PROTECTING EASTERN MONTANA FROM A PROPOSED POLLUTION PIPELINE

Carter County residents stand up for their land and water, taking their concerns about Exxon’s Snowy River carbon pollution pipeline directly to Washington, D.C.

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SOIL STEWARDSHIP TAKES CENTER STAGE AS MONTANA CELEBRATES INAUGURAL SOIL HEALTH WEEK AND DAY

Montanans across the state celebrate and elevate healthy soil practices, honoring Montana’s soils and those who steward them to keep our communities resilient, thriving, and prosperous.

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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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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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Most of us come to Northern Plains through membership in our local affiliates (these are similar to local chapters for anyone new to our organization). I joined the Stillwater Protection Association over 10 years ago and automatically became a member of Northern Plains. Through this Stillwater affiliate I only had some very limited ideas of the kinds of campaigns Northern Plains was involved with, and I did not really become fully aware of the depth and breadth of this organization’s activities until I became a board member where I learned of all of the great work we’re leading across the state. Even after having a number of board meetings under my belt, I, along with other board members, continue to be amazed at the density of our commitment to our essential mission statement: “To organize Montanans to protect our water, land, air, and working landscapes.”

I believe it is important to educate our members about this deep involvement Northern Plains has in tackling key issues in our state. I discussed this with our Executive Director, Maggie Gordon, and she suggested that maybe we do a “Road Show” — travel throughout the state, meet affiliate groups, and have this essential conversation. Well, this “Road Show” started in March and will continue through the early parts of June. Staff member Effy McEldowney, our Grassroots Fundraiser, did a fantastic job of organizing all these meetings. I would like to share with you a review of our first two visits.

First up was Great Falls and our newest affiliate, Golden Triangle Resource Council (GTRC). For some odd reason that surely had nothing to do with my personal preferences, it was suggested we meet in a brewpub….thinking conversation would be somewhat stimulated and “stimulating.” It was both. Lots of folks showed up, I gave a presentation, Effy added more information and answered questions. (I learned that it probably would be best for me to give my presentation before I have a beer.) GTRC has already made its presence known in the area. One campaign particularly stands out — their opposition to a biofuels waste dump being developed in Pondera County. They have been successful in extending the time period for public comment, and many members traveled to Conrad to provide live testimony. Covering four counties, GTRC is really focused on working with ag communities and ag producers. What a fantastic group and what a great addition to the larger Northern Plains organization.

Next stop—Lewiston and the Central Montana Resource Council. This was a morning meeting at a local bakery…apparently, the brewpubs were all closed for some strange reason?! This robust group had lots to say, and they have had lots of successes lately. A hugely successful solar campaign was a centerpiece of their actions: 30 new installations, 10 USDA Rural Energy for America (REAP) grants, 250 property assessments for those interested in learning more about solar….Wow!! What a model for others to follow. Among many other active campaigns their Green Share Garden stands out. This community garden has been in operation for eight years…lots of folks participating……mark your calendars for when they have their end of summer feast!!

If these two visits provide a template of what is to come in other “Road Show” stops, we have much to look forward too. Next stops — Glendive and Miles City.

Although we shared a number of campaigns being conducted that are not at the affiliate level, the one that we really focused on was our new effort to oppose the Snowy River Carbon Sequestration pipeline project in Carter County. Getting involved in this movement to protect Carter County ag producers was pure Northern Plains. A Northern Plains member and a group of his neighbors from the area reached out to us. We met with these folks a number of times. These citizens voted to join our organization and work alongside us. Members with years of experience working on oil and gas issues have helped organize the campaign. After a little over a month of alliance, our amazing staff member, Lead Organizer Gusty Catherin-Sauer, led a delegation to Washington, DC to meet with the Bureau of Land Management director Tracey Stone-Manning. How is that for successful support!!

Happy Spring everyone.

Edward Barta
Chair
Merle promised, “If you don’t like it, I’ll go back to town.” 50 years later, at 89 years old, Rose Marie Aus still lives on the ranch, five miles up the county road between Lindsay and Bloomfield in Dawson County. “I thought it was way too far for me to drive into town, but I let him win.” Of course these days, the road is gravel and often plowed, a far cry from the dirt track that led her and her husband Merle to the ranch. Rose Marie says of the ranch, “This is a beautiful, beautiful place. It’s rough, rugged, and craggy. Merle and I are going to have our ashes scattered on the hill behind the house. The hill is high and it sees everything.”

Rose Marie was born in Bismarck, North Dakota in 1934 and grew up in Harvey. Her father died when she was young so her mother had to bring up four daughters on her own, of which Rose Marie was the youngest. Rose Marie recalls, “My mother tried to make sure that we could take care of ourselves. You can’t sit around with four girls and say ‘you must look pretty to find a man.’ My mother never said ‘when you get married...’ My mother always said ‘when you go to college.’” When I ask Rose Marie where her activist streak and care for the community comes from, she credits her mother as well: “My mother was interested in everything. She kept the house full of books and the news. During WWII, her study was all maps. She had 12 nephews serving in the military. We raised victory gardens. She was active in the church, and she was active in the hospital.”

After graduating from Marquette University in Milwaukee, Rose Marie began teaching in Minnesota. One summer, she worked at the “Old Four Eyes” show in Medora, ND and met Merle. She flatly tells me that she would have married him on the spot if she did not have a teaching contract in Minnesota to go back to. Soon after, Rose Marie and Merle moved to Montana, first to Glendive, then to the Gallatin Valley, and then back to Glendive. Merle ranched, made saddles and sold real estate, while Rose Marie taught English and founded the rodeo team at the college. When I asked her what drew her back to eastern Montana, she quickly replied, “Wherever I’ve been, I have had wonderful, wonderful friends, but the people here are special. I just think it’s the best place to live.”

Talking with Rose Marie, it is clear how much she loves the ranch and the land. Kristin, Merle and Rose Marie’s daughter, often tells me that her dad bought the ranch because so much of it was only accessible on horseback. Rose Marie agrees, “Merle bought me an Appaloosa gelding. Ugly, ugly thing. Head like a washtub. But sure-footed. I used to ride around the ranch. That horse got me through everything.” Of course, the ranch was also a wonderful place to raise a daughter. “Merle had Kristen driving the pickup during feeding when she was three. When she was five, Merle taught her how to detect which cows were in heat.”

Growing up on the ranch had a profound impact on shaping who Kristin is today. “The ranch is such a fundamental part of who I am, I can’t even tell me and the ranch apart much.” Kristin remembers a pretty idyllic childhood, “I rode in diapers, long before I could walk. Dad had me sit in the saddle in front of him and off we went. I just remember being outside every minute I could.” From her father, she inherited a love for the land and an “addiction” to horses which has led to a successful quarter horse breeding program. From her mother, she learned “that it is your responsibility to not just do your job, but to do good things for your community. I think that is something that she has spread to everyone she has ever met.”

Continued on next page.
PEOPLE OF THE PLAINS

After leaving Glendive for college, Kristin’s path back to the ranch had some stops along the way. A stint working as a hand in Colorado reminded her of the importance of small family farms and ranches. “Decades ago I worked in Colorado for a great big ranch that was owned by an absentee real-estate developer from California. I quickly learned it was very difficult to convey all of the elements that are needed to take good care of the land and animals to someone who flies out to go skiing at Christmas. Growing up here with parents that cared about the land and cared about the animals, I never realized how much there was to explain to someone who did not have that ethic.”

Managing the ranch today, Kristin has decades of experience, but she reminds me that she is still always learning. “When you depend on Mother Nature and you have plants, weather, and animals, everything is a balancing act.” And Rose Marie still plays a key role in running the ranch. Kristin says, “It is amazing how involved she still is in management decisions at her age.” Walking through the house, I spy a fitting sign that reads “Team effort… is a lot of people doing what I say!”

Rose Marie and Kristin’s passion for eastern Montana’s land and communities is humbling. Kristin tells me “Because I don’t have kids, Northern Plains fills my need to do the best I can for this ranch and Montana’s future generations.” Kristin and Rose Marie fulfill this vision everyday whether it is Kristin’s involvement in the Soil Task Force, Rose Marie’s constant presence at every Dawson Resource Council meeting, or even their willingness to entertain endless questions about their lives from a fresh-faced, young organizer. When I ask Rose Marie if she has any parting advice for me, she nods sagely and replies “Spend a lot of time together. You just don’t know what might happen.”

TAKING FLIGHT

During his trip to visit members of Golden Triangle Resource Council (see page 3), Northern Plains chair Edward Barta, an accomplished photographer, snapped the photo above of snow geese at Freezout Lake. Edward describes how experiencing Montana’s “clean, pine scented air and crystal blue skies” while viewing our abundant wildlife fuels his work to preserve and protect our communities.
The term “grassroots organizing” conjures up images of scrappy, organic movements; of everyday people coming together to make the changes they decide on and want to see in the world as neighbors and as equals. It is community movement from the ground-up. Northern Plains, its affiliates, and all of its work are based and built upon these ideas.

What that means is that all of the work you will read about in this Plains Truth - all of the challenges and triumphs and rallying cries - are the result of regular people, Northern Plains’ members, coming together to identify issues in their communities or regions, democratically deciding on courses of action, and then striving together to build power and make changes for their common good. The power of Northern Plains’ grassroots organizing is our members -- their ideas, and their visions -- they are our leaders and decision-makers and fierce advocates for stronger, more resilient, and more democratic communities.

Regardless of your level of engagement with our work – whether you support this work through membership dues, by taking action when prompted through emails and phone calls, or by attending every Northern Plains meeting or serving on our board – YOU are part of building and supporting our grassroots power!

Why I’m a Monthly Sustainer

Over a decade ago, I became a monthly sustainer of Northern Plains while working as the organization’s Fundraising Coordinator, initially drawn to the ease of fitting giving into my budget. Witnessing the significant impact of monthly contributions on the organization’s initiatives deepened my commitment to its cause.

Northern Plains’ focus on meaningful statewide change, addressing issues like Country-of-Origin beef labeling (COOL), renewable energy, and responsible energy development, resonates with me deeply. Through my involvement, I’ve formed invaluable connections and found mentors, making it a source of pride for me to be part of such an impactful organization.

Monthly giving aligns with my preference for consistent and reliable support, allowing me to distribute contributions evenly throughout the year. This approach not only aids in effective budgeting but also ensures sustained backing for Northern Plains’ ongoing endeavors.
Montanans are feeling the impacts of rising energy costs. Since August of 2022, most residential customers in Montana have seen a 28% rate increase in their energy bills. What’s worse is that these rates will likely continue to go up, placing an even larger burden on ratepayers when Montanans are already facing rising property taxes and other increasing costs.

However, there is a tried and tested solution to this problem called community solar.

Right now, most Montanans are beholden to our monopoly electric and gas utilities: NorthWestern Energy and Montana Dakota Utilities. We also don’t have the freedom to choose the energy we want because we are burdened with 20th-century regulations that don’t meet the needs of our 21st-century technology system. Current state regulations prevent us from accessing low cost energy that could help ease some financial burdens for everyday Montanans at the time we need them most. Community solar would provide a remedy for that.

Community solar allows for multiple households, buildings, or businesses to share a single solar array. Participating customers would purchase “share(s)” of a larger community solar array and each month they would receive a credit on their energy bill that is equal to the amount of energy their “share(s)” of the solar array generated.

For example, one customer, say a small business, might purchase three shares of a local community solar array. On the small business’s monthly power bill, there would be a credit for how much power those three shares of the array generated that month. Another customer might have bought five shares and another customer two shares. Each would receive a credit for the electricity generated by their corresponding shares.

One great question is how community solar is different from the solar array individuals have on their personal rooftops or properties? The biggest difference is that rooftop solar provides energy to one customer, and the array is located on site at the customer’s home, business, ranch, etc. Community solar allows multiple customers to “plug in” to one community array which may or may not be located on site. With community solar, you do not have to put panels on your own roof to reap the benefits of solar power.

This program would make energy savings possible for more Montanans. Some folks may not be able to afford the upfront costs of solar, some may not have a roof or home suitable for installing solar panels on their roof, and some may be renters without the option to put solar on their home in the first place. Community solar cuts through all of that and allows these people the choice to enjoy the cost savings that come with solar power, without having to install an array themselves.

As energy bills continue to rise for Montanans across the state, it is essential that we look to concrete solutions. We all deserve the freedom to choose low cost energy, and enabling community solar in Montana makes that freedom possible.
Federal oil and gas rule creates long-needed protections

By Gusty Catherin-Sauer

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) finalized new oil and gas standards establishing important new protections for the first time in decades. The long-awaited update will help ensure taxpayers no longer have to pay for well cleanup on federal lands if oil and gas companies fail to remediate sites once drilling is complete. The new rule also includes provisions to help ensure federal and tribal wells are plugged and reclaimed in a timely way.

In the first significant update to bonding rules in over 60 years, the rule released by BLM will require operators to post bonds that adequately cover the costs of plugging federal wells and reclaiming the impacted landscapes should a company fail to clean up drilling sites as required by the Mineral Leasing Act. Northern Plains members now call on the BLM for quick implementation and enforcement of the new standards.

“We are very pleased that executives and shareholders in the oil and gas industry will now pay their fair share instead of offloading the enormous costs of health problems, safety issues, and dangerous lingering pollution to workers, landowners, rural residents, and taxpayers,” said Northern Plains member and Bainville rancher Kirk Panasuk. “I’ve seen firsthand what happens when developers skip town without cleaning up their mess once drilling is complete, including hospital visits from ingesting leaking methane and concerns about benzene and arsenic in our soil and groundwater. BLM’s new protections apply some commonsense fixes to address these problems that communities like mine have faced for far too long.”

The new rules aim to address the long-standing issue of oil and gas companies leaving behind orphaned wells, which can leak methane and other dangerous toxins into the air and contaminate groundwater.

BLM updated bond amounts after a comprehensive review of actual plugging and reclamation costs, which showed that higher bond amounts will not create an undue financial burden for oil and gas operators. The new levels take a meaningful step towards ensuring that operators are incentivized to plug and reclaim the wells and the land disturbed during operation. This begins to put the financial burden where it belongs, on the oil and gas companies and not on our communities and taxpayers.

Northern Plains members have called for these changes for years, submitting public comments, meeting with federal officials, and testifying in hearings to protect our communities in oil and gas country from the health and safety risks and financial burdens of abandoned oil and gas wells. These new protections are a major victory years in the making, and we thank everyone who submitted a comment, wrote a letter, or supported this important work in any way!

JOIN OTHER MEMBERS LIKE YOU - BECOME PART OF NORTHERN PLAINS LEGACY

This spring, we officially launched Northern Plains Legacy. Our planned giving program offers clear ways to support Northern Plains and will sustain your values for years to come. A planned gift is not just any gift. It is an act of love, kindness, and care to yourself, your loved ones, and your community. Because of generous people like you, Montana’s future generations will thrive and prosper.

To learn more about all the ways you can make a lasting gift, visit NorthernPlains.org/plan-your-legacy or contact Caleb at caleb@northernplains.org.
Northern Plains members are engaged in a multi-front battle against the construction of NorthWestern Energy’s methane-fired plant in Laurel, at both the local and state levels.

Yellowstone County Commissioners recently approved a revised version of the city of Laurel's Growth Policy, a move seen by Northern Plains members as the first step to retroactively legalize construction of the industrial plant, built improperly on land zoned for agricultural use. Members attended a public hearing in April about the growth policy and gave powerful testimony, raising concerns about limited public input and the potential negative impacts of the plant on public health and safety. They argued for a proper study on development before any rezoning takes place. However, the County Commissioners unanimously approved the policy despite no one testifying in support of the NorthWestern-friendly revisions.

We will continue to voice our concerns about the hundreds of tons of dangerous and carcinogenic pollution the plant would emit each year and the threats to the Yellowstone River where the plant is sited at a May 21 public hearing. This is when Yellowstone County Commissioners could officially grant NorthWestern the zoning changes needed for the plant to meet legal compliance.

While engaged in the local zoning struggle, our members are also focused on a Montana Supreme Court case concerning the air quality permit for the methane-fired plant. The lawsuit was filed by our friends and allies at the Montana Environmental Information Center and the Sierra Club with legal support from Earthjustice. Though many aspects of the polluting plant will be considered, the justices will primarily be considering whether courts have the power to invalidate (vacate) permits issued by the Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) and other state agencies if found to be legally insufficient.

Northern Plains and other conservation groups are concerned about how this could impact our work to challenge unlawful permits that threaten our land, air, water, and climate. If courts lose their power to enforce the law via permit vacature, those challenging permits would need to pursue legal injunctions, a lengthy, expensive, and difficult process with a much higher burden of proof placed on the challenger. In short, it would diminish citizens’ rights to protect their communities from dangerous, polluting projects.

As this edition of The Plains Truth goes to print, we are planning a rally in Helena on May 15, immediately following the hearing on NorthWestern Energy’s air quality permit. This rally is a crucial opportunity to galvanize support for those seeking to protect Montanans from the dangers presented by the Laurel methane-fired plant!

Check our website at NorthernPlains.org for more details or contact Michael at michael@northernplains.org or call (406) 248-1154.
Stewarding the land at the foot of the Moccasins

By Jackson Newman

It's 10 pm on a frigid March evening, and it's time to check cows. Steph Shammel leads me out of the house and down to the corral closest to the barn where we find a newly born calf struggling to stand. While murmuring words of encouragement and congratulations to the mother cow, Steph turns her headlamp on to get a better look. The calf looks flat and is really laboring to move. Out of caution, Steph calls her son Lyle, “the boss,” to come take a look. Lyle drives down, confirms that the calf is okay, and moves it into the barn to warm up.

The next morning, I sheepishly meet Steph in the family room at 6:30. The night before I had assured her that I would check the cows with her at 6. I set my alarm and woke up, but I could not force myself to leave the warm confines of my bed. However, like clockwork, Steph is out there, giving her son and daughter-in-law a break after the 2 am and 4 am shift. This is Steph's 47th calving season on the ranch.

The night before, I asked Steph and her husband Alan why city folks (like me) should care about small family farms and ranches. Their answer was simple, “Everyone around here is proud of their operation and tries to do it right. If we run the farmers and ranchers off the land, and it becomes a playground for rich people, things aren’t gonna be right.”

Alan and Steph emphasize that families like theirs are stewards of the land. “The cow-calf rancher cannot be replaced. Hard work cannot be replaced.” The Shammel family has been taking care of this piece of land at the foot of the North Moccasin Mountains for generations. They know each coulee, each pasture, and each drainage like the back of their hands.

Stewarding this piece of land is particularly personal for the Shammel family. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, several companies operated an open pit gold mine on the mountain slopes above the ranch. Soon, the Shammels realized that their water was being poisoned due to mining activity. Cows were going dry and wells were being depleted. Alan recalls, “We did not want to stop the mine. We knew we couldn’t do that. We just wanted to protect our water.”

The Shammels fought tooth and nail to protect the water and viability of their ranch at great personal cost. Amidst threats from mine employees, Alan and Steph did not back down. They organized their neighbors and spent hours doing research while also running the ranch. Steph told me that they were afraid to walk fence alone or leave the kids at home for fear of retribution.

Water testing found selenium, thallium, arsenic and nitrates in their wells. After a long battle, the Shammels forced the mining companies into proper reclamation which continues to this day. As Alan relates ruefully, “They would have done zero reclamation if we hadn’t raised Cain.”

I asked what would have happened if this land was owned by an absentee landowner or a huge consolidated ranch? “It made all the difference in the world that we lived here and that we weren’t so big that we didn’t care. They did not expect us to persist.”

Continued on next page.
Tension between conservation and ranching extends back to the settlement of the West. And while we have made significant strides towards understanding the importance of ranching in conservation, age-old narratives about overgrazing or now methane pollution are still resonant. In short, two powerful and important groups, ranchers and conservationists, are still often pulling in opposite directions despite our shared vision and love for the land.

Meanwhile, American agriculture continues its steady march towards industrialization and consolidation. In animal agriculture, the poultry and swine industries are already considered vertically integrated meaning corporations control almost the entire supply chain. In plain language, this means more industrial feeding operations, more air and water pollution, and fewer people on the land in rural communities. According to USDA data, the amount of land stewarded by small and mid-sized farmers and ranchers has decreased by almost 40% in the last 40 years. As the former Secretary of Agriculture Earl Butz once said, the policy today is “get big or get out.” This has led to a smaller and smaller group of elites consolidating land and making decisions that impact the rest of us (the top 10 largest private landowners own over 15 million acres).

Fortunately, small and medium-sized family ranches still stand a chance - the beef industry has not been completely consolidated. Yet, that window is closing quickly if we do not take decisive action.

Conservationists and ranchers must start working together. We still have a chance to protect our grasslands, invigorate rural communities, and keep the close relationships between family ranchers and the land alive. Nobody knows the health of a creek or pasture better than a rancher whose family has been in a place for generations. And luckily, we have a tremendous opportunity for positive action staring us right in the face.

In 2008, after several decades of campaigning, US Congress passed mandatory Country-of-Origin Labeling (COOL) for beef. This meant that beef had to be labeled with the country where the cow was born, raised, slaughtered, and processed. This type of labeling already exists in most other industries - just look at the tag on your t-shirt. During the seven year span when the law was in effect, beef prices for family ranches and feeders hit an all-time high. Unfortunately, ranchers getting their fair share threatened the monopoly meatpacking corporations that own 85% of the market. The meatpackers got to work using their deep pockets and lobbying to get Congress to repeal COOL in 2015. Beef prices immediately tanked for ranchers (but not the consumer).

Now, a new Farm Bill approaches. The farm bill is the vehicle through which Congress passes the majority of the country’s agricultural policies and it is our best chance to get COOL reinstated. And yet, three of the four members of our Montana congressional delegation do not support the current COOL legislation. It’s time that we show solidarity with our ranchers and farmers. Rather than just supporting COOL, us conservationists, consumers, and community members need to prioritize COOL. The good stewardship of land and food depends on it.

During my stay on their ranch, Steph and I went for a ride around the place in their side-by-side. We drove up into the Moccasins through several pastures of grazing cows. Sharp-tail grouse flush from the bushes. An eagle wheels overhead. We pass an old, dilapidated prospectors cabin where Steph tells the story of an old whiskey still.

After a little while, we get out to walk. Steph is surprised to find sagebrush buttercups blooming so early. She points out coyote tracks and elk dropping. We make our way to the top of a hill where we find “the rocks.” A sandstone outcropping forms a sort of natural fort. Steph comes up here with her grandkids to play.
**VICTORY: Federal agency blocks coal bill threatening water quality**

By Svein Newman

In late March, the U.S. Office of Surface Mining Reclamation and Enforcement (OSMRE) blocked a bad coal mining bill that was passed during the 2023 Montana legislative session. The federal agency found that the law failed to meet minimum requirements established by the Surface Mining Control and Reclamation Act (SMCRA), and therefore stopped the bill from going into effect.

House Bill 576, which was sponsored by Rep. Rhonda Knudsen (R-Culbertson), would have allowed coal corporations to deplete and contaminate water sources adjacent to coal mining with minimal liability. The bill altered how damage to land and water is defined -- allowed coal mines to violate water quality standards if pollution was not “long term or permanent,” which creates a great deal of subjectivity. How a coal executive defines “long term” pollution is radically different than how a rancher who depends on clean water would define it.

The bill also removed language that requires assessment of baseline water conditions prior to permit approval, while simultaneously tying damage assessment to those baseline conditions – creating a catch-22 that would make meaningful assessment of damage done by coal companies virtually impossible.

“HB 576 would have caused further harm to my ranching operation and serious harm to others who live near or downstream from mines,” said Northern Plains member Steve Charter, who ranches above an underground coal mine in the Bull Mountains. “Ranchers from across the state traveled to Helena repeatedly to try to stop this bill from harming our operations.”

In addition to fighting at the legislature, Northern Plains members turned out en masse to a federal hearing on the bill in Billings to lobby OSMRE to strike it down. The agency’s ruling is a major victory for the rights and safety of Montana’s coal-impacted communities.

**Members ask feds to rein in state’s abuse of coal permit amendments**

By Svein Newman

On April 5th, Northern Plains and Bull Mountain Land Alliance (BMLA) called on the federal Office of Surface Mining Reclamation and Enforcement (OSMRE) to investigate the Montana Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ)’s misuse of minor coal permit amendments.

Coal companies have worked with the state to avoid critical oversight and community engagement by abusing state rules that allow for tweaks to coal permits without public involvement – often stacking huge quantities of these revisions to create a “death by a thousand cuts” while skirting meaningful review. For example, Signal Peak Energy’s coal mine in the Bull Mountains has seen more than 300 minor permit amendments during the mine’s operation to-date. These so-called minor amendments have fundamentally changed the nature and footprint of the mine in major ways.

Notably, many of them also violate the law. Montana Code requires changes to mine permits that impact water resources to be considered “major revisions,” a process that allows the mine’s neighbors and other community members to provide input. In spite of this law, DEQ has processed quite a few of these hydrologic changes as minor amendments. While this sounds like academic language, it has allowed coal companies (most notably, Signal Peak) to do things like strip access to water sources away from area ranchers who have relied on them for decades – often without the ranchers even being aware of the process until the decisions have been made and sealed in stone.

Members are calling on the government to uphold the promise of the law – to ensure that landowners and water users are protected from the impacts of coal mining, and that communities can participate in the decisions that directly impact them.
Over the past several years, national news outlets from the *New York Times* to the *Wall Street Journal* to National Public Radio have increasingly taken notice of our members and campaigns. This consistent media presence is a clear expression of our power, and it’s worth considering why journalists gravitate our way. The answer is pretty simple - we have compelling stories to share because our campaigns are the result of everyday people standing up to make a difference in their communities. In a world where money, political insiders, and special interests dominate so much of the media landscape, our authenticity stands out. It captivates.

Every campaign we take on at Northern Plains is chosen and carried out by people who have real skin in the game - people whose lives are impacted by the issues we tackle. They are undertaken by people with the courage to stick their necks out and put their beliefs into action. Reporters and their audiences respond to the courage and grit of our members. Our authenticity also makes us interesting! Our grassroots model gives us the freedom to be our true selves, bringing creativity, quirkiness, and soul to what we do.

For example, the Los Angeles Times recently visited Colstrip for part of an expansive series about the energy transition underway in the West. They spent a day with longtime ranching member-leader Clint McRae who shared personal stories about growing up with families who work in the coal mine and power plant. Clint spoke eloquently about the nuances and tensions of caring for your neighbors while sometimes disagreeing with them about policy. Clint’s father, Wally, is a renowned cowboy poet who helped found Northern Plains with other farm and ranch families in the 1970s. Wally’s poetry, grounded in unwavering commitment to place and deep stewardship values, was also featured in the piece, adding distinct cultural authority and a unique perspective to the reporting. You can find that story at: [LATimes.com/environment/story/2024-04-16/red-state-coal-towns-still-power-the-west-coast-we-cant-just-let-them-die](LATimes.com/environment/story/2024-04-16/red-state-coal-towns-still-power-the-west-coast-we-cant-just-let-them-die)

Another longtime ranching member, Paul Hawks, was recently interviewed by On Point, an award-winning nationally-syndicated show distributed to hundreds of NPR stations across the nation. Paul discussed how he and a group of fellow rural Montanans went toe-to-toe with an international mining company - a company armed with massive resources - and negotiated the legally-binding Good Neighbor Agreement between Northern Plains, two of our local affiliates, and the Stillwater Mine. More than 20 years later, this groundbreaking agreement still stands, protecting local communities and two pristine watersheds outside the Beartooth Mountains in Sweet Grass and Stillwater counties. The story was exploring the tension between our need for critical minerals to expand clean energy and the impacts of mining. That story can be found here: [wbur.org/onpoint/2024/03/12/the-copper-trade-off-protecting-todays-lands-versus-preserving-tomorrows-climate](wbur.org/onpoint/2024/03/12/the-copper-trade-off-protecting-todays-lands-versus-preserving-tomorrows-climate)

While reporters at these national outlets have experts, analysts, and top-level politicos available at the tap of a smartphone, we have something that can’t be bought or replicated. We have authentic stories of real people facing immense challenges who find a way to make lasting change despite the odds against them. It’s the repeated story of grassroots power, and it never grows old.
SOLIDARITY

Cultivating a deeper understanding of our history and universal values

By Caitlin Cromwell

“Establishing Indigenous Peoples’ Day as a state holiday would mean a great deal to Native people in Montana.”

That was Northern Plains member Tom Mexicancheyenne, a Northern Cheyenne tribal member who lives in Lame Deer, testifying to the Montana Senate Education and Cultural Resources during the 2023 legislative session. The committee was considering Senator Shane Morigeau’s Senate Bill 141, which would have established Indigenous Peoples’ Day on the second Monday in October and eliminated Columbus Day from the same date.

Montana Senators heard over two hours of testimony from Native and non-Native people across the state in support of Senate Bill 141. But promptly after testimony wrapped up, the Committee’s majority tabled the bill without hardly a second thought.

In the aftermath of that vote, we huddled up – as organizers. Tom, other member-leaders involved in Northern Plains’ Indigenous solidarity efforts, and staff scratched our heads and wondered – why? With so much robust support for a powerful holiday that celebrates the history we all inherit as Montanans and the Indigenous people and tribes who play such an important role in our state, why had the Legislature voted no?

And not just once. Efforts to establish Indigenous Peoples’ Day as a holiday have been advanced five times at the Montana Legislature, and voted down each time.

Back in the early summer of 2023, Tom and others couldn’t make peace with the outcome of the Senate Bill 141 hearing and vote. So we reached out to our friends and allies at Western Native Voice, our sister organization in the Western Organization of Resource Councils network and a Native-led grassroots organizing group that is also based here in Montana. “What did you make of that vote?” we asked them. “Could that have gone differently? Should we do something about it?”

That initial conversation with Western Native Voice was the spark. Our two organizations got together in the summer of 2023 to talk strategy, our motivations for wanting to see Indigenous Peoples’ Day established, and if there was any opportunity to create a different outcome in future sessions.

Fast forward to spring 2024. Our conversations led us to working partnerships with Senators Susan Webber and Shane Morigeau, and have introduced us to a fantastic grassroots organization of volunteers called Indigenous Peoples’ Day Montana (IPD MT).

Led by Marsha Small, who is Tsististas (Northern Cheyenne), IPD MT has been a driving force in conversations about Indigenous Peoples’ Day across the state and has played a central organizing role in all legislative efforts to date. Since 2016, the group has successfully organized to establish Indigenous Peoples’ Day as a recognized holiday in Missoula, Bozeman, Livingston, Helena, Hays, and Harlem.

Continued on next page.
In discussions amongst the powerful coalition of Native and non-Native people and organizations coming together around this topic, we’ve already found that we agree on a great deal. So far, we know that we all believe the following:

- We want to the conversation about Indigenous Peoples’ Day to focus on our common strengths and universal values – Native and non-Native
- Indigenous Peoples’ Day is an opportunity to cultivate a deeper understanding of our state’s history and what it means to be Indigenous
- We want to highlight the economic, educational, and cultural contributions that Indigenous people make to our state
- We’re rooted in the knowledge that Indigenous communities and agricultural communities have things in common
- We’re determined to celebrate our relationships with each other, emphasize celebration over condemnation, and frame Indigenous Peoples’ Day as a celebration for all Montanans

The path to a successful 2025 legislative effort remains long – and we have our work cut out for us. But we’re already encouraged and inspired by the conversations taking place in the aftermath of 2023 and the relationships being built in preparation for the next session.

### Ben Pease: Art, storytelling, and investigating history

In March, Northern Plains hosted the latest installment in our Lessons from Indigenous Organizing series – an events program that stems from our commitment to deepen our understanding of the land we walk on, the history we inherit, and the Native communities working alongside us for a better world.

March’s event featured acclaimed contemporary artist Ben Pease for an Artist’s Talk hosted jointly with the Yellowstone Art Museum in Billings. Ben Pease is enrolled with the Northern Cheyenne Tribe and a member of the Crow Indian Reservation’s Valley of the Chiefs District and grew up in Lodge Grass. He belongs to the Newly Made Lodge Clan and is a child of Newly Made Lodge.

Pease led us through an evening of storytelling that wandered through themes of art, culture, community, and identity. “Art has allowed me to not only look into myself,” he told the crowd, “but also our greater history.”

Over 100 people gathered to learn Ben’s story and hear him describe his artistic process. “I think a lot about what it means to Apsaalooke,” Ben said, “and what it means to belong to a people who have been here and had to change their ways of being and their governance in order to still be here today.”

He also spoke about the value of making time and space for telling stories. “The way we tell stories is moving so fast – we have to slow down, and allow storytellers to spend time and space with their thoughts.”

We appreciate Ben taking the time and space to share part of his story with us, and we look forward to future events in our Lessons from Indigenous Organizing series. Stay tuned for the next one!
Inaugural Soil Health Week cultivates statewide stewardship

By Gusty Catherin-Sauer

Last month, we celebrated the inaugural Montana Soil Health Week and Soil Health Day. This celebration will continue each year during the first week of April thanks to the efforts of Northern Plains members and our allies who helped organize and pass a state resolution in 2023 to establish the annual event. Soil Health Week and Day help raise awareness about the importance of soil stewardship while honoring Montana's agricultural producers and celebrating the importance of agriculture in Montana's culture, history, and economy.

This elevated platform serves to honor this precious resource right under our feet. Healthy soil leads to greater crop yields and more nutritious grasses for livestock, generating prosperity for farmers, ranchers, and rural communities across Montana. Soils also serve as sources of carbon storage and host vibrant hubs of biodiversity. They protect and preserve our water resources, prevent erosion, purify contaminants, and nurture healthy watersheds.

Montana Soil Health Week brought together farmers, ranchers, eaters, organizations, state leaders, legislators, and other partners both virtually and in-person. Northern Plains’ members and staff harnessed this week-long celebration to elevate the importance of soil stewardship, inspiring new audiences to take action.

The celebration included an official proclamation from Governor Gianforte, culminating in a formal signing ceremony and roundtable conversation hosted in partnership with the Old Salt Co-op in Helena. Media across the state reported this and other Montana Soil Health Week stories, amplifying the great work being done by our members and allies. A Future Farmers of America workshop reached over 70 students. Northern Plains’ virtual screening of the documentary, To Which We Belong (featuring Montana producers implementing innovative soil practices) gathered 100 participants, and a Helena soil crawl and luncheon we hosted was attended by at least 30 participants. In short, the seeds we planted with Soil Health Week sprouted with great vitality across Montana.

We can't wait for next year's soil health celebration, but in the meantime we encourage you to learn about the principles of soil health and to explore how these key concepts can benefit you and your community. A great place to start is at our website: NorthernPlains.org/soil-health-resources.

Saving Montanans’ money while creating safer schools

By Jackson Newman

In November, we got a note from a concerned parent in Glendive, “My community needs work on all of their schools. I have an 8th and a 6th grader and have literally contemplated moving so they can attend safer schools.” After a contentious school bond and levy barely passed in Glendive, our eastern Montana members knew that we had to start looking for solutions. Unfortunately, this story is not unique to Glendive. Many Montana communities have been struggling to upgrade aging school infrastructure and need help now.

Schools across the state have been facing funding shortfalls that have resulted in real impacts to the quality of education our children receive. A recent Montana Free Press article read, “A wave of major budget cuts is hitting public schools across the state — a situation officials from four of Montana's largest districts attribute to declining enrollment, inflexibilities in the state's school funding formula, and a funding cliff facing schools as pandemic-era federal relief money runs out.” In addition, Montana's school infrastructure is aging and will soon reach a critical point in which upgrades will be needed. The state's (outdated) 2008 K-12 Public Schools Facility Condition Assessment reads “statewide, there has not been a significant investment in new buildings, and many of the school construction projects in the last few decades have been additions.”

Continued on next page.
Montanans want climate considerations from PSC

By Jack Leuthold

In late February, a broad and diverse group of Montana organizations submitted a deeply important petition to the Montana Public Service Commission (PSC). The petition requested that the PSC adopt a new rule that would require the consideration of climate change in its oversight of Montana’s monopoly energy utilities. If the rule is adopted as proposed, it would be a major win for the health of our climate and could be a game-changer for energy policy in Montana.

In light of the historic Held v. Montana climate trial, it is clear that the state has an obligation to consider climate change in its decision making. This petition is a step in that direction and asks the PSC to uphold Montanans constitutional right to a clean and healthful environment.

Northern Plains’ members have been involved in this process since the petition was filed. Members and supporters from across the state submitted written comments to the PSC urging it to hold a public hearing on the petition so that evidence could be presented, a public record developed, and to give folks all across the state an opportunity to share their thoughts, stories, and experiences with commissioners.

Thanks to hundreds of Northern Plains’ members and supporters who submitted comments and spoke directly to commissioners at their weekly business meeting, the PSC scheduled a public hearing and opened a public comment period about the climate change rule. Commissioners heard the broad support from Montanans everywhere, proving again that your voice matters!

The public hearing was held on April 8 at the PSC’s Helena office. Proponents of the petition were given the first half of the day to make our case, and folks from all across Montana lined up to voice their support of the rule. This included many members from our local Helena affiliate, Sleeping Giant Citizens Council.

Member Tim Holmes spoke on behalf of Northern Plains about the threat that climate impacts have on Montana’s farmers and ranchers:

“As we have seen, the climate crisis affects all Montanans. However, it is especially harmful to those who rely on our land and natural resources for their livelihoods and traditions, including Montana’s farmers and ranchers. Addressing the climate crisis through adoption of this proposed rule is not only essential, but urgent as we are losing grasslands, wildlife, water, and family farms and ranches.”

Along with our involvement at the public hearing, Northern Plains’ members submitted over 150 individual comments in support of the petition from folks all across our state. It is clear that Montanans want action from our state agencies, and Northern Plains will continue to fight for these needed protections that have enormous consequences for the well-being and prosperity of our communities.
After about 15 miles of wash-boarded gravel road with another 15 to go, I was worried that the tires on our well-worn Toyota Camry, proclaimed “thin little city tires” by a Carter County rancher, might not be able to handle the beating they were taking. My fellow organizer Gusty and I were on our way to a Friday night community meeting of concerned landowners in Ridgeway, a two-building outpost in southeastern MT. The landowners were gathered to form an organization to fight a carbon sequestration project proposed by Denbury, a subsidiary of ExxonMobil, on pristine prairie near Ekalaka. This meeting, run by a rancher heavily impacted by the development, is a perfect expression of the democratic ideals core to Northern Plains and our process.

As soon as I stepped through the door as a fresh-faced, new organizer at Northern Plains, it was instilled into me that writing about the process is boring. Folks don’t want to hear about how many meetings a committee held, what kind of deliberations went into the campaign planning, or what was included in the micro agenda for the membership meeting preparations. And honestly, that is probably true! While the results of our work are often inspiring (or sometimes frustrating), the way that we get things done can be a bit of a slog. Just ask any member or staff who has spent hours combing through a mining permit, making phone calls, or knocking doors. However, in this article I am going to attempt the unthinkable… Can we make writing about our process interesting? Or further, can we tease out the importance of how we make decisions and get things done?

Now back to the small Baptist church in Ridgeway where the meeting took place. The initiative that these landowners took shows that the community organizing model is instinctive. Even calling it “community organizing” obscures the fact that sticking together in the face of threats to the community is as natural as it gets. It’s what we do when we are bound by our shared desire to make the places we live better. It’s pretty easy to see why ranchers packed into a stuffy church hall on a Friday night in the middle of calving. However, what are two employees from a Billings-based, statewide organization doing at the meeting?

To answer this question, we have to go back to the beginning. In October 2023, we began to hear rumblings that there was a proposed carbon sequestration project in rural southeastern Montana. While we were interested in learning more, it wasn’t until a few local landowners called up our office to make their feelings about the project known that we began to take action. The next week, I drove down to Ekalaka to attend a public meeting put on by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) about the project.

At the meeting, we learned that Denbury originally notified BLM and began their plan of development (POD) in November 2021. From the start, it felt as though local input was not a valued part of BLM’s decision-making process. For starters, the BLM staff initially only put out 15 chairs while about 60 folks showed up. The meeting was also scheduled during normal business hours which prevented many people with jobs from being able to attend. The public information officer even had the audacity to start the meeting by announcing that a “contractor” (implying that it was Denbury) had purchased food from a local restaurant for the attendees (thanks a lot!).

The project manager gave a presentation on the project and immediately took a defensive stance, bristling at critical questions posed by local residents. Several residents commented that it felt like BLM was selling the project rather than making a good faith effort to inform the public. After the meeting, drinking a beer at the bar in town (which is also part of our process), community members reiterated their frustration that they did not have a say.

This show of local opposition to the project reaffirmed that we needed to take a deeper look. Our Oil and Gas Task Force, a group of members around the state with deeply personal experiences with oil and gas development, received a presentation and voted for Northern Plains to work on this issue going forward. This process of affirming local opposition and member buy-in through democratic voting, is at direct odds with the federal government and ExxonMobil.

The decision about the land in Carter County was made without the consultation of the community. The Biden administration in Washington, DC decided that industrial carbon sequestration was a good idea and made it a priority, signing bills with lavish tax subsidies for these projects (surely influenced by fossil fuel lobbyists). An engineer in Plano, TX saw a large chunk of contiguous BLM land near an existing pipeline in rural eastern Montana and decided it would be great for a sequestration project. The BLM field office in
Miles City has sped the right-of-way authorization process up at every step. It feels like eastern Montana is being used as a sacrifice zone to support industry profits. No one asked the ranchers. No one asked the grazing districts. No one asked the local emergency services. As a local rancher put it, “If this [CO2] comes up and contaminates our water, we are out of business. The bank will foreclose on us.”

Returning to the community meeting in Ridgeway, local landowners voted to form a group to fight and hopefully shut down the project. Folks in the room also unanimously raised their hands to join Northern Plains and work together. They lined up to donate and sign the forms.

The phrase I used above, “sacrifice zone” alludes to the history of Northern Plains. In the 1970s, federal agencies colluded with energy companies to craft the North Central Power Study, a plan to strip mine ranches across eastern Montana, creating a sacrifice zone to feed the electricity needs of the rest of the country. 50 years later, not much has changed. We wouldn’t still be around to fight the good fight if decisions were not made by those most impacted by these projects.

These days, it often feels like our democratic institutions are being eroded. Our Northern Plains process matters because democracy preserves the will of the people. A corporation is not a person, but a rancher is. As I was leaving the church to head back to Billings, I stopped to talk with local rancher Mike Hansen whose land borders the project in several places. With a knowing smile, Mike asked me if Northern Plains “was going to do anything” about the proposed solar farm on BLM land in the northern part of the county. I replied that I hadn’t heard of it. Mike was asking a thorny question that I personally didn’t have a good answer to. However, if a groundswell of locals did ask us to get involved in the project, I know that we would have a thorough, democratic process to consider all sides of the issue and arrive at a good decision.

Some (cautiously) good news for ranchers has come our way from Washington, D.C. on a couple of fronts.

**USDA Finalizes Product of USA policy**

Recently, the USDA finalized a policy that will prevent large meatpacking corporations and grocery stores from fraudulently labeling foreign beef as a Product of USA. Previously, beef could be raised, slaughtered, and processed in another country, shipped to the US, repackaged, and called “Product of USA.” This new policy requires documentation showing that beef was “born, raised, slaughtered and processed in the United States” to label it as American. This is definitely a step in the right direction.

However, the rule only addresses half of the issue. “Product of USA” labels are voluntary, meaning packers can still flood the American market with unlabeled cheap foreign beef. This drives down prices for American ranchers leading to the loss of family ranches and worse land stewardship outcomes for the land. We still need mandatory country-of-origin labeling (COOL) to ensure we know where our beef is coming from. Finally, any policies passed by the USDA can be rolled back by a new administration so getting a bill passed in Congress is still very important!
MEMBERS ON THE MOVE

Eastern Montana members take DC to protect ag lands from Exxon’s pollution pipeline

In mid-April, Northern Plains members and ranchers Liz Barbour and Llane Carroll traveled to Washington DC to meet with Bureau of Land Management Director Tracy Stone-Manning as well as staff from Senator Tester, Senator Daines, and Representative Rosendale’s offices.

The members, who both live in eastern Montana, voiced their concerns about the proposed Snowy River Carbon Dioxide Sequestration project, an industrial pipeline project proposed by Denbury, Inc., a subsidiary of ExxonMobil. The pipeline would inject 150 million tons of carbon dioxide pollution into underground pore space near important aquifers and grazing lands.

When our decision-makers hear directly from informed, organized, and impassioned constituents who will be impacted by their policies, it has the power to shift outcomes quickly in our favor. While the ultimate decision about Snowy River is a long way off, BLM hastily extended a public comment period less than a week after our meeting. The impact of our grassroots power was swift and decisive. Thank you, Liz and Llane for your leadership!

Talking C-PACE with Carbon County Commissioners

Late in April Carbon County Resource Council members and allies met with the Carbon County Commissioners to ask them to implement C-PACE in their county. C-PACE is an innovative energy efficiency financing tool that Northern Plains was instrumental in passing during the 2021 legislative session, but must be enabled at the county level. Members have high hopes for the outcome of the meeting and are planning for next steps.

Discussing Montana’s clean energy opportunities with state senators

Recently, Northern Plains’ members Roxa Reller, Mark Reller, and Ita Killeen met with Sen. Chris Pope and Sen. Denise Hayman to discuss clean energy strategy here in Montana. Among the topics discussed was community solar, a program that allows renters, small businesses, and other folks the chance to benefit from local solar power even if they can’t put panels on their own roofs. We look forward to a continued partnership and further conversation in preparation for potential bills during the 2025 legislative session.

Members talk railroad concerns with Livingston official

Northern Plains’ members Eleanor Wend, Joanna Massier, Rick Van Aken, and Jamie Islay recently met with Livingston’s City Manager to discuss a broad range of local railroad issues. The railroad is a foundational part of the town, as it was there at the founding of the city and the tracks still go right through the community. This meeting was one more step in our member’s efforts to engage the community and work to ensure that responsible planning and public safety are properly balanced with cultural history.
members of Cottonwood Resource Council have enjoyed a successful launch of the Sweet Grass Solar Program. Over 50 people attended the solar community outreach event and over 35 households signed up to receive an assessment for solar energy from an installer! CRC member Sam Spector taught a two-day adult education class on solar in Big Timber.

Cottonwood Resource Council has also had a big presence in the news lately! In celebration of Montana Soil Health Week, CRC member Cameron Skinner wrote a touching guest opinion column in our local Big Timber Pioneer newspaper about the importance of soil health. Good Neighbor Agreement (GNA) member-leader Paul Hawks was interviewed for the nationally syndicated NPR program On Point about the history of the GNA, which you can find online or wherever you listen to podcasts. Montana Public Radio aired a piece titled “Sweet Grass County Could Be a Model for Efficiency Efforts in Schools.” The story reports how the school district’s energy efficiency successes serve as an example of what implementation could look like if Northern Plains’ work to secure federal funding for school upgrades in Montana succeeds (see page 16 for more on that campaign).

GTRC gets rolling with Food Hub outreach and biofuel public meeting!

Golden Triangle Resource Council members have been busy with two active efforts: outreach for a forthcoming Food Hub, and prepping for a public meeting related to a proposed biofuel dumping project in Pondera County. Members attended this meeting on April 3rd, hosted by the Environmental Protection Agency in Conrad, to support local residents concerned about potential water contamination and other negative impacts related to the proposed dumping site.

In March, GTRC hosted a Raise a Pint Night at Mighty Mo Brewery to promote the Great Falls Food Hub, which seeks to connect Montana food producers, consumers, and distributors. The Food Hub celebrated their first few pledges for membership, and GTRC members were able to learn more about how to support the effort. GTRC will be hosting events this summer to get the word out, including two Soil Crawls!

Spring successes in Stillwater!

This spring Stillwater Protective Association members hosted the first of a planned series of public presentations on various topics of interest to their membership and their communities. This first presentation was a wonderful lecture from local geologist, Dr. Ennis Geraghty, a retired Stillwater Mining company engineer, on the rich geologic and metallurgical history of the Beartooth Mountains. The event garnered a lot of local interest and was very well-attended.

Now, members are hard at work planning the next presentation, topic to-be-determined, as well as planning and working on other ongoing projects, including a spring highway cleanup, and a scholarship program for local high school students, with preferences given to those with an interest in conservation-related fields.

DRC prepares for expansion vote

Dawson Resource Council members are preparing for a vote on whether to expand the affiliate to include seven counties in eastern Montana. This proposed expansion comes off the back of a successful MDU rate increase campaign that brought together members from across eastern Montana. The members will vote on whether to expand at their upcoming meeting – stay tuned for the results!
Yellowstone Valley Citizens Council is tackling several issues to improve Billings and build our movement’s power. We are advocating for an urban forestry program, which would include a city tree board and grant-funding opportunities to increase tree cover.

Additionally, YVCC is pushing to make Billings more pedestrian-friendly through their Walkability campaign. This campaign aims to influence the city’s transportation master plan, prioritizing ways to make Billings more walkable and enhance the overall quality of life for residents. Through both of these campaigns, YVCC members are engaging public officials, becoming experts in their fields, and finding their voice to bring about the change we want to see.

**COUNCIL ROUNDUP**

**CMRC hosts Fergus Fresh series**

The Green Share Garden Project, a community food sharing garden created by Central Montana Resource Council, hosted the 3rd annual Fergus Fresh: Food for Life series in Lewistown this April. Members of the community received presentations from homesteaders Sally Karinen, Susan Lohmuller, Winnett ACES soil specialist Kendall Wojcik, and organic farmer Cameron Skinner. The series was a huge success and another step towards building a resilient local food system in central Montana.

**Bear Creek Council gears up for a bear friendly summer!**

Bear Creek Council members have been busily preparing for summer, with plans including the Brewfest and more Bear Aware Gardiner (BAG) activities. The Bear Awareness Gardiner program had excellent success in 2023, including 114 bear cans distributed to Gardiner residents, replacing 9 bear-attracting grease traps in town, and distributing 50 cans of bear spray.

Members continue to comment on Fish, Wildlife, and Parks meetings, including possible changes to wildlife management areas near Yellowstone National Park. Advocating for policies that better protect wildlife in this gateway community remains a core focus of BCC.

The Gardiner Brewfest will take place on July 27th. Bear Creek Council is planning on tabling at the event to help spread the word about all of the work being done in the community!

**Bull Mountain members take action to protect area water**

You can’t protect water resources from mining impacts if you can’t definitively prove what you had before the mine came. The lack of comprehensive baseline geohydrologic research in the Bull Mountains has been used again and again by both coal companies and the state to deny damage and leave community members holding the bag. This spring, members of Bull Mountain Land Alliance are taking action to fix this problem and working on an application to the Montana Bureau of Mines and Geology to take up a two-year study of hydrology in the Bulls. This could provide meaningful data to help protect ranchers and homeowners at risk of losing their water from mining.
Yellowstone Bend talks waste reduction and wraps successful solar projects

Yellowstone Bend members have been holding “trash talks” around Livingston over the past four months in an effort to spread ideas across the community on how folks can reduce waste in their personal lives. The last event was held in April, wrapping up a very successful campaign!

Members have also neared the finish line on two solar projects in Livingston: Sherwood Inn Apartments and the Park County Fairgrounds. Yellowstone Bend members have been steadfast in bringing clean energy to Park County and will continue to do so into the future!
Northern Plains has been hitting the road this spring! From the farms and ranches of eastern Montana to the state’s western mountain ranges, we’ve been traveling near and far to give members like you the opportunity to meet our new chair Edward Barta, gather together with friends old and new, and learn more about our work on the issues you care about.

So far, Northern Plains has made stops in Great Falls, Lewistown, Glendive, and Miles City, but we’re just getting started! (You can read Edward’s thoughts about those first stops on page 3.) Stay on the lookout for when we’re headed to a town near you!

**UPCOMING STOPS**

**Bozeman**  
Tues., May 28, 5-7 pm  
Outlaw Brewing  
2876 N. 27th Ave, 59718

**Missoula**  
Wed., May 29, 5-7 pm  
High Stakes Foundation  
129 W Alder St, 59802