from our roots to the future

52ND ANNUAL MEETING

Join us on November 10-11 as we carry our shared lessons of grassroots power forward to create a sustainable future for generations of Montanans to come.

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AFTER YEARS OF ORGANIZING, COLSTRIP GETS CLEANUP DONE RIGHT

Colstrip owners agree to move forward with “high and dry” ash pond remedy, which will create hundreds of new jobs and protect local groundwater.

STONE SOUP GARDEN’S COMMUNITY APPROACH CELEBRATES SMALL-SCALE AG

Members and farmers Claire Overholt and Patrick Certain sit down to share their ag philosophy and how Northern Plains gives them hope.

FEATURING KEYNOTE SPEAKER: JOHN BOYD JR.

John Boyd returns in-person to share his wisdom and experience as a prominent defender of civil rights and a champion of family agriculture.
Northern Plains Resource Council is a grassroots conservation and family agriculture group. Northern Plains organizes Montana citizens to protect our water quality, family farms and ranches, and unique quality of life.

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The Plains Truth

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

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

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

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

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Northern Plains Resource Council
220 S. 27th Street, Suite A, Billings, MT 59101
Tel: (406) 248-1154 Fax: (406) 248-2110
info@northernplains.org ● www.northernplains.org
We humans need just the right conditions to learn. As a public school teacher, I wanted to create a vigorous learning climate in my classroom. But how? I spent years searching for the best practices and trying to fit them into place. When I succeeded, the blazing light flaring up in the eyes of children as they made a discovery was a beautiful sight.

We in Northern Plains share some very special commonalities, and one of those is our fierce commitment to learning. We fit the description of lifelong learners, but with a twist - we do much of our learning together. I have had two wonderful years as board Chair to watch this kind of learning, to think about it, to revel in it, and, most powerfully, to learn from it.

Learning together means the knowledge belongs to all of us. It tightens our bonds with each other, and strengthens us for the work ahead. Sometimes it forms a raft that holds us a few inches above roiling high water.

Our kind of learning comes from the wellsprings of democracy. We use democracy’s tools to think and question together, to evaluate different paths, the very opposite of that rusty old trap, jumping to conclusions. Our decisions have a sturdiness that would be impossible to find alone.

In meetings, just as we seem to be heading in one clear direction, someone pops up with, “But what about this?” We understand there is something else we need to take into account, and we head right back into deliberations with something new to consider.

Some of our meetings begin a whirl of confusion. Just as I begin to wonder how we can find a way out of this thicket without deep scratches, a clear path begins to emerge. Our deep faith in continuing to listen and question, in finding the best collective path, has gotten us through again.

As board Chair I’ve had many opportunities to see our way of learning in action. Now, my friend Edward Barta is our nominee to chair Northern Plains for the next two years. I’m happy to pass this mix of learning and leading along to him.

If I could, I’d bequeath this chance to every one of you. But I don’t really need to; you are invoking our way of learning in your community work, in collaborations, in affiliates and in task forces every day. Experimenting, pitching offbeat ideas, trying new things, failing and trying again, together. Scattering the seeds of our discoveries as far and wide as we can.

Thank you Northern Plains. You are the best teacher I’ve had in my life.

- Joanie Kresich
Chair
For Tom Heyneman, conservation and responsible land stewardship run in the family. Growing up outside Fishtail on the Bench Ranch, Tom remembers conversations around the family table about “open space, land integrity, and the concept of conservation” as ideas that were “always just around”. This should come as no surprise given his parents, Jack and Susan Heyneman, were important voices in Montana conservation at the time. Jack was a founding member and former chair of Northern Plains who also helped found the Stillwater Protective Association (SPA), our local affiliate in the Stillwater Valley. On the Bench Ranch they were early Montana adopters of holistic ranch management practices and conservation easements on their property.

Tom still has memories of early Stillwater Protective Association and Northern Plains events and issues, recalling community gatherings such as SPA annual picnics in Roscoe and fundraising auctions. He best remembers discussions during his childhood about the Signal Peak mine up in the Bull Mountains and the Stillwater Mine, near his own home, in Nye.

Back then, Tom was sitting in on the early conversations that led to the formation of the Good Neighbor Agreement (GNA), the legally binding contract between Northern Plains, SPA, Cottonwood Resource Council, and the Stillwater Mining Company that established a process for citizens to regularly meet with company representatives to address and prevent problems related to mining impacts, reclamation, wildlife, and other issues. Tom’s father, Jack, was one of the key players in the original negotiation of the GNA contract over 20 years ago.

Despite this legacy, Tom himself was not always the deeply involved member of SPA or Northern Plains that he is today. Though a long-time dues-paying member of both organizations, Tom lived and worked out of state for a few years and served in the US Marine Corps. When he came back to Fishtail and began managing Bench Ranch, what initially drew Tom into a more active role with SPA was the organization’s initiative, begun in 2014, to establish a zoning district in Stillwater County to protect areas from oil and gas activities along the Beartooth Front through citizen-initiated zoning.

Though the citizen-initiated zoning campaign eventually grew beyond Stillwater Protective Association, members, including Tom, continued to stay involved during the years-long struggle with local officials. Tom says that he joined the campaign initially because it seemed like a “no-brainer” and was surprised that the zoning effort came up short.

That didn’t keep Tom from staying involved with his local Northern Plains affiliate, though. In fact, his involvement has only grown. Tom first joined the Northern Plains Board of Directors in 2021 as one of the SPA representatives; in 2022 took on the role of Stillwater Protective Association President; and earlier this year he became deeply involved in helping maintain the Good Neighbor Agreement. Tom says his motivations are a combination of continuing the family legacy and taking seriously his responsibility to the land. As a second generation rancher in Stillwater County, whose sons are already perpetuating that legacy into a third generation, Tom believes that his duty is “to treat and improve the land [the] best he can, and leave it better.” The time and energy he puts into Northern Plains and SPA is “a small price to pay to get to live here.”
Our favorite gathering of fellowship, fun, and learning is right around the corner, and we’re bringing you movers and shakers from across Montana and beyond to help us commemorate the occasion! Join us at Northern Plains’ 52nd Annual Meeting: From Our Roots, to the Future.

From the day we were founded, Northern Plains has championed deep-rooted values of courage, equity, and stewardship. Like Montana’s history, our values and our rich story of grassroots power set us apart. This year, we will explore how to channel that power into tackling the problems we collectively face today.

From transforming our energy economy and food system, to creating more resilient communities in oil and gas country, Northern Plains is building the next generation of grassroots leaders to become agents of change. Join us as we carry lessons of perseverance and people power forward to create a sustainable future for generations of Montanans to come.

This year, we’ll be in a brand new location at The Pub Station in downtown Billings. We’re excited to come together in a locally owned and operated space that builds community and cultivates creativity.

The two-day event allows us to reconnect with old friends, meet new, like-minded individuals, and learn about all the great work that’s happening across the state. We’ll learn more about transforming our energy systems, oil and gas bonding and reclamation, and keeping our farmers and ranchers on the land through succession, and we’ll deepen our cultural connections with a history of Montana Indian Education for All. We will also be offering a virtual streaming option via Zoom to allow anyone to learn from our speakers and panelists, no matter where they live. Plus, we’ll have plenty of entertainment, opportunities for connection, and a great auction with one-of-a-kind Montana-made goods, local art, getaways, and more. We hope to see you there!

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

Keynote Speaker

We are excited to welcome back keynote speaker John Boyd in person this year!

John Boyd is a prominent defender of civil rights and president of the National Black Farmers Association. A fourth generation farmer, John founded the NBFA in 1995 after experiencing the US Department of Agriculture’s discriminatory practices firsthand and learning other Black farmers faced similar discrimination. Now, the NBFA advocates for Black farmers’ rights across America. Boyd is a past nominee for the NAACP’s highest honor, the Spingarn Award, and formerly served as an agricultural advisor for the state of Virginia. We are honored to have such a tireless champion of family agriculture share his wisdom and experience!
**DEADLINES**

**November 09**
- *Election ballots must be received at the Northern Plains’ office by this date, in-person or by mail.*
- *Online registration deadline for in-person attendees.* After this date, you can register for in-person attendance on November 10th and 11th at the event.

**November 11**
- *Online registration for virtual attendees closes on Saturday, November 11 at noon.*

**Meeting of the Membership**

On Friday afternoon, Northern Plains members are invited to come together for the annual “Meeting of the Membership.” Being a member means you have the right to vote on policy resolutions that help guide Northern Plains’ work in the year ahead. Because policy resolutions undergo many changes during the course of debate, you must be present in-person or virtually at the Meeting of the Membership in order to vote on resolutions.

**Resolutions NOTE:** The deadline to submit resolutions to the Resolutions Committee has passed. If you wish to introduce a resolution at the Annual Meeting, the members present need to vote to add it to the meeting agenda. You must also provide digital and print copies of your draft resolution so that everyone can have one to reference during debate. Please contact Caroline at caroline@northernplains.org with any questions.

**Election Ballot**

The ballot of the slate of Board candidates put forward by the Nominations Committee was mailed to all households whose dues are current earlier this month. *Ballots will NOT be available at the Annual Meeting.* Ballots must be received at the Northern Plains office by 5:30 PM on Thursday, November 9.

If you did not receive a ballot, it means your membership has lapsed. If you wish to vote, please renew your membership using the registration form in this brochure, online at NorthernPlains.org/Membership-Dues, or call the office at (406) 248-1154 to renew and request a ballot.
Schedule

Friday, November 10, 2023

12:00 PM  Registration opens
1:00 PM  Meeting of the Membership
4:30 PM  Break
5:30 PM  Cowboy Supper
7:00 PM  Live music at Craft Local OR Social time at The Pub Station

Saturday, November 11, 2023

9:00 AM  Registration opens
9:30 AM  Opening remarks
9:45 AM  Session 1: Transforming Montana Communities Back to the Future
11:00 AM  Break
11:15 AM  Session 2: Oil and Soil: How stronger protections and innovative reclamation can create more resilient communities in Montana’s oil and gas country
12:15 PM  Lunch and awards
1:30 PM  Keynote: John Boyd
2:15 PM  Break
2:30 PM  Session 3: History of Montana Indian Education for All
3:45 PM  Break
4:00 PM  Session 4: Keeping Our Farmers and Ranchers on the Land
5:00 PM  Mary Fitzpatrick on planned giving
5:15 PM  Break
6:00 PM  Dinner and fun

Events in bold will be available over Zoom. Members attending virtually are encouraged to participate in discussion and vote during Friday’s Meeting of the Membership, however Saturday’s sessions will be livestream only. Schedule subject to change.

Learn more about this year’s sessions at NorthernPlains.org/Annual-Meeting.
Social Hours and Entertainment

Join us on Friday night following the Meeting of the Membership at Billings First Church for the beloved Yellowstone Valley Citizens Council (YVCC) Cowboy Supper! Both alcoholic and non-alcoholic beverages will be available. The ever-popular Staff Skit will also take place at the Cowboy Supper! Following these festivities, you will have the choice of a casual evening social back at The Pub Station, or enjoying live music just a few steps away at Craft Local.

We are also excited to be bringing back the much loved game, Heads and Tails on Saturday night! At our closing dinner, everyone will have the opportunity to join in on the fun and the chance to win big! Don’t miss out!

Silent Auction

This year, we are excited for our Annual Meeting Auction to be held both in-person and online! The in-person silent auction will run over the two days of the Annual Meeting, November 10-11. The online auction will begin on Tuesday, November 7 and end on Tuesday, November 14. We have great items donated from across Montana including local arts and crafts, memory-making trips, and special packages from Montana makers and small businesses. Don’t miss the chance to win any of these amazing items and experiences! Many items were generously donated or even handmade by members of Northern Plains (thank you!). The auction is a great opportunity to take home a memorable treasure for you or a loved one. Be sure to use some of your break time to check out all the unique items and experiences we have to offer this year!

Our auction plays a key role in strengthening Northern Plains work for the year ahead. Whether you’re a donor or a bidder (or both), we appreciate all your help in making it a success!

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

Bidding on in-person items will close Saturday night, November 11. Online bidding will end Tuesday, November 14 at 8:00 PM.

Bring the kids!
The Annual Meeting will be family-friendly! We are offering childcare with guided children’s activities on Saturday. Interested? Contact Effy at (406) 248-1154 or email effy@northernplains.org.

Register today by going to NorthernPlains.org/Annual-Meeting or calling (406) 248-1154!
Every summer Northern Plains hosts a few soil events across Montana. These “soil crawls” both support innovative agricultural producers to share their knowledge with others and encourage new people to consider a future in agriculture. This year we co-hosted an event on the hi-line with Patti Armbrister, founder of the Agrarian Food Web. Participants visited not one but four regenerative operations around the Saco/Hinsdale area. The topics covered by Patti and fellow members Steve Charter and Charlie French ranged from the mechanics of a Johnson Su composter, to living mulch and how to get clay to act like loam, as well as a slake test demonstration from local conservation district staff. (If some of these terms are unfamiliar to you, that means you’re a perfect candidate for a future crawl!)

Attendees used Sleeping Buffalo Springs as a base, learning about the greenhouse on site while some even camped out at the hot springs to build relationships and grow their understanding of what’s below our feet over a meal of local produce from Patti’s garden and beef skewers from the Charter’s ranch.

A few weeks later, our final soil crawl took place at Stick Leg Ranch in Valier, Montana where around 35 individuals gathered to learn both about the principles of soil health and to network with some of their peers. Attendees ranged in age and background and Northern Plains members were pleased to have many agricultural producers and professionals in attendance. Attendees included an extension agent, an agronomist, a Montana Public Radio Reporter, and Senator Butch Gillespie, who sponsored our successful resolution this past session to create a Healthy Soil Day and Week in Montana each April.

Ranch owners Jennie and Seth Becker started off the day by covering why understanding the local land context is so important and also covered the benefits of rotational grazing and cover crops. Dr. Tony Hartshorn from Montana State University discussed soil organic matter and soil moisture while Charlie French shared great information about the natural history and geology of the area.

Attendees were also privileged to hear talks on cow epigenetics and seed-saving from local producers Cory Hawks and Michael Deakin. Mariah Gladstone, founder of Indigikitchen, even visited and prepared lunch appetizers. Mariah shared the uses of native plant species for human and ecosystem health and stressed the importance of fostering appreciation for native foods and supporting native producers.

Building soil health is different everywhere, which is why Northern Plains is so motivated to showcase the practices and principles that generate healthy soil, resilient systems, and good food! Thank you for joining us at a soil crawl this summer!

Left: Attendees of our hi-line crawl visited four regenerative gardens around the Saco/Hinsdale area. Above: Attendees at Stick Leg Ranch tour the property, learning about rotational grazing and cover crops.
Rural energy grants in jeopardy – get your applications in now!

By Jackson Newman

Since 2008, the Rural Energy for America Program (REAP) has been helping producers and rural businesses build local, renewable energy generation. The program has played an outsized role in lowering energy costs for ranchers and farmers while making an economically and environmentally sustainable future possible.

The recently passed Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) included over a billion dollars for REAP. This included raising funding caps from 25% to 50% of project costs after a 30% renewable energy tax credit has been assessed. This means that renewable energy for local businesses, ranchers, and farmers has never been more affordable!

However, dysfunction in congress is putting the future of REAP at risk. While the USDA expects the funding cap to remain at 50% for the next round of grants, there is a chance that it is reduced back to 25% or completely ended in the upcoming Farm Bill. The next application deadline is December 31. Get your REAP applications in now or risk missing this historic opportunity!

For more information, contact jackson@northernplains.org or (406) 869-1916.

Montanans demand affordable, clean energy from NorthWestern Energy

By Jack Leuthold

Every few years, NorthWestern Energy releases its Integrated Resource Plan (IRP) before the Public Service Commission (PSC). The plan summarizes how the monopoly utility intends to provide and procure energy for Montanans moving forward and recaps past energy production. The PSC held five listening sessions across the state to hear public comment about NorthWestern’s plan. What we saw was clear - Montanans are strongly against the utility’s plan to double down on expensive, polluting fossil fuel resources for the foreseeable future.

Northern Plains members made their presence known at each hearing, expressing disappointment in NorthWestern. That sentiment was widely shared across the state with an overwhelming majority of commenters expressing frustration with the energy corporation. Billings member Ed Gulick said it best, “the power from this plan is a terrible deal for Montana ratepayers.”

As the historic opinion from the Held v. MT youth climate trial is in the front of everyone’s minds, many voiced concerns regarding NorthWestern’s continued expansion of fossil fuel use.

Northern Plains members will remain vigilant, holding NorthWestern accountable for actions that could harm our communities or our environment. Our love of our land and home necessitates this vigilance. The PSC has completed the public comment process for this plan and does not officially approve or disapprove the plan. It does, however, produce comments of its own to be released early in 2024. Thanks to Northern Plains members, commissioners cannot ignore the public’s demands for cheaper, safer, and more affordable clean energy to power Montana’s future.
MEMBERS ON THE MOVE

Clint McRae meets with EPA officials about Colstrip ash ponds

In August, Colstrip-area ranching member Clint McRae met with Janet McCabe, Deputy Administrator of the United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), and K.C. Becker, Regional Administrator of EPA Region 8 in Billings. EPA officials solicited the meeting about the cleanup of Colstrip’s leaking coal ash ponds, illustrating the power Northern Plains has built around the issue. Clint described how contaminated groundwater from the leaking ponds has impacted the community and local livelihoods, recounting the decades’ long fight to hold the owners of the Colstrip Power Plant accountable for harm done to the region’s resources.

We believe this meeting influenced the Montana DEQ and ultimately ensured that Talen Energy, the company responsible for cleanup, agreed to fully excavate the ash ponds associated with Colstrip Units 1 and 2, as Northern Plains has demanded for years (see page 18 for more information). We also hope it will lead to a more robust cleanup plan for the ponds associated with Colstrip Units 3 and 4.

Members create international dialogue on the health of working landscapes

Northern Plains members Steve Charter, Cameron Skinner, Deborah Hines, and Cliff and Joan Montagne spoke at an international learning exchange focused on knowledge sharing for farmers. The event was hosted by BioRegions International and SouthNorth Nexus at Cameron’s Living Soil Farm. Participants traveled from Mongolia and Mexico to meet with Montana producers and trade solutions to common problems facing the agricultural sector in these parts of the world.

International visitors and locals alike gather at Living Soil Farm to share experiences and community dialogue.

Sue Beug participates in Denver fly-in to support federal oil and gas reforms

This fall Northern Plains member Sue Beug joined regional ally groups across the West in Denver for a Bureau of Land Management (BLM) informational session. Sue and others attended to provide support and feedback on the BLM’s proposed reforms to oil and gas bonding rules. Rule changes increase the bonding funds required of oil and gas companies before drilling to ensure money is available for proper cleanup after projects are complete if companies declare bankruptcy or skip town. These bonding levels have not been updated in over 60 years and ensure the protection and proper stewardship of the public lands.

Sue Beug preps with other WORC representatives from across the West to question BLM staff and support the proposed Fluid Mineral Leases rule.
Ranching members give legislators a tour of the Bull Mountains

Last month, Rep. Denise Baum (D-Billings), Rep. James Bergstrom (R-Buffalo), Rep. Larry Brewster (R-Billings), Rep. Emma Kerr-Carpenter (D-Billings), and Musselshell County Commissioner Mike Turley attended a tour of the Bull Mountains hosted by members Boyd and Steve Charter, and Annika Charter-Williams. Legislators saw the harmful impacts that mining can inflict on a family ranch, and, hopefully, came away with a better understanding of why the Bull Mountains and the people that live there are worth protecting. The representatives asked thoughtful questions and listened closely. We look forward to continued dialogue on how to ensure that the Montana Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) and Signal Peak Energy, owner of the Bull Mountains Mine, uphold their respective responsibilities to the people and irreplaceable resources in the Bulls.

MEMBERS ON THE MOVE

For many decades, the Montana Power Company (MPC) was the state’s largest monopoly energy utility. Since MPC’s bankruptcy, NorthWestern Energy now has that role in Montana. As NorthWestern continues the practice of putting energy ratepayers on the hook for expensive, polluting fossil fuel plants, we see history repeating itself. However, we also see historical rhymes as Northern Plains members today work to hold NorthWestern accountable just as we did with MPC in the 1980s.

1984

The Montana Public Service Commission (PSC) considered Montana Power’s 1984 request for a 55% rate increase ($96.4 million) to help pay for Colstrip Unit 3.


1985

MPC submitted a new request in February 1985, this time for an expanded increase of $129.4 million, phasing in its 1984 request and charging for interest accrued during the phase-in period.

Meanwhile, in June 1985, a state district judge in Butte ruled on MPC’s 1984 suit, concluding that the PSC analysis was flawed, severely weakening the commission’s future ability to protect consumers from huge rate increases connected with Colstrip Units 3 and 4.

HISTORY PROJECT

Unscrupulous electric utilities, 1984 to today (Part II)

By Steve Paulson

Continued on next page.
After much debate – and against Northern Plains’ urging – the PSC decided not to appeal the decision. Northern Plains sought to appeal the case but was not allowed to because we had not taken part in arguments in the original case.

The public was confused and disillusioned, and did not show up in strength at 1985 hearings. In August 1985, the PSC allowed Montana Power a phased-in $80 million rate increase to pay for Colstrip Unit 3.

1988

MPC submitted another rate increase in spring 1988, this time for 11.8%.

Northern Plains and Tom Schneider, who left the PSC in 1985 and was now an expert witness, uncovered incriminating evidence – including internal memos – and submitted them to the PSC as this rate request was being considered.

Colstrip Unit 4 was run by an MPC subsidiary, and MPC had negotiated an inflated price for electricity (4.7¢ kilowatt hour), substantially higher than they could have secured in competitive markets (3¢ KWH). This meant higher costs for ratepayers. Upon being publicly confronted over its shady maneuvers, MPC lowered its requested increase from 11.8% to 7%.

One MPC memo underscored the company’s desire to avoid the marketplace: “The… market price is not one that can easily be manipulated to our ends.”

The PSC was so troubled by MPC’s self-dealing that it not only rejected the 1988 request; it made a 3% cut to the increase it had approved in 1985.

Progress/Regression

During that case, MPC reached an agreement with intervenors to form a Least-Cost Planning Advisory Committee, creating an avenue to avoid future controversies while encouraging MPC to acquire power from the most affordable sources in the marketplace instead of relying so heavily on high-cost power from Colstrip Unit 4. Schneider represented Northern Plains on the Committee.

The Committee released its report and recommendations in 1990. For several years, those recommendations improved Montana Power’s operations. In 1997, however, the Legislature deregulated Montana Power, a disaster for consumers.

After MPC collapsed, South Dakota’s NorthWestern Energy stepped in as Montana’s primary electrical utility.

In the early 2000s, the legislature began to nibble away at integrated resource planning. Pre-approval of utility company plans became a higher priority for lawmakers, leading to today’s environment in which regulatory oversight has been weakened, as have transparency and meaningful public participation.

NorthWestern Energy has continued Montana Power’s destructive monopoly behavior, now well into the 21st Century, straining consumers while continuing to hold onto expensive Colstrip power and building dirty gas plants for the future. The company’s extreme anti-customer, anti-environment behavior has made NorthWestern Energy an outlier in its own industry.

Part I of this story was featured in the summer issue of the Plains Truth.
On a balmy July evening, Patrick Certain bustled around his kitchen, cooking dinner. A dozen people were about to arrive to his farm to help harvest his garlic crop, and he was preparing to feed them. Even in a tiny-home on wheels, this is a regular occurrence; when you run a small-scale, independent farm your best currency is food.

Together with his partner, Claire Overholt, Patrick co-owns and manages Stone Soup Garden in Laurel, a regenerative farm founded on the connection between healthy food and intentional community. They spend just as much time tending to their crops as they do tending to the people who support their operation. Some show their support by buying their produce, others by lending a hand on volunteer nights like this one. For Patrick, working in local agriculture gives him a sense of camaraderie. “Nothing feels better than working in community and getting to be directly connected to the people that you’re feeding,” he says.

The two primarily retail their produce at local farmers markets and through the Yellowstone Valley Food Hub. It was the Food Hub, in fact, that led Patrick to Northern Plains in 2018 when he moved to Billings and attended a Yellowstone Valley Citizens Council meeting. It happened to be the meeting where members voted to start crowdfunding for the Food Hub. “It was a really good time to end up back in Billings with what my objectives were,” says Patrick, “because it immediately plugged me into a community of people that were focused on local food.”

Not only do efforts like the Food Hub help sustain Stone Soup financially, but being connected to the Northern Plains community gives Patrick and Claire hope and encouragement. In a time when young farmers are few and far between, they take a note from longtime farmers, ranchers, and members who fought “Goliaths” of obstacles and are still around to tell the tale. Patrick and Claire’s most urgent Goliaths these days are the droughts, floods, and soil disturbances brought about by climate change. However, Claire says being part of Northern Plains means they aren’t alone. “That’s a lot of the value [for] anyone who’s finding Northern Plains,” she says. You can “face something that feels larger than you.”

The two recently hosted their first Soil Crawl at the farm and shared about their challenges as young, beginning farmers. Patrick’s farming gene “skipped a generation.” His grandfather was an innovative, regenerative farmer, utilizing award-winning soil health practices. While Patrick grew up tending to vegetables in his family garden, it wasn’t until college when he worked on an organic vegetable farm in Bridger that the seed for Stone Soup was planted. “It was such a joy to work with like-minded people on a common goal,” Patrick says. He wanted to create a space for his local community to not only be nourished by his food, but feel invested in the farm’s

On volunteer nights, supporters of Stone Soup Garden come out to help Claire and Patrick plant, harvest, and tend to their community-driven operation.

Continued on next page.
In our ongoing efforts to secure a clean, safe, and affordable energy future for Montana, Northern Plains members are keeping up the fight against NorthWestern Energy’s methane-fired power plant project in Laurel. Despite the many challenges, we are committed to spreading awareness about how this expensive, polluting project threatens our wallets, our health, and our environment.

NorthWestern Energy’s efforts to force the methane-fired power plant onto the Laurel community has repeatedly cut the public out of any decision-making processes. The project’s construction has proceeded without the proper zoning designation and with an inadequate environmental analysis. Back in September 2022, Northern Plains joined a lawsuit to determine whether the City of Laurel or Yellowstone County has zoning authority over the project site. The judge’s decision will finally clear up the legal confusion that has prevented local residents from having a say about the project.

In August, Northern Plains members hit the streets of Billings, throwing a rally to make it crystal clear that NorthWestern is sidestepping the law by building this plant without proper zoning secured. With a fantastic turnout and plenty of media attention at the rally, our members are now taking that energy to Laurel itself. Stay tuned for opportunities to get involved through house parties, letters to the editor, and dialogue with political candidates for Laurel’s city council. To get involved, contact Michael at (406) 248-1154 or michael@northernplains.org.

Dozens of members and supporters came out to Billings to rally and tell NorthWestern Energy that it can no longer skirt the law.
The right to a clean and healthful environment was established largely in response to the massive ecological damage inflicted by the Copper Kings of the 1800s and the industrialists who continued their corrupt tactics throughout the 20th century. As they degraded Montana’s land, water, air, and fundamental rights for over a century, a wellspring of grassroots democracy sprang up in response, leading to a new state constitution drafted in 1972 by everyday Montanans (not politicians) asserting expanded rights and freedoms. Roughly 50 years later during Held v Montana, our right to a clean and healthful environment tackled the very problem it was drafted to confront - the complicity and collusion between legislators, government agencies, and powerful industrial business interests.

The plaintiffs in Held alleged that the state of Montana violated their right to a clean and healthful environment by prohibiting state agencies from considering climate pollution while conducting environmental reviews. During a week-long trial this past June, plaintiffs and experts described the physical, mental, and emotional harm caused by climate change. Roughly two months later on August 14, Judge Kathy Seeley ruled in favor of the youth, invalidating Montana laws that promote fossil fuels and ignore climate impacts.

Seeley’s ruling is far-reaching and comprehensive, setting an important legal precedent as the first successful case of its kind in history. At least three U.S. states have rights similar to our right to a clean and healthful environment with several more working to enshrine such rights. Held serves as an important legal catalyst and moral victory for the nation, but it’s also an important policy victory here in Montana, provided it withstands a legal appeal from Attorney General Austin Knudsen. That appeal is expected to be settled next year by the Montana Supreme Court. Given the incompetence and ineptitude of the state’s legal defense during the Held trial itself, one can only guess its Supreme Court appeal will be an uphill battle as well. (It turns out corrupt laws defended by junk science and callous obstinance do not make for great legal strategies.)

Despite the looming appeal, the current law of the land requires state agencies to analyze climate pollution, and we’ve recently seen the state make early moves. A series of hastily organized “listening sessions” were organized across the state in October by the Montana Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) seeking public input about how best to analyze climate pollution.

As always, Northern Plains members showed up in force to these listening sessions, demanding that state climate analysis be robust and consider the carbon footprint of the entire life cycle of any project. Members also insisted that any changes to environmental laws in Montana must expand citizen rights to know about and participate in decisions, citing a steady erosion of citizen rights in favor of industry interests.

Right now, it is too early to tell exactly how Held will impact fossil fuel projects like Signal Peak Energy’s proposed expansion of its Bull Mountain coal mine or NorthWestern’s methane-fired power plant under construction in Laurel. What we do know is that Northern Plains will use the same rights that these youth plaintiffs so courageously asserted and re-invigorated to defend our communities and protect our climate. As always, we’ll bring the same passion, intensity, and tenacity that we’ve summoned since our founding, the same year the new Montana Constitution was ratified.
Two county-of-origin labeling bills introduced in U.S. House

The summer and early fall have seen momentum pick up for Country-of-Origin Labeling (COOL), an important beef and pork labeling policy Northern Plains has long supported. Two bills have now been introduced in the U.S. House to implement mandatory COOL, fixing a broken system by which beef and pork products remain unlabeled with their country-of-origin, creating economic harm for Montana producers whose products can’t easily be distinguished from foreign beef often produced with lower quality and safety standards.

The first bill is sponsored by Rep. Harriet Hageman (R-WY), the Country-of-Origin Labeling Enforcement Act. If passed, it would immediately implement mandatory COOL without any considerations for trade agreement negotiations, often a sticking point for some legislators. The second bill, sponsored by Rep. Dusty Johnson (R-SD), the Beef Origin Labeling Accountability Act, directs the U.S. Trade Representative to negotiate with our trade partners to resolve any disputes on labeling practices.

Northern Plains is supporting the Country-of-Origin Labeling Enforcement Act from Rep. Hageman because it immediately implements this long-overdue policy. Rep. Johnson’s bill provides no timeline for implementation meaning negotiations can drag on indefinitely while our ranchers and consumers are still left with misleading labels.

TAKE ACTION

Please call your House Representative and urge them to co-sponsor the Country-of-Origin Labeling Enforcement Act:

Representative Ryan Zinke:
(202) 225-5628

Representative Matt Rosendale:
(202) 225-3211

MEMBER VOICE

I was introduced to Northern Plains before I moved to Montana in August 2022. A dear friend and Northern Plains team member showed me the ropes and brought me in. Before officially becoming a monthly sustainer, I got to know the merry band of folks through pop-up events like the summer social series and a fundraiser where I found myself in the middle of a heated auction over a captivating and animated picture of a horse. Alas, victory was just out of reach that day, but my heart was won, and I decided to join this spirited group.

Since joining, I’ve enjoyed reading the weekly email updates which have kept me in the loop about campaign news and granted me access to member-specific opportunities like educational communication workshops and citywide mandates like curbside recycling in Billings. What truly sets Northern Plains apart is its knack for tailoring member involvement to individual interests and comfort levels. The team truly has an endless amount of creativity up their sleeves to engage members!

Contributing monthly isn’t just about supporting a cause; it’s a lifeline to a vibrant community. Whether it’s diving into newsletters, attending virtual meetings, or socializing with new and old team members, I’m constantly reminded of why I’m part of Northern Plains - and why I love to support this organization each month.

- Mary Jane Chandler, Billings
A huge victory years in the making in Colstrip!

By Bronya Lechtman

Northern Plains has organized for years to ensure responsible and robust cleanup of Colstrip's leaking coal ash ponds. These ash ponds have been contaminating groundwater at a massive rate threatening local agriculture, wildlife, and property values. In September, we learned that the “high and dry” approach we have been pushing for - which includes excavating the toxic coal ash and placing it in a newly constructed landfill - has been finalized as the cleanup plan for Colstrip’s oldest ash ponds, the ash ponds associated with Colstrip Units 1 and 2. Both units have already shut down.

In November 2020, the Montana Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) issued an order requiring that the ash ponds associated with Units 1 and 2 be fully excavated, with the ash dug up and deposited in a lined landfill away from groundwater. Talen Energy, the operator of the Colstrip power plant and entity responsible for ash pond cleanup, contested DEQ’s order, invoking a dispute resolution clause that allowed the company to attempt to negotiate a different settlement with DEQ.

In the summer of 2021, DEQ and Talen came to an agreement that still (kind of) required full excavation of the toxic coal ash, but allowed Talen one last opportunity to design a weaker cleanup plan for possible consideration in two years.

Since that time, we fully expected that Talen would make a case for a weaker form of cleanup. Throughout the process, Northern Plains has been watchdogging DEQ and even met with the Environmental Protection Agency to make sure the state upheld appropriate cleanup obligations for Talen and the other companies with Colstrip ownership stakes that have generated billions of dollars from the power plant over decades.

Finally, in September 2023, Talen sent DEQ a letter officially stating they were not going to pursue a weaker cleanup plan. After years of diligent work, we won!

This is great news for local ranchers, workers, property owners, and Tribal members. Northern Plains’ extensive jobs study, “Doing It Right,” showed that this cleanup will lead to hundreds of good-paying, industrial jobs that will last for over a decade. These jobs will serve as a bridge to the future of Colstrip’s economy while also protecting the irreplaceable resources we all reply upon. Thank you to the hundreds of Northern Plains members who submitted comments, made calls, and organized tenaciously for years to secure this landmark victory!

Our work is still cut out for us to make sure excavation is done right, and to ensure that thorough cleanup happens for the remaining ash ponds. For now though, please join us for a celebration of this major victory on Saturday evening, November 11 during the Northern Plains Annual Meeting! For details about this victory party, contact Bronya at (406) 248-1154 or bronya@northernplains.org.

Colstrip area rancher Wally McRae (left) shares a moment with IBEW Local 1638 member Bret Bowen (right). This Colstrip victory benefitted greatly from research collaborations between Northern Plains, AFL-CIO, and IBEW 1638 about the job creation that results from robust cleanup.
Let’s kill Montana’s bad zombie coal bills once and for all!

Montana’s last legislative session saddled us with a pair of horrible bills endangering anyone living near or downstream from a coal mine. One bill blatantly weakens coal companies’ obligations to prevent damage to land and water while another undermines a citizen’s ability to seek justice if damage occurs. Both of these bills “died” at various points within the legislative process after legislators heard the concerns of Northern Plains members who live and ranch in coal country. However, once regular citizens left town, coal lobbyists found a way to resurrect both bills with last minute procedural maneuvers, and now we’re stuck cleaning up this legislative mess. The good news is that we have a clear path to kill these zombie bills.

Before they can become law, the bills must be approved by the federal Office of Surface Mining Reclamation and Enforcement (OSMRE). Given their obvious lack of compliance with federal law, this is our chance to rid Montana of these dangerous bills once and for all. Here are the details.

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. The bill also removes requirements for baseline water conditions to be assessed and determined in advance of permit approval, which is blatantly non-compliant with federal law.

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 a 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 land and livelihood. SB 392 essentially takes that right to seek justice off the table by inserting enormous financial intimidation and risk. Federal law explicitly protects communities from paying coal company legal fees unless they act in bad faith. A similar bill in Alaska has already been overturned by OSMRE.

TAKE ACTION

Together, these bills would be catastrophic for communities that live near coal mines, so we need to stand up and take action to protect our friends and neighbors!

Visit Northernplains.org/ProtectCoalCommunities by November 5 to submit a comment telling OSMRE to deny these reckless bills!

Members and coal country landowners Maureen and Pat Thiele, Clint McRae, and Tom Baratta lobbied against HB 576 and SB 392 during the 2023 Legislative Session.
DRC saves millions for eastern MT, looks to the future

Jackson Newman

This summer, Dawson Resource Council (DRC) won a resounding win for rural Montanans by helping cut the Montana Dakota Utilities (MDU) rate increase by more than half. However, DRC is not stopping and hopes to harness the momentum gained. In the words of our Chair Melissa Holt, “We're used to being underestimated here in Eastern Montana. That's why we're so powerful when we unite together… We built a strong coalition centered on common values, and I'm excited for all we can accomplish together in the future.”

SPA embodies good neighbor values

Andrew Amrein

Stillwater Protective Association (SPA) continues to demonstrate its strong commitments to local communities, most recently acting as liaison between the Stillwater Mining Company (SMC) and frustrated residents in Nye who have been negatively impacted by noise disturbances related to some SMC operations. Through the contractual commitments SPA members have enshrined in the legally-binding Good Neighbor Agreement with SMC and the solid relationships they have built with mine personnel, the organization was able to bring together neighbors - locals and the mine - to discuss the ongoing problem and arrive at some solutions. Though the issue hasn’t yet been fully resolved and the process isn’t yet over, the leadership of SPA members has kept folks talking, listening, and working together, as good neighbors.

Golden Triangle looks forward after big solar success!

Emily Auld

After a busy spring and summer conducting a successful Solarize campaign, Golden Triangle Resource Council members are preparing for new work. Leaders of Northern Plains’ newest affiliate, excited to harness the momentum generated from their solar success, are completing a survey to send to members identifying local needs for future work. Solarize followups and scheduling will continue into the winter, and we are now up to seven signed contracts for solar installations! Members hosted a successful informal Solarize celebration in Great Falls in early October to celebrate the winding down of their first campaign.

CREATE THE FUTURE YOU WANT FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS OF MONTANANS

Northern Plains is proud to be building up the next generation of grassroots leaders. We know the future prosperity of Montana is dependent on all of us standing up, shoulder-to-shoulder, to protect this place we call home.

By including Northern Plains in your estate planning, you can ensure you are supporting work to create and protect a sustainable future for all generations of Montanans for years to come. To learn more about the many ways to structure your bequest, contact Caleb at caleb@northernplains.org.
COUNCIL ROUNDUP

Bull Mountain Environmental Impact Statements, permit expansions, site inspections, oh my!

Bronya Lechtman

There’s always something to keep Bull Mountain Land Alliance (BMLA) members on their toes! In September, the first steps finally began for a federal Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for Signal Peak Energy’s Bull Mountains Mine No. 1. Half of Signal Peak’s mine plan has never received the proper scrutiny it deserves via an EIS. This means that much of the existing analysis is outdated, incomplete, or nonexistent.

BMLA members attended a public meeting in Roundup that will determine the scope of the analysis, and submitted comments to make sure that an EIS reflects on-the-ground concerns in the Bull Mountains.

BMLA members are also responding to a rushed approval of another Signal Peak mine expansion to the southwest, where DEQ rapidly prepared an Environmental Assessment with many gaping holes.

In better news, BMLA secured a visit from a DEQ hydrologist and the mine’s water monitoring company to evaluate springs that have gone dry on the ranch of founding members, the Charters, and hear their concerns directly.

Charter family members join DEQ hydrologist and mine monitoring on an inspection of springs on Charter Ranch that have gone dry recently.

Bear Creek Council celebrates end of Crevice Gold Mine project

Caroline Canarios

For over 10 years, Bear Creek Council members have been concerned about the potential impacts of a proposed gold mine on Crevice Mountain, just outside of Yellowstone National Park. The mine threatened the area’s water, land, and air, and would have placed the area’s wildlife in danger if built. Bear Creek Council joined with other groups and provided significant support to Greater Yellowstone Coalition (GYC) to stop the mine project. GYC reached their fundraising goal to purchase the mine property in late September, and the mine is no longer proposed to be developed. BCC is thrilled to preserve this special mountain for the wildlife that call the area home.
YVCC is bringing more trees to Billings, gearing up for annual Cowboy Supper

Yellowstone Valley Citizens Council (YVCC) is actively working on two exciting initiatives to make Billings a greener and healthier place to live. As this issue hits mailboxes, we'll be hosting a learning session on Urban Forestry at the Billings Public Library. The event will inform residents about how trees can have a transformative impact on the city, from reducing heat and improving air quality, to providing crucial shade. YVCC has made strides by helping Billings secure a $1 million federal grant to support urban forestry initiatives.

YVCC is also hosting the legendary Cowboy Supper on Friday, November 10th at Billings First Church during the Northern Plains Annual Meeting. This will be a delightful evening with excellent home cooked food, the ever-popular Staff Skit, and time to meet new people or reconnect with friends.

CMRC solarize seminars packed with producers

Late this summer, Central Montana Resource Council (CMRC) put on two solarize events in Grass Range and Stanford to inform ranchers and farmers about renewable energy opportunities. Between the two events, over 100 interested community members showed up to learn more about incorporating solar energy into their homes or operations! This campaign builds on the momentum of previous solarize efforts by CMRC which have been so successful that we recently agreed to initiate a third phase with solar installer Bozeman Green Build.

Cottonwood Resource Council welcomes community to annual picnic

Cottonwood Resource Council hosted their Annual Picnic in July, welcoming more than 40 community members to attend for great food and socializing. Members gathered to hear from Betsy Quammen, wilderness advocate and author. It was a wonderful time to gather and we are already looking forward to next year's picnic!
COUNCIL ROUNDUP

CCRC setting up for success

Andrew Amrein

After a busy summer, Carbon County Resource Council (CCRC) members have spent this fall preparing the groundwork for future projects and campaigns. Members working on passing C-PACE (the innovative energy efficiency financing tool) in the county have been connecting with other local allies. Members have also been raising CCRC’s public visibility through articles in their local newspaper and developing new outreach tools. Members are also excited to complete a second full year of water quality data collection along the Rock Creek watershed, which gives them and state agencies another vital set of data to use in future management, advocacy, and decision-making around the watershed.

Yellowstone Bend works to reform local co-op, reduce plastic waste

Jack Leuthold

Yellowstone Bend Citizens Council (YBCC) has had a very eventful year! Members are working hard to elect John Mills to the Board of Trustees for the Park Electric Co-op. We are also nearing the finish line of an impressive solar project spearheaded by YBCC at the Livingston Sherwood Inn Apartments, a local affordable housing enterprise. Affiliate members have also been working with local businesses to help reduce their plastic use, including working with a local performing arts center to help procure reusable cups for their concessions.

Sleeping Giant celebrates another great year!

Emily Auld

In late August, Sleeping Giant Citizens Council (SGCC) members gathered at the Fairgrounds Pavilion for their Annual Meeting to share food and celebrate accomplishments from the past year. Members reflected on organizing around the historic Held v. Montana youth climate trial, efforts to bring passenger rail back to Helena, and work to implement C-PACE – the innovative energy efficiency financing tool – in Lewis and Clark County. SGCC also celebrated the leadership of chair Hugh Zackheim, who will be stepping down from his role in a few months after two great years of service!
DON’T MISS THE 52ND ANNUAL MEETING!

From Our Roots, to the Future

November 10 - 11th, 2023
The Pub Station
2502 1st Ave North, Billings

NOTE: Northern Plains remains committed to the health and safety of our community in the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. We recommend all in-person attendees be vaccinated against COVID-19 if they are able to do so. We will abide by CDC safety recommendations and have masks available. Please stay home if you are sick or have tested positive for COVID.

Register at NorthernPlains.org/Annual-Meeting!