MEMBERS DOMINATE PUBLIC MEETINGS ACROSS THE STATE ADDRESSING OUR ENERGY FUTURE

We stood up in force to protect our land, water, climate, and clean energy future in hearings about coal legislation (pg. 9), bedrock environmental laws (pg. 12), and NorthWestern’s polluting methane-fired plant (pg. 17).

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ONCE-IN-A-GENERATION OPPORTUNITIES HELP US BUILD POWER WHILE MEETING COMMUNITY NEEDS

Federal funding investments we haven't seen since the New Deal are already helping Montanans as we bring our vision for transformational change and greater climate resiliency into reality.
Northern Plains is a grassroots conservation and family agriculture group that organizes Montanans 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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Community Organizers: Andrew Amrein, Jack Leuthold, Jackson Newman, Michael Skinner
Emily Auld, Lead Organizer
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Caroline Canarios, Legislative Director
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Caitlin Cromwell, Director of Organizing & Campaigns
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Effy McEldowney, Grassroots fundraiser
Svein Newman, Political Organizing Director
Dustin Ogden, Communications Director
Karen Olson, Office Manager
Steve Paulson, History Project Coordinator
Melodie Snyder, Data Engagement Specialist

Northern Plains Resource Council
220 S. 27th Street, Suite A, Billings, MT 59101
Tel: (406) 248-1154 Fax: (406) 248-2110
info@northernplains.org ● www.northernplains.org
Welcome to 2024! I hope you all had a pleasant holiday season and are ready for what is going to be an incredible year. Northern Plains has lots of work to do on a huge variety of important issues and, as you know, we have the staff and membership needed to tackle those issues head on. I would like to introduce myself, as your new chair, by sharing a little of my background and noting what brought me to Northern Plains.

I was born in Billings and grew up in numerous small towns throughout the state—Lavina, Westby, Fromberg, Edgar, Darby, Alberton, Joplin, and Philipsburg—mighty big places you’ll surely agree. My father was a school teacher who later became a school administrator. My brother graduated from Edgar High (Wildcats) and I graduated from Granite County High School in Philipsburg (Prospectors)—class of 1969. While attending college, I lived in Missoula, Bozeman, and Billings…..getting a BA in Business Administration from the University of Montana (Go Grizzlies) and an MS in education from MSUB in Billings. I taught for almost 30 years in these foreign countries: Wyoming (seemed foreign to me), Poland, Kuwait, then Tunisia, before retiring in 2003. My wife Barbara and I currently live in Billings. Well, there you have it……73 years in one paragraph!

Although I knew about Northern Plains for much of my adult life, I did not get into the organization until I retired and purchased some property with a cabin in the Stillwater Valley near Nye…..another very large place! While in Nye, I joined Northern Plains’ local affiliate organization, the Stillwater Protective Association (SPA). I soon became impressed with how a small group of people tackled some pretty big issues—and did so with passion, dedication, and persistence. I was hooked.

After a while, I became SPA’s representative on Northern Plains’ Board of Directors and became immersed in the immense world of the organization’s statewide work — issue campaigns, totally remarkable staff, other affiliates, and such…….did I mention — totally remarkable staff!! I became even more involved in Northern Plains oil and gas work, our campaign to stop NorthWestern’s methane-fired plant in Laurel, and the organization’s work to expand our diversity and inclusivity. I helped form and lead the Racial Justice Reading Group with other members passionate about addressing issues of equity and inclusion. In short, I became involved in a lot of areas of the Northern Plains culture like so many other members. I am grateful and humbled to have a voice with this organization.

Perhaps the issue that originally led me to the SPA and Northern Plains was the health and vitality of the Stillwater River and, by extension, all of Montana’s rivers……many of which I have lived near during my time growing up in this state. Spending time fishing in our rivers has been on my radar from a very early age—starting with the mighty Musselshell with my father and grandfather. Many of the towns listed above are near rivers—the Clarks Fork, Gallatin, Bitterroot, Blackfoot, Missouri, Madison, Stillwater, and the Yellowstone. It is clear that these waterways are at risk from a variety of factors…..climate change, mining operations, uncontrolled and irresponsible development…..to name a few. More from me on these rivers in the next edition of The Plains Truth.

- Edward Barta
Chair
On the eve of a January winter storm, as temperatures rapidly drop into the single digits, Steve Krum stands in a field on the edge of Laurel, MT. He looks up at a platform he built, topped with a pair of devices which are monitoring noise and air quality. In the distance, past a small grove of trees and barely visible through the incoming snow, are 18 smokestacks which loom over the Yellowstone River to the south, and the city of Laurel to the north. They are the most visually arresting signs of NorthWestern Energy’s highly polluting, methane-fired power plant being built next to the nation’s longest, free-flowing river. Steve hopes his monitoring efforts will help capture current and future impacts this heavy industrial development will have on the local community. He leans over his devices and says, “I think this might work.”

In early 2021, Steve learned about NorthWestern Energy’s plan to develop a methane-fired power plant in his hometown of Laurel. At that time, various community groups across Montana were also beginning to comprehend NorthWestern’s plan, yet none were actively organizing near the plant. So later that fall, his daughter Kasey and her husband Aaron canvassed their neighborhood of families and landowners whose local roots run as far back as a century. With Steve's help, they formed what would become the Thiel Road Coalition, recruiting residents and members from Laurel and beyond to stop the plant and protect their community. Eventually, attending a Northern Plains meeting became a turning point, igniting enthusiasm and collaboration. Steve noted, “Northern Plains motivated me and our Laurel group, providing physical and financial support against the plant and NorthWestern Energy.”

Reflecting on his involvement, Steve emphasized the value of groups like Northern Plains. He says, without such groups, “the average person would not be able to stand up for their own rights or hold corporations and government agencies accountable, ensuring the protection of property rights, agricultural lands, and the cherished landscapes of Montana.”

Despite public testimony and opposition, NorthWestern Energy has continued development, all while obtaining approval and permits from state agencies who consistently fall short of their responsibility to prioritize the best interests of Montana residents. The plant is predicted to emit 769,706 tons of climate-degrading greenhouse gases per year, equivalent to the annual emissions of 167,327 passenger vehicles. It’s also expected to flood the nearby valley with light and sound 24/7. The Laurel community has been kept uninformed, the promise of clean, affordable power not kept, and for many in Laurel, the plant highlights the deep corruption of Montana’s energy monopoly.

Motivated by a deep sense of responsibility for his family, community, and the environment, Steve continues to volunteer his time, skills, and passion to stop NorthWestern’s efforts. Whether it means monitoring the impacts of the plant in the cold of winter, rallying neighbors in Laurel, testifying at city council meetings, or speaking out in the media, Steve believes that this work needs to be done. As Steve puts it, “I do this for my family’s health, welfare, and safety, their neighbors, the people in and around Laurel, for our precious environment, including the Yellowstone River ecosystem, the State of Montana, and our planet’s future.”
Northern Plains held its 52nd Annual Meeting at The Pub Station this past November. We were especially excited to host the Annual Meeting at a locally owned and operated venue that reflects our values, cultivates creativity, and builds community. Attendees of all ages enjoyed reconnecting with old friends and meeting new like-minded individuals from across Montana and beyond. Through a variety of speakers and panelists, we explored how to channel our power as we navigate the challenges we collectively face today. Northern Plains has a rich history and deep-rooted values, and this past Annual Meeting was a great opportunity to carry the lessons of perseverance and people power forward to create a sustainable future for generations of Montanans to come.

In our first session, former Powder River Basin Resource Council organizer, Jill Morrison, and watershed ecologist and author of New Mexico’s first watershed protection and alternative energy plan, Sterling Grogan, taught us how stronger protections and innovative reclamation can create resilient communities in Montana’s oil and gas country. Both panelists helped us better understand this thorny topic and envision what the future can look like.

Morrison kicked off the session describing her tenure organizing around oil and gas issues in Wyoming. Due to the egregious lack of regulations in the industry, she faced unique challenges when attempting to hold corporations and agencies accountable for land reclamation. Grogan then shared how livestock can be a very useful tool for ecological reclamation and restoring vegetation. The panelists also emphasized the need to highlight the problems with oil and gas development publically, and not to underestimate the power of art and visuals in organizing.

Our next session explored the barriers to land succession in farming and ranching. Virtual speaker Jordan Treakle joined us all the way from Europe to discuss his work as the National Programs and Policy Coordinator at National Family Farm Coalition and how they’re trying to keep family farmers and ranchers on the land. He also explained how access to land is the number one challenge for new farmers, while financial firms across the globe make nefarious “land grab” investments of farmland.

In a later session we celebrated and reflected on the history and importance of Indian Education for All, Montana’s constitutional requirement to teach and honor the distinct cultural heritage of Native Americans in public school curriculum. Panelists Jordann Lankford-Forster, Ta’jin Perez, Hal Schmid, and Steve Doherty were moderated by former Superintendent of Public Instruction Denise Juneau. They looked back on early legislative efforts and all the hard work that made Indian Education for All possible. We learned more about the key elements that led to this great achievement: The strength of women and the importance of working with unlikely allies to get the job done. The panelists also spoke about the importance of growing Indian representation at the Montana State Legislature and how government representation is fundamental to the flourishing of communities.

Our sessions concluded with the topic of how Montana can meet the challenges of the 21st century. Architect and former Northern Plains Chair, Ed Gulick, shed light on how solutions to the climate crisis can not only improve the sustainability of our communities, but also our quality of life. He shared the many ways in which implementing energy-efficient building design and creating walkable...
communities supports local businesses, saves tax-payer dollars, extends our lifespans, and strengthens the bonds of community all while addressing the issue of climate change. Through a hybrid of past living patterns combined with new technologies, we learned how to create a better Montana for all!

In addition to these engaging educational sessions, we welcomed back keynote speaker John Boyd, who joined us virtually last year after his father’s passing prevented him from traveling to Montana. We were delighted to be able to host the farmer, civil rights activist, and President of the National Black Farmers Association in person this year. His inspiring speech reminded us of the importance of building and supporting the next generation of farmers despite the challenges family operations face today. He also spoke about the struggles of being a Black farmer and his work for equality in agriculture. As John Boyd says, “You’ve got to keep on pulling the arc of justice and pull it down until you win.”

This year’s panelists and speakers left us inspired, re-energized, and ready to tackle the challenges we face in the year ahead. We will continue to carry these lessons of perseverance and people power forward to create a sustainable future for generations of Montanans to come.

**Bob Tully Spirit Award - Mary Fitzpatrick**

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

Edward Barta presented this award to Yellowstone Valley Citizens Council member and Billings resident Mary Fitzpatrick.

Throughout the 30 years Mary has been a member, she has served in numerous leadership positions, including board chair. In this role she showed tremendous perseverance through tough times and played a key role in the early stages of planning for our LEED Platinum building, “Home on the Range.” Mary is one of Northern Plains’ loudest cheerleaders and can be found leading chants at rallies rain or shine (not to mention snowstorms!). Her courage, knowledge, and keen sense of humor have been invaluable assets to our work throughout the years. Mary currently serves as our Fundraising Chair, and is a fierce advocate for our clean energy work. Congratulations Mary!
Mary Donohoe Tell It Like It Is Award - Mary Catherine Dunphy

The Mary Donohoe Tell It Like It Is Award is presented to a Northern Plains member that isn’t afraid to speak up and doesn’t shy away from “telling it like it is”. This year, Kit Nilson presented the award to Northern Plains member and resident of Miles City, Mary Catherine Dunphy.

When Montana Dakota Utilities attempted to raise rates by 19% for eastern Montana customers, Mary Catherine didn’t flinch. She rolled up her sleeves and went door-to-door talking with business owners and citizens alike, gave testimony at town halls and public hearings, wrote letters to legislators and the Public Service Commission, and much more. Throughout the campaign Mary Catherine exemplified what it looks like to speak up and use your voice for others.

As member Deborah Hanson says, “Mary Catherine embodies the Northern Plains spirit, and show[s] that we are at our best when we are organizing person-to-person with our well-researched message.” Congratulations Mary Catherine!

Affiliate Awards

Dawson Resource Council (DRC) was presented with the award for “Largest Percentage of New Members”. Sleeping Giant Citizens Council (SGCC) was presented with the “Most New Members” award. Congratulations DRC and SGCC!

Elections

Please welcome our new chair Edward Barta, and our newest board members: Norane Freistadt, Craig McClure, Jeanie Alderson, and Kirk Panasuk.

Resolutions

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

The two resolutions before the membership in November were:

- A resolution to work with Indigenous and community allies to replace Columbus Day with Indigenous Peoples’ Day;
- A resolution declaring that Northern Plains opposes federal coal leasing in Montana.

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

Questions about resolutions? Call Caroline at (406) 248-1154 or email caroline@northernplains.org.
ANNUAL MEETING

Continued from page 7.

Resolution No. 2023 – 1
Introduced by Jeanie Alderson at the Request of the Coal Task Force

A RESOLUTION OF THE MEMBERS OF NORTHERN PLAINS RESOURCE COUNCIL DECLARING OUR OPPOSITION TO THE LEASING OF FEDERAL COAL.

WHEREAS, Northern Plains Resource Council (Northern Plains) formed in 1972 over the issue of coal mining and its impacts on private surface owners who own the land over federal mineral reserves; and

WHEREAS, the first resolution passed by the membership (1975-1) resolved that Northern Plains would make every effort to defeat coal leasing that does not include minimum protection of the nation’s land; and

WHEREAS, our members participated in successfully passing the federal Surface Mining Control and Reclamation Act of 1977 that promised strict reclamation of lands disturbed by coal mining; and

WHEREAS, subsequent numerous resolutions passed by the membership through the years continued to call for coal mining regulation; public participation in leasing decisions; surface-owner consent; adequate bonding; contemporaneous reclamation; protection of surface waters and aquifers; and reclamation that successfully returns the land, vegetation, and water resources to pre-mining conditions; and

WHEREAS, Northern Plains members have participated in the public processes used by the government to solicit public information and comment and have tried for more than 50 years to co-exist with the coal development interests seeking federal leases for coal resources; and

WHEREAS, after more than 50 years of what our members who live on the lands affected by coal mining have experienced and the rest of us have seen on the ground from both the mining extraction companies and from the government’s lax enforcement of laws, including the lack of full reclamation, we believe that coal companies have failed to prove that they can be good neighbors and responsibly use our public resources.

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

That Northern Plains Resource Council now declares that we oppose any new federal coal leasing in Montana or allowing authorization of any federal lease applications that are pending.

Resolution No. 2023 – 2
Introduced by Tom Mexicancheyenne at the Request of the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Task Force

A RESOLUTION OF THE MEMBERS OF NORTHERN PLAINS RESOURCE COUNCIL TO SUPPORT ADOPTION OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLES’ DAY IN MONTANA.

WHEREAS, the Constitution of the State of Montana was drafted and ratified by Montana voters in 1972 and contains two key provisions that ensure Montana and Montanans will: 1) maintain a clean and healthful environment; and 2) honor the contributions and heritage of Montana’s Indigenous peoples; and

WHEREAS, large and diverse populations of Indigenous peoples have been living in what is now known as Montana for thousands of years and into the present day; and

WHEREAS, Indigenous peoples have roamed freely over Montana’s wide-ranging valleys, mountains, and prairies; and

WHEREAS, their spiritual connection with Montana’s plants, animals, air, land, and water is filled with deep reverence and awe; and

WHEREAS, Northern Plains celebrates and values the rich cultural traditions given by Indigenous peoples to Montana; and

WHEREAS, it is within the spirit of the Northern Plains culture to support our Indigenous brothers and sisters, neighbors, communities, and tribal nations, and it is the just and right thing to do.

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

That Northern Plains Resource Council support that Montana individuals, organizations, communities, and the State of Montana replace Columbus Day holiday with Indigenous Peoples’ Day holiday on the second Monday of October, and will work with Indigenous and community allies to realize this goal.
Montana’s last legislative session saddled us with a pair of dangerous bills threatening anyone living near or downstream from a coal mine. One bill, HB 576, blatantly weakens a coal company’s obligations to prevent damage to water outside of a mine permit boundary. The other bill, SB 392, undermines a citizen’s ability to seek justice if damage occurs by potentially putting them on the hook for a coal corporation’s or a state agency’s legal fees. Both bills are bad individually, but taken together they’re a catastrophic gut punch of disrespect to landowners and communities in coal country. They are also both blatantly non-compliant with the federal Surface Mining Control and Reclamation Act (SMCRA) that Northern Plains members were instrumental in establishing in 1977.

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.

Thankfully, before they can become law, the bills must be approved by the federal Office of Surface Mining Reclamation and Enforcement (OSMRE). As part of that review, OSMRE held a public hearing in Billings last November. This was the first ever public hearing in the west on a state law that passed out of the legislature, according to OSMRE staff. This unprecedented hearing is a testament to the powerful and strategic organizing of Northern Plains members and our allies.

We showed up in force, dominating the proceedings with 17 members from communities across the state including Roundup, Birney, Shepherd, Lame Deer, Red Lodge, and Miles City. Members respectfully demanded that OSMRE deny these corrupt laws, and shared expertise and heartfelt stories from the front lines. We packed the room so fully that the crowd bled out the door and into the hallway. Only one person spoke in support of one bill – Rep. Rhonda Knudsen (R-Culbertson) who sponsored HB 576. The collective power, credibility, and strong community of Northern Plains was tangible to anyone at the hearing.

Thank you to everyone who testified, packed the room during the hearing, or submitted comments to OSMRE to defend our coal communities. We hope to get a final decision from OSMRE this winter.

While the hearing left us cautiously optimistic, we recently received great news to bolster that optimism. SB 328, introduced in the 2021 legislative session by Senator Duane Ankney (R-Colstrip) was a bill to weaken bond release standards for coal companies in Montana, making it easier for coal companies to take their money and run before properly reclaiming mined lands. Northern Plains members fought tooth and nail against this bill, and ultimately succeeded in getting important amendments to significantly reduce its harm. But in even better news, we just learned in January, about two-and-a-half years later, that OSMRE rejected this bill altogether, noting it was not compliant with federal law. We hope that if OSMRE rejected SB 328, that they will do the same for the even more troublesome 2023 bills currently under review.

Members dominate historic hearing on bad zombie coal bills

By Bronya Lechtman

Northern Plains members from across coal country showed up to testify against bad Montana coal bills and share their stories, including former legislator Rae Peppers from Lame Deer.

Pat Thiele, Chair of Bull Mountain Land Alliance, testifies against HB 576 and SB 392 in front of a packed room.
As Northern Plains approached its 50th Annual Meeting in 2021, one of many projects we developed was a photograph exhibition to highlight the people, places, and events that helped shape our organizational history. This project culminated in a series of 68 photographs and detailed captions displayed at Home on the Range, our Billings office. These iconic images show how powerful and effective everyday people are when they stand together to protect and improve their communities.

While working on this project, we soon realized that A) we should share this project on our website, and B) our history is so expansive we could continue adding to this collection year after year. As a result, members dedicated to preserving our legacy identified 18 new photographs last year to add to this collection. These images include robust captions telling the stories of the members and campaigns that have made such an impact across Montana.

You can view the entire photo collection at our new online gallery by visiting: NorthernPlains.org/History-Photos

Cindy Webber

Cindy Webber’s primary motivation has been to protect water from pollution by mining and gas drilling. She and her late husband Ed operated a ranch on the Boulder River, and she knows how precious water is.

She served on the Northern Plains Board for several years, and continued to be a leader on all of our oil and gas work. She also chaired affiliate Cottonwood Resource Council.

Cindy was named 2017 winner of the Bob Tully Spirit Award. In receiving the award, Cindy reflected, “I’m definitely something of a reluctant dragon. But I know my treasure and I am willing to protect it.”

Kate French

Kate French joined Sleeping Giant Resource Council in 2009 and was later elected to chair that affiliate. Kate won the Mary Donohoe “Tell It Like It Is” award in 2013, in large part because of her very visible work against the proposed Otter Creek strip mine and industry plans to export Montana coal to Asia on the Tongue River Railroad.

Kate went on to chair Northern Plains in 2015-2017. Afterward, she took on the role of staffer for a time, managing our 2019 study of job creation through cleaning up coal ash at Colstrip.
Patty Kluver

A former Northern Plains board member and Rosebud Creek rancher, Patty Kluver (along with her husband Red and their family) advocated with the Rosebud Protective Association and Northern Plains for the protection of land and water from coal strip mining. The Kluvers were also active in Northern Plains’ campaign to stop the Colstrip power plants.

Patty was a fierce campaigner and outspoken leader for long-term reclamation requirements and the protection of groundwater.

Roger Muggli

Roger Muggli managed the Tongue and Yellowstone Irrigation District. Once he realized farms and ranches were threatened by sodium-laced discharges from coal bed methane development, he joined Northern Plains, becoming a tireless campaigner and fundraiser. He won the Mary Donohoe “Tell It Like It Is” Award in 2003.

In a 2001 op-ed, Roger said, “Many have attacked members of the Northern Plains Resource Council for taking a stand on methane development. I think that we ought to be thanking our lucky stars for their foresight, and their determination to protect the interests of farmers and ranchers in southeastern Montana.”

Jean and Floyd Dahlman

Jean and Floyd Dahlman joined Northern Plains in the early 1970s when Jean read an article in the Denver Post in which Wally McRae called her part of Montana a “national sacrifice area.”

“Over my dead body,” she thought and sent in a check. Since then Jean has been a stalwart organizational leader, especially on our agriculture work and in the campaign to Derail the Tongue River Railroad. Jean and Floyd farm and ranch near Forsyth, Montana.
The Montana Environmental Policy Act (MEPA) mandates a responsible “look before you leap” policy in Montana. It is a landmark piece of environmental legislation that has allowed Montanans to enjoy and sustain the beauty of the Big Sky state for decades. When the Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) announced that it was looking to change how the law was implemented in late September, Northern Plains members sprang into action. Making their presence known in listening sessions across the state and by submitting online comments, members expressed to DEQ that any changes must prioritize the expansion of public rights and participation, and ensure a comprehensive and accurate assessment of the costs associated with climate pollution for all proposed projects. Members stood strong in the fight to protect the land we love.

At the front of everyone’s minds during this process was the recent decision in the Held v. Montana case, which centered on the state’s constitutional responsibility to protect Montanans’ right to a clean and healthful environment, including from the effects of climate change. This means that DEQ, and other state agencies, need to include a climate analysis when thinking of the impacts of proposed projects. This change to MEPA implementation strengthens the law, and will allow Montanans to enjoy, sustain, and preserve our cherished environment for decades to come. Northern Plains will continue to remain vigilant, watchdogging any changes to MEPA that could affect our unique way of life, negatively impact our environment, or limit the public’s participation in important decisions.

Northern Plains’ Racial Justice Reading Group began in 2020 with the help of some passionate members who wanted to discuss social justice issues through excellent works of literature. As 2024 begins, we invite any and all Northern Plains members to join us for another year of the Racial Justice Reading Group! The group meets monthly on the first Monday of the month over Zoom at 5:00PM to discuss a new book. Our meetings usually run for an hour and a half. Any member of the reading group can propose a title to be considered for a future meeting. Our upcoming titles are:

- **The Hundred Years War on Palestine** by Rashid Khalidi for our February 5th meeting
- **My Promised Land** by Avi Shavit for our March 4th meeting

Over the past few years, we’ve read titles including *The Heartbreak of Wounded Knee* by David Treuer, *Jubilee* by Margaret Walker, *This is How It Always Is* by Laurie Frankel, and *Braiding Sweetgrass* by Robin Wall Kimmerer. Our books span topics including race, class, gender, sexuality, and more.

We encourage you to find the book at your local library or shop at local bookstores. Please come willing and open to participate in respectful, open discussion. If you would like to join the book club and get on the e-mail list, please get in touch with emily@northernplains.org.
In the fall of 2022, leaders from Central Montana Resource Council (CMRC) (our Lewistown area affiliate) heard a rumor that their local co-op, Fergus Electric, was considering making significant changes to their rate structure and net-metering policies. Net-metering is how residential solar users get credit for the excess energy that they produce on their solar panels. Good net-metering policy is fair to all members of the co-op while giving solar users a reasonable return on investment. Bad net-metering policy can completely kill solar as a viable option. After a quick phone call to Fergus’ general manager confirming the rumors, CMRC members feared the worst.

Fergus Electric was proposing changing the net-metering rate from retail to wholesale. This means that rather than getting 1:1 credit for each kilowatt hour (kWh) of electricity produced, solar producers would receive 80% less money. Essentially, a solar customer would sell the co-op its excess solar power for 2 cents per kWH and then buy it back at 10 cents per kWh. This would have been devastating for the future of solar in central Montana.

Upon hearing the news, CMRC’s members got to work quickly. They set up meetings with the general manager, made calls to their board representatives, attended a board meeting, and activated a network of concerned co-op members across Fergus Electric. In November, when the co-op announced changes to its rate structure, they decided to keep a more favorable net-metering policy. In short, CMRC members saved residential solar for co-op members!

There are two key takeaways from this success story. First, co-ops (in theory) offer a democratic governance model in stark contrast to our investor-owned utilities such as NorthWestern Energy and Montana Dakota Utilities. While Fergus Electric members had the opportunity to influence the decision-making of their democratically elected board members (who are neighbors), companies like NorthWestern Energy are completely beholden to shareholders and investment funds, most of whom reside outside Montana. NorthWestern Energy’s recent, historic 28% residential rate increase, continued construction of expensive fossil fuel generation, and biannual attempts to destroy net-metering are just a few examples of how out of touch they are with their customers. Profit is always their first priority. With nonprofit co-ops, membership matters.

The second key takeaway from the Fergus success story is that local, clean energy, like solar, is a key part of keeping farmers and ranchers on the land. Industrialized agriculture’s reliance on fossil fuels has weakened the independence and profitability of the family farm and ranch. Longer supply chains and more expensive inputs have ensured that the farmer and rancher’s share of the dollar for a pound of beef or a bushel of wheat is smaller than ever. However, bringing energy generation back to the farm offers a significant solution. Just like farmers and ranchers used to feed their tractor teams grass grown in the sun, solar panels can feed the energy needs of the “modern” producer. As energy is only getting more expensive, solar is a gift to the next generation of ranchers and farmers who will have one less input to worry about.

All of this ties into CMRC’s highly successful solarize campaign beginning in 2021. Working with a Montana-based installer, CMRC has facilitated over 240 solar assessments, 29 contracts, 24 completed installations, and 10 REAP grants. What’s a REAP grant? Great question. The federal government offers grants that when combined can account for almost 65% of project cost for a solar installment. When you pair these grants with advances in solar panel technology, solar power is more affordable than ever for ranchers and farmers.

Back to Fergus Electric. None of this would have been possible without the cooperation of the co-op. Fergus Electric could have killed agricultural solar, but CMRC members made their voices heard and the co-op listened. This is because the co-op board (and general manager) are neighbors, farmers, and ranchers. Rather than selling the community out to a shareholder, co-ops can put the community first.

By Jackson Newman
OIL AND GAS

Victory! New EPA rule to slash methane emissions, improve health for Montanans
By Gusty Catherin-Sauer

Just before the holidays, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) released its final rule to cut methane pollution and other harmful pollutants from the oil and gas industry by requiring equipment upgrades and regular leak inspections. Methane is a powerful greenhouse gas that has over 80 times the climate-disrupting effect of carbon dioxide in the short-term. This rule brings new oversight to more U.S. oil and gas operations than we’ve previously seen, including the first-time oversight for petroleum infrastructure built prior to 2015. These strong new protections have been decades in the making, and we have Northern Plains members and our allies across the country to thank for this big win!

This policy shift will move our work forward to improve public health for our communities suffering from both unclean air and increasingly devastating climate impacts. It will also create new jobs in the clean energy economy. EPA estimates that these new protections will reduce methane pollution from sources covered under these rules by 80% in the next fifteen years alone. However, as important as it is to reduce equipment leaks from the oil and gas industry, we must continue to transition away from fossil fuels altogether, and shift toward renewable energy, sustainable agricultural policies, and better land use practices.

The new standards reflect real and substantial progress. We will work hard to protect these important safeguards. Now we begin the work to ensure strong implementation and enforcement to better protect Montana communities and ensure a healthy climate for generations to come!

Take action to support modernized oil and gas rules
By Gusty Catherin-Sauer

Unfortunately, Montana’s own Senator Daines has sponsored a new piece of oil and gas legislation that caters to industry lobbyists while undermining conservation concerns. The “Supporting Made in America Energy Act” would require the Department of the Interior (DOI) to hold four onshore oil and gas lease sales in oil and gas producing states and also require two offshore oil and gas lease sales in each available area in the Gulf of Mexico and Alaska. These government-mandated lease sales would be required regardless of market demand (or lack thereof) and would not be bound by responsible considerations of environmental or cultural harm.

TAKE ACTION

We need your voice! Oil and gas lobbyists are already fighting these new protections. Speak up and contact Montana’s Congressional delegation!

Tell them to support the expansion and modernization of bonding rules and tell them to oppose Sen. Daines’ reckless “Supporting Made in America Energy Act”!

Rep. Matt Rosendale: (202) 225-3211
Rep. Ryan Zinke: (202) 225-5628
Sen. Steve Daines: (202) 224-2651
Sen. Jon Tester: (202) 224-8594
Climate Change

Climate planning grant provides opportunities to build a better Montana

By Gusty Catherin-Sauer & Jackson Newman

In the 2022 Inflation Reduction Act (IRA), the Environmental Protection Agency was allocated $5 billion to help states, local governments, and tribal governments create and implement plans to reduce climate pollution. Governor Gianforte accepted a $3 million planning grant and designated the Montana Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) as the lead agency to write a climate action plan. DEQ asked the public for ideas and Northern Plains, along with several coalition partners, submitted three proposals.

1) Schools
In November, we got a note from a concerned parent in Glendive. The note read, “My sons have had days where they were too hot or cold to get any benefit from being at school. The boiler has leaked and damaged the gym flooring. Now, it has stopped running completely causing the school to be closed for a day.” Unfortunately, this story is not unique to Glendive. Many Montana communities have been struggling to upgrade aging school infrastructure. With inflation, property taxes, and increasing energy rates, lowering costs for schools is more important than ever to make sure our kids get a quality education. As a result, Northern Plains members submitted a proposal to DEQ to fund a wide-ranging energy efficiency and generation grant program. We see this as a win-win - Montana schools get much needed funding for infrastructure upgrades while also reducing their carbon footprint.

2) Water and Soil
Northern Plains members proposed a measure to provide direct financial incentives for interested conservation districts to utilize low technology restoration techniques, such as beaver dam analogs or other proven erosion control technology, to increase our region’s stores of soil organic carbon. Importantly this program would scale up riparian (riverbank and wetland) restoration efforts completed by conservation agencies and organizations such as the Montana beaver working group. In Montana and everywhere, healthy riparian habitats are an increasingly important resource. They have been proven to store carbon, thereby reducing climate-harming emissions. Our hope is that one or multiple agricultural or carbon sink project concepts will be incorporated into Montana’s climate action plan. This proposal would also encourage farmers and ranchers to choose conservation as the standard on all agricultural lands, ensuring a legacy of clean, abundant water and healthy soils for future generations. It would reduce climate pollution while bolstering our agricultural communities and Montana way of life!

3) Oil and Gas
Natural gas and petroleum systems are the second largest source of methane emissions in the United States. Building on a historical grant opportunity facilitated by a few Montana conservation districts, Northern Plains members submitted a climate pollution reduction project concept to address this. We proposed that a fund be utilized as a “match” or a grant opportunity that incentivizes oil and gas operators to plug and reclaim inactive shut-in wells that have detectable methane or other emissions. Thousands of Montana wells that meet this criteria are leaking significant quantities of methane. If DEQ were to adopt this plan and identify the oil and gas infrastructure with the highest pollution rates, it will help industry reduce waste while creating new jobs. Monitoring and mitigating methane pollution from the oil and gas sector will also benefit energy-impacted communities, which often include low-income and disadvantaged groups, while delivering health and environmental benefits. This program could also ensure that Montana is competitive for future federal funding.

DON’T DELAY, BECOME A MONTHLY SUSTAINER TODAY!

If you’re looking for an easy way to make a big impact, consider becoming a Northern Plains Monthly Sustainer. Monthly Sustainers ensure that we continue to fulfill our mission of organizing Montanans to protect our water, air, and working landscapes for years to come. With as little as $5 a month, you can help us grow our grassroots power to create a future where we live in harmony with nature, where our economy serves the people rather than the people serving the economy, and where neighbors work side-by-side to build a world that lives up to our ideals of fairness, inclusion, and justice. Giving monthly also provides Northern Plains with a predictable source of income to sustain our work. You’ll never get behind on your membership (say goodbye to renewal letters!), and it is simple to change the donation amount whenever you would like. Joining is simple—click the “Donate Now” button on our website or give us a call at (406) 248-1154. We would love to welcome you into the fold!
Help us celebrate the inaugural Montana Soil Health Week this April!

By Gusty Catherin-Sauer

Did you know that one of Montana’s most precious resources is right under your feet? The health of our soils impacts the nutrition in the food you eat, the wealth of local economies, increases drought resilience, and even stores climate-warming carbon, keeping it out of our atmosphere. That is why Northern Plains helped to champion and pass a resolution during the last legislative session to recognize and celebrate our soils and agricultural producers. Special thanks to the bills bipartisan sponsors, Sen. Butch Gillespie (R-Ethridge) and Sen. Janet Ellis (D-Helenā)!

The vitality of Montana’s food, water, economy, and environment are rooted in the health of Montana soils. These soils, and the people who steward them, have the ability to grow nutritious food for our communities and keep our waterways clean. Yet every year our soils are lost or degraded because their value is overlooked. Everyone in Montana is impacted by the health of our soils and stands to benefit from the strong climate and food security that healthy soil provides. Devoting an entire week to celebrating soils is important for a number of reasons.

Soil health is a win-win for us all. It’s good for Montana’s economy and good for the conservation of our working landscapes.

We know from the 2022 Montana Soil Assessment Report that producers want more opportunities to learn from one another. Soil Health Week will allow a diverse group of soil health advocates to gather together to celebrate, educate, build capacity and raise awareness about why protecting soil is important to human, environmental, and economic health.

Now you, too, can join us in celebrating and protecting this extraordinary natural resource. Mark your calendar for the inaugural Montana Soil Health Week and Day!

The first Montana Soil Health Week will take place April 1-7, 2024.

Montana Soil Health Week will build off the momentum and spirit of our summer Soil Crawls, by bringing together experts and enthusiasts to promote the benefits and importance of soil health.

If you have questions or want to learn more about how to celebrate Soil Health Week, contact Gusty at gusty@northernplains.org.

MONTANA DROUGHT MANAGEMENT PLAN

It’s here! Check out the Montana Drought Management Plan today.

This is an extensive resource for a wide ranging challenge. Whether you are an agricultural producer, run a business, or are just an eater, drought has an impact on all of our communities and landscapes.

Let’s build drought resilience together by utilizing this updated resource: Drought.MT.gov/Montana-Drought-Management-Plan
The methane-fired plant NorthWestern Energy is currently constructing in Laurel remains under scrutiny given the destructive social, environmental, and financial costs it would levy on Montanans if completed. Late last year, the brave youth who stood up to protect our right to a clean and healthful environment in the historic Held v. Montana climate trial victory filed a legal brief in an ongoing lawsuit challenging the validity of the plant’s air quality permit. This is a promising development and shows that the climate movement these young folks are helping to lead demands tangible results and accountability from Montana’s decision-makers and monopoly energy corporations like NorthWestern Energy.

Beyond the disturbing climate implications of NorthWestern’s reckless methane-fired plant, the project presents numerous other threats to Montanans. If completed, the plant would shower the Yellowstone River valley with hundreds of tons of hazardous air pollutants every year, including almost 50 tons of cancer-causing formaldehyde pollution. The plant’s price tag of $275 million dollars – which doesn’t include millions more each year for maintenance, operation, and transportation of dangerous fuels – will undoubtedly lead to even higher electric bills for Montanans beyond the 28% rate increase NorthWestern just finagled for itself. However, the most timely concern right now is the energy corporation’s efforts to undermine our democratic systems and local decision-making.

NorthWestern arrogantly began building its massive Laurel project on land zoned for agricultural use. For the plant to become legally operational, this zoning would have to be altered to allow “heavy industrial” projects. In an effort to appease NorthWestern, Yellowstone County’s handsomely-paid commissioners (the majority of whom make over $111,000/year), have pressured the unpaid, volunteer Laurel City Council members to cede control of the land in question to the county and adopt a new zoning plan in the Laurel area. The plan designed by the county commissioners would not only grant NorthWestern the zoning it needs to become legally compliant, it would also expand “heavy industrial” zoning six-fold on land that runs adjacent to the Yellowstone River and other areas immediately next to residential areas. This change would open the door to chemical factories, industrial dumps, slaughterhouses, feedlots, and worse right next the nation’s largest free-flowing river. In late December, a public hearing was held in Laurel, giving the public a rare opportunity to weigh in on the NorthWestern plant as well as the proposed zoning changes.

Thanks to savvy organizing work by Northern Plains members, the room was packed with a standing-room only crowd. Only two attendees spoke in support of the change, one of which was an attorney for NorthWestern Energy. Dozens of other testifiers spoke passionately and persuasively against the plant and the proposed zoning changes.

Acknowledging our concerns (and recognizing our power), Laurel officials voted to table any decisions about the policy until a January meeting. Once again, we packed that meeting and officials decided for a second time to table any decisions until a later date. These are two impressive wins back to back!

As the Plains Truth goes to print, members continue to organize, research, and ensure that our voices are heard and we keep up this positive momentum to protect Laurel and hold NorthWestern Energy accountable for its efforts to trample everyday Montanans while polluting our state and inflating our energy bills.

Montana’s future depends on us standing side-by-side today and building the next generation of grassroots leaders for tomorrow. Luckily, Northern Plains can help you create the future you want—a future where our water, air, and family farms and ranches are protected for years to come. To learn more about all the ways you can make a lasting gift to future generations of Montanans, contact Caleb at caleb@northernplains.org.
As community organizers, it’s rare that we can ask our neighbors, “What do you need?” and genuinely deliver on that need. But we might have that opportunity right now. Between 2021 and 2022, Congress and the Biden Administration passed four major bills or federal funding packages – the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) and the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL) in 2021 and the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) and the Creating Helpful Incentives to Produce Semiconductors (CHIPS) and Science Act in 2022. Combined these represent over a trillion dollars in federal funding, grants, incentives, tax credits, and rebates designed to solve some of our biggest societal challenges – from broken roads and bridges, to clean water access, to improving the electric grid, to the climate crisis.

These four packages represent an enormous investment by the federal government – something we haven’t seen since the New Deal. The Inflation Reduction Act is our nation’s largest investment in clean energy solutions to date – and is the Biden Administration’s big bid to avert climate change.

What does that mean for those of us pushing our communities, elected officials, and decision makers to take bigger action on climate change – faster? It’s an opportunity.

As Kate Aronoff wrote in Dissent Magazine, “the IRA is an invitation to organizers.” In the past we only had sticks, but we now have meaningful carrots to offer our governments and institutions – in the form of federal dollars.

This once-in-a-generation investment also provides an opportunity to reshape people’s relationship to their governments and our democracy. Governments have often failed us. Where we expect them to keep a close eye on things and protect regular people, they’re in bed with industry. When folks are hurting or falling through the cracks, the government hasn’t meaningfully met their needs or helped them through hard times. What would it look like to actually help our communities meet the needs they identify? Our families and neighbors would be better off, and we’d reshape people’s relationship to government in the process.

Here’s the catch. These funds must be seen and felt by our communities and put to use for the right things and in the right way to create this better reality. That’s where Northern Plains and organizations like ours come in. We have a role in shaping how our institutions use these federal dollars – and whether they use them at all, or leave them sitting on the table to make a political point.

Northern Plains and our affiliates already spotted this opportunity, and jumped on chances to deploy the federal funding across our work (and across the state). In 2021, Yellowstone Bend Citizens Council (YBCC), our Livingston-area affiliate, applied for funding for solar projects and installations from the American Rescue Plan Act. YBCC was awarded $250,000 for this work, and they’re nearing completion of the first major project utilizing that funding – a solar installation on a low-income apartment complex in Livingston called Sherwood Inn Apartments.

At the state level, Northern Plains played a critical role in pushing Montana’s Board of Oil and Gas Conservation to apply for federal dollars to plug and clean up orphaned and abandoned oil and gas wells. With some elbow grease and strategic cajoling from Northern Plains members like Sue Beug and Edward Barta, the state applied for – and received! – $25 million from the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law to undertake this work.

Continued on next page.
GAINING GROUND

In 2023, Yellowstone Valley Citizens Council, our Billings-area affiliate, spotted an opportunity for Inflation Reduction Act funding for urban forestry. Tree cover in Billings isn’t evenly spread out – and it’s both a climate issue and an equity issue. Tree cover provides life-saving shade to community members and people experiencing homelessness, brings temperatures down, and filters air pollution. It can also make our neighborhoods greener and deepen people’s sense of connection to their home and place. YVCC took these arguments to the City of Billings, persuading them to apply for funding to build a comprehensive urban forestry program like other cities in Montana have. The city received $1 million from the IRA – a transformative amount for a program of this size.

The opportunities to organize around this federal funding – to shape how it’s used, to ensure our communities feel the benefits of it, and to build people power along the way – are endless. And more are coming! You can find another example of this work on page 15, where we explore federal dollars coming into the state through DEQ’s Climate Pollution Reduction Grant program.

Interested in discussing how this federal funding could benefit your community, and what opportunities exist to organize around it? Reach out to Caitlin at caitlin@northernplains.org.

Lessons learned building a broad coalition in eastern Montana

By Jackson Newman

In late November 2022, Dawson Resource Council spotted a notice in the local newspaper that Montana-Dakota Utilities was applying to the Public Service Commission (PSC) for a 19.2% residential electricity rate increase in eastern Montana. Through our members’ hard work, we reduced the increase by over half to 9.1%. Many of you have already heard this story, but now that the dust has settled, and Northwestern Energy continues to pound ratepayers with historic rate hikes on the other side of the state, we thought it would be a good time to share some of the lessons learned.

Lesson #1: The hardest tasks are often the most effective
One of the most uncomfortable tasks that a person can do to organize their community is knocking on doors. Talking to strangers can be scary! However, the most difficult tasks are often the most effective. Over the course of the MDU campaign, Northern Plains’ eastern Montana members knocked over 250 local businesses and homes to educate people about the MDU rate increase. Almost every business in Miles City, Glendive, and Sidney received a fact sheet about the rate increase and its impacts. Postcards we created for constituents to send to commissioners went like “hotcakes” according to members on the doors (just ask Mary Catherine Dunphy or Al Heidt)! The result of all that hard turnout work was widespread community involvement. 70 people showed up to a community meeting in Miles City. 40 showed up in Glendive. When the PSC held hearings at our request in Miles City and Sidney, the rooms were packed. After the Miles City listening session, PSC Commissioner Randy Pinocci said that it was one of the best public hearings he had ever attended. Face to face conversations are hard, but they work. They build relationships and trust in a way that a mailing or social media post cannot.

Lesson #2: Find common ground
These days, it can feel like the political divide has grown too large to bridge. However, with the MDU rate increase, we made a specific effort to build a diverse coalition. As we strategized ways to activate shared concerns, we soon realized that this campaign was about rural livelihoods and corporate greed. Nobody wants to pay higher rates, especially when Wall Street shareholders and executives were making millions at the expense of hardworking families. Armed with...
facts, we began to reach out to anyone who would listen. Non-profits, small businesses, schools, families - anyone who had a bill to pay. We appealed to local politicians who, understanding the economic challenges of their communities, joined the movement. Five mayors, four legislators, the Fort Peck Tribal Council, and several county commissions across eastern Montana joined in to protest the rate increase. Soon enough, we were all pulling in the same direction. In moments of disagreement, we did not take the bait and focused on what we had in common. In the aftermath of the campaign, many of us built relationships with other folks in the community which we never thought possible.

Lesson #3: Consistency is key
The first couple months organizing this campaign felt easy. We were upset and motivated to get the word out. Yet, as fall turned to winter, then spring, then summer, at times it was difficult to maintain our all-out efforts. Drawing wisdom from the countless patient, even decades-long, campaigns Northern Plains members have won, we realized two seemingly contradictory truths. Going 100%, all of the time is not possible. There are peaks and lulls. At the same time, we needed to keep showing up and doing the work, even when it felt pointless or impractical. Without the sustained pressure of our members, eastern Montanans may well have ended up with a 29% increase rather than a 9% increase. By timing our peaks and lulls strategically, we were able to save millions of dollars each year for eastern Montana communities and score a win against a greedy corporate goliath.

Farm Bill faces stalls and setbacks in Congress
By Caroline Canarios
As the U.S. Congress returns for a new year, both the House and Senate are tackling some big federal issues for 2024. One of the major legislative packages that needs to advance is the Farm Bill. The bill is on a 5-year timeline, and expired in 2023, but Congress took a we-have-bigger-fish-to-fry approach and instead passed an extension on the bill so they could focus their work on the debt limit, and determining house leadership, for example.

While the House resolved those issues in 2023, they continue to experience turmoil around the national debt, aid to Ukraine, and issues at the U.S. border, putting the Farm Bill on the backburner once again. As 2024 moves forward, we are being told by House leadership to expect Farm Bill negotiations to start in March, though that timeline seems unlikely to our allies in Washington.

This leaves our agriculture work in a precarious place as we work to advance campaigns that have been priorities for years. We will continue to hold a strategy whereby Country-of-Origin Labeling for beef and pork (COOL) and livestock reform could be included in the 2024 Farm Bill, while also knocking our delegation’s doors to support standalone legislation for each of these issues.

Call your Representative and Montana Senators and tell them to support Country-of-Origin Labeling:

U.S. Senator Jon Tester: 202-224-2644
U.S. Senator Steve Daines: 202-224-2651
U.S. Representative Matt Rosendale: 202-225-3211
U.S. Representative Ryan Zinke: 202-225-5628
MEMBERS ON THE MOVE

Eastern Montana members meet with Senator Tester’s staff in support of oil and gas protections

In December, Northern Plains members Kirk Panasuk and Deborah Hanson met with staff from Senator Tester’s office. The members, who both live in eastern Montana, voiced their support for stronger financial bonds from oil and gas companies to ensure that funds are available to reclaim oil and gas wells once drilling is complete. “It is estimated that nearly three million acres of federal land in Montana is under an oil and gas lease. The rule that will soon be working its way through the appropriations process will directly impact this land, my home,” said Kirk, referencing proposed new federal rules for oil and gas drilling. (See page 14 for more information about these rules.)

Sleeping Giant member keeps the focus on C-PACE!

Sleeping Giant Citizens Council member Joe Steffens has organized meetings with the Montana Facility Finance Authority and local businesses such as the Brothers Tapworks, run by Steve and Bill Bullock, to appeal to the Lewis and Clark County Commissioners and work to get C-PACE passed in Lewis and Clark County! C-PACE is the innovative energy efficiency financing tool that Northern Plains successfully passed during the 2021 legislative session. Over the past two years, Sleeping Giant has sustained their efforts to pass C-PACE in counties that the Helena-based affiliate serves, and Joe has also had contact with the mayor of Whitehall to work toward enabling C-PACE in Jefferson County.

Members discuss energy rebate program development with DEQ

Recently, a group of members met with the Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) to discuss the process for creating a home energy rebate program in Montana. This program, which is funded through the Inflation Reduction Act, could provide Montanans across the state the opportunity to access home efficiency and electrification upgrades which could both lower their utility bills and cut down their carbon footprint. The DEQ is currently in the process of developing the program structure for the state.

COUNCIL ROUNDUP

BCC raises concerns about draft wolf plan

In December, Bear Creek Council and its members submitted comments to Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks (FWP) detailing concerns with its draft wolf management plan. Notably, the plan details wolf population and management numbers without scientific basis, or without articulating the challenges to conservation of wolf populations in the state. BCC eagerly awaits updates to the plan from FWP, and continues to pay attention to wolf hunting quotas and impacts to populations in and around Gardiner.

SPA to host local lecture series

Would you be interested in attending a series of informational presentations focused on your local area’s history, geography, and anthropology? Well the members of Stillwater Protective Association certainly are, and they are working to put together a pilot program of lectures for this spring and summer to educate each other and their neighbors about Stillwater County! If successful, members hope to make this an annual series and another avenue by which they can share knowledge and spark conversation in their local communities. Stay tuned to hear when the first lecture will take place!
BMLA supports fight to stop Shepherd landfill

While BMLA has been busy as usual defending the Bull Mountains from the impacts of coal mining activity, a new development has emerged. Pacific Steel and Recycling has applied for a permit to construct a dump for auto fluff – a byproduct of automobile shredding – on the corner of Highway 87 and Shepherd Acton road. Montana Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) has made some glaring oversights in the permitting process up to this point. This facility is a fire risk and threatens our air, water, and quality of life in the surrounding community. The proposed facility impacts multiple BMLA members and numerous new members who seek support in ensuring DEQ robustly holds this company accountable. As a result, BMLA took a position to support local efforts to halt the proposed facility given our shared goal to hold DEQ responsible for safeguarding the environment and our water rights.

Sleeping Giant hosts deep listening training to connect with members

Sleeping Giant members hosted a training in late January for active members to practice talking to less active members about getting more involved with SGCC. This training stemmed from a larger desire to connect with members who don’t always attend meetings, and hear their ideas for possible new directions to take the group in the upcoming year that would boost member engagement. Folks who were trained called dozens of less active members of Sleeping Giant to learn about the issues they care about and what they’d like to work on in their community.

CRC hosts annual potluck and launches solar campaign

Members of Cottonwood Resource Council gathered in Big Timber during the most recent winter storm on January 11th to share good food and celebrate their good work over the past year. Along with important updates on the Good Neighbor Agreement with the Sibanye Stillwater Mine, local food, and soil health, members Linda Iverson and Sam Spector presented the details of an upcoming solar campaign for Sweetgrass County, launching early in 2024! Members are excited to sign the community up for solar assessments and increase solar access in Sweetgrass County.

Yellowstone Bend Citizens Council engages with the Livingston community

Yellowstone Bend Citizens Council (YBCC) members have been busy engaging with their fellow community members over the past few months! A group of members recently organized a community conversation about how individuals can reduce waste in their home. The event was a great success and three more are planned for the coming months! YBCC members have also been hard at work gathering Park County residents’ thoughts and concerns about the local railroad to guide their future work on the topic.
Golden Triangle digs into recycling and local food!

At their December meeting, GTRC members chose to explore two new issues: recycling and waste, and local food via the budding Great Falls Food Hub. In January, small groups of members met to discuss research needs and possible projects to propose to the larger membership. Members will continue to meet throughout the winter to firm up community needs in both areas and evaluate which projects would be a good fit for GTRC to pursue.

DRC member Bruce Peterson stands up for climate pollution reduction for eastern Montana schools

Recently, the state of Montana received a planning grant - the Climate Pollution Reduction Grant - to formulate a greenhouse gas reduction plan for the state. Governor Gianforte designated the Montana Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) as the lead agency to facilitate a public planning process. Dawson Resource Council (DRC) member Bruce Peterson from Glendive attended DEQ’s kick-off meeting back in October. Bruce, a retired teacher, suggested DEQ include a program to support eastern Montana schools which was received favorably. DRC quickly got to work and gathered almost 100 comments in favor of the program from folks across the state. Read more about the planning grant and school proposal on page 15.

A busy spring ahead for Carbon County Resource Council

After taking a short, but well-deserved break over the holiday season, Carbon County Resource Council members jumped right back into the swing of things on several projects and campaigns. Members have been preparing for their third year of water sampling on Rock Creek to support responsible land-use decision-making by working on grant materials and adjusting experimental design parameters, and gathering support for C-PACE amongst local business and institutions. Members have also developed and issued comments on county Planning Board development regulations that weakened the public comment process, and are busily preparing for their upcoming Annual Meeting, expected this March!

CMRC celebrates clean water with cold beverages and chilli!

CMRC hosted a Hot Chili, Cold Beer, Clean Water event on Tuesday, January 30th. The event brought together water quality experts from all over the state to discuss the central Montana watershed. Speakers particularly focused on community-led water-monitoring and watershed plans as methods to preserve or enhance our streams and rivers.

YVCC members fight Laurel land zoning changes

YVCC members have been hard at work opposing proposed land zoning changes along the Yellowstone River. Yellowstone County commissioners are seeking to modify Laurel’s 2020 Five-Year Growth Policy, aiming to transfer zoning authority just outside Laurel city limits to the county. The drafted plan also involves a sixfold expansion of “heavy industrial” zoning areas along the Yellowstone River. YVCC members have actively voiced their objections in local media and public meetings, expressing concerns about the potential dangers of the zoning changes. They are focused on preventing increased pollution and raising awareness about how the county is steamrolling Laurel public servants.
SAVE THE DATE!

The inaugural Montana Soil Health Week will be April 1-7, 2024!

The vitality of Montana’s food, water, economy, and environment are rooted in the health of Montana soils. Yet every year our soils are lost or degraded because their value is overlooked.

Soil Health Week will allow a diverse group of soil health advocates to gather together to celebrate, educate, build capacity and raise awareness about why protecting soil is important to human, environmental, and economic health.

Learn more on page 16!