

High Country News

For people who care about the West

FROM PRISON TO FIRELINE

In one of the West's harshest penal systems,
incarcerated wildfire fighters learn to see themselves anew

By Maya L. Kapoor



Cebolla Lane in Vado, New Mexico, is among the worst of the roads the colonia residents try to maintain on their own, without the help of Doña Ana County. JOEL ANGEL JUÁREZ FOR HIGH COUNTRY NEWS

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Crewmembers from an Arizona Department of Corrections fire crew look out from a community bonfire, where they managed the flames.

LINDSEY RAISA FELDMAN



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Editor's note

Is this the best we can do?

The United States incarcerates about 2.3 million people per year, more per capita than any other country, a full quarter of the world's total prison population. For every 100,000 people living in the U.S., 698 are in jail. We as



a nation have chosen to deprive thousands upon thousands upon thousands of men and women of their liberty — one of our highest ideals — with little reflection or remorse. Imprisoned men and women suffer mental and physical breakdowns inside and the disintegration of family outside. Their children do worse in school, and their partners suffer emotionally and financially. Once they are free, most former inmates can't vote (yet another ideal taken from them), and many have trouble finding meaningful work. America's prison system represents a deep moral failure, but we appear mostly fine with it, and with the \$80 billion per year we spend on corrections.

The problem is just as dispiriting in the West, if not more so. Montana, Idaho, Nevada, New Mexico, Wyoming and Arizona have even higher per capita incarceration rates than the nation as a whole, with Arizona at the top. Nearly 43,000 people are imprisoned in Arizona, in a system that is notoriously cruel, negligent and understaffed. In May, Democratic lawmakers called for the firing of Chuck Ryan, the director of the state's Department of Corrections.

Yet amid all this comes a surprising opportunity: wildland firefighting. As Associate Editor Maya L. Kapoor writes in this issue, Arizona prisoners who are allowed to fight fires come to see themselves in a new way. Though they are severely underpaid for their work (yet another moral failure), prisoners find a new sense of self on Arizona's firelines. The work they do is important, and, because there is no prison garb in firefighting, the public views them as heroes. Even their children look at them differently.

Maya's story forces us to rethink our assumptions about prisons and those who are kept behind their walls. But it also asks that we confront a glaring paradox: While the chance to do meaningful work may be good for the prisoners, the low pay they receive is inexcusable. Yet if prisoners were paid fair wages, the entire prison system would collapse. The only ethical response is a review of the entire system, one of the worst in the world, and a stain on American ideals. The next time you see news of a fire, or, worse, the glow of one on the horizon, think about the men and women fighting that fire. Ask yourself: How many prisoners are up there in the heat and dirt, dust and smoke, caught in a system so cruel that this is the best they can hope for? Then ask yourself: Can we not do better?

—Brian Calvert, editor-in-chief



Growlers.
U.S. NAVY

THE LATEST

Backstory

For over a decade, acoustic ecologist Gordon Hempton has been fighting for natural quiet in Washington's Olympic National Park amid the roar of U.S. Navy fighter jets. **Research has shown that noise pollution can significantly disrupt wildlife's ability to navigate, locate food and avoid predators.** Noise pollution is even associated with shorter lifespans. In 2018, Hempton founded Quiet Parks International, a campaign to promote noise pollution awareness. The Navy has tried to minimize the jets' disturbances, though their thundering can still be heard in the park ("The roar of military jets triggers a crusade for quiet," *HCN*, 5/13/19).

Followup

In July 2019, **Washington Attorney General Bob Ferguson filed a lawsuit against the U.S. Navy for expanding flight operations over Whidbey Island**, just east of the national park. The Navy's environmental review for this expansion, the lawsuit asserts, "unlawfully" failed to account for the wildlife and human impacts, according to a press release.

KALEN GOODLUCK

Federal and tribal coalitions challenge Canadian mining

The Stikine River, which flows southwest from British Columbia to Wrangell, Alaska, has tribal leadership and at least eight U.S. senators concerned for public health. Upstream hardrock and coal-mining operations are at the center of a decades-long struggle to regulate international contaminants that flow downstream and across the international border. This is one of the first times state senators have elevated the B.C. contamination concerns to the federal level, according to Michael Jamison, a senior program manager with the National Parks Conservation Association. Meanwhile, the Southeast Alaska Transboundary Commission filed a human rights petition to the Inter-American Commission, alleging that the mining sites release harmful pollution that affects the health of Native communities, as well as the Stikine, Taku and Unuk rivers. In March 2018, representatives from 21 Indigenous tribes and organizations met in Washington state to sign a unity statement, affirming "ancestral relationships



among Indigenous governments in the USA and Canada" and agreement to protect their transnational river environments.

LIZ WEBER

Read more online: hcn.ws/tribal-river-mining

A tailings dam at the Red Chris mine in the Stikine River watershed.

KRISTA LANGLOIS



Sockeye salmon in the Bristol Bay region.

JASON SATOSHI CHING/UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON

62.3 million

Approximate number of salmon that made their way to Bristol Bay in 2018.

31 percent

Portion of the world's harvest of sockeye salmon that comes from the watershed.

The Pebble Mine, a controversial gold and copper mine proposed three decades ago for the headwaters of Alaska's Bristol Bay, has finally made some progress toward a permit. The permitting decision, which hit a roadblock in 2014 under President Barack Obama because of Clean Water Act restrictions, is set to be made in mid-2020. Conservationists say a mine will harm salmon returning to Bristol Bay's clean waters. "We do not believe the impacts and risks to fish and fish habitat have been fully described, and we disagree with many conclusions reached based on the available data and ecological knowledge," the Alaska chapter of the American Fisheries Society said in a statement.

LIZ WEBER

Read more online: hcn.ws/pebble-mine-saga

Photos

"It's such a huge step for a small tribe in the Four Corners to make this leap. We give back to our people through this project, but this is not just for us, this is for the generations to come."

—Denise Lenahan, right, who is helping her Ute Mountain Ute Tribe install solar panels in their quest for 100% renewable energy — and energy sovereignty.

AVERY WHITE

Read more online: hcn.ws/ute-mountain-solar



The Ute Mountain Ute Tribe invested more than \$1 million in a new solar project and got a matching grant from the U.S. Department of Energy Office of Indian Energy. AVERY WHITE

Trending

Can wolves help stave off chronic wasting disease?

The spread of chronic wasting disease in deer, elk and moose is dividing both hunters and conservationists. Some argue that if wolves are reintroduced, then they can pick off the sick animals, but others aren't convinced. See "Can wolf reintroduction help stave off chronic wasting disease?" **SAM BRASCH**, CPR NEWS

You say

MONIQUE VIDAL:

"The wolf is an apex predator that belongs in the system. I would bet that CWD wouldn't be the epidemic it is if humans had not eradicated wolves from the ecosystem in the first place. It will be interesting to see how this all plays out."

STEVE ADLER: "Recent studies have proven that coyotes are spreading CWD, so why wouldn't wolves? Wolves travel greater distances and spread every other type of disease. It's tragic the state and federal wildlife agencies who are extreme wolf advocates avoid this like the plague!"

DAVE JONES: "Wolves are native to Colorado. We should bring them home and let the complexity of the natural world play out. It's not all about shopping malls, cars, roads, cows, and tourists."

SCOTT DAVIES: "I have an idea ... let's reintroduce wolves to your neighborhoods."

Read more online: hcn.ws/wolf-wasting and [Facebook.com/highcountrynews](https://facebook.com/highcountrynews)

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A FOREST SERVICE LOW

I certainly agree with the article, “Forest Service might limit public comments,” (*HCN*, 7/22/19). It is not that they “might,” though, in my opinion, but that they will. I have made personal comments to the agency, and I can see how the U.S. Forest Service plans to remove opportunities for public comments by categorically excluding most projects. This is crazy and one of the worst examples of Forest Service behavior I have ever seen. This even outranks actions under Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush. How low can you get?

*Brandt Mannchen
Humble, Texas*

D.C. OUT OF THE WONK?

You’ve heard the old saying: “You can take the policy wonk out of D.C., but you can’t take the D.C. out of the policy wonk” — or something to that effect (“Critics wary of moving BLM,” *HCN*, 7/22/19). I find it pretty humorous, the recent administrative trend to move federal agencies out of Washington, D.C., as if moving headquarters closer to the land will really change the decision-making structure. If the head of a federal agency is a Harvard-educated Bostonian, is he likely to make more favorable decisions about grazing if he lives in Wyoming? I’d argue no more so than if you hire a fourth-generation rancher from Dubois, Wyoming, and sit him in an office off Virginia Ave. Not to mention the fact that such decisions insult the thousands of Bureau of Land Management employees that live and work in rural communities throughout the West. If folks want decisions that are more local, the discussion needs to be around organizational structure and how decision-making within the agency can be moved down to regional, state and local levels while maintaining consistency across the agency. Not an easy task for an underfunded federal agency responsible for 248.3 million surface and 700 million subsurface acres. So while moving headquarters west of the Mississippi may sound like a stronger connection to the land, a large bureaucratic agency is just that, no matter what direction it faces.

*Neil Crescenti
Boise, Idaho*

EXILING BLM STAFF

Anyone with business experience knows that you have to be in the meeting and at the table to influence policy.



KEVIN SIERS, THE CHARLOTTE OBSERVER, NC, CAGLECARTOONS.COM

And crucial decisions happen in hallway encounters. Distancing Bureau of Land Management leadership from the Washington, D.C., power center will weaken the BLM leadership’s impact. This plan puts BLM political appointees in Washington (and preserves their access) but exiles BLM professional staff with on-the-ground information and scientific expertise. Not good!

*Katherine McCoy
Buena Vista, Colorado*

LOVING LAKES TO DEATH

I grew up near the Cataldo Mission, Idaho, in a dead zone (“Losing Lake Coeur d’Alene,” *HCN*, 6/24/19). As a teenager, I held swans in my arms as they died from lead poisoning. I graduated in 1978 and ran track, so I have felt the burn of sulfur dioxide in my throat and lungs. I am now the water code administrator for the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation, where I have worked since December of 1992. My feeling is that the septic systems and overfertilized lawns around the lake are a huge problem, with the creation of the anaerobic benthic zone that causes the release of toxic mine waste. People are loving the lake to death, so to speak. Enforcement is needed. I don’t know what I can do to protect the lake that my grandpa always took me fishing on, the lake that his parents homesteaded on near Lofts Bay.

*Craig Kvern
Pilot Rock, Oregon*

FOR THE LONG-TERM ECO-GOOD

Unfortunately, with most environmental problems, agreement on solutions is not easy to achieve (“Losing Lake Coeur d’Alene,” *HCN*, 6/24/19). I encourage you to keep up your efforts to provide scientific and economic reasons why we should continue to cooperate for the long-term good of all members or society. I was born and raised in southern Oregon, lived most of my adult life in San Francisco, and have resided here in southern Chile for the past 15 years. Unfortunately, I see many of the same eco-practices occurring here as I did in the late 1940s and 1950s in the Western states: clear-cutting of native forest eco-systems for replacement by “exotic” species, such as Douglas fir, eucalyptus and pine for monoculture plantations. Mining in northern Chile has been a disaster for many of the small agricultural communities, as watersheds become polluted or even dry up — when the mines use the available water (usually upstream) to process the minerals. Large sections of some fjords and estuaries, where large-scale fish farming occurs, become polluted from the chemicals added to the salmon “fish food” to encourage their rapid growth. I have seen my neighbor wash out his tractor water tanks of the residue from the fertilizer and weed-control poisons directly into the small creek bordering my property.

*Ron Pruitt
Vilcun, Chile*

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With coal in free fall, Wyoming faces an uncertain future

As demand shrinks and the industry retracts, counties and the state are in an untenable situation

BY CARL SEGERSTROM

Over the last few months, Wyoming's struggling coal industry has gone from bad to worse. In May, the third-largest mining company, Cloud Peak, filed for bankruptcy, leaving the pensions and future of hundreds of employees in jeopardy. Less than two months later, Blackjewel, Wyoming's fourth-largest coal company, abruptly declared bankruptcy, idling mines and putting hundreds out of work.

As the hits against coal pile up, so do questions about the future of Wyoming's coal mines and the economy they support. With even the Trump administration's regulatory rollbacks offering no relief, the largest coal-producing state in the country is being forced to grapple with the decline of the industry that has long undergirded its economy.

Wyoming's politicians have gone to considerable lengths to prop up the coal industry. Now, the state is walking an increasingly threadbare tightrope as it manages coal's future. Lean too far towards promoting mining, with lax tax collection standards and cleanup requirements, and state and local governments may get stuck with cleaning up the mess the failed businesses leave behind. Tilt

towards proactive tax collection and strong reclamation requirements, and risk becoming another factor pushing the coal economy into oblivion.

The depth of the current downturn was unforeseen even a couple of years ago, said University of Wyoming economist Rob Godby. The Obama administration's Clean Power Plan, which sought carbon emission reductions from the power sector, was expected to deal the industry only a minor blow, and it was discarded by the Trump administration, anyway. Instead, it was cheap natural gas and to a lesser extent renewable energy sources — and the resulting shrink in demand for coal — that ended up knocking coal companies to their knees, said Godby.

The diminishing value of coal draws ominous parallels to the subprime mortgage bubble that precipitated the Great Recession of 2008. But the coal free fall is likely to be even worse than the housing market crash, because houses always retained some value, while coal mines could end up worthless if investors see costs that outstrip potential income, said energy analyst Clark Williams-Derry of the Sightline Institute, a sustainability think tank.

With mines likely to close, Wyoming is entering a new and untested paradigm for coal — reclamation without production. Typically, mines clean up their mess as they go; if they don't, then the state can shut down operations until they do. But

Cloud Peak Energy's coal mine north of Douglas, Wyoming. After the bankruptcies of Cloud Peak and Blackjewel, Wyoming politicians are figuring out how to collect back taxes and ensure that mine cleanup is completed. RYAN DORGAN/CASPER STAR-TRIBUNE VIA AP

once a company goes broke and the mine shuts down, the only funds for cleanup are reclamation bonds, which critics say are inadequate in Wyoming.

The Powder River Basin Resource Council has been pushing Wyoming's Department of Environmental Quality to look harder at the balance sheet of companies before it allows them to buy mines. This effort has kept cleanup obligations from being transferred to Blackjewel and then possibly going unfunded during the company's bankruptcy. Williams-Derry called that a "heroically smart move," because now the cleanup costs are staying with the mines' former owner instead of potentially ending up with the state.

In pushing for strong cleanup requirements, resource council Executive Director Joyce Evans said that requiring mines to do proper reclamation would create more jobs for out-of-work miners. Still, she said she doesn't expect miners to embrace the prospect, even if the reclamation jobs pay just as well as mining, because of Wyoming's history of "social dependency on coal and energy."

Meanwhile, coal's collapse is delivering a one-two punch of unemployment and unpaid taxes to Campbell County, where more than one-third of all coal in the U.S. is mined from the Powder River Basin. The Blackjewel bankruptcy put nearly 600 miners out of work, and the county may never get \$37 million in taxes owed by the company, which was run by Appalachian coal executive Jeff Hoops. This is partly because of the county's lenient approach to collecting back taxes. "We've been dealing with delinquent taxes and Mr. Hoops for several months in an amicable way to try and resolve (the unpaid taxes) without pushing them into what has happened now and keep our miners working," said County Commissioner Del Shelstad in a July 3 meeting in Gillette.

Now, creditors are in line before the county to collect in bankruptcy court. For Gillette's state Sen. Michael Von Flatern, an ex-coal miner, the delayed county tax payments and ongoing dependence on minerals "is starting not to make sense." He described the current bankruptcies as the canary in the coal mine for the industry's long-term decline. "We need to truly diversify our economy," Von Flatern said. "We have a minerals, minerals, minerals economy." But over next couple decades, it's possible that there won't be a market for Wyoming coal anymore, he said. "If Wyoming can't do what we need to do to diversify our economy and change our tax structure, then we'll be in the same place next time we go bust." □

The coal free fall is likely to be even worse than the housing market crash, because houses always retained some value, while coal mines could end up worthless if investors see costs that outstrip potential income, according to one energy analyst.

Carl Segerstrom is an assistant editor at *High Country News*, covering Alaska, the Pacific Northwest and the Northern Rockies from Spokane, Washington. [@carlschirps](#)

Lessons in rural politics

New Mexico Rep. Xochitl Torres Small won a conservative region by talking about concerns all Westerners share

BY NICK BOWLIN

New Mexico's 2nd Congressional District has elected Republicans for the past four decades (minus a two-year blip 10 years ago). That changed last fall, when Xochitl Torres Small, D, won.

The former water rights attorney now represents one of the nation's largest districts, which covers more than half of New Mexico, from the Albuquerque suburbs to the southern border.

Torres Small attributes her success to her emphasis on issues her rural constituents care about, regardless of party. On several issues, she's charted a middle course, breaking with her party to oppose gun purchase background checks, while voting to protect health care for people with pre-existing conditions and restore the Paris climate accord.

High Country News recently spoke to Torres Small about her surprising win, immigration, and energy production. This interview has been edited for clarity and length.

High Country News: What can your example teach the West about rural politics?

Xochitl Torres Small: In the West, I think there's a specific opportunity when it comes to serving people in rural areas. The district I represent has an independent streak a mile wide. What (voters) are most interested in is seeing folks who are willing to put in the work, and most importantly, put in the work with anyone else who is willing

to. And I think that's something that hasn't happened on either side in Washington for quite some time. So I think that's the main lesson: Democrat or Republican, we serve rural communities best when we work with anyone who will lend a hand.

One of the local business leaders said when introducing me (at a town hall), "I don't always agree with her, but she shows up and she says what she thinks and doesn't try to hide it, and she listens." And sometimes that's the best you can do.

HCN: You've introduced a bill on rural health-care access, correct?

XTS: It's not the sexiest thing, right? (laughs)

When we talk about health care, we have to talk about making sure that it's affordable, but you should also be able to get to a doctor close to home. And that accessibility factor is huge for rural areas. It's probably the issue that resonated most in my campaign.

Sometimes the way to make change is making improvements where you can, and one of those is increasing physician residency programs (which place doctors at hospitals around the country for training). It's arbitrarily capped right now, and a bill I introduced would increase the program by 3,000 doctors a year for five years. The bill also identifies priority areas where there are shortages, including rural areas.

HCN: There are reports that the influx of asylum seekers is straining local government services. How is your district being affected by federal border policies?

XTS: We've seen a rapid change in circumstances. If you look back at when I was first elected, we were continuing to see families voluntarily presenting (for asylum) along the U.S.-Mexico border. But the numbers are growing so quickly, and the resources are being depleted so quickly, that the burden of responsibility is being transferred more and more to churches and local governments as these families are released without any plan. It's becoming a humanitarian crisis.

For example, Jakelin (Amei Rosmery Caal Maquin), one of the first children who died in (U.S. Customs and Border Protection) custody, died after not being transported from a remote part of the border in time. That delay was a key factor in her death. And when she finally got to the (CBP) station, they wanted to take her blood oxygen level, but they didn't have an instrument that was small enough for a child's finger.

These are things we should be able to fix, and we're all responsible.

HCN: How do you balance conservation and human health concerns from oil and gas drilling against an industry that is a significant source of revenue and jobs in your district?

XTS: A lot of things were able to occur (during the most recent state legislative session) because of the budget surplus we had, because of the oil and gas production in the district. So being able to reinvest in education, in economic development, in road safety can happen right now because of that revenue.

We need to work to make sure that we produce energy in a responsible way to lessen the effects of climate change. Part of the reason why it's so important to include everyone is that sometimes you need industry knowledge about how best to make the changes we need. I think New Mexico has a pretty good example with the (Energy Transition Act) that was just passed — zero carbon electricity production by 2045. It passed without opposition from the New Mexico Oil and Gas Association.

HCN: Six months into your time in Congress, what's the strangest thing that has happened to you?

XTS: There's definitely a Republican side and a Democrat side (on the House floor), and I spend a lot of time on the Republican side talking with folks. And sometimes I get some strange comments, like, "What're you doing over here?"

I was talking to some folks and one guy said, "You know, Xochitl, you're my favorite Democrat," and I said, "Thanks. ..." And another guy said, "I think you're a lot of people's favorite Democrat!" And another said, "You're so many people's favorite Democrat, you should just become a Republican!" And I said, "Wait a minute, wait a minute, that's not the point!" □

At the U.S.-Mexico border near Sunland Park, New Mexico, Rep. Xochitl Torres Small meets with Border Patrol agents to discuss some of the challenges they're facing, such as recruitment, retention and the need for improved technology.

COURTESY OF REP.

XOCHITL TORRES SMALL

Nick Bowlin is an editorial intern at *High Country News*. [@npbowlin](#)





William Sackett at his market in Rocky Ford, where he and his wife, Leonida Sackett, forced Esmeraldo Echon Jr. and Maribel Echon to work. The Echons were awarded \$330,000 last year in Colorado's first civil human-trafficking trial.

HYOUNG CHANG / THE DENVER POST VIA GETTY IMAGES

A win against labor injustice in Colorado

A community stands up to the human traffickers among them

BY SARAH TORY

Phyllis Adkins, 65, had known William and Leonida Sackett for six years before she met the people who would later become their victims. Like the Sacketts, Adkins owned a farm in Rocky Ford, Colorado, a small, tight-knit community where neighbors are like family.

So when Leonida was able to help her brother, Esmeraldo Echon Jr., emigrate from the Philippines in 2011, it looked like a cause for celebration. A year later, Esmeraldo's wife, Maribel, and their three sons joined him in Rocky Ford.

The Echons saw their arrival as the dawn of their American Dream. Instead, they found themselves trapped by their own relatives in a three-year nightmare of forced labor — until local residents like Adkins began suspecting that something was wrong.

Thanks in part to their testimonies, a federal jury awarded the Echons \$330,000 last year in Colorado's first civil human-trafficking trial. "If it hadn't been for those community members (who spoke up), this case would not have happened," said Jenifer Rodriguez, managing attorney for the migrant farm worker division at Colorado Legal Services, who represented the Echons.

At a time when threats of immigration raids and mass deportations are making immigrants increasingly vulnerable to exploitation, what happened in Rocky

Ford offers hope that rural Westerners can still sometimes count on each other to protect those in need.

The Sacketts were well-known in Rocky Ford, an agricultural town in southern Colorado with a population of less than 4,000, famous for its sweet melons. They owned a farm, a market and 15 rental properties. As Esmeraldo Echon's official immigration sponsor, Leonida had to agree to financially support the family so they would not need welfare or other government assistance. But she used that legal obligation against her newly arrived brother and his family, forcing them to work without pay to cover the cost of their sponsorship and threatening to have them deported if they refused.

From April 2012 to June 2014, the Sacketts forced the Echons, who were unaware of their rights, to work in their fields and at their market, as well as clean and maintain their rental properties and do various other jobs. Maribel had to care for Leonida's ailing mother, while Esmeraldo usually performed hard manual labor 10 hours a day, six days a week. He never knew exactly how much he owed or when it would be paid off.

The Sacketts deny that the Echons ever worked for them. "It was all a bunch of lies, all a bunch of malarkey," William Sackett said in his deposition.

Adkins, a self-proclaimed "staunch conservative," realized something was amiss when Maribel and Esmeraldo came to the Community Presbyterian Church, which Adkins attended, because they

didn't have enough food. Later, Adkins visited the Echons at their home and saw a meticulously kept house with no toiletries and no food save for some old vegetables in the freezer. They had no heat in the winter or air conditioning in the summer because Leonida (falsely) told them that it would drive up the electrical bill by thousands of dollars. To Adkins, it was clear the Echons needed help.

"I knew it was illegal, but I didn't know how to deal with it," she said, referring to how the Sacketts controlled Esmeraldo and Maribel.

Throughout the West, labor trafficking is as pervasive as it is invisible in a range of industries that rely on cheap labor: agriculture, construction, mining, logging, hospitality and domestic services. Nationwide, more than 8,000 human-trafficking cases were recorded in 2017. In Colorado, law enforcement agents reported that 16 investigations were opened, all of them related to sex trafficking. But labor trafficking receives far less attention and fewer law enforcement resources than sex trafficking, experts say, so those numbers don't reflect the scope of the problem. "Most people don't identify as a victim," says Annie Fukushima, an assistant professor at the University of Utah who specializes in human trafficking and migration.

Immigrants are particularly vulnerable, she added, with traffickers often exploiting their undocumented or non-citizen status and lack of English skills and support networks.

And the Trump administration's tough anti-immigration policies have made it harder than ever for trafficking victims to gain legal protection. Last June, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services released a new policy memo, which warned that immigrant human trafficking victims who apply for a special T-visa and are denied could face deportation proceedings. "That would never happen before," Rodriguez said, noting that immigration enforcement used to focus on deporting people with criminal records. Rodriguez now feels she has a duty to warn potential clients about the risks they face.

In 2014, Maribel Echon sought help from Colorado Legal Services, which filed a civil case for non-payment of wages. Later, Adkins and four other Rocky Ford residents testified on behalf of the Echons, helping secure a ruling in their favor. The case is under appeal, but Rodriguez believes it offers an important message for immigrant trafficking victims elsewhere: "There are people who will help you," she said. "Justice can be served." □

Throughout the West, labor trafficking is as pervasive as it is invisible in a range of industries that rely on cheap labor: agriculture, construction, mining, logging, hospitality and domestic services.

Sarah Tory is a correspondent for *High Country News*. She writes from Carbondale, Colorado. [@tory_sarah](#)

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A cactus wren and her football-shaped nest. EMILY POOLE

BIRDNOTE: CHIRPS, QUIRKS, AND STORIES OF 100 BIRDS FROM THE POPULAR RADIO SHOW. Edited by Ellen Blackstone
Hardcover, 224 pages; \$22.95.
Sasquatch Books Seattle, 2018.

Why don't baby pigeons waddle behind their parents like ducklings? What's that business about storks delivering babies? And how do cactus wrens outfit their nests with air conditioning? *BirdNote* is a compilation of the odd but intriguing questions that anyone who shares space with our feathered counterparts has likely pondered. Adapted from a radio show that features two-minute stories on avian life, *BirdNote* pairs short anecdotes with Emily Poole's imaginatively spunky full-color illustrations.

This is not your standard pocket birding book; it's filled with rich connections revealing how birds fit into our culture. And it's equally rich in often-humorous trivia: One Western raptor's image, for example, appears to be etched onto Attila the Hun's helmet. And we'd love to meet the fun-loving bird that so urgently demands, "Quick! Three Beers!" when it calls. In *BirdNote*, readers get an intimate glimpse into the interactions and relationships that birds have with their environment and each other. LUNA ANNA ARCHEY

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Accolades and some new roles

HCN is back after our summer break — and what a few weeks it has been!

First off, congratulations to our Tribal Affairs Desk, whose excellent work was recognized with 19 (!) awards from the Native American Journalists Association this month: eight first-place, nine second-place and two third-place awards, ranging from top features and environmental writing to best coverage of Native America overall. We're extremely excited for the desk, which was established just two years ago to help *HCN* center Native voices for a Native audience, and we look forward to more award-winning work.

Meanwhile, *HCN*'s editorial staff continues to adapt as we work to deliver unparalleled coverage of the whole West.

Maya L. Kapoor has been named associate editor of special projects, where she will focus on editing and writing science stories and overseeing essays, reviews and perspectives. **Paige Blankenbuehler** is now associate editor, overseeing the coverage of Arizona, California, Colorado, Utah, Nevada and New Mexico.

We are also thrilled to welcome three new faces: editorial interns **Jolene Yazzie** and **Helen Santoro** and editorial fellow **Kalen Goodluck**, whose work you'll be seeing in these pages soon.

Jolene grew up in a small town in Arizona called Lup-ton — *Tsé si ani* in the Diné language. After receiving a B.A. in visual communications from Collins College in Phoenix, she worked as a graphic designer for a variety of newspapers, including the *Santa Fe Reporter* and the *Navajo Times*. Since she was little, Jolene has loved capturing moments through photography, but it wasn't until an *HCN* photo assignment not long ago

that she decided to be a photo-journalist; she's now pursuing a journalism degree at Metropolitan State University of Denver. Jolene also creates amazing comic art that celebrates Native American women as warriors.

Helen says her love of journalism emerged from her earlier scientific pursuits. After graduating from Hamilton College with a degree in neuroscience, she worked at Boston Children's Hospital, researching pain and the human brain. There, she found that she loved writing about science more than doing it, so she got a master's degree in science communication at University of California Santa Cruz. She has a cranky 13-year-old cat and probably the only dog in the world that's a picky eater.

Kalen is Mandan, Hidatsa, Arikara and Diné from Albuquerque, New Mexico. Before joining *HCN*, Kalen interned with *NBC News*' investigative unit, where he reported on the medical device industry. He also dug into right-wing extremism through a project with Type Investigations. Kalen attended Bard College in Annandale-on-Hudson, New York, where he grew to love writing and graduated with a degree in human rights. He also earned a master's degree in journalism at City University of New York. When not reporting, he enjoys eating s'mores by the campfire.

Finally, we have a correction from "The Columbia River treaty, six decades later," (*HCN*, 7/22/19). Under the treaty, the U.S. sends hydropower to Canada, not the other way around. In the same issue, "Development in Bozeman and the basin" claimed a population of 112,000 for the city. The population is actually less than 47,000. We regret the errors.

—Nick Bowlin, for the staff



Jolene Yazzie, Helen Santoro and Kalen Goodluck during the recent editorial staff retreat in Gunnison, Colorado. LUNA ANNA ARCHEY/HIGH COUNTRY NEWS

A Bumpy Road in the Borderlands

Vado, New Mexico, is another kind of small-town America

On a hot Saturday afternoon in May 2016, Sen. Bernie Sanders found his way to Vado, New Mexico, a quiet rural community on the east bank of the Rio Grande, 35 minutes from the U.S.-Mexico border. People from urban centers like El Paso and Las Cruces streamed into the town, eager to see the presidential hopeful in one of the three rallies he held in New Mexico that month.

Flanked by locals standing on metal bleachers, an expanse of farmland sprawling behind them, the Vermont Independent spoke about the challenges many towns face: the need for basic infrastructure, including “decent roads and decent bridges,” and a government policy that had “ignored for too long the needs of the people in rural America.” For the residents of Vado, Sanders’ words rang true. They have been fighting for decent infrastructure for decades — for water and sewage lines and, especially, for roads. Every year, the streets of the town become nearly impassable, when monsoon rains turn the dirt roads into mud pits.

In fact, even as Sanders was speaking, a small group of organizers and volunteers, some of them holding signs that said “I Stand with Vado,” took the opportunity to sell burritos and water to raise money for road repairs, while at the same time raising awareness among local and state media. Among them was Ruben Lugo, a longtime resident and organizer.

Lugo, a soft-spoken middle-aged man, had been calling attention to Vado’s roads for years, talking to reporters and attending public meetings. Just a few months before Sanders’ appearance, Lugo had led a community meeting in which he confronted his county commissioner, demanding that government officials do

something to fix the roads. But Lugo already knew that the responsibility would probably fall on the residents, and that they would have to be resourceful and make incremental improvements themselves. That’s because Vado is a colonia — from the Spanish for “neighborhood” — one of thousands of unincorporated, unplanned and generally impoverished communities along the U.S.-Mexico border initially settled by migrant farmworkers. Colonias like Vado receive little outside help at the best of times.

By the time Sanders left, Lugo and his co-organizers had raised nearly \$1,000. Sanders, of course, did not win the nomination in 2016, and the presidency went to Donald Trump, who ran on building walls, not fixing roads. Still, Lugo and the residents of Vado were determined to make a go of repairing their own corner of small-town America.

LUGO FIRST CAME TO THE UNITED STATES

from Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, more than two decades ago, at the age of 17. Most of his immediate family had already made the journey, sharing a cramped two-bedroom house with Lugo’s grandmother amid the pecan orchards in the small town of Mesilla, New Mexico. Lugo told people his family had come “in search of the American dream,” but it was also true that they were fleeing the violence that continues to plague Juárez.

When he first arrived in Vado, Lugo, like most newly settled immigrants, worked in the fields, harvesting pecans, chilies and onions. After a few years, he found a job in construction, building rock walls, which paid better, enabling him to buy a trailer in Vado and eventually the plot of land it sat on. Unfortunately, the cheap land, tucked into one of the lowest lying parts of the Mesilla Valley, came with some unexpected downsides.



Lack of infrastructure in colonias, including Vado, New Mexico

Cut by the Rio Grande, the Mesilla Valley stretches from southern New Mexico to west Texas. Despite its aridity, it is an agriculturally rich region, helped by a monsoon season that runs from June through September. Moisture from the Gulf of Mexico and the Pacific Ocean, carried by the winds of the Atlantic Ocean, nourishes the fertile landscape. But that rain also settles into the bottom of the valley — and on places like Vado. Lugo’s home has been flooded twice.

The annual downpours do more than flood homes, however. They also inundate roads, turning them into a sludgy clay mess that hardens into a cratered nightmare, damaging vehicles and impeding travel. And because Vado is a colonia, there’s little help available. Colonias con-



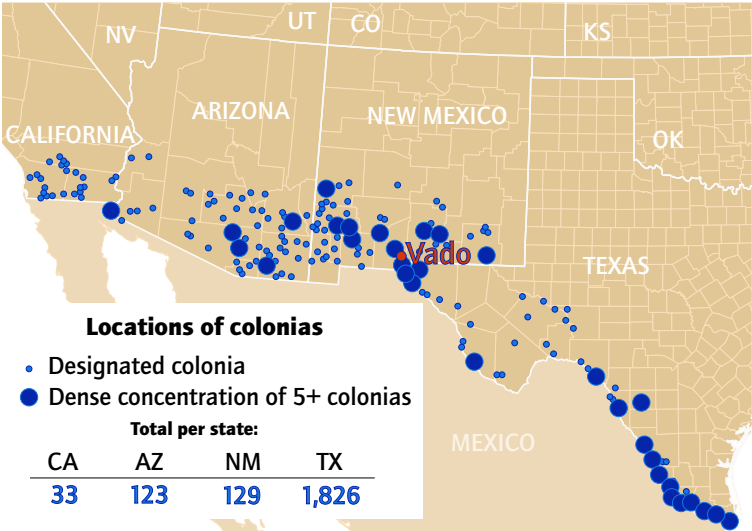
Mexico, means rainstorms can flood homes and make dirt roads like Cebolla Lane, above and to the right, impassable. JOEL ANGEL JUÁREZ FOR HIGH COUNTRY NEWS

stitute a special classification, according to the Department of Housing and Urban Development. By definition, a colonia is a community located within 150 miles of the U.S.-Mexico border and characterized by a lack of basic infrastructure. Nearly half a million people live in colonias in Arizona and New Mexico.

In New Mexico's Doña Ana County, a little less than half of the population lives in one. Because most of these communities are unincorporated, they exist in a kind of bureaucratic limbo. While they fall under county jurisdiction, they often have no formal governance of their own, and they are seldom given much attention by local, state or the federal government. The roads are a daily reminder of their invisibility and of a certain

basic lack of respect. To be so ignored "is something that hurts a lot," Lugo told me. Having a paved road, on the other hand, is a way of saying, "OK, you are part of this community too."

AT THE SANDERS FUNDRAISER, Vado residents raised enough money to pay for a project that the regional Environmental Protection Agency had coordinated with a local advocacy group. Local EPA officials had partnered with an El Paso, Texas-based recycling company, which donated 60 tons of shredded roofing shingles for improving Cebolla Lane, one of the worst roads in Vado. The recycling company had a surplus of shingles at the time and was actually in violation of a Texas regulation for storing too much, so its decision



SOURCE: U.S. DEPT. OF AGRICULTURE AND U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE, ROBERT PETERSON, 2010



▲ Mague Lugo and her husband, Ruben, pose outside their home in Vado, New Mexico. The couple has been pushing for the county to fund infrastructure, instead of citizens having to foot the bill.

► A truck turns onto Ward Road, one of two roads paved by Doña Ana County earlier this year using surplus county funds.

JOEL ANGEL JUÁREZ



to donate the material to Vado seemed like a clear win-win for everybody. The residents paid to transport the shingles and for the use of a grader and roller, and they also pitched in to help with the labor, using wheelbarrows to lay out the material.

But the shredded shingles turned out to be less than ideal for road repair. And ultimately the project, which was finished in July 2016, turned out to be more trouble than it was worth. Even though it improved the road, it created new problems in the process: The shingles hadn't been properly cleaned of roofing nails, and so residents started getting flat tires. The axles on their vehicle were no longer breaking, but driving wasn't getting any easier. Disappointed residents found themselves having to pull up all the material they had just put down. "It was

supposed to last for two years," Lugo said. "But in the end, it was counterproductive."

So the residents came up with a new plan. One of Lugo's neighbors worked at Cemex, a concrete supplier with headquarters just a few miles off nearby Interstate 10. The company agreed to donate gravel for the roads if the residents could figure out a way to transport it and lay it down. The necessary machinery was found and locals hauled the gravel in their own trucks. Each family had to contribute \$120 toward the project, a significant amount for a community where many residents live below the poverty line. The gravel considerably improved some roads but was a costly and temporary fix.

THE CEBOLLA LANE FIASCO shows how hard it can be to carry out even simple projects in colonias, which have prolifer-

ated near the border. Owing to a combination of developers in search of easy money and people in need of affordable housing, developments like Vado are the product of a simple, insidious scheme, where cheap land (most of it in floodplains) is bought, divided and sold at a markup, usually to recent immigrants. Oftentimes, residents were led into thinking infrastructure would follow their purchase, but these promises rarely materialize, leaving them to fend for themselves. As a result, the properties become a jurisdictional jumble. They are hard to govern or improve, and few resources are available to them.

Billy G. Garrett, a former commissioner for Doña Ana County, served Vado and other colonias for eight years. He tried to make improvements, but was often frustrated and thwarted. "The money is not there," he told me. "And the social support is not there politically in terms of the whole county."

One of the biggest hurdles has been logistical. Colonias like Vado were subdivided in a way that makes most of the residents responsible for the roads adjacent to their properties. These "private roads" are essentially public in their use, but the New Mexico Constitution's anti-donation clause prohibits governments from making "any donation to or aid of any person, association or public or private corporation." Because the roads are privately owned, in other words, the government can't legally fix them. This leaves the roads and their maintenance outside of the county's responsibility, putting the onus on colonia residents. Garrett said, it was hard for other people in the county to understand the scale of problems colonias face. "I wanted to get to the point where you can't say you don't know at least the magnitude of (it)," he said.

So, in 2016, Garrett commissioned an infrastructure report for incorporated areas including colonias in Doña Ana County. The assessment, released in 2017, was bleak. The county's colonias needed an estimated \$606 million in infrastructure projects, including wastewater services, drainage and about \$84 million for paving private roads. While bad roads might not seem like a big deal, they are, in fact, extremely tough on families. If roads aren't passable, "people can't get their kids to school, can't get to work, can't get to doctor's appointments," Kelly Jameson, a public information officer for the county, told me. But it's nearly impossible to raise enough money to fix these problems when many residents outside of colonias can't comprehend the disparities, Garrett said. "If you truly want to have every street paved, you've got to understand this is a much bigger problem that you have to take on," he said. "It has to do with changing how people view colonias; (it) has to do with guaranteeing every community has all the things it needs."

Garrett said it is unfortunate that there isn't any real long-term planning going on to address the needs of the colonias. "You can't deal with good develop-

ment if every two years you are going to change how you are going to approach infrastructure,” he said. “Infrastructure is a multi-year process in priorities and planning and getting it built.” And infrastructure is made more complicated by the nature of things: Commissioners change, priorities change, funding changes — and the problems simply get worse.

These issues are incredibly complex and costly, and expecting rural county governments to find all-encompassing solutions is not realistic. Federal funding is available through the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development and the EPA, but it usually requires a matching loan from a local entity, something that is seldom financially feasible here. The state does provide approximately \$4 million a year for projects in the county’s colonias, but, as Garrett said, that’s a drop in the bucket. “The problems with rural Doña Ana County are the same as rural New Mexico, the same as anywhere in the West,” Garrett told me. “What we really need is a major initiative in Washington that says it is important to take care of our rural communities and our rural areas.”

AT THE BEGINNING OF THIS YEAR, Vado saw a small victory. Two of its roads were paved through surplus county funds — a one-off windfall that was designated for a “roads initiative” by commissioners. The funding paved Ward Road, the main thoroughfare in Lugo’s neighborhood. But, as with the shingle paving and gravel dumping, the small gains come with big caveats. When the monsoons hit, many of the families on the side streets will still be stranded in mud.

In February, I traveled to Vado to see how residents felt about the road improvements. Vado has a tranquil, sleepy feel, with just a couple of thousand residents; the town is a patchwork of farmland, houses and roads that border irrigation ditches. I followed Ward Road, with its shiny new asphalt, to branching side streets and clusters of homes and trailers.

The colonia might suffer broadly from structural negligence, but it was clear that residents care about their homes. Nopales, a type of cactus, lined the front of some trailers, makeshift fences and rock walls enveloped others. I pulled up to Lugo’s home, which has been enlarged over the years to make space for his growing family, and was enthusiastically greeted by his dog, Oso, a big, lanky puppy tangled in his yard tether. Mague, Lugo’s wife, opened the door and led me into the kitchen, where her friend Blanca Isabel, wearing a pink shirt that matched the color of her eyeshadow, sat at a round wooden table.

Isabel had moved to Vado 16 years ago, she said, and now worked at a nearby processing plant, which produced chili paste for popular hot sauce brands. Her husband was employed at a dairy farm, one of several in the region. With their



combined income, they had been able to buy a house and plot of land behind Lugo’s. “We didn’t know it was in a flood zone,” she said, adding that during the monsoon season “a lake” forms in front of her house. But other than that, she said she likes living there; it’s a tight-knit community.

When the place isn’t flooded, it’s dry and dusty, and this contributes to another widespread problem: asthma. A lot of people here have it, Isabel said, including her. (According to the U.S.-Mexico Border Health Commission, asthma is a serious concern for communities near the border, where air quality is low and work exposure to chemicals and pesticides is high. Doña Ana County reports that 10% to 12% of adults in the county suffer from the condition.) Her asthma worries her, she said. “If there is an emergency, an ambulance isn’t going to come (in time),” she said. “I have to get sick somewhere else where one can reach me.”

In much of the country, decent roads are taken for granted. There is something very American in the idea of the open road and clean, safe streets — no less so for places like Vado. Here, though, it’s an ideal that still seems far from reach. Here, where citizens often live with undocumented relatives, a kind of isolation prevails. Border checkpoints that lock people in from either direction are permanently set up on the two major highways that connect Vado to the rest of the state. The locals keep their cars meticulously clean, headlights in working order, to avoid any excuse for a run-in with police or Immigration and Customs Enforcement in town. Better roads would connect people, give them mobility — and also help them keep their cars in working order.

For that reason, Ward Road was “a

victory in so many ways,” Lugo told me. “After so many years of fighting, it shows that we can do it. We can bring change.” With one goal more or less achieved, Lugo and his neighbors have others in mind. They’d like to see streetlights and the side roads paved, and a school bus that reaches their neighborhood. The county would also like to see other improvements reach the colonia, including hooking up Vado residents to a centralized sewer system; severe septic tank failures can pose a serious health risk. Adequate drainage infrastructure is also needed to protect residents from annual flooding. Lugo, who traveled to Santa Fe this year to talk with officials, believes Vado is too far from the minds of policymakers. “They think that we don’t exist,” he said. “They don’t realize that we too are New Mexicans.”

Indeed, this reminded me of my own trip to Santa Fe, a few days earlier. There, I had hoped to learn about New Mexico’s relationship to its border communities on “Colonias Day.” I had gone to the Capitol, where a press conference was scheduled. I arrived early, waiting in a marble rotunda, where chairs were set up in rows, a podium in the front of the hall. It was a busy weekday, with visitors and school groups wandering the building as state legislators went from one meeting to the next. Above the rotunda, a crumpled banner hung from a second-story railing. “Colonias Day,” it read. “Federal, state and local government collectively working together to improve social, health and economic conditions.” The appointed hour for the press conference came and went. The chairs stayed empty. After a long wait, I finally left. Outside, traffic buzzed by on well-paved city streets, as tourists came in and out of restaurants. Colonias Day passed, and nobody noticed. □

Blanca Isabel stands near puddles from rainfall three days ago outside her home in Vado, New Mexico. When it rains, Isabel’s front yard and the road leading to her home flood and she has to use a four-wheel drive vehicle; when the mud finally dries, deep ruts remain.

JOEL ANGEL JUÁREZ



Jessica Kutz, an assistant editor for *High Country News*, writes from Tucson. [@jkutzie](#)

This story was funded with reader donations to the High Country News Research Fund.

FROM PRISON



TO FIRELINE



In one of the West's harshest penal systems, incarcerated wildfire fighters learn to see themselves anew

Erne Tilley began fighting wildfires seven years ago while in prison for a drug offense. He could have made twice as much doing something else, but most other prison work is menial.

"There's just not a lot of opportunities to learn and build experience doing something that's worthwhile when you're in that sort of environment," Tilley, a circumspect man in his early 30s with blue eyes and short auburn hair, recently told me. In contrast, on a fire assignment, "You're working hard, you're in a good environment, you're learning stuff, you're building yourself, you're making yourself better."

In time, he became a squad boss. "As a leader, it was a great experience getting all those people in that mindset, and getting them in the position to accomplish all those goals together," he recalled. "It was fun."

Tilley, who was released from prison in 2017, spoke to me last summer from New Mexico's Gila Wilderness, where he was working as a seasonal wildfire fighter. This summer, he started a permanent firefighting position in Alabama with the U.S. Forest Service.

For prisoners like Tilley, wildfire crews are a rare spark of hope in a dark system. Arizona's prisons are notoriously callous: According to Corene Kendrick, a staff attorney with the nonprofit Prison Law Office, as other states move toward restorative justice, Arizona is locking up ever more people — even first-time offenders — under mandatory sentencing laws for nonviolent offenses, such as drug use, shoplifting or drunk driving, with little possibility of time off for good behavior. Kendrick said that's despite plenty of research showing that "extremely tough and long sentences, especially for low-level offenses, don't reduce crime."

Arizona's draconian policies mean that its state prisoners and county jail inmates have faced unusual mental and physical hardships — fewer than three meals a day, for example, or lack of

A firefighter from an Arizona Department of Corrections crew works a night burn.

LINDSEY RAISA FELDMAN

A helicopter picks up an Arizona State Prison Complex fire crew for deployment near Tucson.

ARIZONA DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS

"Once they see what they can do physically and mentally when they're on these crews, it really changes them. They say, 'Wow, if I can do this, I can do just about anything.' "

— Phillip "Flip" Elliott, assistant fire management officer with Arizona's Department of Forestry and Fire Management



access to menstrual products. Indeed, Kendrick's organization and others have repeatedly challenged the state for failing to make court-ordered reforms regarding mental and physical care, such as allowing mentally ill prisoners in solitary confinement to leave their cells for an adequate amount of time each day.

Last summer, prisoners in Arizona joined others nationwide in protesting for everything from fair wages to more rehabilitation programs and an end to racially biased sentencing. In May, *The Appeal*, a nonprofit criminal justice news website, reported that Arizona prisoners who overdose will now have to pay the cost of emergency medical intervention, including overtime for prison staff. A local ABC affiliate reported in April that in one Arizona prison, cell doors have been unlocked for years. Correctional officers have been assaulted and one prisoner has died.

But even amid these chaotic and oppressive conditions, participants in Arizona's Inmate Wildfire Program come to believe that they, and their future lives, can be different. It's the rare program supported by prisoners and correctional officers alike, notwithstanding the exploitative system of which it's a part.

ARIZONA'S CURRENT INMATE WILDFIRE PROGRAM

began with two crews in 1984. Over the last three decades, approximately 2,000 prisoners have gone through the program. At its height, following the devastating 2002 Rodeo-Chediski Fire, which burned more than 426,000 acres in northeastern Arizona, the program had 15 crews; today, it has 12, including one from Arizona's women's prison, working year-round for far below minimum wage.

Away from the prison yard, in pine forests and desert grasslands, Arizona's incarcerated wildfire fighters battle blazes; in towns, they clear flammable vegetation from around people's homes. They work side-by-side with professional wildfire fighters, assist with search and rescue, and even lead crews.

The work is a way for prisoners to feel they are giving back to society. It's also hard, underpaid and dangerous: In 1990, five incarcerated wildfire fighters and a correctional officer died in a blaze in Arizona's White Mountains.

According to Phillip "Flip" Elliott, an assistant fire management officer with Arizona's Department of Forestry and Fire Management, the program, jointly run by his agency and the Arizona De-

partment of Corrections, was a solution to two problems: the rising costs of wildland firefighting, and a shortage of firefighters. Prison firefighters make \$1.50 an hour on fires, compared to \$30 earned by professionals. Each crew saves Arizona money, even as historic fire suppression and climate change make the state's wildfires more frequent and catastrophic. (State officials did not provide requested information about how much money incarcerated fire crews save Arizona, but according to *The New York Times*, they save California some \$80 million each year.)

The program, which wasn't designed with rehabilitation in mind, "is not black-or-white," according to Kendrick. She's spoken with incarcerated firefighters who really appreciate being able to camp and work outside, getting fit and giving back to society. "But on the other hand, it is exploitative, in that they are doing the same or tougher work as firefighters who aren't prisoners, and they are getting paid a fraction of the money, and they don't get on-the-job protection like regular firefighters do," she said.

The fire crews are part of a wider system that relies on cheap labor — a system that exists thanks to the U.S. Constitution's 13th Amendment, which made slavery illegal, except as punishment for a crime. Arizona's prisoners, many of whom are incarcerated owing to mandatory drug sentences, are on the hook for at least 40 hours per week of hard labor for wages as low as 10 cents per hour — though they often receive much less after prison deductions. They lack basic rights like workers' compensation or fair wages. Prisoners make only \$1.50 per hour fighting fires, and less when they are clearing brush — so little, Tilley explained, "you don't really think about what you're getting paid."

Still, the fire crews offer one of the few job-training opportunities available to prisoners. Indeed, in 2018, Arizona created the Phoenix fire crew, which employs formerly incarcerated firefighters as full-time state employees. But even for prisoners who don't want to keep fighting wildfires after they get out — because they're getting on in years, or don't want to spend any additional time away from home, or can't leave the state while on parole — the program points to a hopeful future, despite its fundamentally exploitative basis.

"A lot of them are like, 'You know, this is the first time I've learned leadership skills or I've learned to work on a team,' " Kendrick said.

Several months prior to his release from a state prison in May, Jeremy Campbell effusively described the transformation he'd experienced as a firefighter and squad boss. A polite man with cropped red hair and brown eyes framed by brown glasses, Campbell applied to be on his first wildfire fighting crew about five years ago. In prison for the third time on a drug-related offense, Campbell hadn't spent much time exploring

the outdoors, though he'd done similarly hands-on work: construction, mechanics, metalwork. In prison, he missed the "ruggedness" of those occupations.

"When you're in prison, you don't have a whole lot of options where you can really feel like you're doing something real with your hands," said Campbell, speaking to me over a prison phone from Florence, Arizona. He was monitored by a correctional officer, but seemed to genuinely support the program.

When he initially signed up, "it was all about the job and the sort of things I could do to entertain my time," Campbell said. But the program was transformative. "You get in, and you're just working and doing really cool things, and before you know it, you're really buying into the program. You begin to behave differently in a group and think differently. Your life changes." Eventually, as squad boss, Campbell found himself responsible for the safety of others.

Now in his early 40s, Campbell acknowledged that he's made mistakes and lived a "selfish lifestyle" in the past. But thanks to the wildfire program, he believes he's become a different person. "I would say that today, selfish is the very last thing I am, and I credit a lot of that to my time on this crew," he said. Ahead of his release, Campbell had high hopes for his future, in large part because of his experiences as a wildfire fighter.

Despite the low pay, Campbell said he did not feel exploited: "I feel empowered — not only with each day, I feel empowered about the rest of my life." Being on a fire crew changed his thinking and behavior, from his first, frightening fire, to his eventual role as a leader. "I've learned to deal differently with conflict," he said. "I don't hold any sort of negative feelings." Campbell said he rose each morning in prison in a good mood. His attitude was, "Even though we're here, we're making the best of the situation."

The work came with a prison rarity — respect. "Even though we are incarcerated, we get to be treated like human beings," Campbell said. "We're out on the fireline with professionals who are civilians, and we're looked at like capable firefighters — we're not treated like inmates. We're treated like professionals out there to do a job and it's ..." Campbell paused. "It's really nice. You know, you don't often get that when you're back on the unit. It's a really cool experience."

STEPHANIE CLARK, assistant director of Vermont Law School's Center for Justice Reform, said it makes sense that Arizona's Inmate Wildfire Program could be transformative. Not only does it give prisoners opportunities to change personally through their work, it changes how other people view them.

Prisoners dress the same as and work alongside other wildfire fighters. "That is changing somebody's lens of who they are. ... No one will be evaluated based on being an inmate," Clark said.

The Inmate Wildfire Program doesn't create a space for restorative justice, Clark explained, because it doesn't hinge on a reckoning between crime victims and offenders.

But in a state where ever more prisoners are locked up for nonviolent crimes, perhaps it provides a space, however flawed, for prisoner resilience.

Above all, prison is dehumanizing. But wildfire fighting resists that dehumanization. Wildfire fighters must be alert, making split-second decisions, questioning orders that may put lives at risk, and taking responsibility for the well-being of fellow crewmembers. In

space to maintain dignity in the prison labor system, Feldman said. "I wasn't expecting that."

Feldman's research emerged in part from her older sister's incarceration, which occurred throughout her own childhood. She attributes the pushback she received from other academics when she embarked on her research to unconscious biases against prison populations.

Feldman was initially skeptical that a wildfire program, which pays so little for such dangerous, difficult work, could benefit the men and women who took part. To this day, Feldman opposes prison labor programs. "I personally can't justify



other words, fire crews provide a place where prisoners can feel human again, according to University of Memphis anthropologist Lindsey Raisa Feldman, who interviewed Arizona's incarcerated wildfire fighters for her doctoral research at the University of Arizona.

"When a person goes to prison, their identity is stripped to a very base level," Feldman said. She described prisoners as socially "cauterized," sealed off from the rest of society. "They're considered other, they're considered less than, often ... and they're kind of stripped to their bare non-humanness, you know?" The fire program directly challenges that process, she said.

Feldman's research tracked such differences: Awaiting their parents' return from prison, children of incarcerated wildfire fighters sometimes only want to buy toy fire trucks. Local residents give standing ovations to the prisoners who defend their homes from flames. Watching them catch butterflies and identify species, homeowners reconsider the doubts they've harbored about the chainsaw-wielding prisoners who've come to clear their property of fire fuels.

The story of the Inmate Wildfire Program is really about how people carve out

a prison labor program, just straight-up," she said. "I think that anytime you involve paying an incarcerated person so little or (nothing) at all, it's already too morally bankrupt." But she came to recognize the complex reality of prison wildfire crews. As part of her research, Feldman spent just over one year working as a firefighter embedded with Department of Corrections crews. (When Feldman approached the crews for her research, prisoners and correctional officers alike made it clear that if she wasn't fighting fires with them, she wasn't welcome.) Though the system is unjust, Feldman saw men transformed by respect, responsibility and freedom. "What I saw on the fire crews was incredibly powerful," Feldman told me.

She'd like to see more opportunities for that kind of personal transformation among prisoners — minus the exploitation. "If you can have those things but not in a labor program, you can allow people to access dignity and complex identity without the weight of the labor," she said.

The program's transformative power comes in large part from how the crews operate: Incarcerated wildfire fighters

A crew from Florence State Prison works the Sawmill Fire in 2017 in southern Arizona.

ARIZONA DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS



Members of an Arizona Department of Corrections fire crew rest on the fireline.

LINDSEY RAISA FELDMAN. SEE MORE OF HER PHOTOS IN AN UPCOMING PHOTO ESSAY IN THE JOURNAL CRIME, MEDIA, CULTURE.

work side-by-side with non-incarcerated firefighters and correctional officers. Because of the high risks associated with fires, they are encouraged by correctional officers to think critically about orders and question authority. In other states, such as California, prisoners wear orange jumpsuits that stand out from their officers' uniforms, even on fire details. In Arizona, prisoners and officers on the fireline wear the same clothes. "If you're fighting fire and the fire's gonna overrun you, fire doesn't distinguish between orange and brown," Elliott said.

He agreed that the crews are transformative. "I think a lot of these guys have never been pushed to the limits that they are when they're on this crew," Elliott said. "Once they see what they can do physically and mentally when they're on these crews, it really changes them. They say, 'Wow, if I can do this, I can do just about anything.'"

Feldman found that prisoners who fight fires come to think of themselves differently, developing a sense of identity rooted in valuable work, rather than the identity of "inmate" the penal system gives them.

For example, during fire details — fast-paced situations where crewmembers rely on each other for safety — prisoners can access emotions that are off-limits to men on the yard. "It's an incredibly vulnerable job, because you're at risk of dying every day," Feldman said. "That vulnerability ... lends itself to very close relationships forming. ... They have this space which is not the prison yard, where they can show each other very close, very caring relationships."

And as they work outside, clearing brush in town to protect homes, or camping in the desert waiting to be called out on a blaze, crewmembers can experience nature in transformative ways. Outdoors, working side-by-side with other community members, prisoners develop a new sense of personal value.

Being a wildfire fighter was even transformative for Feldman. "I was never a thrill-seeker," she said. "I wear dresses, I paint my nails, you know? I was not planning on fighting fires." On her first fire, Feldman found herself slogging up a mountain toward flames in 115-degree weather, carrying about 60 pounds of equipment, a prison breakfast heavy in her stomach, questioning her research choices. "The thing I learned, much to my chagrin, was that fires start on top of mountains, believe it or not, because that's where lightning strikes," Feldman recalled. "I was like, 'Fuck, I wouldn't have done this dissertation if I knew that!' " To her embarrassment, she threw up on the hike — but she kept going. "By the time we made it back down, the guys were joking with me," she said. "We were all laughing. They were like, 'That's so awesome that you did it!'"

Feldman believes that Arizona's Inmate Wildfire Program could inform prison programs elsewhere, ideally by encouraging opportunities for change that don't require underpaid labor. She believes this would lead to less recidivism and greater success after prison, an idea she's currently researching.

She frequently saw crewmembers push beyond their designation as felons, whether by poring over nature guides, or

massaging each other's sore backs. One hot day, a fire crew clearing vegetation from an empty lot next to a Walmart found a nest of roadrunner eggs in a low-growing shrub, just starting to hatch. The sweltering day had been especially challenging, she said. "It was a relatively urban space, there were a lot of needles, a lot of beer bottles, and for these men who have problems with addiction, they very much loathe having to work in this place, because it was a constant reminder — like they'd be tossing to the side a Coors Lite (can), when they're in prison for killing a friend, for a DUI car crash. So it was relatively traumatic."

The man who spotted the eggs was in his late 50s and had been in prison for perhaps two decades. "If you looked at his rap sheet, he would look horrifying to a person," Feldman said. "He had been in and out, he had committed violent crimes, like robbery and assault. He had tattoos all over his face." But when the man found the nest, he yelled to the rest of the crew to stop everything and come look. Over the course of hours, crewmembers took turns sneaking up to check on the progress of the hatchlings, as their mother stalked about nervously. For some of the men, the little beaks and cracking eggs led to conversations about the rebirth and transformations they hoped to undergo. It struck Feldman profoundly.

"Even within this inherently exploitative system, which is the prison, individuals are very capable of finding meaning in their lives," Feldman said.

ONCE THEY LEAVE PRISON, the wildfire fighters face a host of challenges, from legal employment and housing discrimination, to disenfranchisement. In a 2017 op-ed in the *Arizona Daily Star*, Arizona Gov. Doug Ducey, R, predicted post-release employment on the Phoenix crew would lower recidivism rates, saving both money and property for taxpayers. Last winter, an incarcerated crew harvested the Arizona Capitol's Christmas tree.

Because correctional officers listened in on most interviews for this reporting with current and former prisoners, it's impossible to say whether any concerns were stifled by self-censorship. Participants mentioned the low wages as something that they would like to see changed, and Campbell suggested awarding incarcerated wildfire fighters reduced sentences, a policy that California has adopted. And, at the end of the day, participants still live in one of the West's most punitive prison systems.

Whatever the program's potential shortcomings, though, Campbell saw each new crew member as "an opportunity to touch one more life." Just as he hoped that his new sense of purpose and direction would help him avoid future drug offenses, Campbell believed that everyone who makes it onto a crew can "change the way they behave, so they don't have to come back." □



Maya L. Kapoor is an associate editor for *High Country News*.

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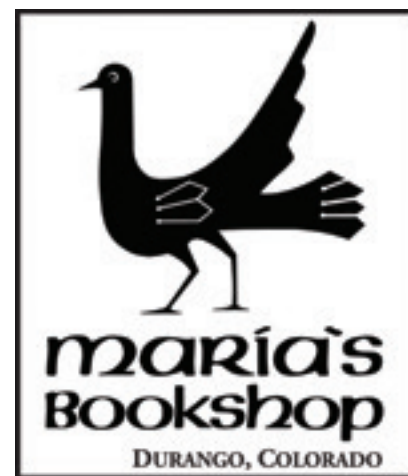
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Job Sanchez feels his new buzz cut in shock the night before the academy starts. After quitting his full-time job as a bank teller, Sanchez needed to work nights and weekends to make ends meet during the three-month academy.



Two cadets time each other while carrying a self-contained breathing apparatus (SCBA) during a physical agility test.



Lead instructor Ryan Carey, 35, was a Hotshot firefighter before a back injury ended his career. He has since taught four academies at Rio Hondo. “At the heart of it, I’m a teacher. I love the fact that even if they don’t continue on in their career, I can take pride in teaching them life skills.”



Above, Dominic Ramirez catches his breath after completing the academy’s final hike, which included surprise medical emergency scenarios, shelter deployments and hiking with a chainsaw.

Right, Job Sanchez and Johnny Hernandez discuss their plans for the future after a grueling field day.



In California, fireline aspirations



Each year, close to 50 men and women graduate from the Rio Hondo Wildland Fire Academy in Whittier, California, starting careers as wildland firefighters. While it's easy to assume that the recruits are drawn to wildfire fighting by its emphasis on traditional tropes of masculinity, such as physical strength, scrappiness and heroics, the reality is more complicated than that. Photographer Christian Monterrosa spent three months with men who recently graduated from Rio Hondo, learning their stories. Many said they were driven by complex situations, from wanting to provide for their families, to dreaming of doing meaningful work for society. Their ranks included ex-gang members, military veterans and recent immigrants. "I do it for my kids," explained one graduate, Franco Barahona, whose wife, Jessica, gave birth to their third child, Samson, a day after his graduation. "I want them to grow up and be proud of me." □

WEB EXTRA For more photos, see hcn.org.

Franco Barahona holds his newborn child, Samson, at a hospital in San Diego, California. His wife, Jessica, went into labor a day after his graduation from Rio Hondo. Barahona left behind a life surrounded by gang violence and a job as a roofer to become a firefighter.



Cadets pile onto each other during a "folded tarp" exercise where they must figure out how to stay on top of a shrinking surface area.

Grounding and grandmothers in a gentrifying Denver



Sabrina & Corina
Kali Fajardo-Anstine
209 pages, hardcover:
\$27.
One World, 2019.

Many of the young female protagonists in *Sabrina & Corina*, Denver author Kali Fajardo-Anstine's poised, rich debut story collection, grow up in fractured families, in which one parent leaves, dies or simply fails at the job. But these families' roots run generations deep in Colorado, and often a grandmother brings stability through her staunch love and practical caregiving, offering simple remedies derived from a Mexican-American or Indigenous heritage: garlic for warts, potato slices on temples for headaches, herbs instead of brain-addling fentanyl for the pain of cancer patients, and for "a cold or a broken heart ... a warm cup of atole made only with blue corn."

Although these women demonstrate abundant love, they are far from stereotypical or saccharine characters. One, armed with a gun, defends her home from an intruder, and all of them tell it like is. The grandmother in the title story says her granddaughter's absentee father "was a nobody — some white guy with a name like a stuffy nose, Stuart or Randall."

Fajardo-Anstine's protagonists might struggle to pass their history exams or revert, for a night, to their youthful graffiti days, but they still feel grounded. They may not know exactly where they're going, but they know who they are and where they belong as surely as they know the traditions that will mark each rite of passage. In the title story, Corina explains, "I had experienced enough Cordova deaths to know one pot was filled with green chili, another with pintos, and the last one with menudo. Deaths, weddings, birthdays — the menu was always the same." They watch with a kind of astonishment as Denver gentrifies, and neighborhoods known for decades as the Westside or the Northside become the "Highlands." "Since the newcomers had started moving to Denver," Fajardo-Anstine writes, "they'd changed the neighborhood names to fit their needs, to sound less dangerous, maybe less territorial."

In many of these expertly crafted stories, there's one woman whose life, or untimely death, serves as a cautionary tale. In the title story, Sabrina is strangled, and her cousin and former best friend, Corina, contemplates her short life and tragic death. Corina wonders why she escaped Sabrina's fate; was it because she was not as pretty and therefore perhaps not as self-destructive or attractive to dangerous men? "These pretty girls," the funeral director tells Corina, "they get themselves into such ugly situations." Corina is determined to buck tradition rather than become yet another victim of the "line of tragedies" so many women in



KRYSTAL QUILES FOR HIGH COUNTRY NEWS

her family endured. "The stories always ended the same, only different girls died, and I didn't want to hear them anymore," she decides.

In the haunting "Sisters," Fajardo-Anstine transports readers to Denver in 1955, where teenage sisters Doty and Tina Lucero live in a duplex off Federal Boulevard. They moved to the city from southern Colorado when their mother took up with an "older Anglo rancher" who gave the girls unwelcome attention. Now they are both working as receptionists, and Tina is determined to marry well to secure her future, while Doty "had no interest in men." But at a time when men control most aspects of public life, pretty, Patsy Cline-loving Doty struggles to escape a persistent suitor.

In the affecting story "Tomi," Nicole returns from La Vista Correctional Facility in Pueblo, where she spent time for crashing her car through "an elderly couple's picture window at four in the morning." Nicole comes home to the Denver house her brother, Manny, inherited when their father died. Manny's wife has left him, and his son, Tomi, is adrift — overweight, failing his reading class, and spending all his time playing video games. Nicole, who years ago stole money

meant for Tomi's education, unexpectedly becomes a good influence on him, though her brother is the only person who believes she's a decent person at heart.

In "Ghost Sickness," Ana is trying to make a better life for herself but is in danger of failing her "History of the American West" class. "If she fails," Fajardo-Anstine writes, "she'll lose her scholarship, the displaced fund, given to the grandchildren of Denver residents, mostly Hispano, who once occupied the Westside neighborhood before it was plowed to make way for an urban campus." Although historical facts elude Ana on the final, a Diné creation story her wayward boyfriend once told her saves the day.

In story after story, characters who are on the verge of slipping into the abyss are saved from it somehow, mainly by the profound pull of indestructible family ties and shared culture in the form of stories, rituals and remedies. Wealthy newcomers may keep coming to Colorado, *Sabrina & Corina* suggests, but their money can't buy the sense of heritage and interconnectedness shared by the Latino and Indigenous residents they're displacing.

BY JENNY SHANK

Dreaming of Thoreau, but dealing with landlords

Before I rented my first house in Boise, Idaho, a city with little precipitation and lengthy dry spells, I dreamt of having a xeriscaped paradise complete with a pollinator garden, raised beds of squash with drip irrigation, and a rain-catchment system to store all the water I needed for my yard. Ten years and three houses later, I am scattering seeds of Kentucky bluegrass and pellets of fertilizer, and routinely using the sprinkler. What happened to my dream?

For renters like me, conservation can be difficult, or even impossible: According to a recent University of Utah study, renters of single-family houses in the state were 94% less likely than homeowners to make landscaping decisions. Meanwhile, the Pew Charitable Trust estimates that the percentage of renters nationally is at a 50-year high. In the three most populous Western states, the percentage of renter households ranges from more than a third of Washington and Arizona residents to almost half in California.

In the yard of my first Boise rental, splotches of withered grass grew, but little else. The grounds were sprayed by a powerful herbicide that killed everything but the grass, and dust from the patches of empty dirt blew into my living room. The landlord told me I could not transform the yard with rocks and mulch. Instead, I had to “maintain” it.

At the time, I was reading Thoreau’s *Walden*. I decided to put one of his ideas into practice: “A man is rich in proportion to the number of things which he can afford to let alone.” I let new elm trees sprout to shade the yard. I let clover and dandelions propagate to provide pollen for bees and nitrogen for the soil. I watered as little as I could, spread native grass seed, pulled weeds by hand, and put decorative rocks in front of the house to reduce the space I needed to water.

After a year without fertilizers, pesticides or mowing, the grasses grew tall, and they seeded new grass that sprouted the following spring. The yard did not look like the conventional grassy lawns

of my neighbors, but it thrived in its own wild way.

At the end of my two-year stay, my landlord made me re-think Thoreau’s maxim: He kept my deposit and billed me for yard work performed on my behalf.

I drove by the property a few weeks later. Everything but the grass patches and oldest trees was gone. Without shade from the elms or groundcover, sunlight cooked the dirt into dust. The landlord’s mission to bring the land back to a monocultured lot negated any environmental good I thought I had done.

Landlords might install grassy yards to maintain property values or homeowners’ association rules, or they might assume that grass is both more desirable and easier to maintain than other yard types. In the arid West, about 70% of residential water is used for landscaping, and most of this water ends up on grass. Yet even during droughts, renters are told to maintain thirsty lawns.

Landlords might be surprised by how attractive a more natural yard can be, or by its other benefits. In addition to saving water, practices such as xeriscaping can require fewer chemical inputs. Pesticides can directly harm people, and the Environmental Protection Agency estimates that between 40% and 60% of the nitrogen used on lawns runs off into rivers and lakes, harming fish and other wildlife. Smarter decisions about Western yards can improve the health of people and the environment.

Even when landlords are flexible, the impermanence of renting can get in the way of environmental dreams. After living for nearly a year in Laramie, Wyoming, in a 100-year-old house carved into four apartments, I potted plants to attract lacewings and butterflies, I put together a compost for food and yard scraps, and I built three large planter boxes — all with the permission of my landlady. A month before I was due to re-sign the lease for another year, the landlady decided to sell the house. With no place to store anything and nowhere to replant any of my plants, everything

ended up in the nearest dumpster.

I’m still inspired by *Walden*, but unlike Thoreau at his cabin on the pond, I have landlords who expect lawncare. Currently, at my new place in Denver, I am being cautious. The houses around me sell quickly, and my current landlady floated news that she might be selling soon. Luckily, with my lease signed for another year, I recently unboxed my composter. I might not be able to transform the entire yard, but I am pulling weeds by hand, and I have sown pollinator plants in a small box built in the backyard. This will not become the xeriscape paradise I dreamed of, and I won’t get away with not watering the lawn, but at least I know that this summer, a few butterflies and bees might visit. □

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LUNA ANNA ARCHER

How partisan politics can make ballot measures undemocratic

A fight over wolf management in Alaska shows how lawmakers can undermine citizen-led initiatives



NEWS
COMMENTARY
BY ALEXANDER
SIMON AND
STEVEN C.
CLARK

Ballot measures were originally developed as a way for voters to enact laws that state legislators were either too cowardly or too corrupt to support. Ideally, these initiatives give concerned citizens throughout the West a direct voice on issues important to them. The U.S. Supreme Court ruled in June that federal courts may not intervene to prevent gerrymandering, for instance, but ballot initiatives at the state level may be among the best ways to stop this undemocratic practice.

Unfortunately, state legislatures and executive branch officials can employ a variety of tactics to subvert ballot measures, undermining this form of direct democracy. For example, the only information about initiatives that most voters encounter is a brief description on the ballot. In most Western states, either the attorney general or lieutenant governor — not the measure's proponents — has final say over that language. Thus, whichever party occupies those offices can strongly influence citizens' perceptions of an initiative — and, ultimately, the law.

Everyone who values democracy should be alarmed by the way lawmakers in recent years have attacked or repealed citizen-led initiatives on lobbying restrictions, Medicaid expansion and other issues. A long struggle over wolf management in Alaska illustrates how entrenched political interests can undermine the will of the people.

In Alaska, hunters can legally shoot wolves from aircraft. Aerial wolf killing is not intended to preserve moose and caribou, or enhance biodiversity; rather, it exists to artificially inflate the numbers of game animals available to hunters. In 1996, it received a lot of negative publicity, and public support declined. Then-Gov. Tony Knowles supported a ballot initiative to outlaw the practice, and his lieutenant governor approved the language that appeared on the ballot. It was clearly worded and closely resembled the description written by the initiative's proponents. Over 58% of voters supported the ban, and aerial wolf killing was outlawed.

In order to see how well the general public likely understood the wording on the ballot, we — two social scientists at Utah Valley University — conducted a study. We gathered data from undergraduate students in Utah, most of whom were, we assumed, unfamiliar with Alaska wildlife laws. Our results showed that over 82% correctly understood that the initiative was intended to decrease the number of wolves that were killed. In other words, the ballot's transparent wording was effective.

A complex series of legal reversals followed the 1996 ban. Despite the public's clear opposition to aerial wolf killing, the Legislature overturned the initiative two years later, with a law allowing hunters to resume the practice. Then, in 2000, while Knowles was still in office, activists placed a referendum on the ballot to repeal the law. The initiative passed; citizens once again succeeded in outlawing

killing wolves from planes. But in 2003, the Legislature reversed the measure, undercutting the voters' decision by passing a bill to legalize the shooting. A new governor, Frank Murkowski, elected in 2002, signed the bill into law.

In 2005, Joel Bennett and Nick Jans gathered enough signatures to, once again, put an initiative on the ballot to ban aerial wolf hunting. But this time, Murkowski's lieutenant governor was able to choose the wording of the initiative. "(We) were very concerned about the wording of the ballot measure," Bennett recalled. "The deck can be stacked against you by a hostile administration or just a sloppy job of drafting. It doesn't take much — just the wrong word or word order can create confusion." Their concerns were well-founded: The data we gathered from another group of undergraduate students indicated that less than half — only 47% — correctly understood that the initiative was intended to decrease the number of wolves that were killed. The majority misunderstood it.

By the time the measure was voted on in 2008, Sarah Palin was governor. In addition to misleading ballot language, the initiative's proponents were also fighting a \$400,000 "public education" campaign produced by the Palin administration, which supported shooting wolves from aircraft. The government's talking points were virtually identical to the rhetoric employed by trophy hunting groups that opposed the wolf-killing ban.

This time, unlike in 1996 and 2000, only 45% of voters supported the initiative. Thus, for the first time in Alaska history, a citizen's initiative to outlaw aerial wolf killing was defeated. After the election, Greg Brown, who owned a whale-watching business in Juneau, remarked, "I work with a bunch of naturalists. Everybody decided they were going to vote against aerial hunting. ... It turned out nine of the 12 ended up voting for it ... because (of) the way it was worded."

Ballot initiatives help ordinary people make sure that laws reflect their values and interests, rather than having decisions imposed upon them by governments and corporations. However, activists should be aware that elected officials can employ a variety of tactics to subvert democracy. Citizens who respect democracy — regardless of their party affiliations — should consider proposing initiatives that require nonpartisan bodies to vet ballot language for clarity. They should also consider ballot measures that prevent governors and legislatures from repealing legislation enacted by popular vote. After all, regardless of our politics, we all at some point contend with "representatives" who fail to represent us. □

"The deck can be stacked against you by a hostile administration or just a sloppy job of drafting. It doesn't take much — just the wrong word or word order can create confusion."

—Joel Bennett, who introduced a 2005 ballot initiative to ban aerial wolf hunting

Alexander Simon is a sociology and environmental studies professor at Utah Valley University. Steven C. Clark is psychology professor and dean of social sciences and humanities at Utah Valley University. This perspective is adapted from their forthcoming scholarly article, "Ballot Measures and the Subversion of Direct Democracy: A Case Study of Ballot Measures to Outlaw Aerial Wolf Killing," in the journal *Society and Animals*.

WEB EXTRA

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MONTANA

Outdoor underachievers, rejoice:

There's a foot race especially for you. Held recently in Missoula, the race was the eminently doable, poetically titled "Lard Butt 1K" — a mere .62 of a mile — which has the tremendous advantage of offering doughnut breaks instead of water stations along the way. Sponsor Krispy Kreme urged competitors to "stop and enjoy as many as they wanted." And for those who eschew sugar, there were beer gardens at both the start and end of the race. Four friends who grew up in Montana came up with the idea, staging their first event in Seattle four years ago. Since then, they've taken the race on the road, holding two in San Francisco before coming to Montana this year. Eric Hanson, Dave Peppenger, Brent Baldwin, who still live in Montana, and Mark Peterson, who lives in Seattle, say their goal is to get people to have a good time outside in a "not-so-serious way," reports the *Missoulian*. The run was inspired by the T-shirts the group designed and sold a decade ago, emblazoned with the artful logo, "Flat Tire Lard Butt Mountain Biking," which proved so popular they created their own Lard Butt apparel company, "focused on below-average athletes," said Peterson. Their Missoula run for weekend warriors featured three waves, the first inviting "showoffs" who actually had "the audacity to run." Second was the "legends wave" for those weighing 250 or more pounds, followed by the "waddlers wave" for everyone else. Runners were encouraged to wear costumes; Hanson noted that "once a group of six people wore full body armor suits like knights." Peppenger added that some people have asked if the 1K could turn into a relay, with doughnut stations the handoff point. There's more than fun involved, he added; money from the race goes to a community center in a "community give-back." Competitors were also encouraged to bring two or more items to the University of Montana food pantry. Hanson called the 1K one of those rare, stress-free events, the kind "where you leave happy, and you don't want a doughnut for a very long time, usually."



COLORADO Somewhere, a chairless camper stands un-a-moosed. KURT NOLTE

IDAHO

The Idaho Statesman headline caught the attention of reporter Dale Shrull — "Something interesting: PETA cries fowl over road name" — so he followed it up in Colorado's *Grand Junction Daily Sentinel*. Tracy Reiman, executive vice president of the animal rights group People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, or PETA, had written a letter urging the mayor of Caldwell, Idaho, to change the name of "Chicken Dinner Road" to one that "celebrates chickens as individuals, and not as things to kill, chop up, and label as 'dinner.'" Reiman was completely in earnest, arguing that changing the name would show compassion for chickens as well as respect for other species. PETA would even help pay for a new road sign, she added. Shrull assured readers that he'd keep an eagle eye out for other signs PETA had a beef with.

THE WEST

If you thought the Bureau of Land Management's mission was to "sustain the health, diversity and productivity of America's public lands for the use and enjoyment of present and future generations," think again. The agency has dropped that sweeping environmental goal from its press releases, reports the *Huffington Post*. The language that appears at the bottom of press releases

now stresses mineral development and the money it brings in: "Diverse activities authorized on these lands generated \$96 billion in sales of good and services throughout the American economy in fiscal year 2017 ... supporting more than 468,000 jobs." There's precedent for the scrubbed mission: In 2017, a few months after Donald Trump took office, the BLM changed the banner on its home page from an image of two boys hiking to one of a giant coal seam in Wyoming. An agency spokesman defended the change, saying that several photos would rotate on the site.

THE WEST

If you're dumb, writes John Kelly in the *Washington Post*, "there are lots of good ways to have a bad time at a national park. ... I'm amazed anyone gets out of Yellowstone alive." Kelly asked

readers to share their most bizarre observations, so Bridget Collins recounted how she'd seen a tourist stop his car and run across the road to take photos of a sleeping bison. "He was three feet away at most," she later told a ranger. "If the bison attacked, I wanted to testify on behalf of the bison." Another reader saw a family advancing on a herd of elk, video camera in hand: "I hear a scream, I look down and see a bull elk with a camcorder hooked on his splendid rack as he charged the tourists and chased them across the meadow. I felt bad for the animal." Yet another described how a woman stepped off the boardwalk to pose near a hot springs for a photo. If she'd broken through the crust, "she would have been parboiled." It's not just Yellowstone, either. Maybe the scariest thing happened at Nevada's Hoover Dam: A mother wanted a dramatic photo, so she placed her screaming 5-year-old on a wall with a 700-foot drop. Luckily, the child stayed upright.

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Tips and photos of Western oddities are appreciated and often shared in this column. Write betsym@hcn.org or tag photos #heardaroundthewest on Instagram.



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