higher bills.

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Northern Plains Resource Council is a grassroots conservation and family agriculture group. Northern Plains organizes Montana citizens to protect our water quality, family farms and ranches, and unique quality of life.

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TO THE MEMBERS

Cultivating creativity within our organizing culture

There are all sorts of definitions of culture, from wordy to succinct. I think of culture as the bundle of things we’ve collected to escort our tiny vulnerable infants from their first unsteady breaths safely into adulthood, and then keep them thriving as adults. Over fifty years, we’ve built our own sturdy culture at Northern Plains that has fed our work as the decades have rolled along. Our Northern Plains culture is designed to keep us nourished when the challenges seem endless and overwhelming. It’s designed to help us resist rigidity and continue growing. It’s designed to encourage us to work with others in ways that reveal how beautiful the world is when we’ve joined in common purpose.

The awe-inspiring prehistoric cave paintings remind us that creativity has been part of human life since the beginning. We have endless ways to paint images on every sort of surface, to decorate everything from our dwellings to our clothing, to gather long into the night for singing and storytelling.

“The best cry for the women’s labor movement 100 years ago. Those activists fought hard for the 8 hour workday to protect themselves from the grueling dehumanization of 70 and 80 hour workweeks, but they understood they needed beauty and joy too…the roses.

Our Northern Plains community is looking closely at the most recent version of this concept, cultural organizing. Organizers in social justice, environmental, and climate movements are exploring how music and storytelling – and other arts forms – forge deep connections between people that are the life blood of organizing.

Our human art forms emerge from our creativity and imagination. Albert Einstein gave a nod to this when he said, “The true sign of intelligence is not knowledge but imagination.” Our grassroots work requires a modern form of diligence that can wear on us: too much corrosive screen time and, since COVID, too little in-person time where we can mix casual hanging out with tending to our agenda, or just hanging out for the pure pleasure of it. Author Rebecca Solnit notes that creative work is unpredictable and needs “room to roam.” When we enter the realm of creativity and art, we leave scripts behind, often with a deep sigh of relief.

Our affiliates and members are tapping into the wellspring of creativity in their communities. Long time Yellowstone Valley Citizens Council member Mary Fitzpatrick’s songwriting and singing has enlivened past annual meetings and a big rally in Billings last year against the Laurel methane plant. Tom Tischia’s love of letterpress printmaking has given our democracy work wonderful graphic posters illustrating our love for the Montana Constitution.

The tools that cultures have used for millennia to tap into joy and love of life are still as powerful as ever, and the Northern Plains community continues that human tradition, using those tools in new and creative ways to uplift our work!

- Joanie Kresich
Chair
Norane Friedstadt is no stranger to nonprofit and community work. She and her husband, Rob, moved to Helena at the age of 22, and have been “slowly moving their way up the mountain ever since. We keep buying houses closer and closer to the hills, and now that we’re on the side of a hill, we can’t go any further!” For forty years, she’s been working in her community of Helena to advocate for conservation and Montana’s open spaces.

Wilderness drew Norane to Montana and has kept her here ever since. She grew up in Spokane, but always knew that Montana would be her place. She has always loved big landscapes, such as the Rocky Mountain Front, and working to preserve large-scale wilderness. Early in her career, she helped start the Prickly Pear Land Trust.

Today, Prickly Pear is a thriving nonprofit that works to preserve and protect the open spaces of the Prickly Pear Valley and adjoining Lands in Lewis and Clark, Jefferson, Broadwater and Powell counties. It began, however, as a small local effort among Norane and her neighbors to protect and conserve Helena’s rugged Mount Ascension from a proposal that would place a subdivision with 300 houses on the side of the mountain. Norane was only Prickly Pear’s second staff person and their first development director. She spent six years helping Prickly Pear Land Trust get off the ground in its earliest days.

Norane has also worked for Wild Montana, Montana Audubon, and, most recently, at the Myrna Loy, an arts and independent movie venue in Helena. When the space finally opened up in her life where she wasn’t volunteering with other organizations, she got involved with Northern Plains. Democratic principles are at the heart of how the organization works, which is really important. Northern Plains values members in an exceptional way, doing a wide breadth of work that is not just single focused.” She’s always felt the need to be part of a movement that’s going forward, and feels that Northern Plains does the best job of inviting people into that movement and appreciating their work.

Norane wants to see a future for Montana that values agriculture and open spaces, and feels some apprehension about how the next few decades will look. This is “one of the things that fuels the desire to be part of the legislative work and working toward a place more aligned with [my] thoughts,” she says. Norane’s commitment to Helena, and to a wild and just Montana, is unceasing.

People of the Plains

Defending our land, air, and water

Our members have been on fire this session—raising hell to ensure our land, water, and air are clean, sustaining our lives and livelihoods. We’ve seen an onslaught of attacks on our environment, our clean energy future, our democracy, and on conservation non-profits. Thanks to the persistent action of our members, many of these dangerous bills will not be a reality for Montana!

“Ratepayer Rebellion.”

― Northern Plains Chair Joanie Kresich, Livingston, testifying in opposition to House Bill 971 to strip away much of the Montana Environmental Policy Act

“Whenever a state law is written that burdens the local community and government by giving undue preference, more control, and more rights to a special interest at the expense of a community and elected officials to control their own growth, it’s just wrong.”

― Steve Krum, Laurel member, testifying in opposition to Senate Bill 228 to prohibit local control of petroleum fuels

“SB 392 is a blatant attempt to stifle legitimate litigation by threatening to impose catastrophic costs on the lessee. Large corporations already have a decided advantage in legal contests due to their ability to muster resources beyond the means of ordinary citizens.”

― Pat Thiele, Roundup member, testifying in opposition to Senate Bill 392 to require “buyer pays a corporation’s court costs” when seeking justice over damage from coal mining

PEOPLE OF THE PLAINS

Norane Friedstadt: Building citizen and conservation power for decades

By Emily Auld

By Caroline Canarios

Supporting bills that make a difference

Our members have also shown up to support legislation that improves our state! These include establishing a farm to food bank program, establishing a soil health week, and standing in solidarity with our Indigenous allies to support efforts to address the missing and murdered Indigenous persons crisis. We’re so proud of our members for standing up for what’s right!

“[the members of the committee] not the perpetrators of this violence… By passing this bill you are recognizing the ones who died at these schools but also the ones who were sent home to die. And you also help recognize my mom and my dad’s experiences and the trauma they lived through.”

― Tom Mexchancheyenne, Lane Deer member, testifying in support of SJ 6 to recognize the Indian boarding school experience

“Agriulture is our state’s biggest industry. On my ranch, and at many others around the state, we see soil health as a way to increase our bottom line and make the ranch more profitable for the long haul.”

― Steve Charter, Shepherd member, testifying in support of SJ 9 to establish a Montana soil health week and day

Legislature

Members take Helena by storm this legislative session

By Emily Auld

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LEGISLATURE

Continued from page 5.

Citizen Lobbying at the Helena Capitol

One of the ways in which our members can make an impact is by coming to the Capitol to lobby as citizens—combating the ever-present lobbyists with a voice not often visible in the building. Thank you to our members from across the state for making the journey to Helena to work the halls, tell your stories, and stand up to protect your communities.

Northern Plains fights for fair, impartial courts and a robust democracy

Our democracy is built on a system of constitutional checks and balances that includes three independent branches of government. But this year, Montana legislators sought to undermine that independence, with bills to give the Governor and legislature more control over our judiciary and make our courts partisan.

Our courts make decisions about land, water, agriculture, business, and so much more. They impact all of our lives in major ways. We therefore depend on our courts to be unbiased and independent, not tools for partisan politicians. Thanks to the voices of members like you, we defeated:

• Four bills that would have made our judiciary partisan, as well as an additional bill that would have allowed judges to campaign on political party endorsements, in addition to
• Two constitutional amendments that would have taken away Montanans’ right to vote for judges and given that power to elected officials instead.

As part of a broader strategy for good governance, Northern Plains also successfully fought attempts to make our city councils partisan, a push to further politicize our election process and undermine local government to four separate bills that sought to write gerrymandering into our constitution.

Northern Plains worked throughout the legislature to combat these bad bills, and our hard work paid off. We organized a February rally at the Capitol that turned out hundreds of Montanans in support of our constitution, and co-sponsored another one in May. Northern Plains members testified in committee hearings, lobbied in the halls, and organized strategic phone calls to constituents in moderate legislators’ districts to encourage everyday Montanans to talk with their legislators and help flip their votes. We crafted newspaper and social media ads to help drive constituent contacts as well.

A group of Northern Plains members has been meeting for over a year, including weekly during the legislative session, to build and implement our constitution protection strategy, and it worked! In addition to defeating bad bills, we helped scotch the introduction of many amendments, including the long-awaited attack on our right to a clean and healthful environment, which was requested in early December of last year but ultimately was never introduced.

We are fiercely proud of our constitution, which was written by Montanans to serve Montanans. For more than half a century, it has faithfully protected our freedoms, rights, and people. We’re proud to help protect it, for this and future generations.

MEMBERSHIP CAN BE EASIER THAN A NETFLIX SUBSCRIPTION

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!
Northern Plains members fight MDU rate increase

By Jackson Newman

A cross eastern Montana, Northern Plains members have stepped up to galvanize their communities to fight the proposed Montana Dakota Utilities (MDU) electricity rate increase. While the utility’s parent company MDU Resources is a proverbial goliath that has netted over $1 billion in profit in the past four years, our members have been fearless in sticking up for their communities. As of this writing, members have contacted over 150 businesses and organizations, while generating hundreds of comments to the Montana Public Service Commission (PSC) from impacted customers.

In December 2022, MDU filed for a rate increase with the PSC. This proposal increases rates for residential electricity customers by 19.2%, for small businesses by 15.1% and for large businesses by 12.9%. By MDU’s calculations, this will increase electricity bills for the average residential customer by over $200 a year.

Furthermore, this would be MDU’s second significant rate hike in less than 3 years given the utility corporation already increased its rates over 15% in 2019 and 2020. If approved, the rate increase would drain millions of dollars a year from eastern Montana communities in utility bills alone. This would also cause inflationary price increases for all goods and services as grocery stores, meat processors, farm suppliers, etc. negotiate higher costs that they’ll be forced to pass on to consumers.

However, impacted parties have the opportunity to let the PSC know how the increase will impact them. Tell the PSC consumers.

Combining art and action to protect democracy

By Dustin Ogdin

A couple of years ago, Northern Plains member and Bridger farmer/rancher Tschida found himself getting deeper and deeper into a new hobby, hand-printed letterpress art. He began to acquire numerous presses, typefaces, and tools to create custom art with rustic charm. Along the way, he became acquainted with an experienced Billings-based letterpress artist, Erika Wilson of Windy Mill Press, who has encouraged Tom as a mentor and friend.

Soon enough, Tom and Erika discovered they also shared a passion for using art to engage and inspire action. As one of Northern Plains’ core leaders in our work to protect democracy, Tom suggested that he and Erika collaborate on some limited edition prints to celebrate the Montana Constitution. The artists created a beautiful design laying out the eloquent preamble to the document utilizing a variety of retro typefaces and fonts that remind us of the durable values enshrined within those words.

After that successful project, Erika and Tom created a second design that honors the shared birth year of Northern Plains and the Montana Constitution, celebrating our commitment to protect our “right to a clean and healthful environment since 1972.” The two even created handmade signs for Northern Plains’ rousing We the People rally in the Helena Capitol rotunda that stated our position in the simplest terms, “The Montana Constitution: Don’t Mess With It.”

Tom and Erika have elevated our work through their artistry, and the they have been extremely generous to donate all of their time and materials, including proceeds raised from selling their prints. As of this writing, we have a few of their artworks remaining for purchase.

Visit NorthernPlains.org/Merch or contact Dustin at (406) 248-1153 or dustin@northernplains.org to learn more!
Hundreds gather in Billings for film addressing Montana’s MMIP epidemic

By Caitlin Cromwell

On Saturday, April 15, something special took place in downtown Billings. Hundreds of people gathered at the Babcock Theater to watch the Billings premiere of Murder in Big Horn, a new documentary series from Showtime about the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIW/G) and Missing and Murdered Indigenous People (MMIP) epidemic facing Montana’s Indigenous communities.

Northern Plains was honored to co-host the screening alongside our sister organization, Western Native Voice, as well as a powerful team of leaders and advocates for the MMIWG and MMIP movement. That team included Four Points Media, MMIP Billings, the Yellowstone County Area Human Trafficking Task Force, the Billings Urban Indian Health and Wellness Center, Friends of the Children – Eastern Montana Chapter, the Snowbird Fund, and more.

Murder in Big Horn documents in three parts a devastating string of disappearances of young Indigenous girls in Big Horn County, Montana and offers a small glimpse into the crisis happening in Native American tribes and communities across the country.

Here in Montana, Indigenous people make up about 6.7% of the population but account for 26% of missing persons cases, according to a report from the Montana Department of Justice that analyzed data from 2017 to 2019. Big Horn County, which is primarily made up of the Crow and Northern Cheyenne Reservations, has the highest rate of MMIP cases in the state. Yellowstone County, just north, has the second highest rate.

Leaders – and parents – like Paula Castro have been raising the alarm for years. Paula’s daughter Henny Scott was 14 when she went missing on the Northern Cheyenne Reservation. Henny was a social and outgoing teenager; she loved listening to music, dancing, and attending basketball games. She was in her first year at Lame Deer High and was eager to play basketball herself.

When Henny disappeared in 2018, her parents reported it to authorities immediately. But it took two weeks for the Bureau of Indian Affairs to issue a missing person report. Paula and her husband Nathan Stops continued waiting for the agency to begin a search party and an investigation, but nothing happened. They began organizing their own searches, and eventually, the FBI stepped in. Henny’s body was discovered within eyesight of the house where she had last been seen.

The individual girls, women, and Indigenous people disappearing are unique – no case is exactly alike, each victim with their own story. But there’s a larger pattern that parents like Paula are helping point out. Why do Indigenous people account for such a disproportionately large amount of the missing persons cases in Montana? Why, when an Indigenous person goes missing, is the response from law enforcement slow, bungled, or non-existent? Paula and others in her shoes are raising these questions on a national stage – and the country is starting to take notice.

Blackfeet filmmakers Ivy and Ivan MacDonald, who produced the series, were in attendance for the Billings screening. So was Crow journalist and advocate Luella Brien, founder of Four Points Media, who played in many of the stories unfolding on screen by way of her work as an investigative journalist. Paula Castro, Cheryl Horn, and Yolanda Fraser, all mothers or close relatives of missing family members whose stories were told in the documentary, also attended and participated in a panel discussion about their experiences and their enormous losses. It was the first time this community of people – joined by Northern Plains members in the audience – was together for a showing of Murder in Big Horn.

Tom Mexicancheyenne, a Northern Cheyenne tribal member and active Northern Plains member-leader, welcomed the crowd gathered on behalf of Northern Plains. “Northern Plains is here today because we have experienced exceptional solidarity from Indigenous communities in our work,” said Tom. “We feel like it’s our turn to offer solidarity in return.”

“This is an issue that affects all of us,” he added. “If any of our communities are not safe, that’s an issue for all Montanans.”

SOLIDARITY

Continued from previous page.

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Budding 2023 Soil Crawls

Healthy soils provide invaluable benefits to farmers and their communities: higher yields, better water storage and drought resistance, less erosion, healthier food, and carbon storage.

Learn more about these benefits by joining Northern Plains this summer for one of our “soil crawls.” These educational farm and ranch tours offer skill building, networking, and so much more. Whether you’re a producer, urban gardener, or consumer, this experience will offer opportunities to learn and connect with like-minded folks! We will visit diverse, long-term regenerative operations and hear about farming and ranching in arid climates. Let’s explore resiliency together by delving into soil health practices like cover crop planting, rotational grazing, and soil monitoring.

We’ll be updating our Soil Health Resources page soon as details emerge for this summer’s crawls. Visit NorthernPlains.org/Soil-Health-Resources for the latest. You can also email Gusty at gusty@northernplains.org to be added to the invite list.

The panel after the screening featured Blackfeet filmmakers Ivy and Ivan MacDonald, who produced the docuseries, journalist and advocate Luella Brien, who is featured in the series, and members of some of the families who have lost loved ones and are featured in the series.
Community solar bill shines in Senate Energy hearing

By Emily Auld

On February 27th, our community solar bill (SB 399) had its hearing in the Senate Energy Committee. SB 399 was crafted to allow more Montanans to access solar energy by purchasing individual shares of collectively-owned solar arrays. Senator Chris Pope (D-Bozeman), the bill’s sponsor, opened with a powerful overview of the concept saying, “This is a good bill that requires no appropriation, but simply creates a framework – sets the table – for small business enterprise, and for Montanans to take an individual step to energy independence, and for some, offers a way to support clean energy production.”

Many proponents testified in support of community solar, including several Northern Plains members. A diverse group of organizations and businesses also spoke in support of the bill. Proponents discussed the economic benefits of the program amidst rising energy costs, and the need to provide another opportunity for low cost power to Montanans. Great Falls Highwoods Trailer Court resident and Northern Plains member Jill Day spoke about how community solar could benefit her community: “There are thirty mobile home and RV communities located within the city limits of Great Falls, all of which could utilize a community solar array.”

Mark Reller, a Northern Plains member and former employee of Bonneville Power, gave technical testimony to advocate for community solar as a small, important step toward sustainable energy resilience: “The longest journey starts with a single step. This bill allows those small incremental steps, adding more capacity with each investment.”

Northwestern Energy was the only opponent to testify against the bill.

After the hearing, committee vote landed in a tie 6-6, and earned the support of chair Walt Sales (R-Manhattan) and earned the support of chair Walt Sales (R-Manhattan).

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After the hearing, committee vote landed in a tie 6-6, and earned the support of chair Walt Sales (R-Manhattan) and senator Daniel Zolnikov (R-Billings). Unfortunately, when a bill lands in a tie vote, it does not pass out of committee. Although the bill did not make it to the Senate Floor, this hearing sets the stage well for reintroduction of the concept in future sessions. Northern Plains member Roxa Reller said afterward that the bill represented “a Montana she wanted to live in.”

We are thankful to all of our members for the work and effort put into this bill, and everyone who sent in a comment supporting SB 399! Northern Plains is no stranger to playing the long game, and as with C-PACE, many good bills take time.

Growing support for Montana’s soils and working landscapes

By Gusty Catherin-Sauer

Picture this, it’s April 2024 and folks across the state are gathering on ranches, farms, and in their communities to celebrate Montana’s first Healthy Soils Week!

SJ 9, sponsored by Sen. Butch Gillespie (R-Etheridge) and Senator Janet Ellis (D- Helena), would establish the first Week of April as Montana Soil Health Week and the first Wednesday in April as Montana Soil Health Day.

Northern Plains members understand how important soil health is for the resilience and prosperity of our rural communities, human and environmental health, nutrition and food, animal feed, fiber, and fuel production. However, we need much wider public awareness of these benefits. That is why we have worked so hard alongside Senator Gillespie to craft this resolution. A growing network of agricultural producers and other stakeholders, including members from conservation districts, farm to school and farm to food bank programs, and regional food hubs have all pitched in to help shepherd this resolution through the legislative process.

Northern Plains member and regenerative rancher, Steve Charter testified at the resolution’s committee hearing, saying “Agriculture is our state’s biggest industry. On my ranch, and at many others around the state, we see soil health as a way to increase our bottom line and make the ranch more profitable for the long haul. Farmers and ranchers continue to report less farm-related income each year, and we are losing people in agriculture. We want to encourage young people to consider a future in agriculture.”

The bill has received strong support in both the Senate and the House with successful hearings in each chamber. As of this writing, the bill has passed through both chambers. We are confident that SJ 9 will be signed into law by the time you’re reading this article!

Northern Plains members are growing support and gaining ground for Montana’s soils in other ways as well. We were honored and excited to host a talk with Enrique Guerrero, a sustainable mining award winner, regenerative rancher, and consultant who has worked on projects across North America.

We spoke with Mr. Guerrero about the best practices in reclaiming land formerly used for mining with a specific focus on how to utilize livestock as a tool to remediate degraded areas. The talk was recorded and you can access it on our community soil health resources web page! To learn more about how to support the Montana Soil Health Week Resolution or to access our soil health resources, email Gusty at gusty@northernplains.org or visit NorthernPlains.org/Soil-Health-Resources.
Higher bills and more pollution - no wonder NorthWestern Energy is hiding

Editor’s note: The following guest opinion article was authored by Billings member Larry Bean and published in the Billings Gazette.

I imagine a world where the law forces customers to buy from a single corporation. Imagine that same law guarantees profits for using expensive, outdated and risky business practices. Worse yet, imagine this corporation chooses to emit dangerous toxic pollutants while hiding from public scrutiny. You need not imagine this scenario. It’s how North Western Energy conducts business in Montana, and we customers deserve better.

The monopoly energy corporation is building an expensive, polluting methane-fired power plant along the Yellowstone River in Laurel. Thus far, NorthWestern has managed to evade any meaningful public input. That is until last Thursday, Montana District Judge Michael Moses ordered the construction of the plant to be halted. Why? The health and environmental impacts, that will surely come if this facility is allowed to operate, were not properly considered. The Montana Department of Environmental Quality issued a permit based only on the inadequate data provided by NorthWestern.

Laurel residents (and Billings residents downwind) will experience carcinogenic air pollution. State agencies tasked to protect our health and air quality have documented that the plant will emit toxic Hazardous Air Pollutants (HAPs) including formaldehyde, propylene and benzene.

Folks living within a few miles of the plant will contend with loud engine noise and overbearing industrial lighting all hours of the day and night, with this massive plant dominating what used to be an agricultural area. In fact, the plant’s site is still zoned for agricultural use, but that hasn’t stopped NorthWestern from continuing industrial construction without proper zoning permits.

Not only does the corporation want to keep us in the dark about the environmental impact its plant will have on the site is still zoned for agricultural use, but that hasn’t stopped NorthWestern from continuing industrial construction without proper zoning permits.

NorthWestern already raised our rates late last year, and it’s trying to get even higher rate increases approved right now. Bad business decisions like this expensive plant are part of the reasoning for rate increases.

Thus far, NorthWestern has barreled forward without meaningful public hearings or comment periods. What is the corporation hiding? And why is it building such an expensive, polluting plant when other responsible energy companies in our region are investing in reliable energy sources that are cleaner, safer, and more affordable? It’s because of a rigged system that the monopoly corporation is abusing.

NorthWestern has brazenly abused its monopoly position, and this expensive methane-fired plant that will pollute the entire Yellowstone River valley is just the latest chapter.

Because NorthWestern hasn’t given the local community or any of its customers an opportunity to provide input, it’s important for us to be proactive in letting the utility hear directly from us. You can add your name to a letter to NorthWestern Energy executives and its board of directors at NorthernPlains.org/WeDeserveBetter. The letter demands that NorthWestern give residents and customers a say in decisions about this plant.

The fight to retain local control over energy decisions is just beginning

At Northern Plains we work to ensure the long term health of Montana by protecting our air and water, putting agriculture and ranching community interests above oil and gas profits, and empowering communities to guide local development. Several dangerous bills have been moving through the Montana legislature this session that threaten these values. Northern Plains members have played integral roles in asking critical questions, bolstering opposition, and providing needed amendments to mitigate the damage these bills could have on our communities.

A common theme within these bad bills is an effort to undermine the voices of local residents while rigging the system for fossil fuel corporations. These bills weaken our democracy and environmental protections by trampling on local governments’ right to address community concerns by bodies closest to the people.

Here is an overview of two of the worst bills:

SB 228, sponsored by Sen. Jason Small (R-Busby) would ban local governments from prohibiting the installation or use of any tool or equipment that burn or transport petroleum fuels. Northern Plains and others pushed hard for an amendment that was included to remove the terms "machinery," "facilities" and "equipment" from the language. However, the bill still prevents municipalities from prohibiting pipelines, and there is a grey area left for refineries or other large oil or gas facilities. We were able to mitigate some of the worst aspects of this bill, but it still undermines local control and environmental protections. SB 228 passed both chambers and has been sent to the Governor’s desk. As of this writing, Northern Plains members are seeking a veto request.

SB 208, also sponsored by Sen. Jason Small (R-Busby), would ban local governments from prohibiting natural gas hookups in building codes. After many calls and emails against the bill from Northern Plains members, SB 208 initially received a tie vote in one of its committee hearings and was not advancing. Unfortunately, the bill was reconsidered and eventually passed both chambers to land on the Governor’s desk.

Both of these bills place the financial interests of corporations above the rights of Montanans to have a say in local decisions. These bills are part of a larger theme of "legislative capture" by fossil fuel companies and monopoly utilities. Sponsors and supporters of bills like this seem to have forgotten what Montana looked like when the Copper Kings ruled our state.

Despite these setbacks, this fight is not over. We play the long game and have many avenues available to re-assert the rights of everyday day people to make our own decisions.
First steps in a long journey

By Steve Paulson

In late 1971, several months before a small group of people formed Northern Plains, some of those same people embarked on an ambitious project – a trip to Washington, D.C., to lobby Congress to enact a coal mine reclamation law. It would be their first big step on a long journey.

In what would later become an affiliate of Northern Plains, these folks had formed the Bull Mountain Landowners Association (now known as Bull Mountain Land Alliance or BMLA) to protect themselves from “land men” – coal speculators who used deceitful tactics to manipulate people into selling the right to mine their land.

BMLA members Anne Charter and her late husband Boyd had already been lied to by coal men. They wondered… what was going to happen to Montana – our land and air and water, our ranching communities, our way of life – if we allow the coal companies to strip mine our state?

“At that point,” Anne recalled in a recorded conversation several years later, “none of us knew how to organize, or anything about it, or what to do… Someone happened to say, ‘Well, they’re having hearings in Washington on strip mine reclamation; somebody ought to go there.’

“So we discussed it at a Bull Mountain meeting. And the men were all immediately SO busy on the ranch they couldn’t possibly get away. But you women can go.”

They chose Anne, along with Vera Beth Johnson, who Anne described as “young, with long black flowing hair, and sparkling eyes,” and Ellen Pfister, who Anne said “does her homework and knows her facts.”

They contacted the committee considering strip mine reclamation and were told the hearing agenda was filled, but that another hearing would be scheduled in about three months. Three months later, they got the same response.

Boyd Charter told Anne that she should contact Montana Senator Lee Metcalf. She called Metcalf’s office and soon received a commitment that he would get BMLA onto the committee agenda.

Citizens from Black Mesa in the Four Corners area (where Peabody coal was developing a mine on Navajo and Hopi land) were the first to testify. A congresswoman from Arizona was openly hostile to them, calling them “agitators” and “Communists.”

Then it was BMLA’s turn. “Vera was the first one to get up,” Anne recalled, “and was explaining all about the Bull Mountains.”

The Arizona congressman was distracted, talking to an aide, when Vera Beth asked him loudly, “Representative Steiger, do you know where the Bull Mountains are?”

After the laughter died down, Anne said, “We had the absolute attention of everybody for the whole time.”

The Arizona congressman came up to Vera Beth afterward and said, “Well, I guess if I was in your position, I’d be out there with a shotgun defending my property.”

Left to right: Anne Charter, Vera Beth Johnson, and Ellen Pfister meet with Wyoming Sen. Cliff Hansen in 1971 during a citizen lobby trip to Washington, D.C.

After the hearing, the BMLA women were approached by several people who had been working for coal mine reclamation in Washington. They asked the women, “Do you know what you’ve done?” Anne replied, “No. We just did our best.”

Continued on next page.

HISTORY PROJECT

Continued from previous page.

And the coal reclamation people told them, “You have just dropped a bomb! Everybody thought that they were going West, they would be entrenched, and [get] everything going before anybody knew what was happening. And you have just come and brought it all out in the open, and they are flabbergasted.”

That hearing – and that chance meeting – began Montanans’ involvement in a national coalition working for effective reclamation law. After Northern Plains formally organized a few months later, more people from Montana got involved and began a multi-year working relationship with citizens from coalfield states around the country.

It took several years’ work but, in 1977, Congress passed the Surface Mining Control and Reclamation Act, and Pres. Jimmy Carter signed it into law.

AGRICULTURE

Members take action for fair beef labeling

By Caroline Canarios

As the years have passed, the movement for fair and honest labels for our beef and pork has only grown. Currently, beef and pork can legally be labeled “Product of USA” if it is processed or packaged in the U.S., meaning beef raised, slaughtered, or processed in other countries can still bear the “Product of USA” label. This fraudulent practice is not only misleading for consumers who seek safe, made in USA products to feed their families, but also harms American ranchers, who cannot distinguish products raised with greater care and higher standards from cheaper products raised by foreign competitors.

In March, however, the USDA proposed a landmark rule to address this fraudulent labeling loophole. The proposed rule requires that only meat born, raised, slaughtered, and processed in the U.S. can bear the “Product of USA” label. Northern Plains and its members are submitting comments to support the rule, acknowledging this important step to stop fraudulent labeling.

While closing the labeling loophole is an important first step, it does not provide the full transparency required for a fair market that mandatory country-of-origin labeling (COOL) for beef and pork would create. The bipartisan American Beef Labeling Act, co-sponsored by Sens. Tester, would reinstate mandatory COOL.

Members took action at the end of March to urge Senators Tester and Daines to include the American Beef Labeling Act in their priorities for the 2023 farm bill. Members bolstered this support by supporting Montana’s House Resolution 6, which urges the U.S. Congress to restore federal mandatory COOL.

Thank you to everyone who called our senate offices; these actions will not be the last! Look for more opportunities this spring and summer to take action to ensure mandatory COOL is restored for our ranchers and consumers.

With questions, or to learn how you can take action on beef labeling, contact Caroline at caroline@northernplains.org or (406) 248-1154.
The big bad zombie coal bills at the lobbyists’ legislature

By Bronya Lechtman

During the 2023 Legislative Session, Northern Plains members in coal country rose in opposition to several dangerous bills that threaten Montana’s environment and fundamental citizen rights. Two bills in particular rose to the top as the worst offenders. One bill would blatantly weaken coal companies’ obligations to prevent damage to land and water while another undermines a citizen’s ability to seek justice if that damage happens to their property.

HB 576, sponsored by Rep. Rhonda Knudsen (R-Culbertson), would allow coal corporations to deplete and contaminate water sources adjacent to coal mining with minimal liability. The bill alters how damage to land and water is defined — making Montana law much more ambiguous — giving state agencies and coal companies tremendous leeway in deciding what damage looks like. This legal murkiness would all but force landowners and ranchers to seek clarity from the court when water or land is damaged. But another bill makes that prospect incredibly dangerous to those without deep pockets.

SB 392, sponsored by Sen. Steve Fitzpatrick (R-Great Falls), would require litigants seeking justice for damage to land or water done by coal companies to pay the legal fees of the coal corporation if a judge rules in the coal company’s favor.

Going to court over land and water disputes with coal corporations is already an intimidating and costly endeavor. However, circumstances arise where seeking justice through litigation is the only option available to protect one’s water, land, property and livelihood. This bill removes that last resort as the worst offenders. One bill would blatantly weaken coal companies’ obligations to prevent damage to land and water while another undermines a citizen’s ability to seek justice if that damage happens to their property.

Because of the incredible testimony, phone calls, letters, and emails from ranchers and landowners in coal country, both HB 576 and SB 392 “died” at various points within the legislative process. However, corporations and corporate-promiscuous legislators were hell bent on silencing landowners and other everyday Montanans. HB 576 was tabled in the Senate Natural Resources Committee; however, after the bill died, coal lobbyists convinced the committee to reconsider the bill with amendments they falsely claimed “solved landowner concerns.” Legislators did not bother to clarify these false claims with landowners, and the bill came back to life by one vote. Similarly, SB 392 failed on the Senate floor, but was brought back to life with a motion to reconsider, where it passed with a close vote.

At the time of this writing, HB 576 is in a free conference committee to work through disputed amendments, and SB 392 is on its way to the Governor’s desk. If both HB 576 and SB 392 become law, folks impacted by coal mining would face harms making lawsuits to protect their land and water more necessary, but the right to go to court would simultaneously be undermined by grave financial intimidation. This attack on coal impacted communities is unacceptable, and these laws are designed only to serve the financial interests of coal corporations.

Because of blatant violations to federal reclamation law, and the dire implications at play, members are by no means done fighting these bills. We will first work to pressure the Governor to veto these horrible bills. If that doesn’t work, we will explore avenues for the federal government to step in given Montana will have proven it cannot uphold United States law.

Signal Peak Energy’s uncertain future

By Bronya Lechtman

In February, a Montana federal district court judge halted the mining of federal coal at the Bull Mountains Mine No.1, operated by Signal Peak Energy. This halt is pending a thorough analysis of the mine’s impacts on ranchers, vital water sources, and the surrounding environment. The decision will require the Office of Surface Mining (OSM) to prepare an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) to determine whether the expansion meets legal requirements to proceed, a step that should have occurred before Signal Peak’s permit expansion was granted several years ago.

Northern Plains was not part of the lawsuit that led to the ruling. This ruling is significant to us, however, because we believe this detailed assessment of environmental impacts is a crucial and necessary step that should be taken before any further federal coal is mined. The criminally convicted corporation has damaged virtually all of the important Bull Mountain water sources used by ranchers, their cattle, and surrounding wildlife. Additionally, Signal Peak has canceled ranchers’ leases and harassed them to the extent that some have abandoned, or may be forced to abandon, ranching in the area. This is a tactic used to evade reclamation obligations that are often only enforced when local landowners are present to demand them.

The future for Signal Peak is now unclear. The corporation can still legally mine private and state-owned coal, and we know it plans to adjust operations to skip over the federal coal. Moving machinery to jump over the federal coal, however, is extremely expensive, and it is unclear how long Signal Peak can afford to do so.

Despite a United States judge finding Signal Peak’s environmental damage so concerning that federal coal mining operations were halted to further analyze the harm, the Montana Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) chose to renew Signal Peak’s permit with no substantial amendments. DEQ’s decision came despite roughly 500 comments from Northern Plains members and others — as well as comments submitted by 14 Montana legislators — articulating the necessity for DEQ to implement significant and stringent new requirements if they decided to renew the permit. The permit requirements we advocated for were straightforward, commonsense protections including a timely and effective plan for permanent water replacement in the event of damage from mining activity and expanded water monitoring and modeling.

We are disappointed in DEQ’s failure to uphold their basic mission to protect local communities. The very survival of many Bull Mountain residents is at stake given the dangers this mine poses to irreplaceable water sources. Stay tuned as we continue this fight to protect the people and places we love while holding corporations and agencies accountable.
Members meet with federal agency on proposed coal ash rule

Clint McRae, Colstrip area rancher, and Past Northern Plains Chair, Beth Kaeding, who has long been part of the fight for robust coal ash cleanup in Colstrip, joined the Western Organization of Resource Councils, Powder River Basin Resource Council, and Dakota Resource Council, in a call with the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) in support of a proposed coal ash rule currently under review. The new rule would build upon and strengthen existing rules around the disposal of coal ash, the waste material produced by coal-fired power plants. Members described the threats and impacts of Colstrip's ash ponds, which leak hundreds of millions of gallons of contaminated water every year, emphasizing the need for more thorough groundwater and community protections.

Yellowstone Valley Citizens Council members meet with Billings city on urban forestry

Yellowstone Valley Citizens Councils (YVCC) members met with Billings City Administrator Chris Kukulski and Billings City Council member Ed Gulick in March to share their vision for urban forestry and denser tree cover in Billings, and encourage the city to pursue an upcoming opportunity for federal funding for urban forestry.

Great work to YVCC members Kris Glenn, Larry Bean, and Pat Laufmann, who attended the meeting along with representatives from the Yellowstone Arboretum. Head over to the “Council Roundup” section to learn more about YVCC’s urban forestry campaign.

Northern Plains members meet with Montana Board of Oil and Gas

Northern Plains members Sue Beug and Edward Barta joined the Board of Oil and Gas Conservation staff administrators for a meeting last month in order to discuss the state’s oil and gas bonding levels which are some of the lowest in the region. Northern Plains has built a good relationship with the Board and staff over the long haul. We appreciate their work to plug the hundreds of orphaned wells across the state, however Northern Plains members remain extremely concerned about Montana’s bonding levels and the industry’s impact on our communities.

Members meet with Senator Esp to discuss water quality

In early March, Northern Plains Members Paul Hawks and Jerry Iverson were able to sit down and continue to develop a relationship with Senator John Esp (R-Big Timber), their legislator in Sweet Grass County. They discussed water quality laws in Montana, an issue Northern Plains has been involved with for years. As we continue our work to protect Montana’s water quality, members building relationships with their representatives is essential to our future success.

BMLA members meet with Rep. Oblander

Over the legislature’s transmittal break, 11 Bull Mountain Land Alliance members met with their local legislator, Rep. Greg Oblander (R-Billings), to discuss their concerns about three bad coal bills that threaten landowners’ rights and greatly diminish protections of land and water in coal country. Members also brought Rep. Oblander up to speed about the ongoing negative impacts that landowners are experiencing due to the actions of Signal Peak Energy, a criminally convicted coal company operating in the Bull. While Rep. Oblander made no firm commitments, the meeting laid a foundation for a working relationship with him into the future.

COUNCIL ROUNDUP

CRC springs into action for solar and local foods

Spring is on the move and Cottonwood Resource Council members are getting ready for an exciting summer of outreach and events. To build momentum around solar energy in Sweet Grass County, members are organizing visits of solar installation sites with members from the Northern Plains Livingston affiliate, Yellowstone Bend Citizens Councils. Members are preparing for the CRC summer picnic, an annual event focused on local food hosted at a local ranch. Summer will be the perfect time to raise awareness about local food in the county, with attendees enjoying the offerings at the annual picnic.

Cultivating gardeners in central Montana

To kick off the spring, CMRC’s Green Share Project Garden hosted their second annual Fergus Fresh Food for Life Series; a series of events and workshops to increase understanding and dialogue on the importance of regenerative agriculture and local food. There were screenings of two films, followed by a panel of five experienced Lewistown gardeners, who told their stories of what has and hasn’t worked for them, their specific methods of gardening, and why they garden. An incredible sixty-five people attended the final workshop!

Bear Creek Council defends wildlife at the legislature

Bear Creek Council members have made their voices heard, testifying at the legislature and remaining vigilant in defending attacks on wildlife. Members have fought a number of bad bills that put the interests of mining corporations over that of local communities.

BCC’s most legislative priorities have been to defeat SB 372, a bad bill that would enshrine hunting and trapping as the primary sources of wildlife management in MT; and SB 557, a bad bill that sought to place financial barriers in front of individuals who seek to ensure our government agencies uphold our right to a clean and healthful environment. BCC members offered critical testimony at these bill hearings and helped to defeat SB 372 and amend some of the most harmful language from SB 557.

CCRC focused on water at Annual Meeting and beyond

Carbon County Resource Council held its annual meeting in late March. Members enjoyed a delicious meal catered by a member and listened to a presentation given by representatives from the Clarks Fork Yellowstone Partnership, a local watershed group with whom CCRC will be coordinating a water monitoring project this year.

The presentation was timely, as CCRC members will be coordinating a water monitoring project this year. CCRC members have made their voices heard, testifying at the legislature and remaining vigilant in defending attacks on wildlife. Members have fought a number of bad bills that put the interests of mining corporations over that of local communities.

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Residents in Chouteau, Teton, Pondera and Cascade Counties are all in for solar this spring! Golden Triangle Resource Council, in conjunction with solar installer Boxman Green Build, has launched Solarize Golden Triangle which includes a series of public meetings and information sessions held across the region. The group successfully advocated for the use of mine waste rock for the repair, instead, to save the land and reduce heavy truck traffic, working with local legislators and through the Good Neighbor Agreement with the Sibanye Stillwater Mine. Members are also planning for several volunteer clean-up opportunities in their communities this spring on both their sponsored stretch of highway and through County programs.

DRC represents at the Glendive Ag and Trade Expo

COUNCIL ROUNDPUP

Emily Auld

Dawson Resource Council members set up an outreach table at the Glendive Ag and Trade Expo in February, providing information about their work to attendees. Members spoke with visitors and distributed handouts about country-of-origin labeling (COOL), our C-PACE energy efficiency financing program, and the Montana Constitution. Attendees of the expo were very interested in these issues and numerous visitors signed up to receive more information. In the coming months, DRC will continue to work towards COOL reform and passing C-PACE in Dawson County.

COUNCIL ROUNDPUP

Jackson Newman

The Montana winter has begun to ease, and Yellowstone Bend Citizens Council members are bustling around meeting with community leaders and local decision-makers. Near the halfway point of the legislative session, members participated in a town hall with local legislators. As champions of our local democracy, members listened to fellow community members and shared their perspectives on relevant legislative bills.

COUNCIL ROUNDPUP

Emily Auld

Bull Mountain Land Alliance members have been busy this spring in the legislature, standing up for our land, water, and citizen rights as legislators and lobbyists collude on many bad coal bills! On top of all of this, Signal Peak Energy applied for a major permit revision at its Bull Mountain mine to increase the height of the waste disposal area, which holds coal processing waste, by about 200 feet. This would make the toxic waste area taller than the length of a football field in total. BMLA members submitted comments to the Department of Environmental Quality opposing this proposal because of the air quality impacts, the amount of topsoil that will be needed to reclaim this mountain of coal waste, and how this mountain of coal waste could impact property values.

BMLA members fight a mountain of bad coal proposals

Bromy Lechman

COUNCIL ROUNDPUP

Gusty Catherine-Sauer

Additionally, YBCC members recently attended a “chef summit” focused on fostering communal composting efforts in the Park County area. Members are encouraged by this collaboration among local businesses as part of Yellowstone Bend’s work to diminish the waste and negative impacts from our food system. YBCC plans to continue deepening our relationships and collective work with local decision-makers, and we are looking forward to getting to know Livingston’s new city manager.

Sleeping Giant keeps riding the rails into 2023

Emily Auld

Bend Citizens Council members are bustling around meeting with community leaders and local decision-makers. Near the halfway point of the legislative session, members participated in a town hall with local legislators. As champions of our local democracy, members listened to fellow community members and shared their perspectives on relevant legislative bills.

YVCC organizes push for urban forestry in Billings

Caitlin Cromwell

In January, Yellowstone Valley Citizens Council members jumped feet first into a new campaign around urban forestry. Unlike many of Montana’s larger cities and communities, Billings does not have an urban forestry program or a comprehensive approach to planting, maintaining, and managing trees in the city. As a result, parts of Billings don’t have much tree cover – cover that can reduce temperatures on hot days, improve air quality, absorb storm water, provide shade for people experiencing homelessness, and make our neighborhoods greener, among many other benefits. Luckily, the federal Inflation Reduction Act includes significant funding for communities for urban forestry. YVCC members are pushing the city of Billings to take advantage of this funding and even met with the Billings City Administrator in March to ensure the city is aware of the opportunity. Stay tuned; we plan to encourage the city to submit an application by the June 2 deadline!

SPA opposes gravel pit; plans for county clean-ups

Andrew Amrein

Already this spring, Stillwater Protective Association members played a large role in galvanizing the local community to protect a scenic section of state land used by wildlife, local ranchers, and recreators in the center of Nye from a proposed gravel pit. The gravel was to be used for repair of Highway 419 past the Stillwater Mine to restore access to Woodbine Campground. SPA members successfully advocated for the use of mine waste rock for the repair, instead, to save the land and reduce heavy truck traffic, working with local legislators and through the Good Neighbor Agreement with the Sibanye Stillwater Mine.

Residents in Chouteau, Teton, Pondera and Cascade Counties are all in for solar this spring! Golden Triangle Resource Council, in conjunction with solar installer Boxman Green Build, has launched Solarize Golden Triangle which includes a series of public meetings and information sessions held across the region. The group

GTRC is Solarizing the Golden Triangle region!

Emily Auld

held a Great Falls Solarize launch on April 22nd – Earth Day - where folks turned out to hear about financing, property assessments, installations, and everything else needed to determine if solar is right for them. Free solar property assessments are available with Boxman Green Build through June 15th on a rolling basis. Please reach out to emily@northernplains.org to learn more.

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The Plains Truth Spring 2023 Page 23
MARK YOUR CALENDARS: SUMMER ONLINE AUCTION

The much anticipated summer online auction returns this July and you won’t want to miss out! We’ll have unique and exciting goods from across Montana and beyond.

The online auction is a great way to support Northern Plains’ mission of safeguarding our land, air, water, and communities while also finding items and experiences that bring you, your family, and friends joy!

We’ll have a wide array up for bid from July 1 to August 1.

Call for items and experiences: We are looking for donations from generous members and businesses throughout the Northern Plains community to contribute to this auction. Thank you in advance for being part of the movement for a stronger, more resilient Montana! The difference you make is widely and deeply felt.

Maybe you have a vacation home that could host a guest for weekend. Or you could be the kind of person that can lead a lucky winner on a day of outdoor adventure. Or maybe you just want to downsize your art collection. Northern Plains’ auctions don’t just raise funds for our work, they also showcase the beautiful diversity of our members and all the different ways they give back to their community. However you can contribute, please consider donating. We’re all in this together!

Your contributions have a far-reaching impact on the state of Montana. Potential donations include:

• Vacation stays and cabin getaways
• Original art such as pottery, quilts, paintings, and more!
• Hand-crafted or heirloom jewelry
• Experiences, workshops, and special tours
• Food items, such as Montana-raised meats

If you have any questions or would like to donate an item of value, please contact Effy at effy@northernplains.org or call our office during business hours at (406) 248-1154.