

High Country News

An aerial photograph of a town nestled in a valley. In the background, there are rolling hills and mountains under a clear sky. The town itself is densely packed with houses, many of which have colorful roofs. A prominent feature is a long, red brick building that appears to be a train station or a large warehouse, with several train cars visible nearby. The foreground shows more residential areas with smaller houses and some commercial buildings. The overall scene is a mix of urban development and natural landscape.

An archaeology
whistleblower
speaks out

When conservation
is a trigger word

Living on the edge
of a tsunami

Vol. 52 / December 2020
No. 12 • hcn.org

A COMMUNITY DIVIDED

How a fierce debate over morality and money
played out in one Wyoming town.

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Nijhel Motley and his horse, Little Bits, part of a Phoenix riding group called “As the Crows Fly,” which is training for the annual Arizona Black Rodeo. **Roberto (Bear) Guerra / HCN**

Know the West.

High Country News is an independent, reader-supported nonprofit 501(c)(3) media organization that covers the important issues and stories that define the Western U.S. Our mission is to inform and inspire people to act on behalf of the West’s diverse natural and human communities. Beginning April 1, 2020, High Country News (ISSN/0191/5657) publishes monthly, 12 issues per year, from 119 Grand Ave., Paonia, CO 81428. Periodicals, postage paid at Paonia, CO, and other post offices. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to High Country News, Box 1090, Paonia, CO 81428. All rights to publication of articles in this issue are reserved. See hcn.org for submission guidelines. Subscriptions to HCN are \$37 a year, \$47 for institutions: 800-905-1155, hcn.org. For editorial comments or questions, write High Country News, P.O. Box 1090, Paonia, CO 81428 or editor@hcn.org, or call 970-527-4898.





Good news still exists

WHAT DOES LAST MONTH'S ELECTION DAY mean for the West? A lot happened outside the drawn-out, deeply divisive presidential contest, as our roundup of down-ballot races and measures reveals. Will gray wolves make a comeback in Colorado? What's up with guns in Montana, drugs in Oregon and California's gig economy? Are Westerners really serious about criminal justice reform, or willing to pay more for climate and conservation? Which states flipped blue, or went deep red? Outside the headlines, this election saw many firsts, including an influx of Native women into state politics.

Our feature takes us to the Wyoming city of Evanston, which is still recovering from a bitter fight over a proposed detention center for immigrants awaiting deportation. Where supporters saw the promise of well-paying jobs, opponents beheld the specter of a system that splits up families at the border. The question "What price for economic salvation?" isn't a new one in the West, but it's instructive to look at how abruptly divisions can form between friends and neighbors, in a dynamic that clearly isn't confined to just one part of the nation.

"What Works" is *HCN's* solutions-oriented department, and I like to think it's near the front of the magazine for a reason: to remind readers and editors that good news still exists. This issue, we learn how health officials in Newport, Oregon, responded once they realized that essential information on COVID-19 wasn't reaching some immigrant farmworkers, who spoke neither English nor Spanish, but rather an Indigenous Mayan language. Newport's solution — a hotline that connected people in Oregon with Mam speakers in Guatemala — could prove a boon for the West's growing number of Indigenous immigrants.

Don't miss our photo essay on the annual Arizona Black Rodeo in Phoenix, a necessary and joyous correction to the erasure of Black cowboys from standard Western mythology. Then mosey over to our reviews section for new titles, including recommendations from some of the West's most interesting authors. I defy you to not find at least one volume you'll long to immerse yourself in.

I flat-out love Olivia Durif's essay about the time she spent working at a rural Washington ranch with a conservation cemetery. In digging graves for natural burials, Durif discovered the joy and humanity that can be found in mourning. As she writes: "One small cemetery makes death feel human-sized."

This has been such a challenging year, with troubles that feel supersized, not human-sized. May your own worries shrink to burdens you can carry. May you find your very own "What Works." Stick your head in a book or throw your arms around the neck of a horse. Remember that the mysteries of life go beyond politics. We'll see you next year.

Katherine Lanpher, interim editor-in-chief

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FEATURE

Divided Prospects

When a private prison company came to rural Wyoming, local officials believed an economic revival was at hand. Instead, it unleashed a bitter debate over U.S. immigration policies and the future of a town.

BY SARAH TORY

ON THE COVER

Evanston, Wyoming, where the historic Railroad Roundhouse (curved building, center), built by Union Pacific Railroad in the early 1900s, still anchors the town.
Russel Albert Daniels / HCN

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Signs and billboards line Harrison Drive on the west side of Evanston, Wyoming. Harrison connects to Interstate 80, heading toward Salt Lake City to the west and Rock Springs to the east (above).

Russel Albert Daniels / HCN

Storage tanks for the Oasis Mobile Home Park's water supply in Thermal, California. Residents complain that the community's water is tainted, and that management has failed to fix the problem (facing).

Andrew Cullen / HCN



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When you can't drink the water

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In California, access to clean drinking water is supposed to be a human right.

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LETTERS

High Country News is dedicated to independent journalism, informed debate and discourse in the public interest. We welcome letters through digital media and the post. Send us a letter, find us on social media, or email us at editor@hcn.org.

HUNTING CAMPS

Sarah Keller's description of her journey to use hunting as a way to center herself does not surprise me or many other hunters ("Hunting for myself," November 2020), though I faced no reality even remotely comparable to hers. I first hunted and shot a rabbit, which my brother and I cooked and ate, about the same time that my age went into double digits. I finally gave up hunting two years ago, at 81, but every fall I think about my younger colleagues who experience the hunt. Those memories are at the core of my being.

I have long thought that, however rewarding the kill, the real genius of the hunt is the time in camp. Hunting camp is a too-long-overlooked sociological phenomenon with many rich stories.

I would urge Keller and others with extra obstacles to a full life to dive deeply into the richness that the hunting camp pours over all who experience it. It will make you a much more secure, happy person.

Wally Brauer
Denver, Colorado

JUDI BARI AND REDWOOD SUMMER

Thank you for publishing Adam Sowards' excellent perspective ("30 years later, the lessons of Redwood Summer," November 2020). It's a good time to remember Judi Bari's role in helping to organize and publicize the events of that summer and beyond. Her background of living and working as a carpenter in the logging towns of Northern California, together with her compassionate sense of revolutionary ecology, led Judi to clarify that activists and loggers and woodworkers were not opponents in the war against corporate extermination of old-growth forests, and thus forest jobs. It is especially tragic and deeply unjust that Judi and her friend Darryl Cherney were badly injured by a bomb planted in their car, and then absurdly accused by the FBI of having set the bomb there themselves, as though they were planning a violent event. To the contrary, Judi's most "dangerous" legacy is of speaking, and singing, the truth powerfully and beautifully about the links between social and envi-

ronmental exploitation.

I can hear Judi Bari's voice still.
Bill Travers
Chico, California

GROW YOUR OWN

Please keep an eye on writers of pieces such as "Sage advice" (October 2020). Etsy is not the only place for culturally appropriating consumers to get our honky mitts on sage. Besides Amazon, it's even available at Walmart. Why not point out that, if you live in areas compatible with growing white sage, you could get seeds and try DIY? Is that not the cowgirl way?

Acknowledge that, the world around, people are moved to combine smoke and scent with spiritual pursuit, or at least a quest for better smells. It might be Japanese or Indian incense as well as white sage or frankincense — some sources of which are also under threat.

Marie Valleroy
Portland, Oregon

TRANSITIONS

As an enthusiastic and longtime HCN subscriber, I was perturbed to open the latest and greatest and not see Brian Calvert's familiar opening letter, which I looked forward to as a prequel to the articles within. So I turned to page 25 (November 2020) to find a postage-stamp-size description I needed a magnifying glass to read at the bottom of the page. I am asking HCN to maintain people's integrity, including the integrity of someone who gave six years of blood, sweat and tears to a profession, and who was a prominent face of the magazine — as editors-in-chief tend to be. I am also asking HCN to be more transparent in the struggles it encounters as it evolves, trying to keep its membership base while also becoming more inclusive and representative of the West it wants to be part of and also represent. For me, celebrating the good that Brian did for this magazine and the challenges he grappled with and asked the magazine to grapple with, more

transparently, honestly and prominently, would have been more in line with the subscriber/magazine relationship you tend to promote as essential.

Andrew Cline
Bow, Washington

WE ARE NEIGHBORS

Kudos to Paige Blankenbuehler for the balanced and incisive reporting in her article "Grand Disjunction" (October 2020). She approaches the ungainly issue of public-land use through helpful storytelling — local people airing their concerns. It helps to assuage the ills of partisan bickering and realize we must all remain neighbors.

Alex Kouvel
Tucson, Arizona

LEARNING IN A COMPLEX WORLD

I loved Khadija Queen's article "Lessons for homeschool" (October 2020). This whole pandemic can be viewed as an opportunity — nowhere more than in breaking our views of education free from the "no child left behind," "nation at risk" top-down regimentation. It's a wild and wonderfully complex world we live in, and we need more young people excited about participating in and learning about it.

Paul Belgum
Santa Paula, California

WHAT FIREFIGHTERS WANT

In "The Forest Service should embrace a full-time workforce" (July 2020), Anastasia Selby made a compelling argument for full-time employment. However, that is in stark contrast to what many Forest Service firefighters actually want.

The seasonality of the job is something the vast majority of wildland firefighters enjoy. The idea that we want to keep working in remote locations, away from friends and family, when the work load has diminished is out of touch. Our jobs are seasonal because the work is seasonal.

Name withheld by request
Kittitas County, Washington

"I loved Khadija Queen's article 'Lessons for homeschool.' This whole pandemic can be viewed as an opportunity. ..."

WHAT WORKS

Unaccounted for

An Indigenous-language helpline connects people in need of COVID-19 assistance.

BY ANNA V. SMITH



IN MID-JUNE, THE RURAL COASTAL towns in Lincoln County, Oregon, experienced a COVID-19 outbreak. In a week, the county's cases went from five to at least 124, all of them linked to a seafood-processing warehouse in Newport. It quickly became Oregon's second-largest outbreak since the pandemic began.

Employees at the Lincoln County Public Health Department began contact tracing: They called workers, asking about their symptoms, where they had been and who they had seen, and asked them to quarantine.

"What we found when we were calling to do our contact tracing was that either most of them were Hispanic and spoke Spanish, or didn't speak Spanish or English," said Susan Trachsel, a public information officer with the Health Department. Instead, they spoke Indigenous Mayan languages, primarily Mam, but the county lacked the necessary translators. No information about COVID-19 had been relayed in that language.

As the outbreak unfolded, health department staff contacted the Oregon Health Authority. There, community partner outreach program manager Oliver Vera had already been in conversation with local organizers about how to better serve the state's growing Indigenous immigrant population, often people from Guatemala or

Mexico. One idea was a helpline that could connect Indigenous speakers with information in their own language. Jorge Guzman, executive director of Portland-based Vive Northwest, works with translators regularly, and in just three weeks he set up a helpline with four Oregon-, Washington- and Guatemala-based Mam speakers.

The helpline for Lincoln County residents received 35-45 calls a week from families with questions about COVID-19 and available resources. If a caller needed further translation assistance in the next step, Vive Northwest could also provide that. The group also created public health videos in 25 different languages, from Vietnamese to Russian to Swahili to Marshallese, a diversity of public health translations that was "something we've never seen in Oregon," Vera said.

This approach differs radically from the past, Vera said, because it lets communities ask for what they need instead of making assumptions. "Oregon is very different than what it used to be 30 years ago," Vera said; the notions underlying English-forward public health guidance in a pandemic epitomize the state's blind spots.

Throughout the state, people Indigenous to Latin America are an often overlooked but growing segment of the population. It's estimated that they make up 40% of Oregon's agricultural

Jorge Guzman and Juan Antonio Martinez of Vive Northwest collaborate on a video for the Oregon Health Authority addressing the COVID-19 crisis in Mam, a Mayan language spoken in Guatemala and Southern Mexico. **Amanda Lucier / HCN**

workers, including meatpackers, farmworkers, and workers in seafood processing and plant nurseries. And many speak only, or primarily, an Indigenous language; Oregon has at least 22.

The lack of outreach to Indigenous communities isn't limited to one county. In late September, a coalition of researchers and farmworker rights organizations released a preliminary study of COVID-19's impacts on farmworkers in Oregon. (Washington is still collecting data.) The study was unique in that it distinguished Indigenous people's responses from those of other workers, revealing how Indigenous agricultural workers have been disproportionately impacted in almost every way. Altogether, it illuminates the larger problems Indigenous people from Latin America face.

"Because we are not recognized and our identity isn't a part of the conversation, we do get lost in the larger system, as we've seen with COVID-19. We have been left out," said Juanita Cabrera Lopez (Maya Mam), ... (continued on pg. 26)

Divisions and diversity

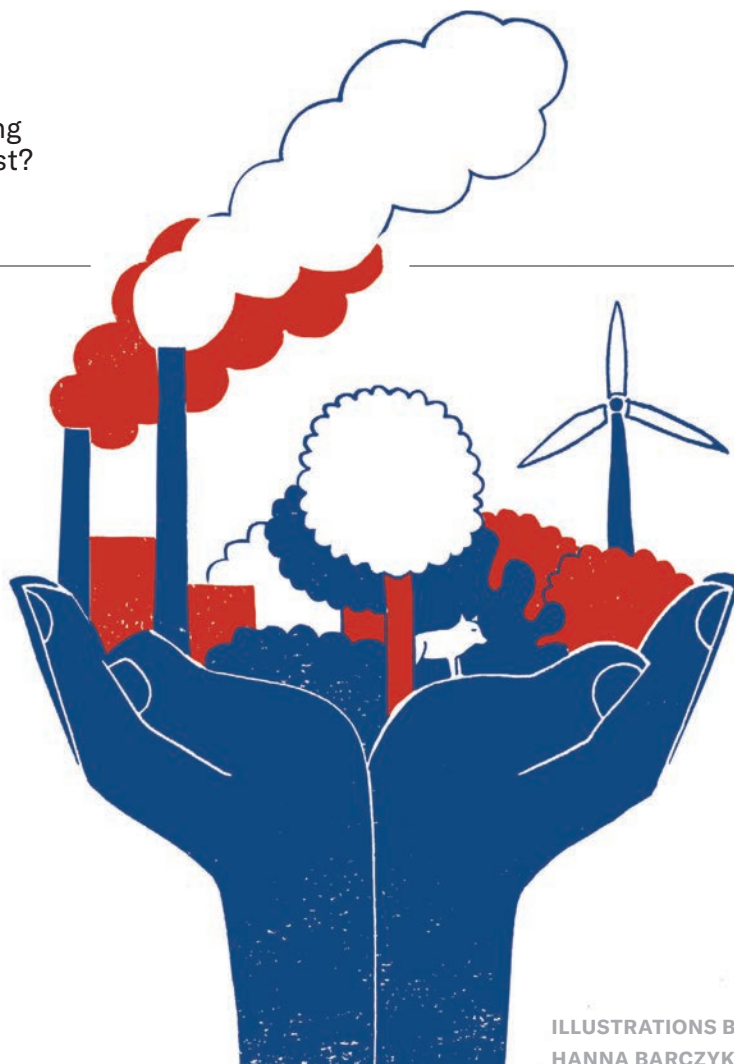
The 2020 elections were defined by grassroots organizing and deep partisanship. What does this mean for the West?

DIVIDED

It's fitting that a year that has lasted decades should culminate in a weeks-long Election Day. Perhaps the only truly bright spot was the political engagement: Over 150 million voters turned out in 2020, the highest percentage of the electorate in more than half a century. What the votes tell us, however, is much muddier. Throughout the country — and the Western United States — the electoral map beyond the presidential contest took a red shift. Previously purple Montana turned deep red, while Democrats won big-time federal elections in Arizona but stumbled at the state level. State and local races defied stereotypes, as Californians voted against better worker protections in the gig economy and Wyomingites voted to raise local taxes. Diverse coalitions played an outsized role. Arizona's presidential race was swayed by Latino and Indigenous voters; in the Tohono O'odham Nation, which has seen its land and important cultural sites destroyed by the border wall, some voting precincts went 98% for President-elect Joe Biden. Latino voter turnout in Nevada buoyed the Biden campaign, but an increased share of Latinos there voted for President Donald Trump, illustrating that the Latino vote isn't a monolith.

Races around the West will have ongoing impacts on people and nature here: How the lights stay on, who gets employment protections and which new leaders enter the fray were all on the ballot this year. Across the region, we highlight how the political sands are shifting and what the results will mean on the ground. As new leaders take office and new laws take effect, *HCN* will remain on the job, covering the West's response and holding a new set of politicians accountable.

—CARL SEGERSTROM



ILLUSTRATIONS BY
HANNA BARCZYK / HCN

ENVIRONMENT

CLIMATE

Coloradans voted to reduce the state income tax on Election Day, but when it comes to climate and conservation, it seems they are willing to open their wallets. In Denver, voters approved a sales tax increase that will fund clean energy projects and spawn renewable energy jobs while reducing utility bills in some areas. The money will also go to climate justice and environmental programs at the neighborhood level, with projects designed to help the low-income and Black and Latino communities who disproportionately bear the brunt of pollution and who, combined, comprise more than 40% of Denver's population. The measure passed easily, with 62% voting yes. On the other side of the Rocky Mountains, citizens voted for a property tax hike estimated to provide around \$5 million annually to the Colo-

rado River District, the main regulatory body for the watershed in the state. Faced with the twin pressures of development and the climate crisis, the agency will use the money to keep water on Colorado's Western Slope, protect ecosystems and drinking water, and ensure water for farmers and ranchers. Elsewhere in the region, Nevada voters amended the state Constitution to require that utilities provide at least half of their electricity from renewable energy sources by 2030. Nevadans passed the same amendment in 2018, but Silver State law mandates that voters pass constitutional amendments twice, which they did handily, though some environmental groups criticized it as locking in a too-slow transition to a fossil fuel-free energy mix.

—NICK BOWLIN

UTILITY COMMISSIONS

Utility regulators, obscure but influential, play a crucial role in how electricity — and therefore greenhouse gases — are produced in the West by

overseeing companies that generate electricity. Their job is to act as consumer advocates, but they can influence the energy mix in their states by supporting renewable energy or defending fossil fuel infrastructure. Montana, Arizona and New Mexico all elected new leaders this year.

In Montana, Republicans maintained their vise-like grip on the five-member Public Services Commission, winning all three seats up for election. The commission is key to determining the future of coal power in the West, especially as other states, including Washington, seek to force their utilities to wean themselves from Montana's coal.

Arizona also trended red, with Republicans winning two of the three seats up for grabs on the Arizona Corporate Commission. In October, the commission passed aggressive energy targets requiring 100% carbon-free electricity by 2050; after the election it amended the targets to include energy savings and nuclear energy in an appeal to new board members.

In New Mexico, the two newly elected Democrats on the Public Regulation Commission won't have time to get comfortable: New Mexicans also voted to disband the five-person commission, which has been an elected position since 1996. Starting in 2023, the governor will select three people to serve on a board. Supporters of the constitutional amendment contended that governor-appointed commissioners will better understand byzantine utility-regulation laws and be less susceptible to being bought and paid for by industry; opponents had argued the amendment dilutes rural voices by concentrating power in the capital. —CARL SEGERSTROM

NEW TAXES

In tax-averse Wyoming, multiple counties made the surprising choice to approve new measures to help pay for everything from hospitals and public facilities to infrastructure projects — a result of the state's decimated budget as the fossil fuel economy collapses. In Sheridan, Niobrara and Crook counties, a 1% special purposes tax will fund \$69 million in public projects. Lodging taxes, imposed on area hotels and motels to fund tourism marketing, rose to 4% in Campbell County. Several counties increased property tax mill levies and created new districts that will be funded through property taxes — including a new museum district in Saratoga, about 150 miles from the capital, Cheyenne, and a fire district in Lincoln County's Star Valley. In Sublette County, the only county in the state without a hospital, residents voted to create a hospital district, which will cost taxpayers \$19.53 annually. In Big Horn County, voters approved increases to property taxes for rural health care. —VICTORIA PETERSEN

GRAY WOLF REINTRODUCTION IN COLORADO

2020 was a big year for wolves in the West, even before Election Day. In late October, the Trump administration stripped their remaining federal protections, before fully returning management to the states and tribes in the Lower 48 for the first time since 1978. On Nov. 3, Coloradans narrowly passed a controversial ballot measure reintroducing gray wolves to western Colorado, which has 17 million acres of public land. The measure requires Colorado Parks and Wildlife to undertake a three-year restoration planning process. While the vote did not necessarily fall upon party lines, it split along a rural-urban cultural divide, passing by large margins in Front Range population centers and the Western Slope's resort and recreation hubs while failing in rural ranching and farming counties. Opponents argued that the measure reduces complex wildlife management into "ballot box biology," while supporters said the state has historically allowed farmers and hunters to have too much influence on the issue. Either way, wolves are returning to Colorado — but with few protections once they arrive. —ERIC SIEGEL

GOODBYE, BISHOP

For the first time in nearly two decades, a familiar and forceful voice in public-lands politics, Rob Bishop, R-Utah, won't return to Congress. Bishop opted not to run for re-election to the House and failed in his primary bid to be Utah's lieutenant governor. A staunch supporter of fossil fuels and the transfer of federal lands to state control and an enemy of the Endangered Species Act, Bishop has led the Republicans on the House Committee on Natural Resources, which oversees public-lands management, since 2015. His departure leaves a power vacuum that Republicans from the conservative Western Caucus, which promotes local control of public-land management and the timber and fossil fuel industries, will likely vie to fill. —CARL SEGERSTROM

POWER

AN INFLUX OF INDIGENOUS WOMEN IN POLITICS

Indigenous candidates, especially women, made gains at the federal, state and local level, increasing representation across the political spectrum. A record-breaking six Indigenous candidates were elected to Congress, including newcomer Republican Yvette Herrell (Cherokee) in New Mexico's 2nd District and Democrat Teresa Leger Fernandez in District 3. Together with re-elected Rep. Deb Haaland, D, they are the first congressional delegation in New Mexico.

COVID-19 galvanized Black voters to polls

THE EVENING AFTER the election, hundreds of people marched through downtown Seattle, demanding that all votes be counted. Local activists of color called for widespread change: abolishing the police, the criminal justice system and the Electoral College. "We must face the white supremacist racist history of this country, and we must abolish every mechanism that keeps it in place," Nikkita Oliver, activist and former Seattle mayoral candidate, said. Across the West and nationwide, Black activists have rallied their communities and driven key wins for candidates.

Nationally, 87% of Black voters supported Joe Biden and Kamala Harris. Despite the pandemic, many states reported record turnout among Black voters, who have long been targeted by voter suppression. With the boom in mail-in voting, many faced new barriers: Historically, voters from communities of color are more likely to have their ballots rejected than white voters. A report from the Black Futures Lab highlighted how Nevada's voter policies made Black voters less likely to be automatically mailed ballots.

In fact, the pandemic may have galvanized voters. COVID-19 has disproportionately affected Black Americans, who are dying at twice the rate of white Americans. According to the American Election Eve Poll, COVID-19 topped the list of issues concerning Black voters. In Nevada, 50% of Black voters surveyed cited the pandemic as their biggest concern, and 83% agreed with the statement that Trump's mismanagement of it was responsible for hundreds of thousands of deaths. The election saw wins for Black candidates in Washington, in particular. Voters elected Marilyn Strickland, the state's first Black congressperson, as well as state Reps. April Berg, Jamila Taylor, and Kirsten Harris-Talley and state Sen. T'wina Nobles, tripling the number of Black women in the state's House of Representatives.

—JANE C. HU



co's history — and only the second state after Hawai'i — to be entirely composed of women of color.

Across Arizona and Washington, Native candidates, including 13 women, prevailed in 16 races for state offices. Multiple firsts came at the state level: In Arizona, Democrat Gabriella Cázares-Kelly (Tohono O'odham) won her bid for Pima County recorder by a wide margin, the first Indigenous woman to hold that position there. "This isn't just my win," Cázares-Kelly said on Facebook Live. "This is a win for the Tohono O'odham people, for the Pascua Yaqui people, for any of you who are tribally affiliated. To people of color: This is a win for all of us." As county recorder, Cázares-Kelly will oversee voter registration, early voting and voting by mail — a critical job in a state like Arizona with a history of voter suppression. She campaigned on expanding early voting sites and community outreach and supports same-day voter registration and restoring the right to vote to people with felony convictions.

Tribal elections also saw the triumph of Native women: The Northern Cheyenne Tribe elected all women to its five-person council and chose women for tribal president and vice president.

—ANNA V. SMITH

ARIZONA FLIPS BLUE

In one of the most surprising victories for Democrats, Arizona flipped blue, at least at the federal level. Residents chose Biden by a slim margin, voting for a Democratic president for the first time since 1996. Democrats also picked up a U.S. Senate seat, with Mark Kelly replacing Martha McSally, R. Kelly will join Kyrsten Sinema, D, in Washington; the last time the state had two Democratic U.S. senators was in 1952. While the political shift might seem sudden, Latino organizers have been working toward this for years, driven by decades of Maricopa County Sheriff Joe Arpaio's toxic anti-immigrant actions and the 2010 passage of SB 1070, the controversial "show me your papers" law. Since then, they've elected progressive officials at the local level and run successful get-out-the-vote efforts. Indigenous voters also made up a key margin of Biden's support.

—JESSICA KUTZ

DEMS PICK UP A SENATE SEAT IN COLORADO

Democrats saw another win in the West, flipping a second Senate seat, in Colorado, where former Gov. John Hickenlooper defeated Sen. Cory Gardner, R. (The other was Arizona.) During Gardner's six years in office, he supported President Trump on key issues that affect the West,

including Trump's fossil-fueled energy policy and the controversial relocation of Bureau of Land Management headquarters from Washington, D.C., to Grand Junction, Colorado; the League of Conservation Voters, an advocacy group, gave him a 11% lifetime score for his environmental record. Green groups like the Sierra Club endorsed Hickenlooper, though he isn't a total win for progressives; he has supported fracking in the state and said he would not advocate for the Green New Deal. He does, however, support taking action on the climate and tightening up environmental regulations rolled back under President Trump.

—JESSICA KUTZ

GUN REGULATIONS

Montana narrowly approved a referendum to put the state, rather than local governments, in charge of gun regulations, and revoked local authorities' ability to stop convicted felons, minors and others from possessing guns — largely in response to a 2016 Missoula city ordinance requiring background checks for all firearms sales and restrictions on where people can conceal carry. Attorney General Tim Fox claimed the city's ordinance was unconstitutional; Missoula appealed the decision, and in 2019, the Montana Supreme Court ruled the ordinance was not enforceable. Outside Missoula, 17 other municipalities have local ordinances prohibiting firearms, including concealed carry, in public buildings, parks and cemeteries.

—VICTORIA PETERSEN

CALIFORNIA'S GIG ECONOMY

Life in California is defined by cars, and so are controversial labor laws. California-based ride-share and food-delivery companies Uber, Lyft and DoorDash waged an aggressive \$200 million campaign for Proposition 22, a nearly impossible-to-overturn exemption from labor laws that will keep such workers as independent contractors — without union protection, insurance or overtime — rather than employees. In a decisive blow to labor advocates, it passed with 58% of the votes, enshrining the gig economy and laying groundwork for similar measures elsewhere.

Prop. 22 arose in response to a bill passed in 2018, which required companies to give contractors employee status. Ads for 22 claimed that it would help drivers — largely people of color and immigrants — "maintain their independence." But loopholes may allow companies to pay far below minimum hourly wage, and families of workers who die from COVID-19, contracted on the job, could have a harder time receiving compensation.

—ELENA SAAVEDRA BUCKLEY

FAR-RIGHT POLITICIANS

The 2020 election was a mixed bag for far-right Western politicians, but one pattern emerged: Women had far more success than their male counterparts. In the region's highest-profile federal election for far-right candidates, Lauren Boebert claimed western Colorado's sprawling 3rd District. Boebert, a staunch pro-life, pro-gun restaurant owner turned politician, has battled COVID-19 restrictions and rallied with anti-government extremists.

In North Idaho and western Montana, two politicians with ties to far-right militia movements and the Bundy family's so-called Patriot Movement prevailed. Heather Scott, a supporter of the American Redoubt — the movement for a conservative Christian haven in the Inland Northwest — and an ally of eastern Washington's controversial former state Rep. Matt Shea, handily won re-election to the Idaho state Legislature. In Montana, Jennifer Fielder, who has ties to militias in Montana, won a seat on the Montana Public Services Commission, which regulates power utilities.

Elsewhere, far-right fellas were trounced. In central Idaho, Eric Parker, who notoriously drew his sniper-rifle on federal agents during the 2014 Bunkerville standoff, was defeated in his bid for a state Senate seat. And you'd be hard-pressed to find a far-right politician who had a worse week than Washington gubernatorial candidate Loren Culp. Not only was Culp thoroughly defeated by incumbent Jay Inslee, D, he also lost his day job as police chief of Republic, Washington, when the city council voted to defund his one-man police department a few days earlier.

—CARL SEGERSTROM

JUSTICE

CRIMINAL REFORM

After a summer of Black Lives Matter protests and calls to defund the police, California saw a number of criminal justice-related ballot measures. Residents voted down a proposition backed by police unions that would have classified certain low-level crimes, including shoplifting, as felonies and made it harder for incarcerated people to obtain parole. Voters also approved Proposition 17, which makes parolees eligible to vote. (Since 1974, people with felonies have been able to vote, but not if they were still serving a sentence.) In Los Angeles County, residents voted to amend the county charter to invest 10% of the county's unrestricted general funds, anywhere between \$300 and \$500 million, in affordable housing, mental health services and restorative justice programs for low-income

and communities of color. The measure, which was supported by Reimagine L.A. County, a coalition of community organizations and racial justice advocates, arose in response to the country's reckoning over racism. "Without a doubt, Measure J wouldn't even exist, and it wouldn't be possible right now, if we had not seen and experienced all the things that happened with George Floyd and Breonna Taylor and the millions of folks marching," Eunisses Hernandez, co-chair of the Yes On J campaign, told the *LAist*.

Not all social justice measures prospered, however: California residents retained an affirmative action ban and voted down a measure that would have expanded the number of rent-controlled apartments. —JESSICA KUTZ

DRUG REFORM

The West continues to be a proving ground for drug reform. This year, Oregon became the first state in the country to decriminalize the personal possession of drugs like cocaine and heroin, oxycodone and methamphetamine. Instead of jail time, offenders will face a \$100 fee, or, in lieu of that, a health assessment. The law created a fund carved from marijuana tax

revenue to treat addiction and establish new recovery centers. Oregon also became the first state to legalize psilocybin mushrooms for use in licensed settings. In general, psilocybin has become less restricted across the West, thanks to local efforts to decriminalize psychedelics in places like Denver and Oakland.

Arizona and Montana voted to legalize recreational marijuana, joining six other Western states where it's already legal. In Montana, half of the new tax revenue from drug sales will go to environmental conservation programs. In Arizona, where marijuana possession was a felony, residents will now have the chance to expunge their records for certain possession offenses. The state will also create 26 social equity licenses to open retail marijuana facilities for marijuana, to be given to people from communities that have been disproportionately impacted by drug enforcement. Still, some progressive activists, including LUCHA, in Phoenix, say the changes did not go far enough to remedy how communities of color were impacted by drug laws, and they oppose tax revenues going to law enforcement.

—JESSICA KUTZ



When you can't drink the water

In California, access to clean drinking water is supposed to be a human right.

BY EILEEN GUO



Residents of the Oasis Mobile Home Park in Thermal, California, complain that the community's water is tainted, and that management has failed to fix the problem. **Andrew Cullen / HCN**

WHEN SARA GALLEGOS* turns on her faucet, she's never sure what will come out. "In the mornings, it's the color of coffee," she said. At other times, "It's super yellow."

Gallego is one of the roughly 1,900 residents of the Oasis Mobile Home Park, a community of 220 dilapidated trailers in the unincorporated community of Thermal, California. Located on Torres Martinez Indigenous land, Oasis is home to low-income people with few other housing options. Many are farmworkers, and many are also undocumented.

The trailer park is bordered on one side by agricultural fields, but the park itself is characterized by unpaved dirt roads and seeping sewage. Fields of tall grass encroach on its edges. At home, Gallego and her four kids use bottled water for drinking and cooking. For showers, dishwashing and brushing their teeth, however, they still depend on the tap. Lately, Gallego has emerged from her showers with red eyes, clumps of hair in her hands.

Oasis has a history of unsafe drinking water. In August 2019, water monitoring detected arsenic, a known carcinogen, in the park's groundwater supply at nearly 10 times the legal limit mandated by the federal Safe Drinking Water Act.

The Environmental Protection Agency cited and fined the park's owner for violating the Safe Drinking Water Act and ordered him to provide an alternative supply of drinking water while he fixed the water supply. In late May, after nearly a year of additional monitoring, the EPA declared the water safe again. The emergency water deliveries halted, but Gallego and her neighbors

remained suspicious of the liquid flowing from their taps; one resident said it sometimes came out "oily, like butter."

After months of complaints, in late August, the Leadership Counsel for Justice and Accountability, a Fresno-based nonprofit, conducted its own tests and detected high levels of arsenic in Oasis' water — over eight times the legal limit. That prompted another EPA investigation and citation.

Gallego and her neighbors are among the estimated 1 million Californians who lack clean drinking water, generally because they live in impoverished rural communities with small water systems and limited budgets. This is still happening despite the passage of California's Human Right to Water law in 2012. The only such legislation in the country, it is supposed to guarantee that every resident has access to clean drinking water.

Today, the arsenic problem continues, even as the coronavirus pandemic makes access to clean water increasingly urgent. Even though California law states that water is a right, the story of Oasis exemplifies how difficult it is to ensure clean drinking water for the most vulnerable people, not just here but across the West.

ON A SATURDAY AFTERNOON in early September, with a record-breaking heat wave that sent desert temperatures soaring to 118 degrees Fahrenheit, about 10 Oasis residents took advantage of the minimal shade of two saplings by an empty parking lot to share their grievances with *High Country News*.

They arrived in small groups — mostly

family units — in separate vehicles, each person responsibly masked. They were mostly women, all mothers; one was a representative of the local school board. A teenage girl came, and a couple of men, too. One woman wore a hair-wrap, which she later carefully unwound to show us how her dark locks, like Gallego's, were falling out.

People were still arriving when the meeting began. At times, driven by a sense of urgency, they spoke over each other and finished other people's sentences. "We don't want to be forgotten," one woman said. One of the men expressed his astonishment that this was happening in America. "Can you believe this is the richest country in the world?" he asked.

Arsenic occurs naturally in the groundwater, here in California and throughout the Southwest. But most communities have filtration systems that remove most of it from the drinking water. Such infrastructure is costly to maintain, however. In California, a 2017 study from UCLA found that water systems in mobile home parks were more likely to have had health-related violations, and four times as likely to experience water service shut-offs. Altogether, they were 40% more likely to have less reliable groundwater.

Responsibility for providing clean drinking water — and other utilities and amenities — falls to landlords, who are generally focused on maximizing profits, said Gregory Pierce, co-author of the study and a senior researcher on water and transportation initiatives at UCLA's Luskin Center for Innovation. But even when the mobile property owners are operating

in good faith, the cost of updating aging water infrastructure can be prohibitive, especially if the water system is small, as they are in most mobile home parks.

According to the California State Water Board, the state's 2,100 small, independent water systems account for 80% of all drinking water citations.

At Oasis, the issue is further complicated by the park's location on Indigenous land. Owing to laws concerning tribal sovereignty, state regulators, including the public utilities commission, lack jurisdiction there. This leaves regulation to the EPA Region 9 office, which covers California, Nevada, Arizona, the Pacific Islands and 148 tribal nations. Oasis is just one community on a very long list.

"We are aware of residents' concerns about the color and odor and taste that is coming out of the taps," said Amy Miller, EPA Region 9's director of enforcement. But "the EPA does not regulate taste, color and odor."

It does, however, regulate arsenic. "Because (Oasis) is on tribal land, EPA is the primary agency overseeing the water system," Miller added. "But I think, as a community down in the Coachella Valley ... we all need to, to work together, all the different agencies, to find solutions."

Indeed, water systems located on tribal land are not even counted among the 7,403 public water systems in California the state water board tracks. Water systems in Indian Country generally have much poorer infrastructure than the ones serving the general population. In 2018, Indian Health Services identified nearly 2,000 potential projects for addressing water, sewage and wastewater infrastructure needs; their estimated cost came to \$2.67 billion.

Meanwhile, the Oasis community continues to live without clean drinking water. The

sewers overflow, and the old electrical boxes often overheat, causing power and water outages that force families outside, interrupting the children's homework and sleep schedules. "I'd like for one of the politicians to come and live here for a week, to see what we suffer," one resident said.

In addition, after the EPA declared the water safe to drink again, the park was no longer required to provide water. So Gallego continued to buy seven large boxes of bottled water and three gallon-sized jugs every week for her family of five, at a cost of roughly \$75 each month. Many of her neighbors do the same; one family had a cabinet filled with rows upon rows of neatly stacked 12-ounce bottles of water.

FOR A FEW MONTHS at the start of the pandemic, panicking consumers hoarded bottled water and other basic supplies. At the time, the EPA had not yet declared the park's drinking water safe, and the park owner couldn't obtain the large quantities the agency ordered. As a result, Riverside County and the Coachella Valley Water District, a regional water district that serves several towns in the western part of the valley, stepped in. They provided water trucks for the local residents — a service that could continue if the funding were available, said Castulo Estrada, the vice president of the water district's board of directors.

The only longer-term solution, Estrada said, would require consolidating Oasis' water supply with that of the Coachella Valley Water District. But this would take time, and money: The district has identified 100 small local water systems that are ripe for potential consolidation, and each would cost multimillions.

California has passed a number of laws to simplify funding, including earmarking \$130 million each year for the next 10 years

for clean water projects. Even though Oasis is fourth on the list of local water projects, each will take years to complete, meaning that it may be a decade or more before residents have consistent access to clean water.

And for many, that's simply too long to wait. "Residents no longer believe that there's a way to have a healthy community," said Nataly Escobedo Garcia, a water rights specialist with the Leadership Counsel for Justice and Accountability.

So Escobedo is currently helping people like Gallego look for alternative housing in the area, aided by a local poverty alleviation organization and the Riverside County Housing Authority. But affordable housing is hard to find, and it's not clear who would fund such a move, or how many residents would benefit.

Since the new citation was issued in September, Gallego no longer has to drive to the grocery store every Sunday to pick up the family's water for the week. Instead, she gets at least a gallon of water per family member every day.

But these deliveries will eventually end, too. And when they do, Gallego wonders how many years will pass before there's a lasting solution. How old will her children be?

That's what worries her most, despite her own physical problems: the impact that all of this will have on the health of her four young children. Gallego came to Oasis hoping to give them a better life, but lately, she's been wondering whether she made the right choice. In the meantime, there's little else she can do but wait, either for a long-term plan for clean water or for assisted relocation. ☀

** Some names in this story have been changed in order to protect the source from possible retaliation.*

"I'd like for one of the politicians to come and live here for a week, to see what we suffer."

Shelves bow underneath the weight of water bottles purchased in bulk for drinking and cooking in the home of one Oasis Mobile Home Park resident in Thermal, California. **Andrew Cullen / HCN**



A whistleblower speaks out over excavation of Native sites

In California, archaeologists unearthed Indigenous burials 11 years ago, but the remains have yet to be repatriated.

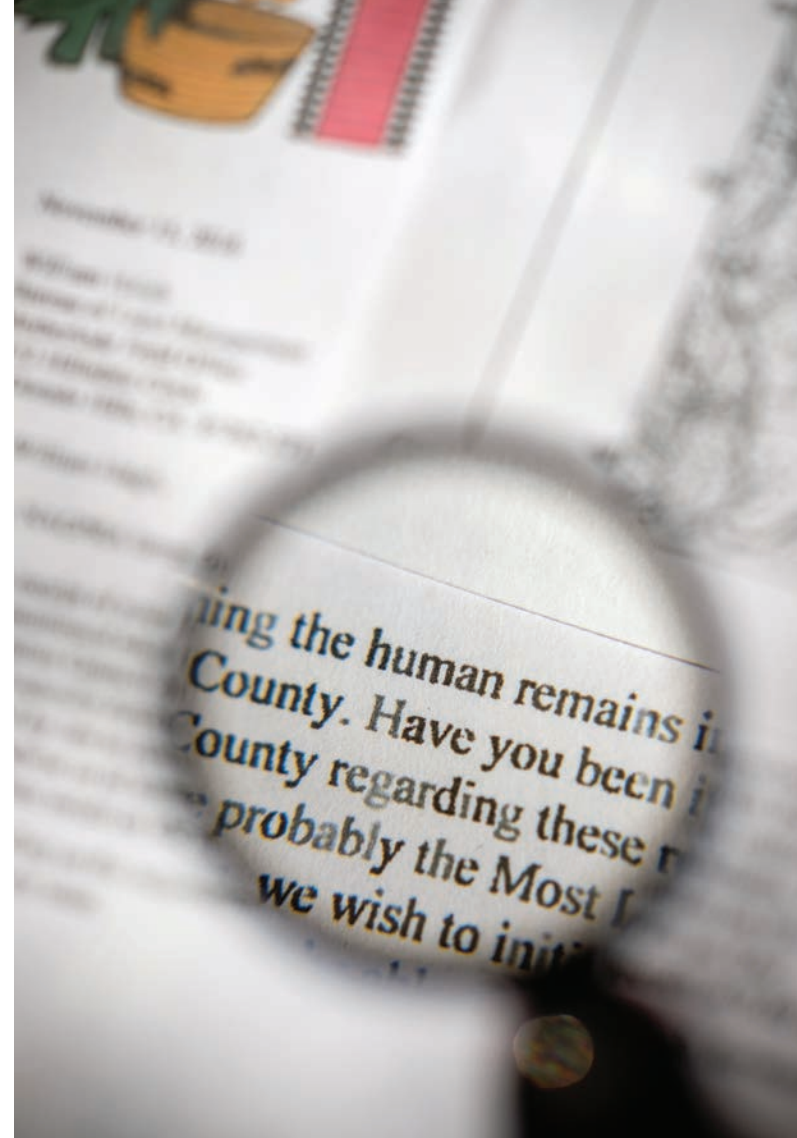
BY TAY WILES

IN 2009, WHILE EXCAVATING prehistoric artifacts in California, graduate student archaeologists from the University of California-Davis found Indigenous funerary objects and fragments of human bone. But despite what the law requires, according to internal documents obtained by *High Country News*, the archaeologists kept digging at the site. They continued the excavation, and apparently left a local tribe in the dark about their findings for years.

The remains were likely relatives of either the Southern Sierra Miwuk Nation or Tuolumne Band of Me-Wuk Indians, who are based in Mariposa and Tuolumne counties in the western foothills of the Sierra Nevada. The researchers collected at least 72 bone fragments and much of a human skull. At the time of this article, officials with the Bureau of Land Management — the agency that approved the digs — had not repatriated the remains, despite requests from tribes. “I haven’t even seen the artifacts and human remains yet,” said Southern Sierra Miwuk Tribal Chairman Bill Leonard. Stephanie Bergman, a former archaeologist at the BLM’s Mother Lode Field Office in El Dorado Hills, California, where the digs were authorized, blew the whistle on what she alleges was misconduct by the university and her former employer.

The case illuminates the often-fraught relationship between archaeological study and Indigenous rights, and the BLM’s failure to hold violators accountable. Bergman, who now works for the National Park Service, hopes that her experience will shed light on these issues. Unanswered questions abound, and the BLM has failed to confirm even basic facts. But Bergman provided *HCN* with a patchwork of internal documents that reveal a bureaucratic process that can leave tribes disenfranchised when they try to protect their ancestors’ still-buried remains, or recover them once they’re unearthed — especially if that tribe is not federally recognized.

IT’S UNCLEAR WHY those UC Davis students were pulling human remains out of burial sites in the first place. The problems began in June 2009 in the central Sierra Nevada foothills. UC Davis anthropology professor Jelmer Eerkens had a BLM permit to dig on federal land in Mariposa County, where his students hoped to find obsidian artifacts from the Indigenous communities who lived here over 3,000 years ago. Three digs revealed shell beads and a shell pendant, along with fragments of cranium, ribs, scapula, clavicle and other remains of six individuals.



They halted some portions of the digs “due to the discovery of human remains,” according to a student dissertation that Bergman acquired. The puzzling part is why they continued with the rest, pulling dozens of bone fragments out of the ground, according to internal emails, rather than immediately stopping so the BLM could consult tribes, as is required by the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA).

Seven years later, in 2016, Eerkens notified the BLM that the students had only just realized, upon closer review in a lab, that they had excavated fragmentary human, not animal, bones. Yet the dissertation claims the students knew they had encountered human remains at those sites, at the time of the digs: “Excavation of three of the units had to be halted ... due to the discovery of human remains,” the student wrote. “The remaining six units were excavated.” Both

Eerkens and the former graduate student declined to speak with *HCN*.

Following Eerkens’ notification, the BLM sent a letter to inform the Tuolumne Me-Wuk, the closest federally recognized tribe in the area, about the remains. The Tuolumne Me-Wuk suggested contacting the Southern Sierra Miwuk: “We realize that they are not Federally Recognized but are probably the (most likely descendants). If you are not allowed by law to consult with them, we wish to initiate consultation on this matter.”

But Southern Sierra Miwuk Chairman Leonard didn’t hear about the issue until 2018. “If there’s no federally recognized tribe in the county, (BLM officials) don’t go through the protocols they should because we don’t have that government-to-government relationship,” he told *HCN*. In 2018, the two tribes asked that the remains and funerary objects be repatriated.

The agency declined to answer why repatriation has not yet happened.

Where are the remains and artifacts now? That's also murky. Since the excavations occurred on BLM land, the agency has legal control. But spokespeople declined to comment. According to Chairman Leonard, his most recent information places the remains at UC Davis. Yet an employee with the university's anthropology museum told *HCN* the remains are not there. Bergman, the former BLM archaeologist, says that Eerkens explained during a meeting in 2018 that he had at least some of them in his personal possession — even though federal law requires storage in a federally approved facility. “I was thinking, ‘Are these things in his garage, and how many does he have?’” Bergman recalled.

INTERNAL DOCUMENTS indicate that issues with the university's field school — and the BLM's permitting and consultation practices — continued well past 2009. In the summer of 2010, the school planned more fieldwork in Mariposa County. “I know that this type of information is very valuable to research and it will help others to understand our ancestors and their way of life,” wrote Tuolumne Me-Wuk Cultural Director Stanley Cox in a letter to the BLM before the digs began. “But we cannot condone excavating archaeological sites just in the name of research so a graduate student can make a name for themselves.” The letter was dated a week past the Archaeological Resources Protection Act deadline to air grievances.

The crunched timeline was a pattern, according to Bergman. Both she and her predecessor,

now an archaeologist in Wyoming, received last-minute permit proposals from UC Davis that left less than the legally required 30 days for tribal consultation. “I think they were doing this knowing that I/the BLM/ wouldn't have time to scrutinize the application, nor would the tribes,” Bergman later wrote in an internal complaint. “I was too new and too busy to question it all or know the difference.” It's unclear how the archaeologists responded to the Tuolumne Me-Wuks' letter, or whether burials were found that summer, but the BLM did authorize a permit.

If any field schools took place between 2010 and 2016, records for these projects were missing, as of a 2018 internal BLM investigation.

In the summer of 2017, part of a human skull was unearthed in Mariposa County when a wildfire crew bulldozed an area in response to a blaze. The sheriff was notified, as is standard procedure. A deputy called Leonard, who quickly came to the site, and together they found the cranium. “We prayed over it and put it back in the ground,” Leonard told *HCN*. Two months after Leonard reinterred the remains, the BLM authorized UC Davis to excavate at the same site, according to site numbers on the

research proposal and other documents. It's unclear whether that dig took place or why the agency authorized work at a site known to have human remains.

The BLM also apparently approved a “human remains discovery protocol” that year on how to handle inadvertently discovering burials. The protocol, submitted by a UC Davis researcher, provides a window into where the process may be breaking down, stating: “Upon discovery of human remains, excavation in the unit of discovery will cease immediately. ... While the protocol for human remains discovery is being undertaken, work will continue at the site in areas away from the unit where the human remains were discovered.” This policy received mixed reviews from several experts in archaeology and cultural resource law — perhaps a reflection of varying interpretations of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act.

One California archaeologist said it seemed like standard procedure — that NAGPRA only requires excavation to urgently stop in the burial's immediate area, not necessarily at the entire site. Other legal experts were alarmed. Leonard and his two predecessors told me

it would be highly unusual to let archaeologists continue digging anywhere near a burial. For her part, Bergman emailed her supervisors about the UC Davis protocol: “(It) gives the field school and the BLM the authority to not comply to NAGPRA.” She sent her concerns to Emily Palus, at the time deputy division chief of cultural resources for the entire BLM. Palus told *HCN* over the phone that she did have concerns about the “university's write-up” and “per protocol, I contacted Tony Overly, the BLM cultural lead in the (California) state office.” The BLM declined *HCN*'s requests to interview Overly.

AS THE NEW Mother Lode Field Office archaeologist in 2018, Bergman had to review requests from developers, researchers and anyone else whose work on BLM land might have archaeological impacts. Within a week at her new job, she noticed unresolved questions regarding the UC Davis field school. Bergman, who was concerned when she heard burials had been excavated in 2009, couldn't find much documentation of previous field schools. But while searching the office, she discovered something else that troubled her. “Stephanie (Bergman) was

High Country News obtained hundreds of pages of documents that include maps, permits for archaeological digs and internal emails. The documents reveal that graduate student archaeologists excavated human remains in Mariposa County, California, in 2009 (opposite and right). **Roberto (Bear) Guerra/ HCN**



... reviewing our very old files on this, dating back to the late 1990s,” then-field manager Bill Haigh wrote in an email to colleagues. “While doing so she discovered a plastic bag filled with what appear to be human remains. In our files. Related to the first (UC Davis) field school.” The bag was labeled with the name of a former field office archaeologist from the ’90s and stored with a folder labeled “NA Remains.” Bergman never learned what became of them.

Bergman began to worry that this was more than just a single mistake by a well-meaning graduate student or overworked BLM manager — that it was an ongoing problem. Weeks before the field school was to start that summer, Bergman convinced her superiors to deny UC Davis any new fieldwork permits. She then complained to the Office of Inspector General about the constellation of issues surrounding the BLM’s archaeological permitting practices — from apparently allowing burial excavations in 2009, to the bag of bones at the office. OIG officials kicked her complaint to the BLM. The land agency completed a basic review of records related to the complaint, as well as a rigorous law enforcement investigation of its employees’ conduct. One of the investigative reports, which *HCN* obtained, said documentation of the 2009, 2010 and 2017 digs was missing from the BLM’s files. “There are no field maps, field notes, artifact catalogs, locational data, periodic updates or a final report in the files,” Colorado BLM archaeologist Daniel Haas said in the report. “The permit records do not show that reporting

was completed in a timely fashion, if at all.” Haas noted that the principal investigator on the BLM permit, likely the professor in this case, needed to provide more oversight of graduate student fieldwork in the future.

The BLM also referred the case to the U.S. Attorney’s Office in Sacramento. Experts say it can be difficult to convince federal attorneys to take on NAGPRA or ARPA cases. “Crimes of violence, common law crime, people hurting people, those are easy (for federal attorneys) to see as important,” said David Barland-Liles, a National Park Service law enforcement manager and National NAGPRA Office investigator. “But crimes against resources, particularly resources of a cultural nature ... presenting those to the U.S. Attorney’s Office — those are harder sells.” A public information officer with the U.S. Attorney in Sacramento declined to comment on whether they investigated the case. By October 2019, the “BLM Director” referred the case to the California state director for “administrative action,” according to internal emails. It’s not clear whether California BLM did take any internal disciplinary actions.

The only repercussion the university archaeologists faced appears to be a letter from the BLM. In 2018, the agency drafted a missive, noting that the school had violated the terms of its Archaeological Resources Protection Act permits, as well as NAGPRA. In June 2020, *HCN* asked the BLM about the status of the letter, which *HCN* obtained. Three weeks later, in July, the agency

issued a finalized letter to Eerkens, requiring him to send reports and deposit the ancestral remains and funerary objects at an approved curatorial facility this fall. “The BLM is assessing the adequacy of the University’s performance with regards to the permits,” Martha Maciel, a public information officer at the time, wrote in an email. “The BLM will work to bring it into conformance.”

At the time of this article, the agency did not respond to multiple requests to interview James Barnes, who helped shepherd the UC Davis permits in 2009 and 2010, and is now head of California BLM’s tribal relations. Calls to the Tuolumne Me-Wuk have also gone unanswered. Eerkens told *HCN* by email that the Tuolumne Me-Wuk are “working with the BLM” regarding the remains and objects excavated in 2009, “and out of respect to the tribe and their ancestors, they asked me not to talk about this further. I apologize.” Eerkens did not mention the Southern Sierra Miwuk, whose territory his graduate students excavated.

FOR SOUTHERN SIERRA MIWUK Chairman Leonard, the real problem underlying this tangled mess is that his tribe is not federally recognized. “If we were recognized, the BLM couldn’t dodge us,” he told me. Since 1982, the tribe has actively sought recognition. The U.S. government said in its latest rebuff that the Southern Sierra Miwuk do not constitute a modern “community.” Being unrecognized means the tribe isn’t always protected under federal archaeology laws. It must work alongside a recognized tribe

in order to participate in the consultation that the BLM is required to do before archaeological digs. “We have to go to our big brother over in Tuolumne or someone else and say, ‘Hey, (the government is) picking on me.’” Leonard said. In the case of the Mariposa County excavations, the Tuolumne Me-Wuk Tribe is assisting in the stalled repatriation process. “We’re fortunate to have a tribe there to help us. ... Without them we’d have been just bulldozed over in a sense.”

Without recognition, Leonard also can’t access various funding sources for administrative staff. That makes consultation nearly impossible. “Even when they say you have the right to participate, yeah, it’s kind of like access to health insurance. You can buy it if you’ve got enough money,” Leonard said. “(The BLM will) pick a tiny spot out of thousands of acres and then say, ‘What are your concerns?’” Leonard said with a shrug. That kind of question takes time and resources to answer — two things he has in short supply. This is a problem not just for the tribe, but for the BLM, whose attempts at consultation can fail if the tribal chairman is unable to respond.

Over the years, however, Leonard said, working with universities and the federal government on archaeology and repatriation has gotten “a lot better.” While the BLM process is still challenging, he’s optimistic that the issue of the Mariposa County excavations will be resolved. He received a letter from the BLM this summer that said the agency wanted to conduct tribal consultation. Bergman, meanwhile, left the BLM in frustration over how she says her superiors handled these issues. Leonard spoke with the new archaeologist at the Mother Lode Field Office a few months ago and was encouraged by her attitude. “I think we’re going to have different results in the future,” he said. Until Leonard gets his ancestors back, he’ll be banking on promises. “I felt like she was going to make sure that these things didn’t happen in the future. As long as she was there.” ☀

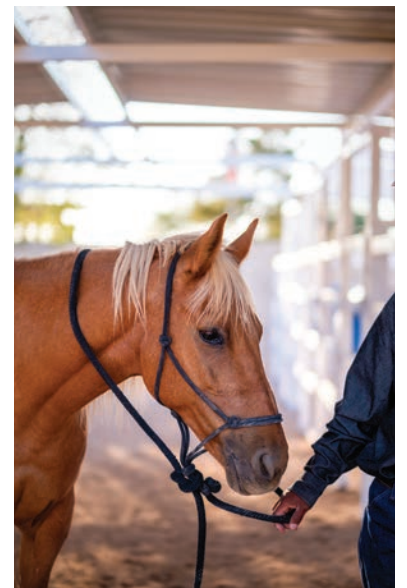
The only repercussion the university archaeologists faced appears to be a letter from the BLM.



Black cowboys reclaim their history in the West

At an annual rodeo in Phoenix, the contributions of African Americans are finally recognized.

TEXT BY DAJA E. HENRY | PHOTOS BY ROBERTO (BEAR) GUERRA



Shaheed Muhammad gives his horse, Shaka, a run on a recent October afternoon (top). Jerrae Walker talks with rider Nijhel Motley in the barn of his property in Laveen, Arizona, where the team gathers to ride (left). Walker and his horse, Cinnamon (above).

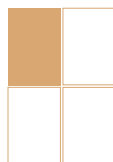
AS THE SUN SETS over Phoenix's South Mountain Park on a crisp desert evening, dust swirls over the park's outdoor riding arena. Laughter carries from the stands and into the mountains as four men and their horses take turns flying around blue barrels and over the pockmarked dirt. They call themselves "As the Crows Fly," after their unique riding style — blazing over obstacles instead of around them. The Crows work as a team in a kind of horseback relay, training for the annual Arizona Black Rodeo.

Wearing a beige cowboy hat, jean vest, bandanna and worn leather boots, Ricky Magee, who works as an IT technician by day, waits in the middle of the ring atop Cajun, his umber-colored horse, until it is their turn. Just as his partner approaches the last barrel, the two burst out to receive the baton. But as Magee grabs the baton and Cajun catches her stride, the horse steps into one of the many craters in the well-worn dirt. Cajun tumbles to the ground and Magee lands inches away.

In years when a pandemic has not shut down everything, the rodeo is a way to acknowledge African Americans' long-neglected contributions to Western history. The rodeo celebrates the accomplishments of men like Bill Pickett, a Black cowboy in the late 19th century who started off as a ranch hand in Texas and became a rodeo star famous for his steer-wrestling technique. And Bass Reeves, a deputy U.S. marshal who was famous for the arrest of thousands of criminals in Oklahoma and Arkansas, and who, some historians suspect, was the inspiration for the fictional Lone Ranger.

Though historians estimate that as many as one-fourth of the cowboys in the late 1800s were Black, they have largely been erased from the history of the "Wild West." But at a ranch in South Phoenix owned by David Knight, a retired Black trucker from Indiana, the riding group is reclaiming that history. Though these men are aware of their historical erasure, they are not on some grand crusade to right the wrongs of the past. As far as they're concerned, they're simply sharing the traditions that were passed down to them.

**NIJHEL MOTLEY, 24,
AND LITTLE BITS**
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania



Nijhel Motley, the youngest of the group, comes from a horseback-riding family: His mother rode while she was pregnant with him, and his father raced quarter horses in Philadelphia, their hometown. Motley rode before he even knew how to walk. Now, Motley studies sports communications at Arizona State University but spends most of his free time on ranches caring for and training horses.

"Rodeo does something good for the soul," he said. "It gives me a sense of empowerment. We're doing our part by showing people in this area and in this community that there are Black cowboys around here. There's always been."

Motley is well aware of the erasure of Black cowboys from history and the current barriers to their participation in rodeo. "When you don't have the land and the money and the funds, it's easy for you to get pushed under the rug," he said. "It's a lot harder for us to break through that seal, but it's happening."

**JERRAE WALKER, 36,
AND CINNAMON**
Gary, Indiana



Jerrae Walker's father competed on the Black rodeo circuit, so he spent much of his childhood on the road. The Bill Pickett African American circuit held its first rodeo in 1984 in Denver, and his father's group, Thorough Laddins, followed the circuit throughout the Midwest. Growing up around rodeos, Walker never felt excluded from mainstream cowboy culture. Horses were just part of his life. "That was what was available," he said. "A majority of the people that were riding, and a majority of people in Gary, Indiana, were Black."

Walker joined the Marines at 17. After four years and two tours on the frontlines of Iraq, he left the military and eventually settled in Phoenix, seeking a change of pace. He purchased Cinnamon, a strawberry blond quarter horse, and connected with the group of cowboys at Knight's ranch. The cowboys lacked a large practice space of their own, so Walker bought some land of his own. "I try to lead by example," he said.

RICKY MAGEE, 35, AND CAJUN
Franklinton, Louisiana

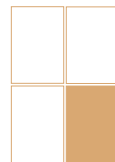


As a kid, Ricky Magee helped his uncle train horses. "He believed that if a child

can ride, or a young man can ride, that the horse is ready to go and it has enough manners to do a show," Magee said. "I got hooked from just riding and training the horses."

Magee and his uncle traveled from his hometown of Franklinton, Louisiana, to Mississippi to showcase the horses. The tradition originated on his grandfather's 40 acres, where he'd raised horses and cattle. For Magee, the riding wasn't just a hobby, but a way to make extra money. Magee's uncle helped him buy Cajun, a quarter horse with a blond mane, from a ranch in Oklahoma seven years ago. Magee moved to Phoenix about a year ago, excited about living in the "Wild West," he said, where people ride horses in the streets and openly carry guns. Knight's ranch felt like a secret society. "I didn't think Black people thought it was cool to ride horses," he said. "I've been called country for a long time."

**SHAHEED MUHAMMAD, 32,
AND SHAKA**
South Central, Los Angeles

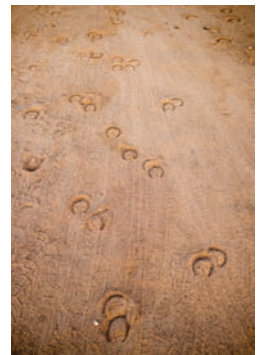


Shaheed Muhammad is 6 foot 6, so he knew he needed a tall horse. He and Shaka, his lanky chestnut thoroughbred, tower over their teammates. He grew up watching the "good guys," who were typically white, swoop in on horseback in movies, wearing fancy hats and shiny boots. "I've always had an affinity for horses," he said. Back then, however, he was drawn to more popular aspects of Black culture in South Central: hip-hop and basketball. Once he learned that his dad had conducted search-and-rescue missions on horseback, though, Muhammad's own interest in horseback riding was renewed. He met Shaka on a friend's ranch, and bonded with the horse on weekly rides. His journey through the "horse game," as he calls it, had been lonely before he discovered Knight's ranch.

The gatekeepers that surrounded him in his early days of riding were white; he was often misled and misunderstood by arrogant riders. "They felt like they were God's gift to horses," he said. "They feel like it's their culture that they've mastered." As he watched those riders show off their expertise and dominance, the Westerns he'd watched took on a different meaning. In their assertion of ownership, not only of their horses but of the culture itself, he began to see what was wrong with America's past. "Now that I look back as an adult, these were actually the bad guys," he said. "You're conditioned to believe this image of cowboys, but these people are intruding on people's land and stealing." 🌟



*“Rodeo
does
some-
thing
good
for the
soul.”*



Hoofprints in the riding corral.

Fossil fuel politics erode backcountry compromise

William Perry Pendley's illegal stint as Bureau of Land Management head undoes a first-of-its-kind land designation in Montana.

BY CARL SEGERSTROM

IN CENTRAL MONTANA, sagebrush-covered hills roll gently down toward Arrow Creek before dropping off in dramatic cliffs where the creek joins the Missouri River. This Bureau of Land Management land, near the Upper Missouri River Breaks National Monument, is prime habitat for deer, elk and game birds. Arrow Creek's remote location and its renown as a hunting destination made it an ideal candidate to debut a new land-management designation: the backcountry conservation area.

Backcountry conservation areas were conceived as a compromise between giving land the full protections — and restrictions — of a designated wilderness area, and offering no protections at all: a way to conserve big game wildlife while still supporting recreational access.

In July 2020, the BLM designated the nation's first backcountry conservation areas in Montana. But the agency did not outlaw oil and gas drilling within their boundaries — and state officials and some public-lands advocates say that could make the designation meaningless. “The idea is a really good idea, but the backcountry conservation areas we got are just words on a paper,” said Aubrey Bertram, eastern Montana field director for the Montana Wilderness Association.

Now, even the watered-down version of the Montana designations has been thrown out. In October, Federal District Court Judge Brian Morris ruled that the

management plans establishing the Montana backcountry conservation areas were invalid because William Perry Pendley, the de facto head of the BLM, was unlawfully filling that position. The ruling, and the lawsuit that led to it, underline how — and why — state officials, conservationists and members of the public have lost trust in an agency that's undone land protections and scrapped previous compromises over the past four years.

First proposed during the Obama administration, backcountry conservation areas have been championed primarily by hook-and-bullet conservation groups. BLM land classifications range from recreation- to preservation-focused — categories that differ according to how much road-building or timber-harvesting is allowed and whether motorized vehicles or bicycles are permitted. The new designation was meant to bridge partisan and ideological divides by blending habitat protection with recreational access, allowing some road construction and vehicle travel while preventing future industrial development. “In places where rural folks are wary of overly restrictive land designations, backcountry conservation areas provide durable conservation that won't be rolled back,” said Joel Webster, the senior director of Western Programs for the Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership.

The inaugural backcountry conservation areas covered nearly

120,000 acres of land in western and central Montana. Under the plans establishing them, oil and gas drilling could not occur unless the BLM determined that it wouldn't harm wildlife or recreation. Even though the lack of significant fossil fuel deposits in the areas made drilling unlikely, oil and gas companies could stake claims anyway: Speculators often lease BLM land with marginal development potential, paying as little as \$1.50 an acre. Such leases can prevent the agency from conducting habitat restoration or trail maintenance. (The BLM did not respond to requests for comment.)

This has led Montana land managers to question the designation's conservation value. “What really matters is, ‘What does it protect?’ ” said John Tubbs, director of Montana's Department of Natural Resources and Conservation. Without clear and binding restrictions, such as withdrawing the land from oil and gas leasing or banning commercial logging, the state lacked confidence that the new category would actually safeguard the landscape, Tubbs said.

The October ruling that scrapped the Montana backcountry conservation areas stemmed from a successful lawsuit brought by the state against the BLM. The court agreed that Pendley's tenure violated laws limiting how long political appointees can serve

without Senate confirmation. (Pendley's official nomination was withdrawn because of his anti-public land record; as of press time, he continues to serve as the BLM's acting director.)

Environmental groups asked the court to extend the Montana ruling and thereby invalidate scores of the regulations, environmental impact statements and resource management plans that Pendley oversaw. A suit filed by Colorado conservation groups, for example, charges that expanded oil and gas leasing in the state is illegal because Pendley played a role in approving it. Meanwhile, the Interior Department, which oversees the BLM, is expected to appeal the Montana case to the 9th Circuit Court of Appeals.

Hugo Tureck grows grain on a flat bench of land above Arrow Creek and runs cattle through the proposed backcountry conservation area and down to the Missouri. He supported the new designation back in 2015. But as the plans came to fruition, the BLM stopped holding local resource advisory committee meetings and communicating with residents. If they had called him, he said, he would've told them there's no reason to allow oil and gas leasing in the drainage. “If you think about oil and gas, you're on the wrong side of the river,” said Tureck. “There's nothing out here.” ☀



Mule deer swim across the Missouri River in the Upper Missouri River Breaks National Monument. **Danita Delimont / Alamy Stock Photo**

When conservation is a trigger word

In order to attract a broader constituency, organizations must first address a history of missteps and exclusion.

BY ERIC SIEGEL

IN 2018, WHEN NOÉ ORGAZ, an organizer from Conservation Colorado, first attended the all-women's group *Mujer, Fuerza y Sentimiento* ("Women, Strength and Empowerment") in Denver's Montbello neighborhood, he was told to sit quietly at the back of the room. "You're welcome to be here, but not to speak. You can observe," a facilitator politely explained.

The group, which started in a McDonald's lobby in 2015, helps Latina women empower each other and advocate for changes in their community. Orgaz, who came on behalf of *Protége* ("Protect Yourself!"), the organization's Latino organizing arm, wanted to ask the women to testify in support of House Bill 1261. Known as the Climate Action Plan, it would set Colorado on course to reduce its greenhouse gas emissions by 90% in 2050 and improve air quality, a critical issue for the women's group. But getting their support wouldn't be so easy.

The group had good reason to be wary of outsiders. After a previous Conservation Colorado organizer abruptly stopped attending meetings, the women feared that their information was being used without their consent. Even though that wasn't the case, they no longer trusted people like Orgaz. "You guys are a transactional organization," he remembers the facilitator telling him. "You come in, take what you want, leave, then come back when you need something else."

This distrust has made it difficult for groups like Conservation

Colorado to reach out to communities previously marginalized by the environmental movement. Environmental organizations are realizing that if they want to attract a broader constituency, they must first make up for past missteps.

That requires atoning for a past that was exclusionary from the outset. It is well documented, for example, that the conservation movement — historically the province of elites and white recreationists — has focused on protecting wilderness and public lands at the expense of environmental justice. Legacy conservation organizations, like the Sierra Club and The Wilderness Society, have recently acknowledged this, releasing statements that address their own histories of racism. "It's time ... (for) some truth-telling about the Sierra Club's early history," executive director Michael Brune said, acknowledging that the organization's founders, notably John Muir, advocated "for both the conservation of nature and the conservation of the white race."

This history is still a barrier to building trust today, Orgaz admits. He's met older Latinos, he said, who recall how Colorado's former Democratic governor, Richard Lamm, allied himself with environmental groups on an anti-immigrant platform. Limiting immigration, Lamm argued, would reverse the environmental degradation that results from unchecked population growth. In 2004, Lamm angled for a seat on the Sierra Club's board of directors, knowing that the orga-



Dina Puente in her Montbello home. Puente and 11 other women were able to prevent a waste treatment plant from expanding into their community after they had participated in one of *Protége*'s community organizing trainings. **Kevin J. Beaty / Denverite**

nization had previously promoted similar views. (He lost.) "That's an issue in the minds of folks," Orgaz tells me. "It's in the conversation. These are our realities."

But there is also skepticism about the way conservation groups operate. Often, organizations have strict funding timelines and protocols dictated by funders with their own agendas. This can short-circuit the trust-building process, said Brent Davies of Ecotrust, an Oregon conservation group that works with Indigenous communities. Building a genuinely collaborative partnership takes time. "It's very important to talk to a variety of people — and get formal permission," she said. This echoes her words during a recent seminar about reframing conservation. Rather than mandating a solution, organizations should "look for outcomes that are community-led and collectively shared," she said.

If Orgaz wanted to work with the Denver women's group, he had to do more than just promote his organization's agenda. He had to show he cared deeply about the issues directly impacting their communities — lack of green space, inadequate sidewalks, rampant air pollution. So Orgaz, who now works for the Sierra Club, attempted to reshape what conservation looked like. He sought to connect the dots between everyday health and environmental issues — such as asthma

— and the overall effects of heat and air pollution, for example.

He eventually was able to build relationships with people like Dina Puente. In 2012, Puente, her husband and three daughters moved from a small farming community on Colorado's Front Range to Montbello, where there were more opportunities for her children. But, shortly after moving, one of her daughters, Daniela, started having difficulty breathing. The neighborhood is disproportionately impacted by pollution due to a nearby petroleum refinery, interstate highway and former EPA Superfund site. After Daniela underwent multiple medical procedures and missed 114 days of a school year, doctors eventually diagnosed her with severe asthma. "My second home is still the Children's Hospital," Puente said recently.

Puente and 11 other women from her group eventually participated in one of *Protége*'s community organizing trainings, where they learned new tools for gathering and sharing their community's stories with elected officials. As a result, they were able to prevent a nearby waste treatment plant from expanding into their community.

"People who have been disproportionately impacted by pollution are 'expert witnesses,' especially when it comes to the effects of climate change," Orgaz said. "These are real people feeling the effects." ☀



REPORTAGE

Alaska braces for latest climate change threat: landslide-generated tsunamis

Melting glaciers and thawing permafrost expose an emerging hazard in Alaska.

BY VICTORIA PETERSEN

TUCKED AGAINST glacier-capped mountains, the Begich Towers loom over Whittier, Alaska. More than 80% of the small town's residents live in Cold War-era barracks in this former secret military port, whose harbor teems every summer with traffic: barnacle-encrusted fishing boats, sightseeing ships, sailboats, superyachts and cruise-liner monstrosities. This summer, coronavirus travel restrictions put a damper on tourism in the usually buzzing port. Then came warnings of a potentially devastating tsunami.

Whittier residents have been mindful of tsunamis for generations. In 1964, the Good Friday earthquake was followed by a 25-foot wave that crushed waterfront infrastructure, lifting and twisting rail lines and dragging them back to sea. The Good Friday earthquake — which killed 13 people here and caused \$10 million worth of damage — still occupies Whittier's memory.

With tons of rock and rubble precariously perched high above a nearby fjord, ready to crash into the sea, the town's present is being

shaped by both its past and preparations for an uncertain future. This destabilization is being driven by climate change: Tsunamis are becoming more likely in Alaska as hillsides, formerly reinforced by glaciers and solidly frozen ground, loosen their hold on once-stable slopes.

On May 14, an Alaska Department of Natural Resources press release and a public letter from 14 scientists warned locals of a possible landslide-generated tsunami. Alaska has identified three similar events in the past:

Tsunamis in 2015 and 1967 occurred in remote areas, while one in 1958 killed two people whose boat was capsized. But the unstable slope in Barry Arm, a narrow steep-walled fjord in Prince William Sound, is vastly more dangerous. The potential energy from a catastrophic slide here is approximately 10 times greater than previous events, the state's top geologist said in the May press release.

The landslide in Barry Arm has been lurching towards the ocean since at least 1957, when Barry Glacier — which once gripped the base of the mountainside and held back the slope — first pulled its load-bearing ice wall out from under the rocky slope. As the glacier retreated, so did the slope's support system — dragging the rock face downward toward the ocean, leaving a distinct, zig-zagging indentation in the hillside. Between 2009 and 2015, Barry Glacier retreated past the bottom edge of the landslide, and the slope fell 600 feet. Since 2006, Barry Glacier has receded by more than two miles. Scientists believe the slope is likely to fail within the next 20 years — and could even do so within the year.

Climate change makes land more unstable and increases the risk of landslide-caused tsunamis. As the climate warms, glaciers melt and recede, pulling back from the mountainsides they were hugging. Barry Glacier's wall of ice — which once held the hillside in place, supporting it against the fjord's mountains — has thinned, edging away from the rock face, releasing its support and revealing an unstable slope that is slipping downward toward the ocean. Brentwood Higman, geologist and executive director of Ground Truth Alaska, is working with other scientists to research climate change's impact on landslide-triggered tsunamis. "(These events) are worth worrying about regardless of climate change," Higman said. "But there are a number of reasons to think climate change makes them a lot more likely."

As glaciers recede, the land above them also becomes more unstable. The craggy alpine region of south-central Alaska is already thawing dramatically. Once-frozen slabs of rock, dirt and ice are releasing trapped liquids and becoming more prone to sliding down mountains.

Another less-obvious symptom of climate change increases the risk. When there's more water in the atmosphere, precipitation becomes more intense. Rain, even more than earthquakes, is prone to trigger landslides, Higman said. Climate change will make landslides more likely and more frequent, said Anna Liljedahl, an associate scientist with the Woodwell Climate Research Center. "It's a new emerging hazard, and that's why it's urgent to do an assessment of where we have these unstable slopes and where they are a hazard to people," Liljedahl said.

Tracking unstable slopes can give local governments time to install warning systems, so scientists are working to

identify unstable land, focusing on monitoring landslides near communities in Southeast and south-central Alaska.

In mid-October, Gabe Wolken, the Climate and Cryosphere Hazards Program manager for the Alaska Division of Geological and Geophysical Surveys, took a helicopter to Barry Arm. From the air, he conducted a lidar survey, using a laser scanner to measure the topography of the slide area in fine detail, calculating how the landslide has moved and changed since June. The data is still being processed. But there are new rockfalls in the area every time he visits, indicating the area's instability. "The rock itself isn't very competent," Wolken said. "It's basically falling apart."

Whittier residents are aware of the risk, said Peter Denmark, who runs a commercial kayaking business in town. "With the people around town, there's a laissez-faire attitude about it," Denmark said. Alaskans have "thick skins" when it comes to disasters, he said. "If it's not tsunamis, earthquakes, volcanoes, forest fires — it's one thing or another." Still, Denmark is taking precautions; he avoids the Barry Arm area on kayaking tours.

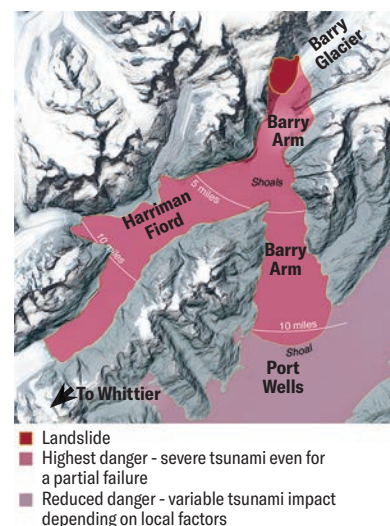
Kelly Bender relies on summer tourism in Prince William Sound. From her waterfront office, she charts water taxis, fishing boats, kayaking and sightseeing tours. Before news of the potential landslide broke, Bender said her fleet went into Barry Arm daily. With its scenic location near glaciers and a popular beach, the state estimates that 500 people could be in the area at any given time during peak tourist season. Bender has changed tour routes, canceled water taxi trips — even canceled a planned wedding. "The danger part of it — people are feeling like 'we know what to do in a tsunami,'" Bender said. "It's the business part of it that we're all really, you know, hanging by a



Satellite images of the receding Barry Glacier made on Sept. 15, 2013, and Aug. 24, 2019 (above top and bottom). **NASA Earth Observatory**

A view of Barry Arm in which the receding Barry Glacier and the vulnerable section of land are visible on the right side of the image (opposite). **Gabriel Wolken**

Illustration of current potential tsunami risk in Barry Arm (below; adapted from the original). **Brentwood Higman and Patrick Lynett**



thread." When tsunami warning sirens blare in Whittier, residents know to move swiftly away from the coast and head to higher ground. The state encourages coastal residents to keep a "go bag" filled with emergency supplies and to plan evacuation routes.

While it's still possible to avert or mitigate many of the worst impacts of climate change, there is really no way to eliminate landslide-generated tsunamis. The state uses howitzer cannons to trigger controlled avalanches in railway and highway corridors, but there's no easy way to gently coax a colossal land mass off the side of a mountain and into the

ocean. "It's pretty much science fiction," Higman said. Smaller landslides might be able to be stabilized from the bottom up, but large landslides, like in Barry Arm? "Forget about it," Liljedahl said.

Increasing preparedness, installing a robust monitoring system on and near landslides and creating an effective localized alert system are the best way to protect communities, she said. Some locals, like Denmark, the kayak outfitter, prefer a quicker approach, however. "My idea was to just blast it down and duck," he said. "But nobody thought that was a good idea." ☀

Twenty signs in 2020 that the climate crisis has come home to roost in the West

BY JONATHAN THOMPSON

IN SEPTEMBER, PRESIDENT Donald Trump visited fire-ravaged California and declared that the wildfires that had already burned across millions of acres were the result of forest mismanagement, not a warming climate. “When trees fall down after a short period of time, they become very dry — really like a matchstick. No more water pouring through, and they can explode,” he said. “Also leaves. When you have dried leaves on the ground, it’s just fuel for the fires.”

Trump is right about one thing: Global warming isn’t the only reason the West is burning. The growing number of people in the woods has increased the likelihood of human-caused ignitions, while more than a century of aggressive fire suppression has contributed to the fires’ severity. In addition, unchecked development in fire-prone areas has resulted in greater loss of life and property.

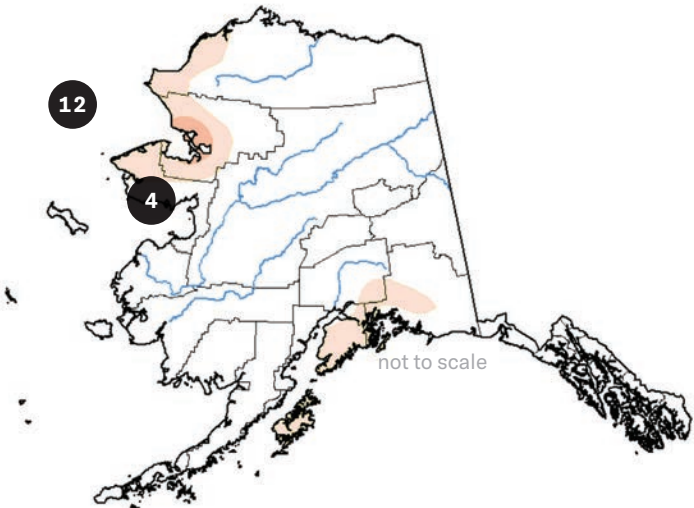
Yet, much as California Gov. Gavin Newsom told Trump, it’s impossible to deny the role a warming planet plays in today’s blazes. “Something’s happening to the plumbing of the world,” Newsom said. “And we come from a perspective, humbly, where we submit the

science is in and observed evidence is self-evident that climate change is real, and that is exacerbating this.”

The accompanying graphic includes a few examples of the evidence Newsom mentioned. But then, you only have to step outside for a moment and feel the scorching heat, witness the dwindling streams, and choke on the omnipresent smoke to know that something’s way off-kilter, climate-wise.

But during his September stop outside Sacramento, California, under a blanket of smoke, Trump merely grinned and shrugged it off, again asserting that scientists don’t know what’s happening with the climate. And, anyway, he said: “It’ll start getting cooler. You just watch.” ☀

Sources: National Interagency Fire Center; CalFire; Maricopa County; National Weather Service; National Centers for Environmental Information; National Water Information System (USGS); Energy Information Administration; Oregon Department of Forestry; Environmental Protection Agency; Western Regional Climate Center; United States Drought Monitor

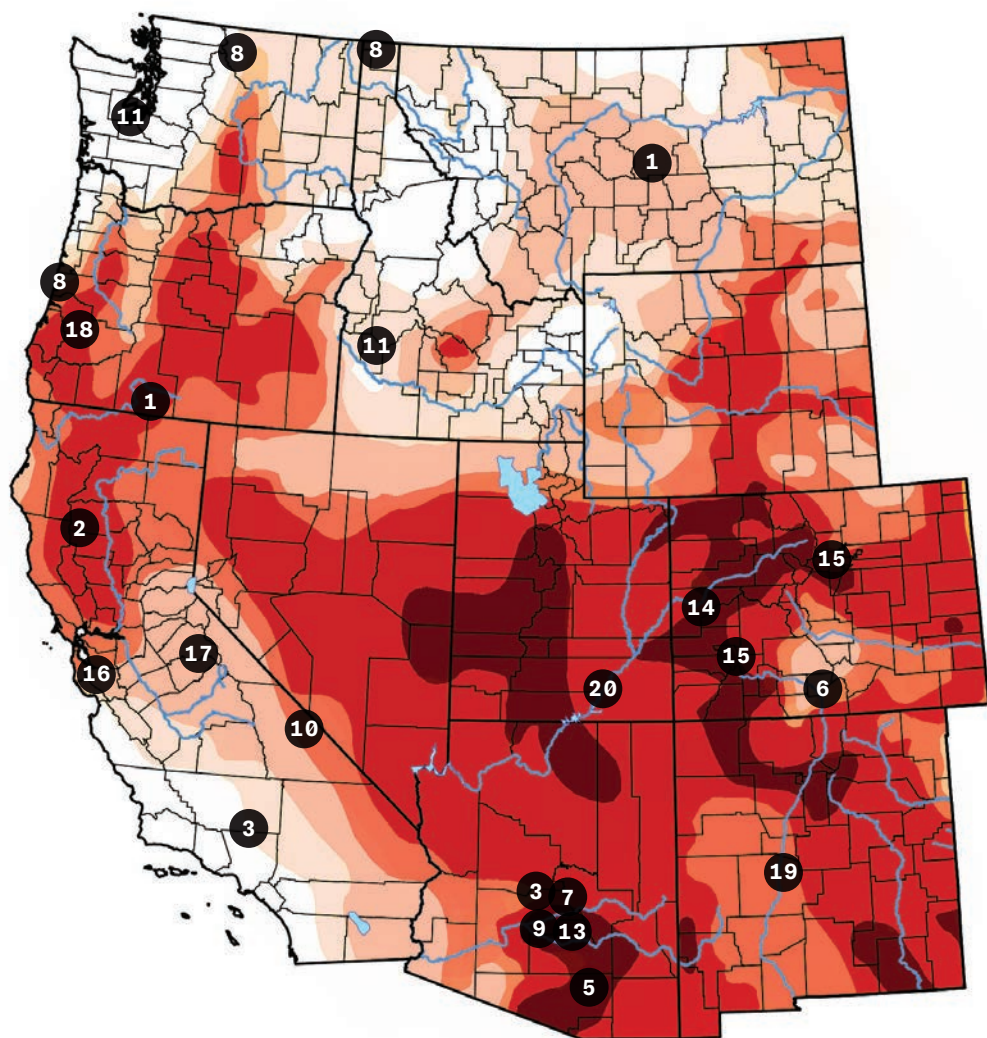


2020 DROUGHT LEVELS

NO DROUGHT
ABNORMALLY DRY
MODERATE DROUGHT
SEVERE DROUGHT
EXTREME DROUGHT
EXCEPTIONAL DROUGHT

- 1. Lewistown, Montana, (70 degrees Fahrenheit) and Klamath Falls, Oregon, (65 degrees) set high-temperature records for the month of February.
- 2. California had its driest February on record.
- 3. In April, parts of southern Arizona and California saw the mercury climb past 100 degrees Fahrenheit for multiple days in a row, shattering records.
- 4. Nome, Alaska, experienced its warmest May since record-keeping began in the early 1900s.
- 5. Seven large fires burned across more than 75,000 acres in Arizona during May, and in early June, lightning ignited the Bighorn Fire in the Santa Catalina Mountains near Tucson, ultimately torching 120,000 acres. A week later, the Bush Fire broke out in Maricopa County and became the fifth largest in the state’s history.
- 6. On July 10, Alamosa, Colorado, set a temperature record for a monthly low (37 degrees Fahrenheit). Later that day, it set another record for the monthly high (92 degrees).
- 7. Phoenix, Arizona, set an all-time record for monthly mean temperature in July (98.3 degrees), only to see that record fall in August (99.1 degrees Fahrenheit).

- The temperature in the burgeoning city exceeded 100 degrees on 145 days in 2020 — another record.
- 8. Westwide in August, 214 monthly and 18 all-time high-temperature records were tied or broken, including in Porthill, Idaho (103 degrees), Mazama, Washington (103 degrees) and Goodwin Peak, Oregon (101 degrees).
 - 9. By the end of October, Phoenix had experienced 197 heat-associated deaths — about five times the yearly average during the early 2000s.
 - 10. In Death Valley National Park, the mercury hit 130 on Aug. 16, breaking the previous all-time record set in 2013.
 - 11. Across the Western U.S., hundreds of monthly and all-time high-temperature records were broken in August, including in several places in Idaho and Washington, where the mercury climbed above 100 degrees.
 - 12. Warm temperatures in Alaska caused ice on the Chukchi Sea to melt, leaving record-tying amounts of open sea.
 - 13. During monsoon season (June through August), Phoenix received just 1 inch of rain, or about 37% of average, and then received no precipitation at all in September or October.



14. Grand Junction, Colorado, experienced its driest July and August on record. On July 31, lightning ignited the nearby Pine Gulch Fire, which grew to 139,000 acres, making it (briefly) the largest in state history, only to be eclipsed by the 207,000-acre Cameron Peak Fire in the northern part of the state.

15. Colorado's wildfire season was not only its most severe on record, but most of the fires also burned far later in the year than normal. In mid-October, when Colorado's mountains would normally be covered with snow, the East Troublesome Fire west of Boulder tore through high-elevation forests and homes to become the state's second-largest fire ever. Shortly thereafter, the Ice Fire broke out at nearly 10,000 feet above sea level in what was once known as the "asbestos forest" near Silverton, burning over 500 acres.

16. A dry thunderstorm that generated more than 8,000 recorded lightning strikes hit Central and Northern California in late July, igniting multiple megafires. The resulting August Complex became the largest fire in state history,

and together with the SCU Lightning Complex, the LNU Lightning Complex and the North Complex fires, it burned across more than 2 million acres, destroyed 5,000 structures and killed 22 people.

17. Smoke from California's fires spread across the region, causing particulate matter to build up to levels that were hazardous to health and significantly diminishing solar energy output.

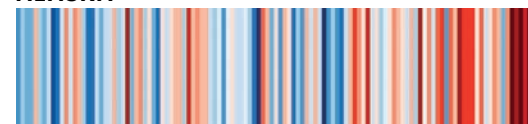
18. In September, several fires were sparked in Oregon's tinder-dry forests. Fueled by high winds, they went on to burn more than 1 million acres and 4,000 homes.

19. In August the Rio Grande in New Mexico shrank to the lowest mean monthly flow since 1973. Other rivers in the region, including the Colorado, Green and San Juan, ran at far-below-average levels throughout the summer.

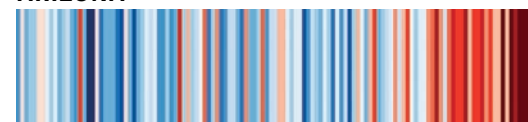
20. As of early November, Lake Powell's surface elevation had declined by 35 feet since the same date in 2019, and summer hydroelectric output from Glen Canyon Dam's turbines was 13% below the previous summer's.

The stripes shown here represent the change in temperature from 1895-2019,* with each stripe representing the average temperature for one year. Red is warmer and blue is cooler than the 1901-2000 average. *Alaska is from 1901-2019. Ed Hawkins / University of Reading, [showyourstripes.info](https://www.showyourstripes.info).

ALASKA



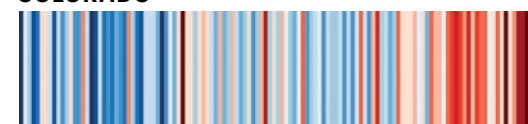
ARIZONA



CALIFORNIA



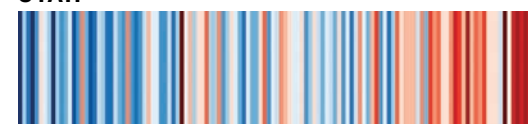
COLORADO



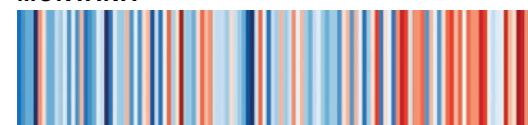
IDAHO



UTAH



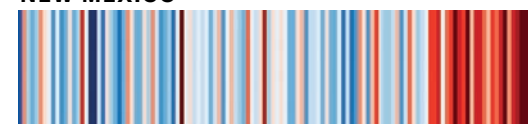
MONTANA



NEVADA



NEW MEXICO



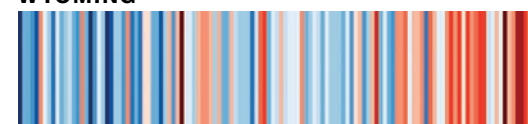
OREGON



WASHINGTON



WYOMING



(continued from page 7) ... executive director of the International Mayan League. "COVID-19 has amplified the inequalities and discrimination and lack of resources and erasure of our peoples."

THE PAST FEW YEARS have seen an influx of Indigenous immigrants from Latin America to the U.S., said Blake Gentry (Cherokee), who works with Casa Alitas migrant shelter's Indigenous Languages Office in Tucson, Arizona. Despite multiple federal policies and executive memos requiring that immigrants receive information in their primary language, the federal government doesn't keep records of Indigeneity, or what language an immigrant speaks. Instead, shelters like Alitas compile their own data from interviews. "If you don't ever count someone as Indigenous and you don't count someone as an Indigenous language speaker, you can't demonstrate a need that needs to be addressed," said Gentry. That means that Indigenous people who speak languages like Mam, Mixteco and Kaqchikel are often assumed to be Spanish-speaking Latinos when they interact with border agencies and immigration courts.

This has also been true of public health agencies dealing with COVID-19. In Arizona, Gentry said, Alitas and Indigenous Alliance Without Borders have been creating and circulating Indigenous language videos and resources in lieu of state health agencies. In Oakland's Fruitvale district, which has a large Mam community, COVID-19 cases were one of the highest in the county, but Mam translations were not included in state resources.

The Oregon study of COVID-19's impact on agricultural workers shows the effects on a family level. Over 24% of those interviewed were Indigenous, and they described troubles with quarantining and finding medical attention, owing to the cost and possible job loss.

Indigenous agricultural workers were more likely than those who were non-Indigenous to struggle to pay for rent, food and child care, but less likely to know about paid sick leave or efforts like the Oregon Worker Relief Fund. Remittances to families in Guatemala or Mexico had declined or stopped altogether.

"It means information isn't getting out, particularly for Indigenous workers," said Lynn Stephen, professor of anthropology at the University of Oregon, who has worked with Indigenous migrants for 20 years and interviewed farmworkers in the study.

Respondents also said that workplace safety was often not communicated or translated. Sometimes, COVID-19 precautions were impossible to follow, given the close quarters in packinghouses and nursery farms. "There are many people who do not speak (Spanish). Most speak Mam," said one anonymous fruit-tree farmworker in Woodburn, Oregon. "There is a company I know where most workers speak Mam, 50% who do not speak Spanish. Nobody translates."

Newer communities, like those in Newport, can prove difficult for grassroots organizers and others to contact, and for good reason, Stephen said. One-third of Oregon's farmworkers are undocumented; one Indigenous farmworker told Stephen that when his family kept an appointment with Immigration and Customs Enforcement, his wife and daughter were detained and deported. "That's the context that people operate in in daily life," Stephen said. "So they don't answer calls from people they don't know."

THE HELPLINE CREATED by Guzman and Vera is still operating and is used by callers in at least three other Oregon counties, but its future is uncertain. Calls had slowed after the summer outbreak, but in October, Oregon experienced massive wildfires at an unprecedented scale. Swaths of the Coast

Range — including Lincoln County — burned, and evacuation orders were issued. Air-quality warnings from the thick, hazardous smoke were in effect for weeks, impacting agricultural workers outside. Evacuation alerts sent in the middle of the night didn't include Spanish or Indigenous languages, though translations in Spanish were sent out within 24 hours. The number of calls to the helpline rose again, including one that Guzman recalls vividly: A Mam family, who lost their house in the wildfires, called asking where to find mattresses and blankets. It's difficult to imagine how the family would have found that information in rural Oregon without speaking with someone in the right language. "I think this is an opportunity that could really translate outside of COVID into other needs," Guzman said. "And, hopefully, help us make decisions going forward as to how to best support them."

At the end of October, Stephen and others involved in Oregon's farmworker study presented their findings and made policy recommendations to Oregon state legislators, hoping to strengthen support for frontline agricultural workers, including mandated trainings in the worker's primary language. Other recommendations include expanding aid funds and re-enforcing anti-retaliation and workplace protections to lessen the fear of job loss if a worker takes time off or sick leave. Until policymakers account for and reverse the erasure of Indigenous people — in COVID-19 relief and elsewhere — advocates fear that they will continue to be underserved and underrepresented. "We are being critically affected across the country," Cabrera Lopez said. "But we're not on the radar. For them to respond, they need to realize we exist and are at that table." ✨

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THE LATEST

Tongass timber

Backstory

Alaska's Tongass National Forest holds life-sustaining value for the Tlingit, Haida and Tsimshian peoples. It's also at the center of a decades-long battle over logging. Since 2001, part of the 16.7 million-acre forest has been protected by the "Roadless Rule," a federal regulation banning logging in certain areas of national forests. In July, 11 Southeast Alaska Native tribes asked the U.S. Agriculture Department for a new rule that requires it to work more closely with tribes on forest management ("Eleven Alaska Native tribes offer new way forward on managing the Tongass," October 2020).

Followup

In October, the USDA formally exempted the Tongass National Forest from the Roadless Rule, lifting protections on about 9.3 million acres of the world's largest intact temperate rainforest, home to centuries-old Sitka spruce, hemlock and cedar. None of the 11 Alaska tribes recommended a full repeal of the rule, and around 95% of public comments opposed complete exemption. President-elect Joe Biden's administration, however, could reinstate protections for the Tongass. Meanwhile, the tribes' July petition remains under review. —Victoria Petersen



Contributing Editor Kalen Goodluck photographs in Tucson, Arizona, for April's land-grab university feature.
Luna Anna Archey / HCN

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HCN COMMUNITY

Interns look back



"The *HCN* internship taught me to seek nuance over easy tropes, and helped me see my home region in new ways — key skills for an emerging journalist. After I became an editor, *HCN*'s incredible network of writers and community of readers gave me some of my most satisfying professional relationships and dearest friends, without whom I could not have become a freelance writer-artist, reporting and illustrating magazine-length features about people, wild creatures and the land."

—**Sarah Gilman**
HCN intern 2006, Freelance journalist, illustrator and poet



"I came to *HCN* as an intern way back in the Lander years, and I was fortunate to work with Geoff O'Gara, Danny Whipple and Kathy Bogan, who gave me an eye-opening education in environmental journalism and also in the sometimes-precarious finances of small but feisty nonprofit organizations. My time at *HCN* truly launched my writing career, and I am grateful for all I learned, and for the community that gave me my start."

—**Susan Tweit**
HCN intern 1982, author



"There are so many things to love about *HCN*. But for me, it's all about community — the community of journalists who have grown together around *HCN*, as interns, staffers, contributors. Now more than ever, community is what carries us, reminds us we are not alone, reminds us to take care of one another."

—**Laura Paskus**
HCN intern 2002, freelance journalist and author



"As a freelance journalist, my job is to craft accurate, compelling and meaningful stories — skills that I learned as a *HCN* intern seven years ago. But the most meaningful part of my internship was the community it provided, both among fellow writers and the magazine's readers. Once, a total stranger approached me at an airport because they knew my photo from *HCN*."

As small newspapers continue to fold, I value this community more and more. Writing can be a solitary endeavor, but *HCN* readers make it far less so."

—**Krista Langlois**
HCN intern 2013, freelance journalist

HCN's esteemed intern and fellow program is an unparalleled "journalism bootcamp" that has prepared hundreds of talented young writers for a world well beyond our doors — though sometimes we're lucky enough to hire them as staff. Thanks to donor support, we've been able to "seed the West" with skilled writers who share a deep understanding of this region and its complexities.

DIVID

When a private prison company came to rural Wyoming, local officials believed an economic revival was at hand. Instead, it unleashed a bitter debate over U.S. immigration policies and the future of a town.

By Sarah Tory | Photos by Russel A. Daniels

T

HERE IS A ROAD LEADING OUT OF EVANSTON, Wyoming, that is known as the Road to Nowhere. It runs through dry sagebrush bluffs along the edge of Bear River State Park, a green corridor through the rolling high desert just outside of town. Just under 12,000 people live in Evanston, which lies in Uinta County, near the state's southwestern border. There is a small downtown surrounded by a smattering of residential streets lined with modest, single-family homes. Beyond that, on the windy and treeless outskirts of town, is a Walmart, chain restaurants and a few hotels. To the north, eighteen-wheelers rush by along Interstate 80 on their way to Salt Lake City, while to the south, Highway 150 leads to the Uinta Mountains, a blue smudge across the sky.

Evanston grew up alongside the Union Pacific Railroad in 1869 and became a thriving oil and gas town during the late 1970s and early '80s. But by the mid-1980s, the boom began to sputter out, and many of the long-established businesses in downtown Evanston closed their doors, including Blyth & Fargo, one of the West's first department stores, which had operated for 107 years. Over the next two decades, the town's economy fluctuated as the price of oil rose and fell again and again. Since 2015, the last major oil downturn, Evanston's economy has worsened; the average salary in Uinta County has been consistently \$4,000 to \$5,000 lower than the Wyoming average. Storefronts have boarded up, and oil workers have left for Texas. But those who remain love Evanston, with its slow pace and family-oriented feel, its homegrown celebrations like Cowboy Days and Cinco de Mayo, the "Fresh Air, Freedom and Fun" heralded in Evanston's official slogan. They like the low taxes, the nearby mountains, and the fact that Evanston is not California. The town leans Republican, and the few Democrats are mostly moderate. It is a live-and-let-live kind of place, one longtime resident told me. "We all got along OK," she said. "Or, we did."

A few miles outside of Evanston, the Road to Nowhere ends in a

Interstate 80 at the edge Evanston, Wyoming, which marked the crossroads of many of the country's historic cross-country routes, including the Mormon, California and Oregon trails and the Pony Express (facing).



ED PROSPECTS



patch of open land. An ambitious new facility was supposed to be built here and help lift Evanston out of its economic doldrums — a privately run detention center for immigrants awaiting deportation orders. In 2017, the Trump administration was ramping up immigration enforcement, and the government needed more detention centers to hold people arrested by Immigration and Customs Enforcement, or ICE. A private prison company called Management & Training Corporation (MTC) saw an opportunity in Evanston, a town in search of its next industry. The detention center, which would cost between \$70 million and \$90 million, would bring up to 200 full-time jobs, with correction officers' entry level salaries starting at \$42,000 per year, plus benefits.

For decades, the for-profit incarceration industry has found a welcome home in places like Evanston: rural communities looking for an economic boost. In the 1980s and 1990s, the U.S. radically expanded the number of prisons — and prisoners — in the criminal justice system. After Sept. 11, 2001, that trend spread to the immigration enforcement system as well. From 2000 to 2016, the number of immigrants in U.S. detention rose 442% — and the growth has continued, with 40 new detention facilities opening since 2017, many of them in rural areas and most of them privately run.

"These are places that have been left behind," Tara Opsal, a researcher at Colorado State University who studies how prisons have shaped Western communities, told me. "Industries that once supported them have abandoned them, and rural communities are often looking for a new industry that will solve everything."

Evanston, however, was different from the other towns that Opsal had studied. Here, the proposed detention center sparked an unexpectedly fierce debate around morality and the economy. Residents excited by the prospect of



The historic Blyth & Fargo department store building is visible from a neighborhood just off Evanston's main drag (top).

An abandoned building in Evanston's rail yard, where the Transcontinental Railway — and an ensuing boom — came through in 1869 (above).

Mark Anderson, a Uinta County commissioner, was in favor of the detention center and the economic benefits it would have brought Evanston (facing).

good jobs found themselves pitted against their neighbors, who were appalled that their town might become part of a system that detains asylum-seekers and separates migrant children from their parents.

The fight over the proposed detention center opened a window into the ideological and economic challenges facing rural America. What happens when a private prison company comes to a small, tight-knit community, promising salvation — and not everybody is willing to accept it?

IN 1979, JUST AS OIL COMPANIES were descending on southwestern Wyoming, an attorney named Tim Beppler moved to Evanston with his wife, Katie. Oil prices were soaring, leading companies to explore the Overthrust Belt, an area that stretches

from Alaska to Mexico along the Rocky Mountains, but which had long been considered too difficult and expensive to drill. A few years before, a company named American Quasar had made the first significant discovery in Pineview, Utah, seven miles from the Wyoming border. By the time that Beppler moved to Evanston, eight major oil and gas fields had been found in southwestern Wyoming. The town became a hub for the surrounding fossil fuel industry, bringing an influx of oil workers followed by engineers, physicians, teachers and lawyers. Evanston's population ballooned from 4,900 to over 13,000. Local resources were overwhelmed: Crime and alcohol abuse rose, schools were crowded, and when Beppler and his wife tried to buy a house in 1979, there were only two still available. They bought one of them.

But if the oil brought challenges to Evanston, it also brought new resources. Money provided by the energy companies to help mitigate the industry's impacts funded new initiatives like the Uinta Arts Council and a recreation center. Community members attended public meetings, volunteering to help plan the new projects. "People were excited about the growth," Beppler recalled.

Then, in 1986, oil prices collapsed. The Uinta County Economic Development Committee began looking for ways to rebuild the economy. Over the years, the town leaders tried to bring in new businesses and well-paying jobs, advertising in magazines and newspapers and hiring an outside consultant who recommended creating a website to attract new companies. Nothing worked out.

"Wyoming has been spoiled with our oil gas and coal industries just being so prevalent and so good for us," Mark Anderson, a Uinta County commissioner, told me. "That's what we've relied on. We haven't really ever had to diversify our economy."

And so, when MTC appeared in

early 2017 with a proposal to build a 500-bed facility that would house immigrants for ICE, local officials saw a quick fix. That spring, both the Evanston City Council and the Uinta County Commission issued resolutions in favor of the proposal before soliciting community input.

Kortney Clark, a mother of two, has lived in Evanston for 20 years. When she learned about the proposed detention center, she balked at its suggested location: near Bear River State Park, where she likes to take her kids for walks. Others were upset over the secrecy surrounding the town and county's decision to support the proposal, and some were skeptical that it would have lasting economic benefits.

Meanwhile, the ACLU of Wyoming got involved, soliciting Antonio Serrano, a Cheyenne-based organizer, to help inform locals about the proposal and organize a campaign against it, based on the principle that detaining immigrants on non-criminal charges is wrong. In early 2018, Serrano launched WyoSayNo, a coalition of immigrants' rights groups across the state, to fight the detention center, organizing protests, writing petitions and filing public records requests.

Clark knew almost nothing about the U.S. immigration system, but she learned quickly. A few months before, news had broken that the Trump administration was separating migrant children from their parents at the border. As Clark read about ICE detention centers and how parents were often held there for weeks or months at a time and then deported, without their children, the prospect that her town might become even a small part of that system horrified her — all the more so because of her own work as a health-care case manager, helping children with special needs to stay at home with their families. "My job is keeping families together," she told me.

Project supporters, on the other hand, were motivated by the promise of new jobs and economic

growth and security. Critics were also worried about the message a detention center would send to Evanston's Latino and immigrant community, which makes up around 10% of the town. Many of Trump's immigration policies, especially family separation, have been widely condemned for their cruelty — even by members of his own party. "There was a real sense of this (detention center) as an example of Evanston taking an incorrect moral position," Opsal, the CSU researcher, told me.

Public meetings about the detention center grew increasingly tense, pitting those in favor of the facility against those who opposed it. It was hard to tell which group was larger, Beppler told me, but he was struck by how many people were vocalizing their concerns, even though they seemed to have little effect on local officials, who remained eager to pursue the proposal. For the Bepplers, the most distressing part of the issue

was how bitterly it divided the community. In the past, Evanstonians had come together over their problems to discuss alternatives and come up with solutions. When the town needed a recycling center, for example, a few locals started Uinta Recycling Inc., a nonprofit run mostly by volunteers, in 2004. But the detention center brought out a different response. The two sides became hyper-polarized, Beppler said. "It was an us-against-them situation."

BY LATE FALL 2018, the growing opposition to the proposed detention center started to concern MTC and the county commissioners, who began looking for ways to drum up more local support. Mike Murphy, the vice president of marketing for MTC, sent an email to Amanda Hutchinson, the Uinta County clerk. "We are looking for 3-4 individuals in Evanston to sign onto some editorials we want to publish supporting the ICE facil-

ity in Uinta County," he wrote, in an email obtained by a WyoSayNo public records request.

Despite the opposition, the plan appeared to be moving ahead. In July 2019, the federal government requested proposals from contractors for a 250-to-500-bed immigrant detention center. Uinta County anticipated that MTC would respond by confirming Evanston as the proposed location. Instead, in July 2019, MTC abruptly abandoned its proposal, telling county commissioners that it was a business decision. Soon after, CoreCivic, a private prison company, offered to take over, expanding the proposed detention center's capacity from 500 to 1,000 beds.

Mark Anderson, who was elected to the Uinta County Commission in January 2019, had to decide whether or not to support CoreCivic's plan. Immigrant detention is a controversial subject, and for-profit ICE detention centers have come under fire for inadequate medical care, lack of access to lawyers, abusive conditions and suicides. A recent report from the House Homeland Security Committee criticized ICE's oversight mechanisms and medical treatment of detainees. The report, based on a yearlong review by the committee's members and investigators, came to the conclusion that "ICE prioritizes obtaining bed space over the wellbeing of detainees."

So, before he made up his mind, Anderson decided to tour one of CoreCivic's facilities. He visited the Otay Mesa Detention Center in San Diego and told me he was impressed by the level of oversight he found there. "You read a lot of stuff in articles," he told me. "Every negative little thing — a lot of that is maybe not as truthful as what I saw."

Anderson also reached out to other counties across the country that had had CoreCivic facilities in their communities for many years. "I made dozens and dozens of calls," he told me. No one had anything negative to say about the company,



he said, adding that even some of the public officials he talked to who were “liberal-minded” on immigration told him — to his surprise — that CoreCivic had had a positive economic impact in their communities.

Perhaps it shouldn’t be surprising, considering that small-town budgets are often heavily reliant on private prisons and detention centers, not to mention the administrative fees and other perks that private companies offer to win over local governments. Chronic underinvestment in rural communities means that towns are “kind of held hostage by these private prison corporations,” Bárbara Suarez Galeano, the organizing director at Detention Watch Network, a nonprofit that advocates against immigration detention, told me.

People in Evanston continued to debate the merits of CoreCivic’s proposal. But Anderson felt like he had heard from enough of his constituents to be able to support it himself. “People reached out to me all the time,” he said. “It’s a small town.” Some locals hesitated to support it publicly, telling Anderson privately, “I hope it happens.” Anderson began to feel like opponents were less interested in the local issues than in trying to convince him that immigrant detention was entirely wrong, whether it happened here or anywhere else.

Faced with increasingly vocal opponents, supporters began to organize their own campaign. In November 2019, a local man named Jonny Pentz started a Facebook group called Uinta County Say Yes! At a public meeting last December, representatives from CoreCivic presented the plans for the detention center. An artist’s rendering showed a 300,000-square-foot facility sitting on a bluff next to Bear River State Park, surrounded by multiple layers of razor-wire fencing and 16-foot-high walls. The meeting was packed, and people had two minutes to ask questions or share their opinions. When Pentz spoke, he said that he would

be the first to apply for a job at the future detention center. “There is more local support for you than is being reported,” he said. Beppler, who also attended, came away less certain. “I think that if nothing else, (the meeting) drove home that the community was not of one mind on this issue,” he told me.

The proposal moved ahead anyway. In January, the county commissioners voted unanimously to pass a land-transfer resolution authorizing the county to sell 63 acres near Bear River State Park to CoreCivic for \$315,000.

And then it all came crashing down — again. This spring, CoreCivic became the second company to walk away from Evanston in less than a year. The abrupt cancellation hit local officials hard. “It’s off the table now,” Eric South, the chairman of the Uinta County Commission, told the *Casper Star-Tribune* on April 8. “All these bleeding hearts and liberals ought to be happy about it.”

CoreCivic would not agree to an interview about its decision. In a statement, a spokesperson for the company wrote, “There were ultimately a number of factors that made it difficult for us to consider proceeding.”

Although CoreCivic had left Evanston, the tension sowed by the proposal lingered. In August, I made plans to visit Evanston, and Clark reached out to Pentz on my behalf, saying that I was interested in talking to both supporters and opponents. The day before I was supposed to go, however, Clark told me that Pentz had posted on the “Uinta County Say Yes!” Facebook page, describing me, falsely, as “a supporter of the antifa movement” — an ideology associated with a loose group of antifascists who sometimes stir up chaos and are not opposed to violence. Throughout the summer, rumors circulated on social media that antifa organizers were coming to rural towns, and Pentz, who was then running for the Evanston City Council, warned people not to speak to me.

I called Pentz, hoping to clear

things up. “A few people tried to figure out what you’re trying to do here,” he said. Pentz explained that he felt that everything was political, and added that he and those on “his side” had suffered for supporting the detention center. “We’re just a bunch of people who are literally suffering because our oil fields are dying,” Pentz told me. “There’s no jobs, no opportunities. And when we speak up and say what we want, we have reporters all over Wyoming coming here and writing stuff down about us and calling us racists.” We spoke for about 10 minutes before Pentz ended the call.

ELSEWHERE IN THE WESTERN UNITED STATES, proposed immigration detention centers have stirred up passionate battles in local communities, many of them already home to prisons and ICE facilities. In McFarland, California, a cash-strapped town in the Central Valley, a proposal to convert two state prisons into an ICE detention center managed by a private company called The GEO Group sparked months of protests and contentious public meetings. When the city’s planning commission voted on the proposal last February, the result was a tie, which meant the motion failed. But The GEO Group appealed to the city council, which approved the proposal in April. (This summer, following a lawsuit that accused the city of illegally approving permits for GEO, a federal judge ordered a halt to the approval.)

Since the early 1990s, Adelanto, another struggling town in California’s Mojave Desert, has embraced incarceration facilities as an economic development strategy. It has three within the city limits, two of them privately owned by The GEO Group. In 2016, the company paid the town \$960,000 a year in taxes — an eighth of Adelanto’s budget, but pocket change compared to the nearly \$2.2 billion that the company brought in from all of its contracts that year. “We need the money in the city,” Adelanto’s former mayor had told me.



In February, the Adelanto Planning Commission approved The GEO Group’s plan to convert its state prison into an immigration detention center. Jessie Flores, the city manager, cited the approximately \$1 million the company pays the city for operating its prisons — about 10% of the city’s revenue. Immigrants’ rights groups appealed the decision, putting the proposal’s fate in the hands of the city council. More than 1,600 people emailed the city before a vote in September that kept locals in a meeting past 3 a.m. The vote ended up deadlocked, 2-2, meaning that the earlier ruling by the Planning Commission stood, and GEO can move forward with the expansion. Once again, opponents vowed to fight.

All these local conflicts are now caught up in the reality of the pandemic, as surging COVID-19 infection rates have forced ICE to decrease the number of detainees it holds. Meanwhile, the state and the federal government are fighting over immigration detention in California. Last year, ICE signed a 15-year contract with The GEO Group for the Adelanto ICE Processing Center, which included



Kortney Clark and her children, Zoey, left, and Aryiah, right, at their home in Evanston. Kortney helped organize opposition to the detention center, which would have been located near a park she and her daughters frequent (*left*).

The sagebrush slope that was set to be the site of the privately run ICE detention center. The location is about a mile east of downtown Evanston, and just above Bear River State Park (*below*).



the company's proposed expansion — less than two weeks before California passed a new state law to phase out private prisons and detention centers.

A FEW DAYS AFTER I spoke to Pentz on the phone, I visited Evanston. I was a bit wary of what I might encounter — one of the commenters on Pentz's Facebook post about me wrote: "I say we all get our guns on and stand together." The evening I arrived, however, was peaceful. In a park near the old train station, a small group of people had gathered for an outdoor concert. I had hoped to talk to others who had supported the detention center, but Pentz's warnings had circulated. When I called the county commission's office to talk to some of the commissioners, the clerk asked if I was "the reporter writing about the ICE detention center." Most of my calls went unanswered.

I wandered around the downtown, which is lined with historic brick buildings that give it an old-timey charm. The Blyth & Fargo building is still there, but now it hosts a vape shop and a tattoo parlor, among other businesses. Across the street, a colorful

ice cream store called The Scoop stood empty, the sign still beckoning even though the shop had closed a few years ago. Main Street was mostly deserted, but pop music played from speakers attached to the streetlights.

There was good news on the horizon: A rubber glove and boot manufacturer had recently made plans to relocate from the Pacific Northwest to Evanston. And an existing beauty care company was expanding to make hand sanitizer — a much-coveted product during an ongoing pandemic. Above the entrance to the newly renovated Evanston Cultural Center, flashing green lettering read: "Come to Downtown!"

But, despite the good news, the tension between neighbors had not dissipated. I met Clark outside her house in a subdivision. She has short brown hair and spoke softly, her tone matter-of-fact even when discussing the recent conflict with Pentz. Like Beppler, Clark had been taken aback by the level of acrimony that had flourished in Evanston. "I understand that people need jobs," she said. Her husband, who works as a diesel mechanic, commutes an hour to

Park City, Utah. In the past, they had discussed moving closer to his job, but they couldn't afford it, she said. Still, she thought, if people did more research about why immigrants are undocumented and how hard it is to obtain legal status, they might reconsider their support for the detention center. "I think not really knowing and understanding is the reason why they thought it was OK to bring that (the detention center) here," she told me.

In the end, the detention center had crystallized the hidden differences among people in a generally tight-knit community — over immigration, over politics, over the future of their town — obscuring what they still had in common: the desire for better opportunities in Evanston.

The proposal had also stirred up disturbing memories: Evanston had compromised its integrity over economic concerns before. More than a century ago, Chinese immigrants were brought into the U.S. and then to Wyoming to work on the Transcontinental Railroad. When the project was finished, thousands of jobs disappeared, and white workers grew resentful of the Chinese who remained, convinced

they were taking their jobs for lower wages. One morning in September 1885, a fight broke out between white miners and their Chinese coworkers in nearby Rock Springs, ending in a riot and the massacre of 28 Chinese. In Evanston, armed mobs threatened more violence, and white residents petitioned the Wyoming governor to pay off the Chinese workers so they would have enough money to leave town.

For Tim Beppler, the detention center felt like an unsettling echo of that history — a time when the town was caught up in anti-immigrant sentiments and policies. In the end, the railroad era ended, just like the oil rush that followed. In 2018, and then again in 2019, Beppler wrote a letter to the county commissioners. "Please don't let this sad history repeat itself," he said, referring to the often-forgotten history of Evanston's Chinese community. He could have been talking about the people and communities most affected by any boom-and-bust industry, whether it's oil or prisons. Beppler concluded with a question and a warning: "What will we do," he wrote, "when the national immigration policies change again in a few years?" ☀

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Employment

Crazy Horse Memorial® Manager of Residence Life for The Indian University of North America®

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and knowledge of recruitment, selection, training and ongoing development of residential life activities and supervision of student support staff is essential. Preference is given to qualified candidates who are enrolled in a federally recognized Native Nation. Benefits include year-round lodging, food while programs are in session, medical, dental, vision, life insurance, SIMPLE IRA retirement plan, supplementary benefits, paid time off, holidays and a variety of designated benefits for employees. Qualified candidates should submit a cover letter, résumé and three references to: Human Resources Manager, Crazy Horse Memorial Foundation, 12151 Avenue of the Chiefs, Crazy Horse, SD 57730-8900. Or email a cover letter, résumé and three references to hr@crazyhorse.org.

Executive Director — Powder River Basin Resource Council, a progressive nonprofit conservation organization based in Sheridan, Wyo., seeks an Executive Director, preferably with grassroots organizing experience, excellent communication and financial management skills, and the ability to problem-solve complex, environmental and sociopolitical issues. To see a full job description and learn how to apply, go to our website at: <https://www.powderriverbasin.org/prbrc-job-opportunities/>.



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Executive Director — Eastern Nevada Landscape Coalition, based in Ely, Nev., is looking for a new Executive Director to replace the longtime Executive Director, who is retiring at the end of the year. ENLC is a 501(c)(3). For the full position announcement, go to the website. 775-289-7974. enlc@sbcglobal.net. www.envlc.org.

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Crazy Horse Memorial® Director of Programs for The Indian University of North America®

Crazy Horse Memorial®, in the Black Hills of South Dakota, is currently accepting applications and nominations for the Director of Programs for The Indian University of North America®, an entity that offers unique academic programs in partnership with select institutions of higher learning. Candidates must be enrolled members of a federally recognized Native

Nation and possess a Ph.D. or Ed.D. in a relevant field from an accredited college or university. (ABD candidates may be considered with an agreed upon completion date) and have the ability to gain faculty status within a partner University. Experience in the recruitment, retention and education of Native American high school and college students is required. The successful candidate must possess excellent analytical, communication and interpersonal skills and represent the Memorial professionally in various venues. The Director is the onsite administrator responsible for the successful delivery of the academic programs of The Indian University of North America, including offering and overseeing strong student success coaching. Must have prior administrative experience and prior college teaching experience. This is a full-time salaried exempt position based at Crazy Horse Memorial and will require travel at times. Benefits include medical, dental, vision, life insurance, SIMPLE IRA retirement plan, supplementary benefits, paid time off, holidays and a variety of designated benefits for employees. Qualified candidates should submit a cover letter, résumé and three references to hr@crazyhorse.org. Human Resources Manager Crazy Horse Memorial Foundation, 12151 Avenue of the Chiefs, Crazy Horse, SD 57730-8900. 605-673-4681. crazyhorsememorial.org.

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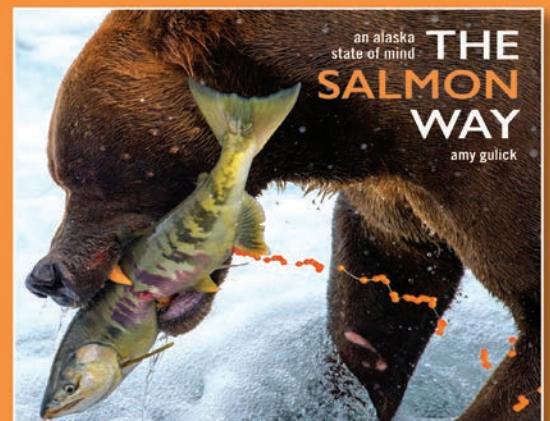
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John Fielder photographs, oil paintings, historical art, and mountain stories galore.

A close-up photograph of a dark brown leather wallet. The leather has a rich, textured appearance with some variations in color and grain. The top edge of the wallet is curved, and the stitching along this edge is visible, showing a double-stitch pattern. The wallet is positioned horizontally, and the background is a solid, light gray.

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According to leading scientists, gray wolves still need protection under the Endangered Species Act to fully recover from decades of eradication efforts. There are only 108 wolves in Washington state, 158 in Oregon, 15 in California, and only 6 recently sighted in Colorado. But that didn't stop the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service from stripping wolves of their legal protections across the contiguous U.S.—a purely political decision unsuccessfully tried before by presidents from both parties.

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Stop destroying Tohono O'odham sacred sites

There is no word for wall in the O'odham language, but there is a word for wisdom.

BY NED NORRIS JR.



WHERE THERE SHOULD BE OUTRAGE, the Tohono O'odham Nation has found only silence.

Our sacred sites and burial grounds — which hold the deepest significance to our people — have been run over and blown up with a seemingly proud indifference by federal contractors as they rush to build President Donald Trump's border wall.

As these cultural sites have been desecrated, federal officials have hidden behind false motivations and political games. But we are not fooled, and we are not without a voice.

While the president's border wall is appallingly shortsighted — a political stunt that has relied on the illegal use of federally authorized dollars — it is not the first attempt to divide our people and change the narrative of our history.

The O'odham have lived in Arizona and northern Mexico since time immemorial. We experienced the impact of a border through our lands in 1854 — a border that was drawn without regard for our history, our original territory boundaries or our sovereign rights. More than 2,000 of the nation's enrolled tribal citizens continue to live in Mexico today.

As a result, for the past 160 years, the Tohono O'odham have been on the front lines of border issues, often bearing the brunt of failed federal border policies. In the 1990s, federal policy designed to move undocumented migrants from ports of entry pushed people onto the nation's lands, greatly increasing border traffic and causing environmental and cultural harm.

Today, President Trump's border wall upholds another historic injustice against the O'odham. It threatens to further erase our history, our traditions and our culture.

Quitobaquito Springs and Monument Hill are sites sacred to the Tohono O'odham. Both include burial grounds, and both are located in what is now Organ Pipe National Monument. They sit close to the border and are within our ancestral territory. The National Park Service — itself a federal agency — recognizes that there are burial sites located in these areas. Yet U.S. Customs and Border Protection contractors have dismissed these facts and plowed ahead with bulldozing and blasting large portions of this land.

This has led to the ruin of an O'odham burial site and a location historically used for religious ceremonies and as the final resting place for many of our tribal ancestors. The administration commenced this destruction with no advance consultation, no notice of the destruction after the fact and no effort to mitigate or avoid irreparable damage to the sacred sites.

The Trump administration's reckless disregard for our religious and constitutional rights is embodied in the dynamite and bulldozers now rumbling through our original homelands. Many of our tribal citizens feel they have no choice but to protest these destructive activities. They have been met with tear gas and rubber bullets from law enforcement.

All of this — the desecration, the erasure and the assaults on our people — are the costs we pay for this administration's campaign prop.

We fully recognize the need for border security. The Tohono O'odham Nation's reservation includes 62 miles of international border with Mexico. We spend an average of \$3 million of our own money each year on border security and enforcement. Funding border security is a federal responsibility, but the federal govern-

Tohono O'odham Nation Chairman Ned Norris Jr. testifies in February at an oversight hearing on destruction at the U.S.-Mexico border. **House Committee on Natural Resources: Democrats**

ment has never reimbursed us. Our police department spends more than a third of its time on border-related issues.

But President Trump's wall will not stop undocumented immigrants, who will climb over it, or smugglers who dig beneath it. It will, however, harm our desert environment, destroy our cultural resources and divide our people.

The O'odham have always been compassionate and welcoming. We have a long history of helping travelers passing through our lands. These values are part of who we are. These values are so engrained in our worldview that it is reflected in our language, which has no word for "wall."

Instead, I share *amicudalig*, our word for wisdom. It means knowing right from wrong, good from bad. Let us together focus the discussion of border security on *amicudalig*. Acting with wisdom. Acting for the good of people and for the good of our land.

I call on Congress to act with wisdom and abolish the dictatorial statutory waiver authority that has single-handedly allowed the Trump Administration to avoid implementation of scores of federal statutes to destroy our sacred and traditional lands. Legislate on behalf of what is right, not what is wrong, and pass comprehensive immigration reform. There are common sense solutions to border issues. None of them involve a wall. 🌵

Ned Norris Jr. is the chairman of the Tohono O'odham Nation.



Lauren Crow / HCN

Q&A

LAST JANUARY, 50 years after President Richard Nixon signed the National Environmental Policy Act into law, the Trump administration announced its plans to issue new regulations to severely curtail the scope and breadth of the law in order to streamline new infrastructure projects. In September, those rules were finalized, marking a new era in which some of the most important environmental safeguards against industry influence and haphazard planning have been removed.

The changes mark a swift departure from the original intent of a policy passed back in 1970. The act's original goal was to ensure that

government agencies fully assess the environmental consequences of all significant projects and consider alternatives to harmful actions

whenever possible. The law does this by requiring environmental impact statements and soliciting meaningful public input.

NEPA undone

Environmental lawyer Dinah Bear discusses new regulations that diminish the law's power.

BY JESSICA KUTZ

Since its creation, NEPA has given a voice to communities both human and natural that face possible harm through industry actions. It has successfully rerouted highways that would have destroyed wildlife habitat and displaced residents from their homes, halted pipelines, protected important cultural sites from mining and provided a platform for people disproportionately impacted by environmental injustices.

To understand what changes to NEPA mean for the West and how a new administration might respond, *High Country News* spoke with Dinah Bear, an environmental lawyer and consultant based in

Tucson, Arizona, who spent more than two decades — spanning from the Reagan administration through the George W. Bush years — working at the Council on Environmental Quality, the federal agency charged with implementing NEPA. This conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

What are your main concerns with the recent changes made to the NEPA process?

To sum it up, the Trump administration has significantly narrowed the purpose of NEPA, they've narrowed the application of NEPA, and they've narrowed the scope of analysis for actions when NEPA applies. They made the whole process extremely deferential to private sector applicants, and then they've tried to bar judicial review.

The changes fundamentally mischaracterize the purpose of NEPA. The original regulations pointed out that the purpose of NEPA was essentially to try and implement the country's environmental policies. Now, the new regulations say that agencies have satisfied NEPA if they've considered the relevant environmental information and the public has been informed regarding the decision. It narrows the process down to a paperwork process instead of meeting the goals of the statute.

It also gives agencies the ability to narrow the number of actions that NEPA applies to. Agencies can now determine whether or not Congress really intended for NEPA to apply to a proposed action. Did Congress really mean it to apply to mining or oil and gas development? There's no guidance. It's just up for the agencies to decide.

Further, agencies can now adopt what's called "the functional equivalence exemption," which allows federal agencies to say, "Well, we've got these other statutory requirements for a resource management plan, so we won't do NEPA at all." The administration has also completely eliminated the conflict-of-interest provisions in the original regulations. Now

a private sector applicant, like Exxon, can write their own environmental impact statement.

There is also the omission of cumulative effects. That may be the biggest jaw-dropping thing. Cumulative effects were the reason that NEPA was passed. If you go back and you look at the legislative history, there are many references to Congress realizing that there were many separate actions that combined to have a huge impact on the environment.

What kind of projects would be streamlined by this new process?

It's hard to think of any project that won't. If you are working on a forest management plan, you're now looking only at direct impacts — not cumulative ones. That means you might not be looking at the bigger picture — on how an action under a plan affects water flow, for example. One of the main reasons the national forests were established was to protect watersheds.

When you look at something like energy development, whether it's oil and gas or solar, you're looking at a process, which, if it kicks in, is going to be incredibly deferential to the applicant. Obviously, for lots of forms of energy development, there's also concern about how projects impact climate change. But that climate change advisory definition is a cumulative impact. And along with these revised regulations, the Trump administration also revoked the climate change guidance.

How will these new changes impact the ability of NEPA to protect communities from environmental harm?

Public comment is still required, but there are much stricter limitations on how you comment now. Frankly, for people who are environmental professionals, it's not going to be impossible to comply. But for people who aren't professionals, whether they're an environmental justice community or not, submitting a comment is more daunting.

The NEPA process has been incredibly important for environmental justice communities and for sovereign Indigenous nations. I was involved in a case a few years ago, in Laredo, Texas, where Customs and Border Protection was going to spray an herbicide along the banks of the Rio Grande River to kill an invasive weed right across the street from a school and playground.

We stopped that from happening, and instead, CBP had a meeting with the community and talked about alternatives. That was a community which, frankly, was terrified of the Border Patrol and wanted so badly to have a conversation, but wasn't sure how. They ended up doing it and stopped the spraying, and the way they did that was through NEPA.

Proponents of the changes argue that the process is too lengthy and inefficient. New changes shorten the time spent on review and limit the length of

assessments. Having served on the Council for Environmental Quality for 25 years, what is your perspective?

When I first came on board, most major departments that do a lot of NEPA work, like the Department of Agriculture or the Department of the Interior, had maybe a dozen people — an interdisciplinary staff — who worked on NEPA. But over the years, and this is a bipartisan problem, that staff has been whittled away. Contractors do most environmental impact statements now. When agencies use contractors, it inevitably takes longer: You have to go through the contracting process, and contractors have to run things by the agency. The time limits and the page limits in the new regulations are not unreasonable if — and that's a big if — there's adequate staff. We don't have adequate staff in these agencies.

What's at stake for the future of NEPA?

If the agencies start actually implementing these regulations, I think virtually everything will be litigated, which is kind of ironic, because the rationale for these changes was to make everything more efficient. However, there is nothing that would stop a new administration from making changes in the regulations. There is also the Congressional Review Act, which allows Congress to overturn or stop the regulations from going into effect. ☀

"Now a private sector applicant, like Exxon, can write their own environmental impact statement."

Looking for fresh reads? Western authors weigh in.

Here are some books from 2020 you don't want to miss this winter.

BY ELENA SAAVEDRA BUCKLEY

THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC may have disrupted much of what boosts new book releases — bookstores, events and author signings, attention spans — but Westerners need good reading material as much as ever. Fortunately, writers have obliged, with new works that offer education, delight and, occasionally, escape. Here, some of our favorite authors suggest books to dive into this winter. By spring, we hope this reading will help you feel both more grounded in the present, and ready to build a better future.

Subduction, Kristen Millares Young

One of the books I read this year and loved (and keep recommending!) is *Subduction* (fiction, Red Hen Press), set on the Makah Reservation in Neah Bay, Washington. The story follows two characters: Claudia, an anthropologist who has spent the last few years conducting fieldwork among the Makah, and Peter, the son of one of her cultural correspondents. There is a lot of interesting tension surrounding major themes of family, community and belonging — Peter has lived off the reservation for years and works as an underwater welder, and Claudia is herself Latina and an immigrant — but the book is also full of beautiful and lyrical prose grounded in the land and seascape of the Northwest coast. So if you're nerdy about place-based writing and like to give the field of anthropology the side-eye, this is a book for you.

—Danielle Geller is a writer of personal essays and memoir (Dog Flowers, forthcoming 2021), and

she currently lives and works on the traditional territory of the Lekwungen People.

Votes for Women: The Battle for the 19th Amendment, Ally Shwed, editor

As you can imagine, this has been a crazy time. The only new book I've read recently is *Votes For Women*, an anthology graphic novel (graphic nonfiction, Little Red Bird Press). All of the contributing comics creators are female. I love the book's exploration of the history of women's suffrage from a variety of different perspectives — Black woman, Latinx and Native women, LGBTQ+, etc. I actually liked it so much that I bought it for my mother for her birthday last month.

—Graphic novel author R. Alan Brooks teaches writing for Regis University's MFA program and Lighthouse Writers Workshop, and writes a weekly comic for The Colorado Sun, "What'd I Miss?"

The Cactus League, Emily Nemens

I loved reading *The Cactus League* (fiction, Farrar, Straus and Giroux) earlier this year. There was something about reading this book that just felt warm and comfortable to me, even though a lot of the characters are struggling or even self-destructing. Maybe it was the pacing and the prose, or the depth of attention to how individual people think and feel. It felt like being with a friend.

—Jon Mooallem is the author of *This is Chance!* and a writer at large for The New York Times Magazine.

Horsefly Dress: Poems, Heather Cahoon

It is such a pleasure to experience so many Old Stories told in and between the lines of Heather Cahoon's gorgeous poems (poetry, The University of Arizona Press). I

love seeing the landscapes of our shared land — the Flathead Reservation of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes — here, too. These places are familiar to me; the Mission Mountains, the Jocko, the small blip-of-a-town called Dixon, infamously made famous for a brief moment in the '70s by poets Richard Hugo, James Welch and J.D. Reed. I want to rise up and journey up into that valley now, find my own traces of Coyote's passing.

—Métis writer and storyteller Chris La Tray (Missoula, MT) is an enrolled member of the Little Shell Tribe of Chippewa Indians, whose second book, *Becoming Little Shell*, will be published by Milkweed Editions in the spring of 2022.

Book of the Little Axe, Lauren Francis-Sharma

The best historical fiction illuminates the forgotten truths of a bygone era, and *Book of the Little Axe* (fiction, Atlantic Monthly Press), does just that. Set in the era of westward expansion, this novel tells of the love between mother and son, and the connection between Trinidad and the American West from a perspective that we did not study in our history books.

—Rishi Reddi is the Cambridge, Massachusetts-based author of the novel *Passage West*, which tells a story of the Punjabi and Mexican and Japanese families who farmed in California in the 1910s.

Electric Deserts, Amber McCrary

I enjoyed *Electric Deserts* (poetry, Tolsun Books). I love it because it's an electrifying take on land, iden-

"It's a love letter, and I think we all need that in some way."

tity and love. It's a love letter, and I think we all need that in some way. —*Jake Skeets is the author of Eyes Bottle Dark with a Mouthful of Flowers. He teaches at Diné College on the Navajo Nation.*

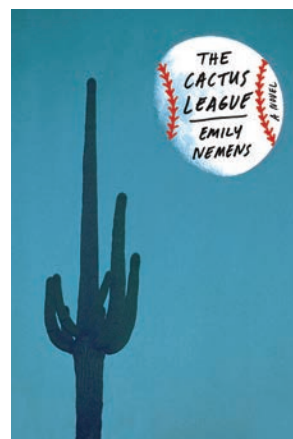
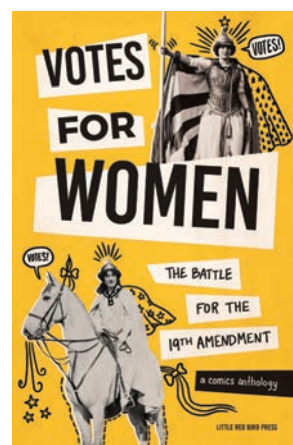
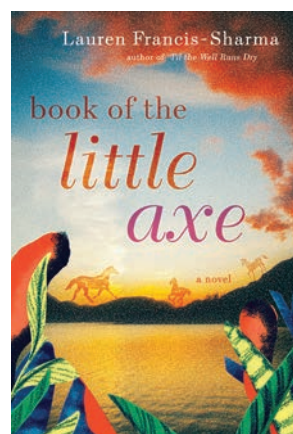
This Is Chance!, Jon Mooallem

I loved *This is Chance!* (nonfiction, Random House). I'm always amazed by the ways the best writers can conjure up the past, working only from documents, interviews and (in this case) audio recordings, and Mooallem's narrative about the magnitude 9.2 earthquake that shattered Anchorage in 1964 is among the best historical reconstructions I've ever read. Vivid and detailed, it follows local radio host Genie Chance as she remains on the air for marathon stretches throughout the aftermath of the quake, her voice bringing the fractured city back together. It's a story about a community uniting in the face of disaster — in other words, the right book for 2020.

— *Eva Holland is a Yukon-based freelance writer and the author of the new book Nerve: Adventures in the Science of Fear.*

Meditations with Cows: What I Learned from Daisy, the Dairy Cow Who Changed My Life, Shreve Stockton

I loved *Meditations with Cows: What I Learned from Daisy, the Dairy Cow Who Changed My Life* (nonfiction, TarcherPerigee). This beautifully written memoir by rancher and writer Shreve Stockton is full of beautiful details and observations that can only be written by someone who knows and loves the land deeply. Based in Wyoming, Stockton expertly brings her cattle to life so we feel we know them as well as she does. Her prose is deceptively effortless — even a city slicker will learn something — while residents of the High Plains will have the pleasure of seeing the plains and the prairie through fresh eyes. Given that many are stuck indoors and aching for nature, Stockton's gorgeous book is a balm, and her intelligent



take on land, animals and ranching should be required reading for anyone wishing to learn more about our beautiful country.

—*Marie Mutsuki Mockett is the recipient of the 2020 Sister Mariella Gable Award for American Harvest. She is also the author of a novel, Picking Bones from Ash, and a memoir, Where the Dead Pause, and the Japanese Say Goodbye: A Journey, which was a finalist for the PEN Open Book Award. She lives in San Francisco.*

Postcolonial Love Poem, Natalie Diaz

This is the book I keep by my bed — the one I read over and over. Words are failing me more than usual these days, so Diaz's ability to distill overwhelming, unwieldy ideas into small, tender sentences strikes me as the ultimate miracle. Her poems are everything: sexy, defiant, lyrical, brilliant. Hers is the kind of writing so uncomfortable it soothes you, makes you grateful for being human. (poetry, Graywolf Press)

—*Sierra Crane Murdoch is a journalist and essayist based in Oregon and the author of Yellow Bird: Oil, Murder, and a Woman's Search for Justice in Indian Country.*

Anything Will Be Easy After This: A Western Identity Crisis, Bethany Maile

Recently, I've been loving *Anything Will Be Easy After This: A Western Identity Crisis* (nonfiction, University of Nebraska Press) for the badass way it combines sharp cultural critique, memoir and reporting, on Idaho rodeo queens, ladies' night at the shooting range, wild mustangs, the industry of development, and the many stories the West tells itself about itself.

—*Ander Monson is the author of, most recently, I Will Take the Answer and The Gnome Stories from Graywolf Press. He teaches at the University of Arizona, and his next book is Predator: a Memoir (Graywolf, 2022).* ☀

OUR FAVORITE NEW TITLES:

FICTION

Telephone, Percival Everett, Graywolf Press

Via Negativa, Daniel Hornsby, Knopf
Sharks in the Time of Saviors, Kawai Strong Washburn, MCD

The Great Offshore Grounds, Vanessa Veselka, Knopf

The Cold Millions, Jess Walter, Harper

How Much of These Hills Is Gold, C Pam Zhang, Riverhead Books



NONFICTION

A History of My Brief Body, Billy-Ray Belcourt, Hamish Hamilton
Fire in Paradise: An American Tragedy, Alastair Gee and Dani Aguiano, Norton

Carry: A Memoir of Survival on Stolen Land, Toni Jensen, Ballantine Books

Oak Flat: A Fight for Sacred Land in the American West, Lauren Redniss, Random House

Carbon County, USA: Miners for Democracy in Utah and the West, Christian Wright, The University of Utah Press

POETRY

Swerve: Poems on Environmentalism, Feminism, and Resistance, Ellery Akers, Blue Light Press

Piñata Theory, Alan Chazaro, Black Lawrence Press

A History of Kindness, Linda Hogan, Torrey House Press

Upend, Claire Meuschke, Noemi Press



Amy Berenbeim / HCN

“Today was terrible, but it was also all these other things.”

Lessons from digging a grave

Any death is as small and personal as a life.

BY OLIVIA DURIF

THE ONLY PERSON I've ever buried was a stranger.

It was a chilly afternoon in mid-November, the kind of weather you'd expect at a funeral. Crisp oak leaves rattled softly in a steady breeze. It wasn't raining, but the ground was damp, the air thick with the smell of pine and wet dirt. Autumn on the dry side of the Cascades comes as an impossible relief, with the summer's blazing heat and wildfires finally giving way to cooler weather.

That year, I was working as a garden manager for Ekone Ranch, a nonprofit land trust in rural eastern Washington, a few miles north of the Columbia River. The organization's 1,138 acres of oak and ponderosa forest include a summer camp and a designated conservation burial ground, White Eagle Memorial Preserve — a cemetery you can't see. Graves are lightly mounded, marked sparingly with rocks and pinecones, or not at all. There's a legal limit to how close together bodies can be buried, but otherwise most of the land is fair game: You can choose to be buried under a dense canopy, or along the edges of open meadowland — or even near (though not too near) a canyon's edge, where the landscape slopes steeply toward a perennial creek.

Natural or "green" burials have been marketed in the United States since the early 1990s. Lately, they've been getting more press, positioned by advocates as an answer to the polluting, profit-driven American funeral industry that Jessica Mitford first critiqued in the 1960s. But nature is not the opposite of capitalism. There is no shortage of products and profitable experiences aimed at making death greener. I'm not saying that natural burial is an answer to environmental catastrophe or that other ways to commemorate and dispose of the dead are less valuable. I'm talking about how one small cemetery makes death feel human-sized.

I met the woman I buried once before she died. It was mid-morning in early October, when the ranch's horses had only just started to grow

in their fuzzy winter coats. I was drinking coffee in the lodge, the main communal area. Jodie, the cemetery director, a serious and joyful woman with wispy reddish hair and a hearty laugh, was showing some people around. The woman was tall and underdressed for the weather, wearing a long, boxy dress. An older man, presumably her father, was dressed in black rain gear and a wide-brimmed felt hat. I waved a friendly hello, and they continued on their tour. I learned later that she was dying of cancer and had come to choose her gravesite. It was hard to tell how old she was, maybe in her early 40s. She looked sick — pale and exhausted.

As an employee of the ranch, I could add digging hours to my paycheck, or choose to have my labor put toward the purchase of my own plot — to dig my own grave over time. At the ranch, death is part of daily life. Pigs and chickens are killed regularly for meat. Injured horses are put down. Sometimes human acquaintances are buried; sometimes friends. Many employees have already bought their own plots, even young people who consider themselves healthy. The ranch's program coordinator and her husband, for example, included an option to make contributions to their future burial site on their wedding registry, next to a fund to purchase a tiny home and another for a trip to France. "We realize this may sound a bit morbid," their website read, "but we want to make sure we plan ahead and support an amazing place at the same time!"

WHEN THE TIME CAME, Jodie instructed a few of us to start digging the woman's grave. We went out to the spot she had purchased, a little clearing between two scraggly oaks, and switched off working. Alyssa, an artist who teaches crafts at the ranch in the summer, outlined the grave based on the measurements we'd been given. She started shoveling out the fluffy top layers of pine needles, oak leaves and decayed organic matter. The loamy layer below was relatively thin, quickly giving way to heavy, rocky clay. Oak roots dense enough to require a handsaw periodically interrupted our progress. The deeper we dug, the rockier the grave became, and at about three feet down, my pickaxe dinged and scraped against the first solid layer of basalt. Slowly, I chipped away at the final six inches of bedrock. Eventually, I gave the ax to Shannon, a former summer camper who often returned to the ranch to visit or do seasonal work. I sat down by Alyssa, a breeze cooling my warm, flushed face, layers of work jackets, vests and flannels strewn around the deepening grave as a conspiracy of ravens cackled above us.

We'd just about finished the job when Jodie arrived, wearing a large knit sweater and fingerless gloves. She greeted us, chatted for a while

and then jumped cheerfully into the grave. She lay down and closed her eyes, like she was trying out a mattress. Then she took a deep breath, opened her eyes and paused for a long time. "It's perfect," she said.

Jodie bases her level of involvement in burials on intuition; what any particular set of grieving people needs is always different. The best burials, she told me, are when people say, "Today was terrible, but it was also all these other things." At one of her favorite funerals, a 3-year-old girl leapt into an empty grave before her grandmother's body could be lowered in. The girl started imitating a dog, digging with all fours and barking at the sky. Her family laughed and later told Jodie how grateful they were that this moment was possible. I like the idea that joking about death can be its own kind of reverence, that any death is as small and personal as a life.

About six weeks later, the woman's body arrived, wrapped in a sage-colored shroud, lying on a piece of plywood in the back of her brother's old and impeccably clean pickup truck. He parked as near to the grave as he could. The brother, a clean-cut 30-something-year-old, was solemn and graceful as we unloaded the body, glad, it seemed, to have something to do with his hands. Four of us lifted the body just enough to clear the plywood and lower it onto a two-wheeled wooden cart. The woman's body seemed longer now than she had been tall, heavy and not quite solid. We pulled the cart through the forest, Jodie and the woman's family walking behind.

Once we reached the grave, we lifted the woman's body again and lowered her down, dropping to our knees to settle her in the ground. The afternoon was quiet, the mood sad but focused, governed by the physical task of the ceremony. There were four mourners in attendance; nobody spoke for very long. I remember the father's speech most distinctly. He was sitting in a canvas camping chair, wearing the same brimmed hat and worn jacket I'd seen him in before. He closed his eyes and told stories of his daughter's life, but trailed off before he could finish them — as if his memory was a home-movie reel on fast-forward that he couldn't pause or keep up with. After he finished, the woman's brother and friend shoveled a bit of soil over her body. Her father grabbed a handful and opened his fist reluctantly, letting the dirt fall on top of his shrouded daughter.

After a few shovelfuls, the family was ready to leave. I moved in with the other staff members to finish the job, full of someone else's grief. It still hadn't rained, and it was hard not to relate to the weather. Heavy, textured clouds. A release looming in the near future. As we worked, Jodie walked the family back to her cabin, where she invited them in for tea. ☼

Heard Around the West

Tips of Western oddities are appreciated and often shared in this column.
Write betsym@hcn.org.

BY BETSY MARSTON

IDAHO

Mike Healy of Hailey, Idaho, says the semi-weekly *Idaho Mountain Express* runs a “Miscellany” section in its classifieds that’s eagerly scoured by connoisseurs of local oddities. People give shout-outs or complain about everything from a braying donkey to e-bikes on public lands. And then there’s the, well, unusual: “Needed: Well Witcher for property near Hailey. (No pay), Let’s find some water,” and “Lost: kitty, orange and white, about 10 pounds; does not answer to Klaus. ...” And there’s one notice bicyclists everywhere can relate to: “To car license GAMAN. As I biked down Elkhorn Road where the bike lane was closed for paving ... you drove behind me honking incessantly, tried to push me off the road, and flipped me off. You really showed your character!”

COLORADO

Anne Landman of Western Colorado Atheists and Freethinkers, which she founded in 2007, has shown that perseverance pays off. Twelve years ago, she asked the city of Grand Junction to allow anyone, regardless of religious belief, or lack thereof, to offer the invocation before city council meetings. The council said, “No,” though its policy was eventually liberalized. Landman finally got the opportunity to offer an invocation this year, and for that feat, reports the *Grand Junction Daily Sentinel*, she won the “Nothing Fails Like Prayer” award, plus \$500, from the Freedom From Religion Foundation in Madison, Wisconsin.

WYOMING

If there’s a grizzly with star appeal in the Lower 48 states — one with her

own social media presence — it’s 24-year-old Grizzly 399, who usually wanders through Grand Teton National Park with her several cubs. A grandmother many times over, she produced another litter — four cubs! — this year. So in late October, when she appeared on highways and dirt roads near Wilson, Wyoming, people stopped their cars, grabbed phones and cameras and just about went nuts. Photographer Maureen Matsen told Gaia GPS’ *Out and Back* podcast that whenever she sees this happen, she thinks she should “just start filming these photographers because of the joy on their faces.” Wildlife photographer Thomas Mangelsen, who has been documenting Griz 399’s life for 15 years, says this mother bear is special because she appeals to human emotion. When one of her cubs was killed by a car one summer,

Mangelsen says he saw “Griz 399 sobbing on the roadside near the body of her cub, grieving much like a human mother would.” Yet you don’t want to mess with this mama bear: In 2007, a tourist walking near Jackson Lake Lodge blundered into her space and was attacked by Griz 399 and her yearling cubs. “They’re just going to eat me,” Dennis Van Denbos recalled thinking. “There’s nothing I could do. There’s no way I could fight off four grizzlies.” He suffered several bites but was glad that wildlife officials spared the bears. Montana writer Todd Wilkinson says the decision to let Griz 399 live has been important for grizzly recovery in the Yellowstone area. A prolific mother, Griz 399 has produced seven litters, including three sets of triplets, plus this year’s quadruplets: “Now she’s long in the tooth, her fans are



Sienna Gonzales / HCN

wondering how long she’ll live.”

ALASKA

You can’t talk about grizzlies without mentioning this year’s “Fat Bear” champion at Katmai National Park and Preserve in Alaska. Weighing in at more than 1,400 pounds, the “Lardacious Leviathan,” aka the “Earl of Avoirdupois” — chosen by public vote in a true expression of democracy — is aptly named “747.” “It’s pure coincidence he has the same name as a jumbo jet,” says Naomi Boak, the park’s media ranger, adding, “but he is the size of a jumbo jet.”

COLORADO

The *Durango Herald* reminds readers that blindly following your GPS can get you in a whole lot of trouble. That’s what happened to a 30-foot box truck near the top of 12,800-foot Engineer Pass north of Silverton, Colorado. The vehicular behemoth was way out of its league on a section of the Alpine Loop, a gnarly road that requires four-wheel drive and a high-clearance vehicle. When the driver finally realized the steep terrain was too much for him, he tried to turn around, and that’s when the truck became stuck. “How it got that far is beyond me,” marveled Wayne Barger, owner of a towing company. He predicted it would take several tow trucks and “a couple thousand dollars” to extricate the rig, adding, in what is probably a serious understatement, that the driver seemed “very upset.” GPS mishaps are all too frequent these days. A sign on a dirt road to Ruedi Reservoir near Aspen puts it succinctly: “YOUR GPS IS WRONG. TURN AROUND NOW.” ☼

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#IAM THE WEST

ROSE B. SIMPSON

Artist

Santa Clara Pueblo, New Mexico

We grow our food in the Earth. We build our homes with the Earth. We build our art with the Earth. Other places, you don't have this direct relationship to dirt — to the actual ground. I've traveled a lot, but I choose to be home because this place is family, it really is. The relationship to this river, to these mountains, these trees, the types of animals here, it's familial — all the good and bad, all the things about it. I think there's a different pace that comes from this place that creates a different kind of person that's a little bit more rough or raw. Like the cut in the side of the road where you see that ancestry, very physically, it's hard not to be conscious of your body in space or your actual lived experience. I think people come here for that — for that relationship to place.

Do you know a Westerner with a great story?
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