

# THE PLAINS TRUTH

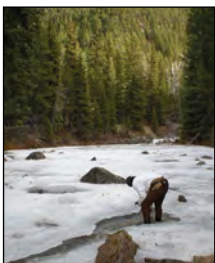
VOICE OF THE NORTHERN PLAINS RESOURCE COUNCIL

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## Honoring 25 Years of the Good Neighbor Agreement!

A quarter-century of tireless community organizing to maintain a seat at the table with the Stillwater Mining Company, collaborating to protect two pristine Montana watersheds



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## Deepening the roots of Montana Soil Health Week

2nd annual celebration of soil stewardship expands with events across the state



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

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#### Membership Dues

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

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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.

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#### 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](http://www.worc.org)

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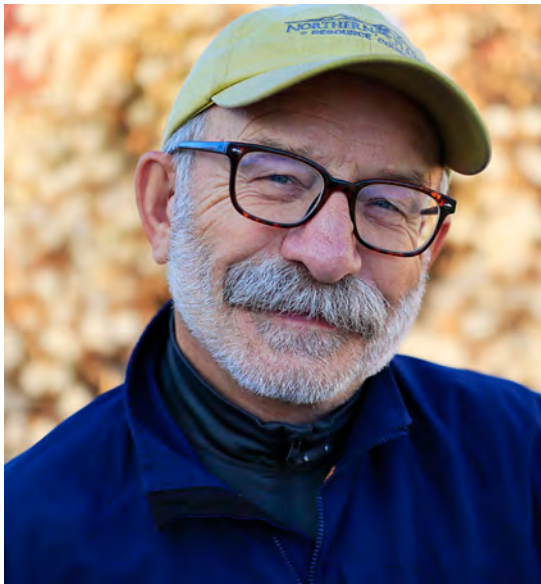
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## A fishing trip contemplating the Crazies and the wind

I had the good fortune of growing up in many small towns throughout the state of Montana. A few of those towns are in Eastern Montana near Billings, where my wife, Barbara, our golden retriever, Rosie, and I live today. Just north of Billings is the thriving metropolis of Lavina where we lived when I was first introduced to the Crazy Mountains. My grandfather took me fishing in the Mussellshell drainage near Harlowton, Two Dot, and Martinsdale where I could see the northeast part of the range.



As an adult, I have traveled Interstate 90 a gazillion times and, like everyone else, I always look forward to seeing this iconic mountain range pop out of the prairie .....nothing but eye candy, particularly when covered with fresh snow. This past January longtime Northern Plains member Gilles Stockton recommended that our book group read a new book titled “The Crazies: The Cattleman, The Wind Prospector, and a War Out West” by Amy Gamerman. Soon after hearing from Gilles, I read Gazette writer Brett French’s interview with Ms. Gamerman and I was hooked. Notices were sent out and the book club was set to discuss it at our April 7th meeting date. Plus, both Mr. French and Ms. Gamerman agreed to join the discussion!

In preparation for this book club discussion, in mid-March I decided to take Rosie, our camper van, the book, and my new fishing rod (birthday gift) to Big Timber, up to Harlowton and over to Martinsdale and the Martinsdale Reservoir and spend a few days just admiring the mountains, fishing, and

reading this story. Fresh snow had fallen recently, so I knew they would be spectacular. And, on my very first cast with the new rod I caught one of the portly rainbows I had heard were in the reservoir. (This is a true fish story!)

So, what’s the story the book has to tell? Well, as most of you know, you cannot think about the Crazies without considering the wind. It’s a story about wind and ranchers trying to stay on their land. It’s also a story about the little guy fighting the big guy. Now, I do not pretend to understand a lot about ranching but I do know that profits are extremely thin and that one or two bad seasons can put some ranchers at risk of losing their land... land that oftentimes has been in families for many generations. Finding a cash flow to support ranching is often needed. Enter wind energy and wind turbines. Ranchers put up a few wind turbines here and there and this becomes a source of much needed income. Nothing better than saving the family ranch!

Enter Russell Gordy. A Texan. Mr. Gordy owns around 44,000 acres of newly acquired prime ranch land with terrific views of the Crazies. He owns huge amounts of land elsewhere as well—Colorado, Wisconsin, Minnesota. He leases a good chunk of his out of state land to energy developers—fossil fuels with little regard to protecting the land from the ensuing devastation. But, he wants his Montana land pure.....he does not want windmills messing with his view. So, there is the conflict. Other key players such as NorthWestern Energy and the Montana Public Service Commission (PSC) become involved. And, as we all know, NorthWestern Energy is not a fan of clean energy so you can imagine which side they are on.

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**The Crazies. Photo by Edward Barta, 2025.**

I highly recommend the book to anyone who hasn't read it yet. It explores many of the themes, tensions, and conflicts that have been central to our work since Northern Plains' founding: landowner rights, energy development, defending family agriculture, and protecting our land, water, air, and communities.

While at Martinsdale Reservoir I could see the northeastern side of the Crazies. I could also see windmills off in the distance. I was able to fully appreciate the beauty of one while at the same time, feel good about the clean energy being provided by the other. That said, I know these issues can be complicated for landowners no matter their perspective on clean energy.

I'll finish with a fishing tip: while fishing at Martinsdale, use a heavier weight line and rod... it's just darn hard casting a line with gale force winds in your face!

*- Edward Barta*  
Chair

## MONTHLY SUSTAINER: HEIDI ANDERSON

I heard of Northern Plains when I first moved to Montana in 2002. At that time, I was attending Bear Creek Council meetings and remember thinking how amazing it was that the state had an organization like Northern Plains to help citizens be involved in the legislative process and in local politics. I grew up in rural Wisconsin and I have always valued taking care of the land. My Dad is a semi-retired logger, and both he and my Mom always instilled in us that you had to take care of the land. I know often people think of loggers as people who harm the land, but he really always has the future in mind.

I love that Northern Plains provides a voice for Montanans and that they send me emails with bills distilled into common language. I met people in the community by being a part of the Legislative Phone Tree during the session. I would make my phone calls to my neighbors and got to know them a little better while providing input into state bills. I love that Northern Plains is a watchdog for the state. I'm too busy (like most of us I think) to watch the bills that are happening in the legislature, and getting updates from Northern Plains allows me to participate and feel like I'm helping to keep our state beautiful.

I donate to Northern Plains monthly because I want them to be around. I want them to be part of my budget rather than an organization that I give to when I have a little extra money in my pocket.

## Scott Sweeney: Steward of the land and his community

By Jack Leuthold



Scott speaking at the 2024 Annual Meeting.

Northern Plains attracts people for many reasons. For Scott Sweeney, it was the lure of “helping and assisting ordinary people and giving power to regular citizens, not just the wealthy.” This desire to help the everyday Montanan is an integral part of who Scott is.

Scott has been a part of the central Montana community for decades - establishing deep roots with the people, organizations, and the land in the process. A civil engineer graduate from Montana State, Scott spent much of his professional career working for his local rural electric co-op, Fergus Electric. Throughout 40 years, Scott worked his way up the ladder and eventually became the General Manager of the co-op in 2004. Scott’s concern for the everyday person was put in the spotlight while he was in this role. Whether it be making sure that the co-op members have affordable energy bills, or ensuring the safety of the line crews working to keep the lights on, Scott always worked hard to act as their advocate.

The belief that community is worth protecting and supporting didn’t stop when Scott retired from Fergus Electric. Scott is an active member of Northern Plains’ local affiliate in Lewistown, Central Montana Resource Council (CMRC), saying, “I joined CMRC because it was an active group working on clean energy, clean water, and supporting small farmers and ranchers.” Scott himself is one of those ranchers working on the family ranch that his great-grandfather homesteaded in 1889. In an interview published by Fergus Electric, Scott described his experience as a rancher saying, “It helps me understand the trials and tribulations people go through around here, whether it’s the fluctuation of the price of livestock or a good hay versus a bad hay year.”

After joining CMRC, he heard that it was an affiliate of Northern Plains. This connection to a statewide group intrigued Scott and he soon found himself at a Northern Plains Annual Meeting and, in his words, “he was impressed.” Scott now finds himself involved in Northern Plains’ statewide campaigns working to advance clean energy and agriculture policy. Over the last several months, he has found himself in Helena advocating for the passage of Senate Bill 188, the Montana Solar Shares Act, which would enable a program that could help Montana’s utility customers save money on their monthly energy bills. “The group really helps caring people work together to pass legislation that supports clean air, water, healthy soils, and fair prices and to oppose bills that don’t,” he says.

Scott’s past experience and knowledge makes a powerful spokesperson that can communicate our values with credibility and authenticity. His commitment to the everyday person, his stewardship of the land, his care for his community and neighbors, and his steadfast commitment to Northern Plains’ mission has made him an invaluable leader that pushes our work forward.

## Hand-in-hand; working with the land

By Jordan Buser



**Laurie and Mark Gaugler on their Judith Gap ranch.**

As old-man winter gives way to spring, the snow-laden Judith Basin in Central Montana begins its yearly transformation into fertile green rolling hills and sprawling wheat fields. Carved by the Judith River and its tributaries, nestled between the Judith, Moccasin, Belt, and Snowy mountains, the Judith Basin has been home to farmers and ranchers for generations.

It is clear that these farms and ranches are beginning to change. As the new generation returns home to ranch, new ideas are emerging that expand our relationship to agriculture and the land we all call home. Across the state, agricultural producers are exploring lower input practices that prioritize soil health and biodiversity.

For Mark and Laurie Gaugler, fourth-generation ranchers based in Judith Gap, this means working hand-in-hand with natural processes to create the best possible outcomes for their cattle and the land. Since taking over operations they have implemented intensive grazing practices using electric fencing, matched their cattle's genetics and calving season to the local environment, prioritized building-up organic matter, replanted native species, and worked to improve the water table.

These practices are slowly emerging as a foundational blueprint for many young farmers and ranchers. While the number of family farms and ranches has declined over time, from 2017 to 2022 Montana witnessed a 7% increase in the number of beginning farmers and ranchers. This promising

trend is emblematic of a growing movement of people looking to become more connected with the land and how their food is produced.

“One thing that is really rewarding about agriculture is that you can see the fruits of your labor, and even though things can be really challenging, you can see what you're changing, what you've raised, the grass that you've produced, you can see it, that is really rewarding,” said Laurie.

The Gauglers are now running the same ranch Mark grew up on, and the land is a part of who they are. Everything they do goes right back into it.

“For Mark and I, we want to try and leave things better than when we got them,” continued Laurie... “humans have a great way of messing things up that are oftentimes in a pretty good balance. We think we are improving things, and then the next generation looks back and says ‘why did we do that?’ We're not trying to go back... just implement some changes that are historically normal, and work in conjunction with nature.”

The emergence of regenerative ranching practices is not just about conservation and soil health, it is a response to the rising costs of agricultural inputs and changing weather patterns. Profit margins are not as good for ranchers as they used to be; intensive grazing saves money by decreasing reliance on costly supplements. Good soil health means increased adaptability and resilience during drought years.

“Leaving plenty of grazing, doing good cattle management, not taking too much grass off the land, it goes hand in hand together,” reflects Mark. “When you see that, when you start to get a glimpse of that success, okay cattle looks good, grazing looks good, you put the pieces of the puzzle together, and you see that this is working.”

Recognizing that agriculture and conservation go hand-in-hand, the next generation of farmers and ranchers are starting to question how we can work with natural ecosystems to advance family agriculture for this and future generations.

Laurie put it best: “Nature has a good way of trying to reclaim, it is always trying to fix things in the right way if we just let it.”

## Honoring 25 years of the Good Neighbor Agreement

By Casey Kennedy

Over twenty-five years ago, a group of determined members took matters into their own hands to protect their community's land, water, and environment - and demand a seat at the industry table. After a year of intense negotiations with the Stillwater Mining Company, these community members established a groundbreaking and legally binding agreement – one not tied to any single company, but to the land itself.

Little did they know that a quarter century later, some of the very same members from Big Timber and the Stillwater Valley would be at that same table, working just as hard to protect their communities.

Today, members of the Good Neighbor Agreement (GNA) remain deeply involved in the daily responsibilities of upholding the enduring agreement. They navigate complex regulations, advocate for new mining technologies, participate in water monitoring events, attend inspections, and consult with independent technical experts - all to maintain a water quality standard three times more stringent than state standards. Most importantly, **they have voting power**. Members of the GNA play a co-governance role with the mine when it comes to operational decisions that impact water quality, traffic, and the health of both valleys.

GNA members know more about mining practices, tailings storage facilities, waste rock, explosives, and nitrogen management than they ever wanted to know, but this hard work has demonstrated that when local people *organize* and build enough power, it is possible to hold industry accountable and ensure that mining practices minimize harm to the environment and to our communities.

Trust between our members and the company has deepened over the years, and while the effort to uphold the agreement has not lessened, neither has the mutual respect and transparency it fosters between all parties.

This May, the Good Neighbor Agreement will recognize 25 years of perseverance, innovation, collaboration, and dedication - decades of everyday people standing up to shape the future of their land, water, and communities. What better way to mark the occasion than to gather around the table with the very same folks who've carried out this work?

Stillwater Protective Association, Cottonwood Resource Council, Northern Plains Resource Council, and Sibanye-Stillwater will come together (*and not for a mining-related meeting for once*), to recognize the unique and collaborative partnership that's protected the Stillwater and East Boulder rivers for the last twenty-five years.

**Join us on Thursday May 29th in Columbus to honor this impressive milestone in environmental stewardship, community organizing, and member-led change.**

**To RSVP, visit: [NorthernPlains.org/event/gna-25th-anniversary](https://NorthernPlains.org/event/gna-25th-anniversary)**



## Energy economics: Finding success in strategic messaging

By Jack Leuthold



**Members rally for C-PACE at the Capitol in 2021. The innovative clean energy and energy efficiency financing bill was eventually passed in 2023 after employing an economics-focused message.**

upgrades with repayment done through an assessment on their property taxes over many years.

Earlier this year, we saw the PSC deny an interim rate increase from NorthWestern Energy that would've raised energy costs for Montanans right as we were heading into the winter months.

Just recently in the 2025 legislative session, we've seen the Montana Solar Shares Act, a bill that would enable a cost-savings program for investor-owned utility customers, pass through both the Senate and the House - receiving broad bipartisan support all along the way.

The success of all these campaigns shine light on an important, yet simple point - the economic argument works. Using these wins as recent examples, we see that focusing on the financial benefits that renewable energy and energy efficiency upgrades can provide, not only leads to forward progress on our issues, but helps us build broad coalitions of partners across the state and country.

The Montana Solar Shares Act is a great case study of this strategy in action. As mentioned earlier, this legislation would enable a program in Montana allowing investor-owned utility customers to buy "shares" of a local community solar array and receive a credit on their bill at the end of the month equal to the amount of power their "share" created. This program has the obvious environmental benefit of greater clean energy investment. By enabling this program, we would be opening up another pathway to transition away from fossil fuels. However, as we all know, the climate benefits that come with a transition away from dirtier energy generation is not a message that sits well in many circles. No matter how frustrated we may feel about those who are unmoved by climate science, our goal is to win campaigns and bring good policy to our communities.

Montanans find themselves at a very interesting energy crossroads. Our utilities are doubling down on their investments in both new and aging fossil fuel generation. The Montana Public Service Commission (PSC) is considering another rate increase that would affect hundreds of thousands of Montanans. And, federal funds and programs that had the promise to usher in cost-saving opportunities to homeowners and small businesses live in a perpetual state of limbo under the Trump Administration. Luckily for us, we know how to use the power of community to move campaigns forward that not only help our fellow Montanans, but our whole state.

Northern Plains doesn't have to look far back in our history books to find success stories. In 2021, Governor Gianforte signed the Commercial-Property Assessed Capital Enhancement (C-PACE) program into law giving commercial property owners access to private funds that cover 100% of the upfront costs of renewable energy or energy efficiency

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Luckily for us, the solar shares program doesn't just bring environmental benefits to our state, it delivers substantial economic benefits as well. Northern Plains' members have focused exclusively on how this program could lead to increased private investment, more opportunities for local jobs on local projects, and put more money back into the pockets of families and small businesses. These economic arguments have the ability to strike deep within everyone, regardless of how they are thinking about current environmental issues.

At the end of the day, even if our primary focus is on economics, we are advancing policies that benefit the climate, environment, and our pocketbooks. We are finding common ground and building trust with those who have different perspectives than many of us. The road we are taking with these campaigns may look a little different, but the destination will always be the same - a cleaner, healthier, and protected Montana.

## GAINING GROUND

### Two proactive wins at the legislature show our power

By Caitlin Cromwell

Northern Plains is on the precipice of helping pass two major, proactive bills this legislative session.

Step back and think about that. Montana's governing bodies are in the tight grip of the majority party – and our core values as an organization and a movement are, in large part, not reflected in the priorities of our elected leaders. Even so – and along with our partners – Northern Plains members have pushed, powered, and persuaded two critical pieces of policy through the legislative process. That's power. And policy is how we deliver for our people.

First up is Senate Bill 224, which establishes Indigenous Peoples Day as an official state holiday alongside Columbus Day on the second Monday in October. Indigenous Peoples Day Montana, a grassroots group co-founded by Marsha Small and



**(L to R) Montana Renewable Energy Association Executive Director Makenna Sellers, Sen. Chris Pope (D-Bozeman), and Northern Plains Legislative Director Caroline Canarios celebrate the passage of the Montana Solar Shares Act through the Senate.**

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**Indigenous Peoples Day Montana co-founder Marsha Small and bill sponsor Sen. Shane Morigeau (D-Missoula) are all smiles given the success of SB 224.**

Ben Pease, have worked to get legislation establishing the holiday for six sessions running now. Working with legislative champions like Senator Shane Morigeau and Senator Susan Webber, Indigenous Peoples Day Montana has slogged through some tough bill hearings and committee votes – all for legislators to reject the concept, over and over.

But this session was different. Through Indigenous Peoples Day Montana's leadership, a broad and diverse coalition of Native and non-Native people and organizations came together around a different message. Indigenous Peoples Day is a recognition of our shared history as Montanans – no matter who you are or where your people come from – and an invitation to celebrate your story and learn more about your neighbors. Northern Plains was grateful to participate in nearly two years of regular meetings with this group, which also included Western Native Voice, the Extreme History Project, several faith institutions,

and a great team of individuals. The group wrestled with the message – and the frame – for Senate Bill 224. And from those meetings emerged the beginnings of new relationships across the state and across cultures, and a deep commitment to the strategy we developed together. Today, Senate Bill 224 has successfully cleared both the House and the Senate, and awaits the Governor's signature.

Second is Senate Bill 188, the Montana Solar Shares Act, which enables community solar for customers of Montana's monopoly utilities. Members of many rural electric co-operatives already have access to these programs. Co-ops that have chosen to capitalize on it have built community solar arrays and sold shares of those arrays almost overnight. But folks who get their power from NorthWestern Energy and Montana Dakota Utilities can't access this benefit or opportunity – unless community solar gets legislatively enabled.

Northern Plains member-leaders built a strategy to get community solar passed way back in 2022. Since that time, Northern Plains, the Montana Renewable Energy Association (MREA), and Senator Chris Pope (D-Bozeman) have worked hand-in-hand to introduce community solar legislation – and built the right groundswell of support for it – two legislative sessions running. In 2023, our bill died on a tie vote in the Senate Energy committee. This session, we've gotten the bill out of committee, through the Senate floor, through its House committee, and off the House floor. Just like Senate Bill 224, our community solar legislation has passed out of the entire Montana Legislature and only awaits a signature from the Governor.

The lessons here? There are a handful. There is power in working closely with others (like Indigenous Peoples Day Montana and MREA) around shared goals and a shared strategy. We live in the space between pragmatism and hope. And this is a long game – this is not the first time either of these bills has been run (and far from it, for Indigenous Peoples Day!). Each fight can build our power to tackle whatever comes next – if we center the roles and leadership of regular people, and bring more people into public life along the way.

## From corporate profits to public benefit: Reforming Montana's energy rate-setting

By Michael Skinner



**A recent Public Service Commission meeting gathered many members demanding safer and more affordable energy from Montana's monopoly energy utilities.**

It will not come as a surprise to Northern Plains members that Montana's monopoly utilities and their captured regulators have long prioritized corporate profits over the interests of working people. Beneath the jargon, regulatory capture, and dirty old-energy investments lie two critical financial tools that affect our monthly electricity and gas bills: the mechanisms used to manage fuel cost volatility and secure high profit margins.

Understanding the financial mechanics behind NorthWestern Energy's rate-setting can support our fight for an economy that serves working people. Two central concepts here are the Power Cost and Credits Adjustment Mechanism (PCCAM) and Return on Equity (ROE).

The Power Cost and Credits Adjustment Mechanism (PCCAM) lets NorthWestern Energy forecast its power and capacity costs in advance and adjust customer bills periodically to cover any shortfall or surplus.

If actual costs exceed forecasts, customers see an increase in their bills; if costs fall below the estimate, credits may appear on future statements. This is a great deal for monopoly utilities, but not for customers. The structure protects the utility from the unpredictable swings of volatile fuel prices - especially from sources like natural (methane) gas, which carries high transportation and storage costs - while transferring that risk burden directly on us - the ratepayers. For comparison, renewable energy sources lack a similar "pass-through" pricing mechanism, because utilities don't have to pay anyone for sunshine, wind, or water. Instead, those renewable resources force utilities to manage any cost fluctuations internally without passing on risks to ratepayers. That's one reason that fossil fuel technologies are more financially attractive to our investor-owned utilities under the current regulatory framework.

The other mechanism, Return on Equity (ROE), is set by the Public Service Commission (PSC). ROE is essentially a state-approved profit margin that the PSC determines NorthWestern Energy is allowed to make on the energy facilities it builds, owns, and operates to provide electricity to ratepayers. The utility contends that a high ROE (profit) is essential for securing the loans and investors needed to maintain operations and stability. However, historical evidence shows that utilities have raised capital successfully even with lower ROE figures. This raises an important question: does an inflated ROE truly serve the ratepayer, or does it simply boost profits for shareholders? Ultimately, the PSC's decision on ROE directly influences how much of the utility's revenue is derived from customer rates, meaning that an excessively high ROE pushes the burden of unnecessary profits onto working people.

NorthWestern Energy continues to request excessive ROE percentages (profit margins) that don't jive with expert analysis of what reasonable rates are expected for the utility to remain financially healthy with the ability to borrow the funds needed to build and maintain reliable energy infrastructure. This is because the utility's equity returns (profits) are determined by a small group of regulators (PSC commissioners) who may not always reflect or understand modern, risk-adjusted standards. Why do major investors and academic institutions place the benchmark for equity returns for monopoly utilities between 5.7-6.28%, but NorthWestern is asking for a return on equity of 10.8% in its latest rate increase request? Why was NorthWestern granted 9.65% less than two years ago? Are we supposed to believe that a monopoly utility with no competitors and 400,000 guaranteed "customers" is a higher risk business than your average corporation?

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# GRASSROOTS POWER

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Both of these mechanisms lead Montana's utilities to continue down the path of fossil fuels resources such as oil, coal, and natural gas because those sources benefit from both PCCAM and high ROE. PCCAM makes the utilities more money because they pass on the risk of market fluctuations to ratepayers, and ROE incentivizes the most expensive resources (which happen to be fossil fuel resources) because ROE is a flat percentage of building and maintenance – the more a utility spends, the more it makes in ROE “profit.” As a result, our utilities ignore the innovative, cleaner, and safer renewable energy sources that would lead to lower power bills.

The time has come for Northern Plains members to push for change at the PSC. The PSC has the power to recalibrate how risks and returns are managed so that the incentive structure no longer favors outdated, high-risk fossil fuel technologies. Instead, incentives must be redirected to encourage investments in clean, efficient, and reliable energy sources. This shift not only promises a reduction in volatile fuel costs passed on to customers, but it also supports the development of a modern energy infrastructure that truly benefits the people of Montana and sets up to meet the challenges of the 21st century.

Expertise on these complex issues is not necessary for action. What matters is that we come together to challenge a system that has long enabled monopoly utilities to profit at our expense and to demand a fairer, forward-looking energy future that prioritizes the well-being of working people over outdated corporate interests.

Call the PSC at (800) 646-6150 or email [pschelp@mt.gov](mailto:pschelp@mt.gov) to submit comment.

## MARK YOUR CALENDARS FOR OUR SUMMER ONLINE AUCTION!

You're not going to want to miss out on our summer online auction this year! We'll have an array of exciting goods and opportunities from Montana and beyond.

Our online auction is a great way to support Northern Plains' mission of protecting our water, air, and rural prosperity while finding unique items and experiences that are sure to add joy to your summer days. Bidding opens Tuesday, July 15 and will close on Friday, August 15.

Call for items and experiences: We are looking for donations from generous members and businesses throughout the Northern Plains community to contribute to this auction. Thank you in advance for helping us build a stronger, more resilient, and sustainable Montana! Your generosity makes a big impact.

Do you have a vacation home that could host a guest for a weekend? Could you provide a one-of-a-kind outdoor adventure tour? The Online Summer Auction is the perfect way for you to make a difference! It not only raises funds for our work protecting Montana, the auction showcases the beautiful diversity of our members and all the ways they give back to their community.

Potential donations include:

- Vacation stays and cabin getaways
- Original art such as pottery, paintings, quilts, and more
- Experiences such as special tours or workshops
- Heirloom or handcrafted jewelry
- Food items like Montana-raised meats

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

# Growing healthy roots (reflections from Montana Soil Health Week)

By Gusty Catherin-Sauer



Farmers and ranchers are beginning their seasons right now, starting seeds, ordering equipment, calving or lambing and beginning the months of hard work required to produce food for their communities and our country. Today, to work in agriculture, innovation is just a reality. Here at Northern Plains, we support a healthy, localized, and sustainable economy in farm and ranch country and in our towns. We believe that a focus on healthy soils is part of that innovation and can increase the bottom line, this is because consistent soil management can lead to a decrease in fertilizer input.

The roots of Montana Soil Health Week began in 2023, when Northern Plains championed a bipartisan resolution at the Montana State Legislature that dedicated the first week of April each year to celebrating soil health, with Soil Health Day on the first Wednesday. This elevated platform honors this precious resource right under our feet and serves as an opportunity to highlight the vital role of soil health in supporting our food system, building climate resilience, and protecting ecosystems and communities in Montana.

As Senator Butch Gillespie, the resolution's sponsor put it, "Not everything we do here at the Capitol is popular, but this resolution was. My goodness sake, we had calls coming in from across the state, and I am proud to be a part of this. Soil health is dealing with the basis for all life." 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. The week-long celebration included a virtual kick-off event featuring author, educator, and agriculture advocate Liz Carlisle, a legislative luncheon, a Future Farmers of America convention youth activity, four in-person workshops, a film screening, and more!

On Soil Health Day, Northern Plains Resource Council and the Montana Association of Conservation Districts (MACD) hosted a lunch for the general public, state legislators, and Capitol staff to celebrate one of our most vital resources, soil. Throughout the few hours at the Capitol, MACD and Northern Plains provided folks with soil education while highlighting that Montana Soil Health Day is an occasion to celebrate!

2025 marked Montana's second annual Soil Health Week. The seeds we planted at our inaugural celebration have sprouted, bringing greater 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](https://NorthernPlains.org/soil-health-resources).**



**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.**



**Cottonwood Resource Council members spend time with Montana Poet Laureate Chris LaTray after an event they hosted.**



**Members Tom Baratta and Pat Thiele from a recent Helena trip testifying in opposition to bills that weaken water quality standards.**



**Supporters of Indigenous Peoples Day and members of the coalition that came together to pass legislation gather after Senate Bill 224 was heard in the House State Administration committee. Bill sponsor Senator Shane Morigeau (D-Missoula) stands in the center of the group, alongside Indigenous Peoples Day Montana co-founder Marsha Small. The photo also includes the Extreme History Project, Western Native Voice, Northern Plains Resource Council, and students from Arlee High School.**



**Northern Plains members and staff wind down after a meeting with representatives of the Sibanye-Stillwater Mine in their ongoing work to uphold the Good Neighbor Agreement.**



**Caption: Members Linda Iverson and Kathryn Eklund photographed with Rep. Jamie Isaly (D-Bozeman) during the Constituent Conversation townhall event organized by Northern Plains affiliates Cottonwood Resource Council and Yellowstone Bend Citizens Council.**



**Northern Plains staff and members hosted a roundtable discussion organized by the U.S. Green Building Council at our LEED-Platinum office, Home on the Range. The event gathered local businesses, organizations, and government leaders, including Billings Mayor Bill Cole, to discuss ways to advance sustainable building.**

## Northern Plains Ranchers take D.C.

In March, Northern Plains members and Carter County ranchers Jack Owen, Steve Summers, and Tyler Wilson joined Northern Plains lead organizer Jackson Newman on a flight to Washington D.C. to lobby against the proposed Snowy River Carbon Capture and Sequestration project. The Snowy River project is being proposed by a subsidiary of Exxon Mobile and would use an unproven technology with a track record of dangerous accidents to transport carbon dioxide from fossil fuel projects in Wyoming for storage in 100,000 acres of underground space in Carter County. Like many of their neighbors, Jack, Steve, and Tyler are concerned about potential contamination to groundwater, the introduction of invasive species to local grasslands, and potential pipeline ruptures (as has happened in other parts of the country - leading to hospitalizations and evacuations of entire towns).

Jack, Steve, and Tyler met with the offices of every member of Montana's congressional delegation, expressing their concerns about the project. They met with Sen. Tim Sheehy directly, and had an especially productive conversation. Sen. Sheehy said he would contact the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) on the community's behalf. (BLM oversees the permitting application for this project).

On a separate trip a few weeks earlier, Fergus County rancher and Northern Plains member Scott Sweeney also visited the U.S. Capitol to stand up for policies that benefit Montana's rural communities. Scott represented Northern Plains within the Family Farm Coalition to meet with members of Congress, urging legislation that restores competition to cattle markets. This includes revising the Packers and Stockyards Act and restoring mandatory Country-of-Origin Labeling to give ranchers a fair shake in what has become a corrupt system rigged to benefit a handful of meatpacking conglomerates while robbing our rural communities of income.

Thank you to Jack, Steve, Tyler, and Scott for taking the time to stand up for your communities! Your work illustrates the power of everyday people sharing personal stories with elected leaders about how decisions made in Washington, D.C. impact constituents at home.



**(L to R) Ranchers Tyler Wilson, Jack Owen, and Steve Summers stand with Northern Plains lead organizer Jackson Newman in front of the U.S. Capitol.**



**Scott Sweeney (third from the left) with fellow advocates and organizers within the Family Farm Coalition pose for a photo in the halls of the US Congress alongside staffers for Sen. Tim Sheehy.**

## Sleeping Giant looks to smart city planning for Helena's future

By Emily Auld

Sleeping Giant members want to see transportation reimagined within the city of Helena. This spring, members have been attending public meetings on transportation and the new city growth plan, and are forming a campaign around encouraging alternative transportation such as walking, biking, trains, and buses. Members are hoping to work with the City to encourage a smart growth plan for Helena, and research areas where citizen power would be effective to influence and improve transportation and decrease car travel.

## CCRC dives in on county growth plan

By Jackson Newman

Carbon County Resource Council members have been meeting to discuss the upcoming Carbon County growth plan. They have been taking a detailed look at how the new growth plan can adequately address the rapid growth in the county with an eye to making suggestions to the county planning board.

## BMLA members make the trek to Helena to defend of our water

By Brady McGinley

Members of Bull Mountain Land Alliance have made a couple of trips to the Capitol to oppose a series of bills that threaten our critical water resources. Most concerning is HB 587, a bill written by the coal lobby and sponsored by Rep. Parry (R-Colstrip). BMLA members have testified before both the House and Senate Committees on Natural Resources, illustrating how the proposed rollbacks of water protections will impact ranchers and landowners who live downstream from one of Montana's coal mines.

## YVCC is standing up to NorthWestern

By Michael Skinner

Yellowstone Valley Citizens Council is organizing Billings residents against NorthWestern Energy's proposed rate hike. Members have hosted letter writing parties, staffed an information table at Zoo Montana's Party for the Planet, and hosted a pint night. Now members are drafting testimony for the upcoming Public Service Commission hearing that will decide the case. More than 80 handwritten postcards have landed on commissioners' desks, new members have joined YVCC, and many neighbors are hearing about the utility's money grab for the first time. With momentum building, YVCC is demanding fair, affordable energy for all.

## CMRC members support soil health and clean water

By Jordan Buser

In April, Central Montana Resource Council hosted a seminar as part of Montana Soil Health week. Members also worked to address environmental and community concerns with Vacom - a German manufacturing company moving into Lewistown.

In the spring, members are preparing to start their second year of water monitoring on Ross Fork Creek - expanding both the frequency and number of sites monitored. Meanwhile volunteers at the Lewistown Green Share Garden are continuing soil remediation efforts after compost containing the herbicide Milestone contaminated the garden during the previous growing season.

## CRC poetry, politics, and permaculture

By Caitlin Cromwell

Cottonwood Resource Council hosted Montana's Poet Laureate Chris La Tray (Metis and Little Shell) for a talk at our local theatre in Big Timber, where we had great turnout, laughter, and reflected on treating each other like neighbors and taking care of the land.

We co-sponsored a transmittal break town hall with our neighboring affiliate, Yellowstone Bend Citizens Council. Check out YBCC's roundup to learn more!

Finally, we hosted a free workshop in Big Timber on healthy soil for backyard gardeners with permaculture expert Kareen Erbe. CRC was delighted to have an opportunity to take part in the statewide Montana Soil Health Week.

## Eastern Montana Resource Council hosts property rights lawyer in Terry

By Jackson Newman

Last month, Eastern Montana Resource Council (EMRC) organized a seminar to inform landowners about property rights and related matters as proposed wind farm projects enter the region. Montana-based property rights attorney Hertha Lund shared insights about how landowners can negotiate the most beneficial deals with potential energy developers if they choose to. The event took place at the Evelyn Cameron Heritage Center in Terry with approximately 20 folks attending in person and about 35 more joining the event virtually over Zoom.

## Spring time in Stillwater County

By Jordan Buser

Stillwater Protective Association continues to serve as an important partner in the Good Neighbor Agreement with Sibanye-Stillwater Mining Company. Members are hard at work planning the 25th anniversary of this agreement to commemorate the ongoing collaboration between community members and the mine. Additionally, this spring SPA is gearing up for their summer Stillwater Speaks series, welcoming four speakers from across Montana to discuss a variety of topics related to Stillwater County. Stay tuned for more!

## YBCC partners with CRC to organize “Home from Helena” event in Livingston

By Jack Leuthold

Yellowstone Bend, along with Cottonwood Resource Council, organized a community event in Livingston during the Legislative transmittal break to ask questions and hear updates from local state legislators. Issues discussed ranged from attacks on the Montana Environmental Policy Act (MEPA) and the courts, to property taxes, to state energy policy. With over 90 Park and Sweet Grass County residents in attendance, YBCC sees the event as a major success and is very thankful for Rep. Jamie Isaly (D-Bozeman) for taking time during his break to speak with constituents.

## Golden Triangle starts the spring with local food

By Emily Auld

In 2025, Golden Triangle Resource Council members have been focusing their energy on helping get the newly forming Montana Food Hub off the ground. This hub will be based in Great Falls and will help connect restaurants and residents around Central Montana to their local growers and producers. GTRC members are helping organize events such as a Pint Night, local food dinners, and other presentations to area groups to encourage membership pledges. If you're interested in learning more or pledging membership to the Food Hub, please go to [montanafoodhub.com](https://montanafoodhub.com).

## BCC defends wolf populations at the legislature

By Caroline Canarios

Bear Creek Council members have worked tirelessly throughout the legislative session to defend wolf populations in and around Yellowstone National Park. Wolves have been under attack in many bills this session, and BCC members have tried to protect animals from callous bills that threaten both the vitality of this essential species with the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem as well as the positive economic impact that wolves bring through tourism.



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