

High Country News

For people who care about the West

The Rise of Lisa Murkowski

The senator from Alaska is poised
to control America's energy future

By Krista Langlois | Page 12





Alaska Sen. Lisa Murkowski poses with fellow Alaska Sen. Ted Stevens, who later died in a plane crash, and The Hulk. The senators shared a fondness for the Marvel Comics character, who explodes in size and smashes anything in his way when angry. COURTESY MURKOWSKI OFFICE

On the cover

Sen. Lisa Murkowski, R-Alaska, at the 2013 release of the energy blueprint titled *Energy 20/20: A Vision for America's Energy Future* in 2013.

BILL CLARK/CQ ROLL CALL
VIA AP IMAGES



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FEATURE

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Alaska's pragmatic senator hopes to reshape America's energy policy. You just don't want to see her when she's angry. By Krista Langlois

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Editor's note

Pontificating

When John Boehner, Republican speaker of the House, announced in September that he was resigning, he affirmed a basic political reality of our time: Uncompromising hijackers have fractured his party and turned Congress into a mean-spirited, ineffectual mess.



"We got groups here in town, members of the House and Senate here in town, who whip people into a frenzy believing they can accomplish things they know — they know! — are never going to happen," he told *Politico* after his resignation. Boehner made his decision just weeks before a potential showdown over Planned Parenthood funding and the threat of another government shutdown, and mere hours after Pope Francis' visit to the capital, which gave him, he said, a moment of clarity.

Boehner's resignation exposed a deep problem for the Republican Party — the devout refusal of many ultra-conservatives to recognize solid science, sound policy or broad public opinion. Widely reported reactions from the hard right to the pope's words about climate and the poor further underscore the problem. As our D.C. correspondent, Elizabeth Shogren, reports in this issue, a few of our Western lawmakers are not immune to this kind of chicanery — twisting themselves in rhetorical knots to refute the pope's message in ways that would be hilarious were they not so horrifying. And yet Francis' message is resonating through the West's Catholic communities, helping religious leaders recast inequality and the environment as moral issues, and urgent ones at that.

Boehner is not the only Republican in office interested in seeing Congress work, of course. Lisa Murkowski, the senator from Alaska who is the subject of this issue's cover story, has proven willing to buck the hard-line elements of her party and follow her conscience, even if that conscience is admittedly die-hard Alaskan and nerve-wracking for some environmentalists. Murkowski wields dual Senate chairmanships — the Committee on Energy and Natural Resources and the Appropriations Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies — which both have a lot of sway over Western issues. We think she is worth watching, not the least to see which side of her will become her most lasting political persona: the negotiator or the fighter. Both aspects are bound to come out as she seeks to retool American energy policy.

In July, Murkowski moved a bipartisan energy bill out of committee, one that sidesteps some contentious issues, including oil export bans and public-land transfers, in favor of modernizing U.S. energy efficiency, infrastructure and regulation. "The end result will be more affordable energy, more abundant energy, and more functional energy systems that will strengthen and sustain our energy nation's renaissance," the Energy Committee said in a statement. It is possible that such reasonable legislation will pass. Then again, these days, even something that simple feels like a Hail Mary.

—Brian Calvert, managing editor



A greater sage grouse navigates a hazard near a Wyoming gas field. ANGUS M. THUERMER JR./WYOFIL

Cue the grouse lawsuits

The federal Fish and Wildlife Service decision that the greater sage grouse does not need Endangered Species Act protection — announced in September — was no surprise to anyone who's been following the bird's saga. The agency was looking for every reason possible to avoid listing the bird, because of the potential impact it would have on energy production and development across the West. Expect lawsuits, though, from states, industry and hardline environmental groups. The Center for Biological Diversity's Randi Spivak says, "Greater sage grouse have been in precipitous decline for years and deserve better than what they're getting from the Obama administration." Ironically, the hardline groups are partly responsible for the decision they'll be seeking to overturn. If it hadn't been for the lawsuit-created pressure of a deadline, it's unlikely that sage grouse conservation efforts ever would have been strengthened enough to circumvent a listing.

JODI PETERSON hcne.ws/grouse-lawsuits

Trending

Mount Hood

Skiing is one of the immediate, and visible, casualties of climate change, but the cascade of consequences is long. By the end of the century, snow depths in the West could decline by 25 to 100 percent, according to a report by the National Resources Defense Council. The Palmer Snowfield, an international destination well known for its summer skiing, is emblematic of changes in the Cascades. The snowfield's retreat forced public operations to shut down Aug. 3 this year, the earliest since 1979; typically, people ski there through Labor Day. As climate change affects skiing in the Cascades, what more will be lost? PAIGE BLANKENBUEHLER

250 billion

gallons of water consumed annually by U.S. hydraulically fractured shale oil and gas wells

1 percent that represents of total industrial water consumption nationwide

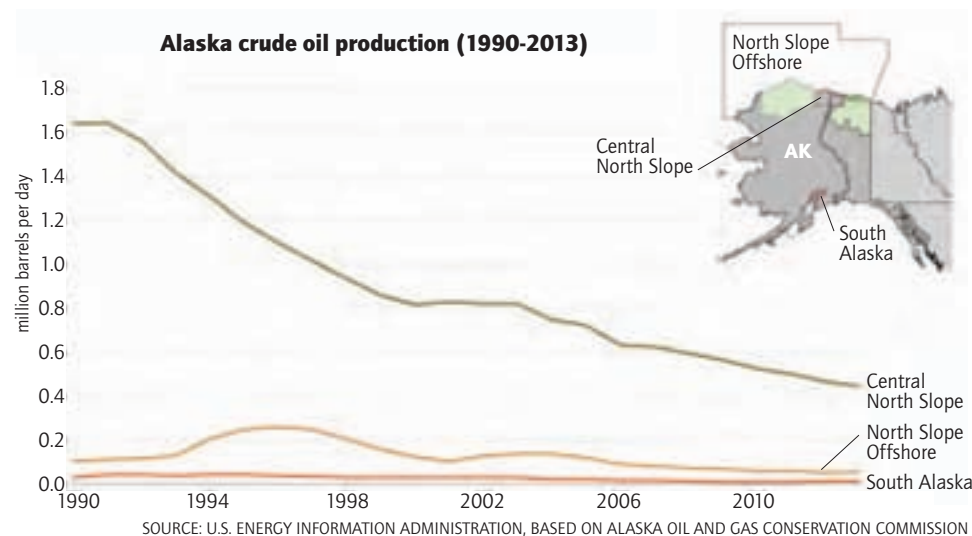
In a study published in *Environmental Science & Technology Letters*, Duke University scientists show that, while the fracking required to free up the oil and gas trapped in tight shale formations is a water-intensive process, the overall water footprint for shale drilling is smaller than that of other industrial uses, including conventional oil and gas production. The paper sheds new light on the intense scrutiny fracking has received for its water consumption in these dry times. Meanwhile, both sides of the debate have used the study's seemingly contradictory takeaways to bolster their arguments.

JONATHAN THOMPSON
hcne.ws/fracked-water

Arctic drilling

On Sept. 28, Shell captured national attention when it announced that the exploratory well it drilled in hopes of extracting the first barrels of oil from Alaska's Chukchi Sea was a bust. But even as green groups urge the oil industry to abandon its Arctic dreams, some analysts are

predicting the world's growing population will require an additional 10 million barrels of oil a day between 2030 and 2040. Alaska's politicians are determined to get a piece of the pie, even as they face a sharp decline in the rate of production in the Arctic. KRISTA LANGLOIS
hcne.ws/ANWRdrill



Video

Bee season

In this "Wild Science" video, we explore how climate change may be impacting bee populations near the Rocky Mountain Biological Laboratory in western Colorado. Rebecca Irwin of North Carolina State University is investigating whether changes in climate have forced wildflowers to bloom earlier in the year, before bee season. If true, it could have grave consequences for natural ecosystems. DAKIN HENDERSON hcne.ws/miss-bees



DAKIN HENDERSON

Manifest destiny, c. 2015

According to the new definition for Advanced Placement United States History students, Manifest Destiny was driven by a desire for access to "natural and mineral resources and the hope of many settlers for economic opportunities or religious refuge." The new curriculum took a big step away from the racial connotations of the previous definition, which said the ideal was "built on a belief in white racial superiority and a sense of American cultural superiority."

PAIGE BLANKENBUEHLER
hcne.ws/manifest-destiny

You say

BOB SALSURY:

I've skied there since '68. For the last 10 years, a new pattern has emerged. Winter slugs hard in December, snow-precip-wise, and ends in late January to February. This is change. Deny all you want. The canary has keeled over.

FREDERIC R. PAMP:

I find it hard to get excited about troubles for a rich man's sport, when climate change is going to kill and/or displace millions of poor people.

JONATHAN A. WIEDIE:

We are a blip. Gone soon enough, on a cosmic scale. This planet isn't nearly as threatened as our race is.

hcne.ws/no-ski and
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REVOLTING REVIEW

My thanks to Emma Marris for saving me precious time and money with her reviews of the wilderness-themed books by Jason Mark and Fred Pearce ("Wilderness redefined and defended," *HCN*, 9/14/15). As she suggests, the authors' purist non-interventionist OK with extinction philosophy will alienate many readers, but I think "revolt" might be a more accurate description. We've heard all this abstract hands-off gibberish before, from other self-anointed Darwinian didacts, even though it goes against the consensus of the great majority of us who follow our own natural compass, as we strive to protect vulnerable, imperiled species, regardless of setting.

Frankly, I'm more concerned with the continuing existence of Mark's "throwaway" creatures, like the pika or Arctic fox, than I am about extending the progeny of solipsistic savants like Marks and Pearce, the very embodiment of superficial narcissists neatly skewered in Phil Ochs' wry, caustic observation: "So good to be alive when the eulogies are read." Thank you, Emma. Now to some serious reading.

Harry Koenig
Pueblo, Colorado

BLIND HYPOCRISY

I found your story "Sea lions feast on Columbia salmon" (*HCN*, 8/17/15) both interesting and disturbing. That some are ready to kill these animals due to their apparent localized "over-population" is the very definition of hypocrisy. Humans have over-populated the planet since the 1960s, and our over-consumption and careless actions have put the entire planet at risk. We have fouled every corner of the Earth with our waste and destruction, endangering not only the other 10-15 million estimated species, but our very selves.

Until we start realizing that we are part of our planet's living fabric and that we must control our own population and consumption, any attempt to "manage" nonhuman animal populations appears both dishonest and duplicitous.

Einstein stated that we cannot solve problems by using the same thinking that caused them. The humans-come-first paradigm is the cause of nearly all our environmental problems, and persecuting other species that are merely the victims of our actions and are just reacting to the predicaments we put them in, is immoral and unjust. The blind hypocrisy of humanity must be brought



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out from the shadows, and those of us who understand that humankind must live within the bounds set by nature, as do all other species. Otherwise, this little evolutionary experiment called *Homo sapiens* will extinguish itself along with many innocent species. Einstein also said that there are only two phenomena that are infinite, the universe and human stupidity. Let us not prove him right.

Rick Adams
Boulder, Colorado

GALLED, BUT NOT SURPRISED

The article "On life support," (*HCN*, 8/3/15), on the efforts to "save" the silvery minnow, is so depressing. Yes, I realize this is a desert river, not like the rivers of British Columbia. I've travelled often in the Southwest and subscribed to *HCN* for well over a decade, so there were no surprises here. Yet this short article succinctly encapsulated man's outrageous gall regarding our fellow creatures.

With almost all the water flow of this large river being allocated to cities and farming, eliminating spring floods, and allowing the river to actually dry up entirely at times over the past 20 years, biologists are put in the outrageous position of having to opt for hatcheries over free-run fish. "Reclamation determined in April that it couldn't spare water from upstream reservoirs for a spring pulse of water, a temporary surge needed to trigger spawning." That sentence pretty much takes the cake.

Trevor Jones
Vancouver, British Columbia

PREJUDICE BY DEGREE

In "It's time to end Custer worship," (*HCN*, 8/3/15), writer Todd Wilkinson asks whether George Custer

should "be celebrated as a hero of conquest or recast as the bigoted, egotistical, narcissistic villain he apparently was? Does he deserve to have his name attached to towns, counties, a state park and a national forest, or should his name, like the Confederate flag, be removed?"

There is a small and humorous counter to Custer's memorialization. On the Crow Reservation, not far from the site of Custer's demise, is the small town of Garryowen. "Garryowen" was the doomed cavalry's marching song. Taking it as the name for a reservation town makes it a kind of a scalping.

Wilkinson suggests the totality of a historical personage should be brought into question because that person held prejudices that are unacceptable today. He quotes *New York Times* columnist David Brooks: "We should remove (Robert E.) Lee's name from most schools, roads and other institutions, where the name could be seen as acceptance of what he did and stood for during the war."

In coming to terms with our past, we have to acknowledge that views abhorrent today were often broadly accepted then. Mark Twain, in *Roughing It*, writes of his encounter with a Native tribe in the Great Basin: "We came across the wretchedest type of mankind we have ever seen ... considerably inferior to all races of savages on our continent." Twain was reflecting the biases of his times, and I doubt anyone would suggest we reject his writings.

Historical personages are products of their times. We are rightly proud of our advances, but prejudices remain deeply entrenched in our society. We differ from the time of Custer, Lee and Twain by degree, not by kind.

Richard LeBlond
Richlands, North Carolina

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Can the pope bridge the climate divide?

Pontiff's call for urgent climate action resonates with Western Catholics — but not Congress

BY ELIZABETH SHOGREN

Pope Francis, in his first-ever visit to the United States in late September, lauded President Barack Obama's response to climate change and challenged Congress to take "courageous action." But it's going to take a lot more than the pontiff's passionate plea to bridge the wide divide between Republicans and Democrats. Not only have congressional Republicans — and some Democrats from fossil-fuel states — blocked comprehensive climate legislation for many years, but some are also trying to undermine Obama's Clean Power Plan, which aims to reduce greenhouse gas emissions from the electricity sector.

Even if Francis has yet to accomplish the miracle of reconciling U.S. politicians' wildly divergent views on climate change, he still may play a transformational role by inspiring ordinary Catholics in the American West — and around the globe — to take the health of the planet more seriously and even to start voting for candidates who prioritize slashing emissions.

Still, the pope clearly wants to influence the political elite. He not only urged Congress to steer the nation away from fossil fuels and the destruction of ecosystems, he also implored political leaders to stop feuding. "We need a conversation which includes everyone, since the environmental challenge we are undergoing, and its human roots, concern and affect us all," he said.

And he added a note of optimism, saying, "I'm convinced that we can make a difference. I'm sure," a statement that provoked long applause and a standing ovation from many of the congressional representatives, Supreme Court justices and cabinet members gathered in the Capitol.

The pope has already started to inspire change in local church congregations, in the West and elsewhere, with his encyclical *Laudato Si'*, which was released this summer. Pedro Lopez, for example, works for



the League of Conservation Voters in Arizona. Before the pope unveiled his encyclical, Lopez and his team would attend mostly Latino Catholic churches around Phoenix and struggle to connect the priests' messages with climate change in short talks after Mass. "Now that we have the encyclical, it's an open door for us to make a call to action to Catholics," Lopez says.

Some priests have even begun to do the activists' work for them, summarizing the encyclical for their congregations and encouraging members to pray and work to solve the climate crisis. Lopez believes that, in time, the pope's message will inspire Latinos, who represent a growing share of eligible voters, to support candidates who are committed to reducing greenhouse gas emissions and ushering in renewable energy. "We can change the whole political landscape," he says.

Democratic senators are hoping for just such a shift: They introduced a new climate change bill — deliberately timed for the pope's visit — that would reduce greenhouse gas emissions nationwide by at least 2 percent a year, provide more tax incentives for renewable energy and remove some fossil fuel subsidies.

Western Republicans' responses to the pope's visit ran the gamut. Just prior to it, 11 Republicans, including David Reichert, D-Wash., introduced a resolution to address the causes and effects of "measured changes to our global and regional climates including mitigation efforts and efforts to balance human activities that have been found to have an impact."

On the other extreme, Rep. Paul Gosar, R-Ariz., decided to boycott Francis' historic speech, the first time a pope has addressed the U.S. Congress. "If the Pope wants to

devote his life to fighting climate change then he can do so in his personal time. But to promote questionable science as Catholic dogma is ridiculous," Gosar wrote at the conservative website Townhall.com.

Nor did the first Jesuit pope sway Wyoming Sen. John Barrasso, R, who was taught by Jesuits. "The pope speaks for the Lord when it comes to matters of faith or morality, but not on issues of economics or the environment," Barrasso told Fox News. Barrasso then attacked the Democrats' new climate bill, saying it would weaken the economy and make electric power less reliable.

If the pope could move any congressional Republican, it may be Alaska Sen. Lisa Murkowski, who chairs the Senate Energy Committee. Murkowski, a Catholic, recorded a video about her encounter with Francis, who briefly held her hands when he was in the Capitol on the way to give his speech. "It was a moment I will always remember; the feeling of his presence; the love that this man radiates. It was extraordinary," Murkowski said. Her statement echoed the pope's call for "dialogue," but avoided mentioning climate change, which has already impacted her state especially hard (*see story page 12*).

Some Western Democrats, however, seemed hopeful that Francis' words will resonate long after the media excitement dies down. "The pope gave an enormous wakeup call today to everyone who thinks unregulated consumption is an unending free ride. Now we need to turn that wakeup call into lasting action," said Rep Raúl M. Grijalva, D-Ariz. Sen. Tom Udall, D-N.M., said: "This is an important moment for our country. When the pope speaks, we all listen." □

Pope Francis stands with congressional leadership and local clergy on the Speaker's Balcony on Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C., following his address to Congress in which he urged members to work together. Senate Minority Leader Harry Reid, shown lower right, had called out Republicans in a floor speech the previous month for their "knee-jerk opposition to addressing climate change."

BILL O'LEARY/THE WASHINGTON POST VIA AP, POOL

Correspondent Elizabeth Shogren writes *HCN's* D.C. Dispatches from Washington. @ShogrenE



Washed away

Vulnerable communities on Colorado's Front Range struggle in the wake of 2013's flooding

BY KATE SCHIMEL

THE LATEST

Backstory

Given its flamboyant fountains and emerald-green golf courses, it may come as a surprise that Las Vegas has become a model of water conservation in the desert West. **Since 1989, Sin City has cut its per capita water use by 40 percent — while continuing to grow. The secret: rigorous reuse.** Every drop that goes back into the sewer system is treated, and much of it is released back into shrinking Lake Mead. There, it's credited against Nevada's Colorado River allotment, allowing the state to pull far more than its 300,000 acre-foot share ("The Vegas Paradox," *HCN*, 1/23/14).

Followup

On Sept. 22, **Los Angeles agreed to pay Las Vegas nearly \$45 million for access to 150,000 acre-feet of its unused allotment of Colorado River water.** The deal will help make up for shortfalls in the water supply L.A. normally gets from drought-hammered Northern California. But it's not a sale per se. When Las Vegas needs the water, it'll pay Los Angeles back — and take the water from Lake Mead.

SARAH TORY

On a blustery day in June, Victor Galvan stands at the edge of a scraggly field in Evans, Colorado, hemmed in by tidy homes and a smooth road. Across the untidy lot, near a yellow house with a high picket fence, a backhoe is at work, clearing a section of the field. A recent rain has left mud puddles everywhere. Two years ago, this empty lot was home to a community of several hundred mobile home residents who worked in nearby counties. But in September 2013, record-breaking floods raced out of the Rocky Mountains, and rain-swollen rivers swept across these plains, inundating hundreds of homes, stranding people on rooftops for hours and destroying much in their path.

"It was kind of like a maze in here," Galvan says. Some of the buildings were completely destroyed, others flipped, still others denuded of everything but their frame. Afterward, the town opted not to rebuild the mobile home park and to simply clear out the space where Galvan now stands.

Hardly anyone along the Front Range escaped the ripple effects of the 2013 floods, regardless of class. But in the months after, as communities began recovering and rebuilding, many of the most vulnerable — the towns' poorest, its elderly and its immigrants — were displaced. The state's legendary housing boom had bypassed them, and when the floods hit, many low-income residents had nowhere to go. As with similar environmental disasters, like Hurricane Katrina or Superstorm Sandy, the Front Range floods exposed systemic problems exacerbated by economic inequality.

"Places where the land was cheap and the housing was affordable, that's the floodplain," says Galvan, who is a regional organizer for the Colorado Immigrant Rights Coalition.

Galvan, who was himself temporarily displaced by the floods, recalls arriving just days after them and wading through knee-deep water to help residents retrieve belongings. "It was shocking, really," he says, recalling the desperation of digging through a foot of mud to try to salvage photographs, mementos and, crucially for the Latino immigrants who occupied many of the trailers, paperwork: identification, visas and other documentation. "That night I had nightmares of people

wandering this mobile home park, looking for other people, looking for their belongings, lost," he says.

Many trailer park residents who were displaced by flooding will likely never return to their homes. Few of the parks have been rebuilt, thanks to a combination of zoning shifts in response to the flooding and local resistance to mobile home parks. In Evans, the flood-affected trailer park was demolished and replaced by a city park. In Lyons, at the mouth of one of the canyons from which water poured, city officials staged a protracted campaign to rebuild housing in a downtown city park. It failed when voters rejected a ballot initiative on the proposal earlier this year, and as yet, there are no alternatives on the horizon.

Now, the former residents of the destroyed mobile home parks find themselves with limited options, thanks to the economic changes the Front Range has undergone over the past decade. Between 2010 and 2015, the average rent in Greeley, east of the mountains, increased by \$260. Nearby Boulder and Fort Collins have had even steeper increases. In some areas, dis-

crimination and distrust between officials and immigrants already had families in a tenuous situation. But the devastation of the flooding sped up the process.

"Affordable housing is in a crisis, and the flood made it worse," says Andrew Rumbach, an assistant professor at University of Denver, who has studied how vulnerable communities are recovering. Many families had to move considerable distances to find homes they could afford, further distancing them from useful city services and the social networks that can help provide support after disaster strikes.

Galvan estimates that he worked with around 100 families, all of them immigrants, after the flooding. Today, he knows where just a handful are. Others have quietly faded away, moving too often to keep track of or leaving the state altogether. The ones he's still in touch with are scattered across the Front Range from Pueblo, over 100 miles to the south, to Greeley and other northern towns.

Rumbach says the fate of the displaced immigrants offers a lesson for disaster planners and city managers, in a future of changing climate and the more extreme weather events it can bring. Resilience isn't just about physical preparation, he says; communities need to tackle the larger issues, as well, as part of their disaster planning.

"I feel like some of these places are celebrating their resilience to the flood, when some of their people have never been able to come home," Rumbach says. "A significant number of people who used to live there will never live there again." □



Sonia Marquez, with the Colorado Immigrant Rights Coalition, looks for keepsakes amid the muck in a flooded home at a decimated trailer park in Evans, Colorado, in 2013. Many of the residents in the trailer park were immigrants who didn't have flood insurance, and because some were not citizens or legal residents, they couldn't get government help. BRENNAN LINSLEY/AP

HCN correspondent Kate Schimel lives in Seattle, Washington. @kateschimel



In wilderness, a wildflower barely survives

Will the Wilderness Act stand in the way of recovery for a rare California wildflower?

BY JIMMY TOBIAS

Dave Imper and three other scientists hike past old-growth pines toward the summit of Mount Lassic in California's Coast Range. The peak — a dry island of green serpentine soil and sparse vegetation in the mid-July heat — holds a botanical treasure, a fragile plant called the Lassics lupine. One of California's rarest flowers, it lives behind bars.

At the top, Imper, a retired Fish and Wildlife Service botanist and rare plant advocate, kneels next to a wire cage shaped like an oversized top hat. Beneath it, a lupine is blooming, its rich pink-and-white flowers in vibrant contrast to the rocky ground.

"This is just a holding pattern," Imper says, pointing out 20 more flowers in cages nearby. There are approximately 350 Lassics lupines left on the planet, found only here and on nearby Red Lassic. The plants face threats from encroaching forests to severe drought, but the cages protect them from the most imminent danger: rodents.

The Lassics team hypothesizes that fire suppression has caused the plant's present woes. The natural fire regime, they say, would normally burn back encroaching vegetation that creates new habitat for rodents, giving them easier access to the scrumptious lupine seeds. The flowers, which evolved on wide-open barrens, aren't made for that kind of predatory pressure. "Smokey the Bear (screwed) us," says Imper.

Caging the lupines, the scientists warn, isn't enough; they want to cut back or burn the invading chaparral and trees, too. But Congress designated Mount Lassic a federal wilderness in 2006, and Forest Service officials say the 1964 Wilderness Act makes such intervention difficult, although it doesn't prohibit it outright.

Jimmy Tobias is a former Forest Service trail worker and a freelance journalist in California. @JamesCTobias

"The imprint of man's work (shall be) substantially unnoticeable," the law states, and its protective regulatory hurdles have hampered rapid action to save the lupine.

In this case, ironically, wilderness may hinder wildflower conservation. "We have this (designation) that was meant to save and preserve," says Dan Dill, the Forest Service district ranger who administers Mount Lassic, "but it has quite possibly put a species in jeopardy at the same time."

In 2003, scientists realized that chipmunks and deer mice were eating nearly all of the lupine's annual seed output. In response, Imper and his colleagues at Fish and Wildlife and the Forest Service began caging the wildflowers almost immediately. Within seven years, the population nearly tripled.

Then, at the end of summer 2012, officials at Six Rivers National Forest ordered the team to remove the cages. Forest Service botanist Lisa Hoover, who helps oversee the project, explained that the site was located in designated wilderness, and top agency brass believed the cages made the mountain look "trammelled by man." Normally, the researchers stored the unwieldy equipment onsite during winter; now, they didn't know if they'd be allowed to use it in the future.

After meetings between the Forest Service and Fish and Wildlife, the team was allowed to resume caging the following summer. Imper, however, has lobbied for years for more aggressive action. In 2012, for instance, he delivered a 171-page report to agency officials urging the felling, burning or girdling of conifers and chaparral in lupine habitat. But his recommendations fell flat. In the Forest Service, he says, "there has been outright opposition to doing any restoration."

The lack of action is due to administrative obstacles, not agency opposition, says

Hoover. The National Environmental Policy Act requires federal agencies to analyze the environmental impacts of their actions, so the Forest Service must do rigorous reviews before removing vegetation, especially in wilderness areas. That requires input from specialists as well as extra work and money, and is subject to public comment. Given its limited resources, the agency has not initiated the NEPA process.

Critics like Imper, though, believe the agency has mismanaged the crisis. Improving habitat can be consistent with wilderness values, says Ryan Henson, policy director at the California Wilderness Coalition, citing other successful restoration efforts within protected areas. His group is working on legislation that would, among other things, direct the Forest Service to pursue robust lupine management without delay.

And then there's the Endangered Species Act. This fall, Imper hopes to petition for an emergency listing. The brutal drought killed most of the lupines on the south-facing slopes this summer and cut the overall population in half, so it's increasingly urgent that trees be removed from the wetter north side. A listing would offer stronger legal cover for such actions.

In mid-August, a wildfire marched through the wilderness. Imper and his colleagues waited anxiously to see if the flowers would survive. Finally, in early September, a researcher hiked in. The southern part of Mount Lassic, and much of its chaparral, was charred. The crucial northern slope, however, experienced only low-intensity fire, which killed a few flowers and some trees, but likely left the big pines intact. The fire might reduce rodent density, but the flowers still face drought, heat and invading forest, with no relief in sight. "The plants are being squeezed in every direction," Imper says, "and there's no place left to go." □

Caged Lassics lupines on Mount Lassic in California, left. Kary Schlick traps small mammals, above. Seed-eating rodents are the main threat to the rare plant.

COURTESY DAVE IMPER



The renamed Salish-Kootenai Dam in Montana.

BILL BARRETT/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

THE LATEST

Backstory

When Kerr Dam was built on Montana's Flathead Reservation in 1938, no tribal government existed to resist it, and the Salish, Kootenai and Pend d'Oreille people suffered cultural and economic losses. **The dam, on the Flathead River, powers roughly 79,000 homes in northwest Montana, and the tribes have been working to acquire it since 2011.** They planned to use the annual revenue — ranging from \$25 million to \$60 million — for education, health care and cultural programs ("Montana tribes will be the first to own a hydroelectric dam," *HCN*, 11/25/13).

Followup

In September 2015, the Confederated Salish and Kootenai became the first tribes ever to own a hydroelectric dam. The ownership of Kerr Dam, now renamed Salish-Kootenai Dam, was transferred from Northwestern Energy to Energy Keepers Inc., the tribe's power company, at a price of \$18.2 million. Dustin Shelby, manager of Energy Keeper, said this transaction represents "the most prominent exercise of the tribes' sovereignty."

PAIGE
BLANKENBUEHLER

Getting the salt out

An obscure facility that keeps the Colorado River's salinity levels in check is on its last legs

BY STEPHEN ELLIOTT

The Paradox Valley in western Colorado got its name because the Dolores River bisects it, rather than running through it in the normal topographical fashion. The landscape is short on people, long on sagebrush and probably best known for the dramatic red cliffs that loom over travelers making the long drive from Telluride, Colorado, to Moab, Utah. This remote valley was formed millions of years ago, when a huge dome of salt collapsed. Now, that salt remains, buried just within the earth, and as a white, crystalline blanket atop the red soil.

And that's a problem. The waters of the Dolores pick up that salt and carry it to the Colorado River, where it eventually degrades the water quality for downstream cities and farmers. For about a quarter century, however, an unassuming facility has been tackling this salt. Every minute, in fact, the Paradox Valley Unit sucks nearly 200 gallons of brine, which

is seven times saltier than ocean water, from wells here, then shoots it 14,000 feet beneath the earth's surface, in order to keep it out of the river. It's perhaps the most critical piece of a massive project designed to keep salt out of the Colorado River, but it's in trouble. The facility itself is near the end of its lifespan, and there is no obvious replacement. Not only that: The re-injection process can cause earthquakes.

The federal Bureau of Reclamation operates the Paradox Valley Unit under the auspices of the Colorado River Basin Salinity Control Program, which was created by Congress in 1974. At the time, the river was highly saline once it reached Mexico, thanks to a combination of natural loading and upstream irrigation. That risked violating a U.S. water treaty with Mexico, and it also had what retired hydrologist Dan Luecke, a former consultant for the Justice Department and several environmental organizations, calls "adverse effects" on agriculture, on water treatment in urban areas and on

the environment. Salty water reduces crop yields when it's used for irrigation on the 5 million acres of farmland along the Colorado, and it mucks up water treatment plants in the municipalities, including Los Angeles and Las Vegas, that rely on the river.

The Paradox unit began operating in 1991. Since then, it's kept some 2.6 million tons of salt out of the river, making it by far the most productive of the dozens of the salinity control program's projects in the watershed.

The locals, however, are paying for the downstreamers' gains. Since injection began, approximately 6,000 earthquakes have shaken the valley, where previously seismic activity had been virtually unknown. Scientists generally agree that the tremors are caused by the deep injection at the facility, much as wastewater injection wells are causing quakes in oil and gas fields in Oklahoma and elsewhere.

Though the quakes are relatively minor, about 100 have been above the threshold for human detection. There have been no official reports of damage, but one local farmer said that the last significant earthquake, a 4.4-magnitude event in January 2013, broke a dam and caused a creek to flood; his wife thought a truck had crashed into their home. After that episode, operators reduced brine injection pressures and volumes. Since then, the tremors have calmed a bit.

Meanwhile, the facility is facing its own existential crisis. The injection well deposits the salty brine about 2.5 miles down into the Mississippian Leadville formation, in a space that will eventually fill up, rendering the facility useless. Officials aren't sure how long they have, but Andy Nicholas, facility operations specialist, estimates about 10 years, 20 tops.

So the Bureau of Reclamation is scrambling for another way to get the salt out. Either a second well could be drilled, risking more tremors, or the salt could be disposed of in vast evaporation ponds. Both options have their drawbacks, including expense and the lack of available land nearby. An environmental impact study is underway to review alternatives, but it could take several more years.

Without the unit's deep injection, the salt that covers the desert valley floor at Paradox, and the thousands of tons of it just beneath the surface, will continue to flow to the Colorado River and its millions of downstream users. Each ton of salt in the river causes \$173 in damage to crops, water treatment facilities and the like, according to the Bureau of Reclamation. That puts the price tag for going without the Paradox unit at around \$457 million annually, and that doesn't account for the damage done to fish, bugs and other aquatic life. As Luecke says, something has to be done: "It's important that that salt be taken out." □



Paradox Valley Unit Facility operations specialist Andy Nicholas at the Paradox Valley injection well, which shoots salty brine 14,000 feet beneath the Dolores River. STEPHEN ELLIOTT

Fall board meeting

Fueled by strong coffee, sunny weather and exuberant readers, the *High Country News* board of directors met in Portland, Oregon, on Sept. 18 and 19. The weekend kicked off with a talk by **Michelle Nijhuis**, *HCN* contributing editor, on wildfire and climate change in the Pacific Northwest. The more than 150 *HCN* fans in attendance sparked a lively discussion on how climate change, fire suppression and exurban development have encouraged repeated mega-fires in the region. The next day, the board approved a strategic plan and budget designed to deepen *HCN*'s coverage of critical issues while increasing its reach. We discussed the lessons learned from *HCN*'s coverage of the early August mine blowout that polluted the Animas River in Colorado. Led by on-the-scene reports by senior editor **Jonathan Thompson**, *hcn.org* hit a record, with more than 200,000 visitors in one week; eight radio programs interviewed Jonathan. All the attention, driven largely by social media, showed how *HCN* can substantively contribute to a breaking national story. Our new strategic plan calls for, among other things, expanding our corps of field reporters and learning how to turn the occasional floods of new online readers into invested members of our community.

AUTUMN VISITORS

Here in *HCN*'s hometown of Paonia, Colorado, as the cottonwoods and aspens shimmer toward gold, we've welcomed several fall visitors.

In late August, **Anjillee Schwarz** and **Dharmajan Vilardi** came from La Veta, Colorado, to visit family in Paonia — the family in question being our very own Associate Designer **Brooke Warren** and her partner, **Bodie Cabiyo**. Anjillee, who has 20 years' worth of issues piled in her house, said *HCN*'s fracking articles helped her understand how to fight fracking in her own area.

From Eagle, Colorado, came **Jack Albertson**, to visit and pick up some issues of the magazine. He sells wine across the Western Slope and had just attended the Telluride Film Fest.

James Hannigan and his daughter, **Cat**, made a pit stop in Paonia on their way back from a horseback trip through the Weminuche Wilderness in the southwest part of the state. James, a scientist at the National Center for Atmospheric Research in Boulder, Colorado, studies atmospheric chemistry, and works on projects in Hawaii and Greenland. He was especially eager to read our Aug. 31 feature, "Unlocking the Methane Mystery."

CORRECTIONS

Alert reader **Mark Adams** of Livingston, Montana, dropped us a note: "In the August 31st issue the box 'Wild Graffiti' states that the damage done to Yellowstone Kelly's grave was in Yellowstone National Park. In fact, his grave is on the rim rocks above Billings, Montana. His nickname Yellowstone (real name Luther) has more to do with his years exploring and guiding in the Yellowstone river valley than any association with the park." Thanks for the historical info, Mark!

In our Sept. 16 issue, we included *The Vendetta of Felipe Espinosa* by Adam James Jones in a list of self-published books. However, the publisher is actually Five Star Publishing, an imprint of Gale, not Five Star Publications, a self-publishing service.

—Jodi Peterson for the staff

We love the wild places and vistas of the high country, but we also value science and appreciate that HCN uses the work of scientists in the field for its understanding of what needs to be done.

—Bill Strawbridge and Meg Wallhagen, Mill Valley, Calif.

I hope more and more readers will join this monthly giving program — it is the core of HCN's investigative reporting.

—Bill Mitchell, Vashon Island, Wash., former HCN board member

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Andrea L. Smith | Easton, PA

Mary Lou Soscia | Portland, OR
Sam H. Sperry & Joyce Beckes | Helena, MT
Alicia Springer & Christopher P. Thomas | Chico, CA
Sherman Stevens & Martha Taylor | Flagstaff, AZ
Darlene Marie Steward | Boulder, CO
Jim & Peggy Stewart | Ferndale, WA
Rick & Lynne Stinchfield | Pagosa Springs, CO
Marilyn Stone | Paonia, CO
Daniel Stonington | Seattle, WA
David & Miriam Stout | Kremmling, CO
Laura Stuntz | Fort Collins, CO
Andrea Suhaka | Centennial, CO
Donald Sullivan | Denver, CO
Liz Taintor | Steamboat Springs, CO
Theodore Taylor & Denise Stone | La Grande, OR
Alice Thomassen | Belfair, WA
Mike Todd | Phoenix, AZ
Janet & Greg Torline | Harrison, ID
Constance L. Trecartin | Tucson, AZ
Dale & RuthAnn Turnipseed | Twin Falls, ID
William Tweed | Three Rivers, CA
Chuck Twichell & Mary K. Stroh-Twichell | Santa Rosa, CA
Bruce Van Haveren | Evergreen, CO
William Vancil | Eloy, AZ
Marybeth Vellequette | Boulder, CO
Eve Vogel | Amherst MA
Chrilo Von Gontard | Bainbridge Island, WA
Kirk & Kris Vyverberg | Sacramento, CA
Kody Wallace & Gary W. Donaldson | Salt Lake City, UT
Eric Waltari | Brooklyn, NY
Robin Waples & Paula Jenson | Seattle, WA
Cathy & Norman Weeden | Bozeman, MT
Mary Weisberg | San Mateo, CA
Robert & Jill Welborn | Wheatland, WY
Toby Welborn | Carson City, NV
David Wells | Grizzly Flats, CA
David Wells | Twin Falls, ID
Miriam Wells | Loveland, CO
Richard & Barbara Wells | Moscow, ID
Peggy & Robert Wenrick | Tucson, AZ
Gordon West | Silver City, NM
Bruce Weydemeyer & Charlotte Kinney | Santa Fe, NM
George Whatley | Kettle Falls, WA
Marilyn Whittaker | Lafayette, CO
Bill Wilson | Seattle, WA
George Winters | Darrington, WA
Grant Winther | Bainbridge Island, WA
Janet Wise & Paul Michalec | Lakewood, CO
John C. Wise | Hidden Valley Lake, CA
Liz Wise | Vernon, AZ
Greg Woodall | Hurricane, UT
Jack L. Wright | Bremerton, WA
Thomas C. Wylie | Centennial, CO
Ronald Yankey | Boise, ID
Charles Yoder | Baltimore, MD
Dave Yokel & Kathy Taylor Yokel | Fairbanks, AK
Paul Zarn | Petaluma, CA



U.S. Sen. Lisa Murkowski, R-Alaska, speaks during a 2010 Senate Republican news conference on the need for a bipartisan energy bill. BILL CLARK/ROLL CALL VIA GETTY IMAGES

Lisa Murkowski's Alter Ego

*Alaska's pragmatic senator hopes to reshape America's energy policy.
You just don't want to see her when she's angry.*

On election night 2014, Alaska Sen. Lisa Murkowski was mingling with a crowd of Republican supporters at Anchorage's Hotel Captain Cook when results began pouring in. The 9,000-square-foot ballroom was packed with people and balloons, and as Republican wins were reported from North Carolina, Montana and Colorado, excitement began to build. Before Alaska's voting booths even closed, the trend was clear: Republicans were taking back the United States Congress.

Surely, elsewhere in the country other GOP politicians were equally thrilled that night, but none expressed themselves as exuberantly as Murkowski. Around midnight, the senior senator picked up a chair from a small stage and brandished it over her head. Her triumphant howl rose above the noise of the crowd: "I am the *chairmaaaaaaan!*"

Murkowski herself wasn't facing re-election. But the Republican sweep nonetheless gave her the power she'd been seeking for over a decade: chairmanship of the prestigious Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources. No other seat in the Senate holds so much influence over how and where energy is developed, and no other state has as great a stake in the matter: 61 percent of Alaska is federally owned, and 90 percent of its revenue comes from the oil industry.

For most Alaskans, the energy chairmanship would be sufficient. But Lisa, as nearly everyone in the state calls her, had also strategically positioned herself to lead one of the most important subcommittees in resource development: the Appropriations Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies. This second chairmanship controls the spending of energy-policy heavyweights like the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management and the Environmental Protection Agency, giving Murkowski unparalleled leverage over officials who might thwart energy development — and making her among the most influential people in Washington when it comes to the economies and environments of the American West.

Murkowski is a steadfast supporter of the oil industry. She wants to reduce restrictions on development, ramp up production and open more public lands to drilling. Yet she's also a moderate Republican who was among the first in her party to acknowledge that climate change is a threat. Her voting record is among the most bipartisan in Congress, and her ability to broker deals is a source of both admiration and fear. "In the context of other Alaska members of Congress I've dealt with in the past 15 or 20 years, she's the most for-



Lisa Murkowski celebrates as the Republicans pull ahead in the 2014 elections.

ROBERT HALLINEN/ALASKA DISPATCH NEWS

midable," says Athan Manuel, director of the Sierra Club's Lands Protection Program. "She's smart, she's serious, and she's very professional."

She may be all those things — but first and foremost, Murkowski is an Alaskan. "Anything bad for Alaska is a deal-breaker for me," she recently wrote to *High Country News*. As the first woman from her state and the first person born there to serve in Congress, Murkowski's willingness to compromise may be trumped only by the fierce protectiveness she feels toward her home turf. Cross Alaska — as President Barack Obama has done by limiting oil and gas development there — and you cross Murkowski. And especially with her new gavels, Lisa Murkowski is not someone you want to cross.

"She's always been a tough lady," says Oliver Leavitt, an Iñupiat leader and family friend. "But now she's a tough lady with a big stick."



The Trans-Alaska Pipeline brought an employment and energy boom to Alaska — for a while. CHRISTIAN HEEB

"Everybody was talking about energy. Everyone was talking about how oil was transforming our state. And there was awareness of what energy resources and energy wealth could bring to us."

—Lisa Murkowski, quoted by the Washington Examiner, 2004

LISA ANN MURKOWSKI was born in Ketchikan in 1957, the second of six children. Her father, Frank, was in banking, and it became a family joke that as soon as his wife, Nancy, got settled enough to put up new wallpaper, they'd move again. By 1962, when Lisa was in kindergarten, the Murkowskis had moved up the coast to Wrangell, then known as the timber capital of Alaska.

Like most Southeast Alaska towns, Wrangell is accessible only by water or air, a thumbprint of civilization surrounded by the vast green archipelago of the Tongass National Forest. Rainfall in the Tongass can exceed 150 inches a year, and more often than not, the rocky beaches and narrow ocean passages are shrouded in clouds. Moss blankets everything.

Though some of the biggest trees in the world grow here, the timber industry long ignored Southeast Alaska. Logs were too far from market, and often too soggy, to be profitable. But just before the Murkowskis arrived, the federal government began subsidizing huge logging contracts, transforming sleepy fishing villages into international hubs of com-

merce. Two sawmills sprang up in Wrangell, each running two shifts a day. From the Murkowskis' new home, the family could watch tugboats piled with logs chugging up and down the coast.

Frank had a 19-foot motorboat, the *Emerald*, and often took Lisa and her siblings into the maze of islands around Wrangell to fish for salmon or picnic on remote beaches. As the 1960s passed, the view from the *Emerald* changed. Swaths of old-growth rainforest were replaced by muddy, stump-strewn clear-cuts. Environmental protection was almost nil; logging companies drove their bulldozers right up the channels of salmon-producing streams.

Yet from the Murkowskis' perspective, Southeast Alaska was thriving. Lawmakers and international businessmen visited Wrangell frequently, and as bank manager — an important position in a frontier town — Frank was invited to meet every luminary passing through. He and Nancy would join Sen. Ted Stevens for lunch with fewer than a dozen others.

It was such a tantalizing glimpse into political life that, in 1970, Frank ran for

the U.S. House of Representatives. To help get out the vote, 13-year-old Lisa spent hours in a makeshift post office in the basement, licking stamps and stuffing envelopes. It was her first political experience, and she was hooked.

But Frank lost, and the family moved to Fairbanks. There, Lisa again witnessed the transformation that resource development can bring to a struggling rural economy. Not long after the Murkowskis rolled into town, the first shipment of North Slope crude began flowing through the Trans-Alaska Pipeline. Tens of thousands of pipeline workers flooded the town; in three years, the number of businesses almost doubled.

The Murkowskis absorbed some of that wealth. Their home sat on five acres and featured a heated swimming pool, tennis courts, a stable and an airplane float. The family passed their time flying bush planes, skiing and hunting with the likes of Ted Stevens and his family — the Alaskan equivalent of royalty. Lisa, by now a tall, athletic teenager, particularly loved horseback riding, and was unfazed by shoveling out a winter's worth of frozen manure each spring.

IN 1980, FRANK WAS FINALLY elected to Congress, beginning a 22-year career in the Senate. That same year, Lisa graduated from Georgetown University with a degree in economics. Now retired, Frank and Nancy spend their summers in Wrangell, in a modest log cabin wedged between the industrial harbor and the protected waters of the Inside Passage, not far from Lisa's childhood home. Local art decorates the walls. On the sunny May morning that I stop by, a bag of organic fertilizer leans against the porch.

Frank offers me coffee and sits down at the table, while Nancy relaxes on the couch with her feet up, reading the news on a phone in a jeweled case. It soon becomes clear that Mrs. Murkowski is a political force to be reckoned with: When Frank fumbles a reference to a mining operation his daughter opposes, Nancy jumps in with the latest news and legislation. "In our family, all we talk about around the dinner table is politics," she says. "All our children — but Lisa mainly — were raised on politics."

In 1985, after earning a law degree from Oregon's Willamette University, Lisa returned to Alaska, working first in the district attorney's office and later in private practice. But the Alaska of her childhood was changing. From Anchorage's Government Hill district, Murkowski watched as the resource economies that had defined Alaska since statehood began to crack. In the Tongass, a combination of market forces, federal regulation and environmental pressure devastated the timber industry. Sawmills closed their doors, and unemployment shot up to around 35 percent. Murkowski — now married with two small boys of her own — watched in dismay as families she'd grown up with

lost their jobs and moved away.

On the other end of the state, the Alaska pipeline began its long, steady decline. The oil fields at Prudhoe Bay had peaked, and the federal government was slow to offer leases in its Arctic holdings. Amid this turmoil, in 1999, Lisa Murkowski decided to run for the Alaska House of Representatives.

From the beginning, she bucked the system. Frank was a classic conservative, fighting taxes to catalyze the free market. Lisa increased the state tax on liquor to offset the costs of alcohol abuse and supported reproductive rights, sponsoring legislation that required insurance companies to cover contraception. She volunteered for several finance committees, familiarizing herself with the state's complicated budget process and quietly building a reputation as a politician who knows the issues. "She wakes up every morning and thinks about three things," says Kara Moriarty, CEO of the Alaska Oil and Gas Association and a family friend. "Policy, policy and policy."

In 2002, Murkowski was still wrangling with the intricacies of state fiscal policy when her father announced he was ending his last Senate term two years early to run for governor. All he had to do was name his successor.

The list of possibilities was long, and Frank Murkowski remembers putting their names into a spreadsheet to compare qualifications: law degree, legislative experience, personal background. Among the candidates were Sarah Palin — then a rising political star — Ted Stevens' son, Ben, and Frank's own daughter. Frank wasn't serious about Lisa at first, but as he put together the spreadsheet, she started to rise to the top.

Lisa couldn't believe it. But after taking a few days to consider, she accepted the nomination.

"And then that — what's the word?" Frank calls to Nancy, who's still on the couch.

"Nepotism," Nancy says, without looking up from her phone.

"Nepotism," Frank repeats. "I learned how to spell nepotism real quick." (Bumper stickers of the day read, "Lisa, who's your daddy?")

But the shadow of nepotism no longer hangs over Murkowski's career. "She's her own person," Nancy says.

"She's a *what*!?" Frank asks, aghast.

"I said, she's her own person. She makes up her own mind."

"Oh. Yeah," Frank says, relieved, then adds, "I've shot a lotta ducks, so my right ear doesn't hear as well as the left. Lisa, by the way, is an excellent shot."

TED STEVENS ONCE SAID that Lisa Murkowski was "a hell of a lot better senator than her dad ever was," and many D.C. insiders who have worked with both agree. "I think that Gov. Murkowski was a good bit louder and a bit more impetuous than (Lisa)," says McKie Campbell, Lisa's former staff director. "Because she is somewhat quieter and more reflective, people often mistake that for a lack of resolve."

During her early years in the Senate, Murkowski kept a low profile; a *Newsweek* article dismissed her political style as "unglamorous" and referred to her as "the other woman from Alaska." But while Palin worked the cameras, Murkowski worked the backrooms. She volunteered for the committees with the most influence on Alaskan issues —

"National forests are supposed to be managed for multiple use. Multiple use — last time I checked — included harvest."

—Murkowski's remarks to Forest Service Chief Tom Tidwell, 2015



Alaska Gov. Frank Murkowski and his daughter, Sen. Lisa Murkowski, at a 2003 ceremony at the Interior Department in Washington, D.C., marking the renewal of rights-of-way for the Trans-Alaska Pipeline. Above, a young Lisa in 1983 with mentor Alaska Sen. Ted Stevens, for whom she worked as an intern. CQ ROLL CALL/GETTY IMAGES, LEFT; COURTESY MURKOWSKI OFFICE, ABOVE



Lisa Murkowski and Rep. Don Young, R-Alaska, hold a news conference about Alaska's energy future at the Capitol last January, voicing opposition to the Obama administration's proposal to protect millions of acres in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge from oil exploration and drilling.

AP PHOTO/
J. SCOTT APPLEWHITE

Alaskan lawmakers once wielded outsized influence in Congress. That's changing.

In 2004, as a sweeping energy bill languished in Congress, the late Sen. Ted Stevens, R-Alaska, successfully pushed through his own pet project by attaching it to another bill that was sure to pass. Incentives to build a 1,400-mile pipeline to carry natural gas from Prudhoe Bay to the Lower 48 states became part of a bill to fund military construction. The legislation created a new agency dedicated to building that one pipeline, eased permitting requirements and provided up to \$18 billion in loan guarantees.

It was vintage Stevens, then one of the Senate's most powerful members. At the time, he was both president pro tempore — third in line to be U.S. president — and chairman of the Senate Appropriations Committee. For decades, thanks largely to Stevens and others (including Frank Murkowski), Alaska's congressional delegation wielded extraordinary power. Those days are over, largely because the rules have changed, and also because Alaskans hold sway only as long as their petroleum does.

"There's no question that the oil industry is the wealthiest industry in the history of the planet," says Chris Miller, an energy lobbyist who was a longtime Hill staffer for Sen. Harry Reid, D-Nev. "When its interests line up with members, that's a very powerful combination." The industry relied on Stevens to use his leverage to advance its priorities, such as creating exemptions from the Clean Water Act and drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge; in exchange, the senator could "call on the political power of the petroleum industry to do things on his behalf."

Starting in the later 2000s, however, the natural gas boom in the Lower 48 made Stevens' pipeline unexpectedly irrelevant. And today, the surge in domestic oil production, led by North Dakota and Texas, has further eroded Alaska's status as a crude superpower. In fact, the state's production is plummeting, and with it, its influence in D.C.

But Alaska's heft in Washington had also been due to Stevens' particular legislative might, as well as to congressional rules that enabled senior members with the right political skills to amass enormous authority. Stevens is gone; so, too, are the rules that helped him build his power.

"Ted Stevens could work miracles, not only for Alaska, but for other things as well," says former Louisiana Sen. J. Bennett Johnston, a Democrat who chaired the Energy Committee prior to Frank Murkowski. As chairman of the appropriations committee, Stevens had control over earmarks, the pro-

visions in appropriations bills that provide funding for specific projects or companies. This allowed Stevens to create things like the Denali Commission, which spent more than \$1 billion to build electricity generation, hospitals, ports and other infrastructure in remote parts of Alaska. (After Stevens lost a re-election bid in a cloud of indictments, funding for the agency plunged by 90 percent.)

Alaska's present-day representatives — Lisa Murkowski included — will never match Stevens' clout. (The state's other senator, Dan Sullivan, is a freshman who has yet to make much of a mark.) Changes in the rules that govern both the Senate and the House have practically done away with earmarks, and Republicans have even put term limits on chairmanships. In recent years, partisan gridlock has made it difficult for even the most skillful and powerful senators to pass legislation. Murkowski has big ambitions and a powerful job, as chairman of the Energy Committee. But while her committee adopted a bipartisan energy bill, it lacks key provisions she wants most for Alaska, such as an increase in the revenue states get from off-shore drilling and an end to a ban on crude exports.

Another factor limiting Alaska's influence is its waning role as an energy provider. Alaska's concerns were still front and center when Congress drafted the last energy bill in 2005. These days, however, "you just don't see the same level of focus about Alaska and its resource development," says Greg Dodson, a former Democratic Hill staffer and vice president for energy policy at the Center for American Progress, a left-leaning think tank.

Now, Alaska's star may be rising again, but not because of its delegation or its crude. President Barack Obama's recent visit was so important to Gov. Bill Walker, a Republican turned Independent, that he flew to Washington, D.C., so that he could accompany Obama to Alaska on Air Force One. In Alaska, the president danced a traditional Yup'ik dance with schoolchildren and chatted about salmon fishing in Bristol Bay, which Obama has helped protect from offshore drilling and a massive copper mine. The president also met with tribes. He listened, and then offered a lifeline to villages hit by effects of climate change, such as sea-level rise, storm surge and erosion. He even pledged to revive Stevens' Denali Commission, for a purpose Stevens most likely never imagined: turning it into the lead federal agency for helping move those villages to safer ground. ELIZABETH SHOGREN

Indian Affairs, Appropriations, Energy and Natural Resources — and built the relationships necessary to further Alaska's pro-development ambitions on the national stage. Colleagues describe her as unfailingly polite and personable, with a genuine desire to get things done.

Yet Murkowski's attempts to revive logging in the Tongass and expand Arctic drilling either died in Congress or got caught up in endless litigation and roadblocks, and her disregard for the pillars of conservatism riled some Republicans. By 2010, the financial market had collapsed, Obama was president, and Palin had ousted Frank from the Alaska Governor's Mansion, the harbinger of a wave of Tea Partying in the state. Murkowski, on the other hand, was openly pro-choice and supported gay rights. She even collaborated with Democrats on a public-lands bill that created 2 million acres of wilderness and 1,000 miles of wild and scenic rivers.

When she finally did catch the media's attention, it was for the wrong reason. Lisa Murkowski — an incumbent Republican senator with a famous last name from a strongly Republican state — lost the 2010 primary to a Tea Party candidate named Joe Miller who believed "compromise is destroying the nation."

Murkowski was devastated. She conceded the primary, and it looked like she'd throw in the towel altogether. "In many ways, she thought how good it would be to be back in Alaska on the sidelines of a soccer game and just be known as Nick or Matt's mom," Campbell remembers. But back in Alaska, supporters kept calling her back — a waiter at a restaurant in Anchorage, acquaintances she'd run into at the airport. She contemplated a write-in campaign, but the notion seemed preposterous: No one had won by write-in since Strom Thurmond in 1954, and it seemed unlikely that anyone with a last name as difficult as "Murkowski" would stand a chance.

But support kept building. One evening in mid-September, Murkowski found herself at the dinner table at her cousin Anne Gore's house in Anchorage, hashing out her options long after the salmon was eaten and the dishes cleared. "We always have very loud dinner table discussions in this family," says Murkowski's older sister, Carol Sturgulewski, who was there. "We look at issues 18 different ways. It's OK to have a difference of opinion, because if she doesn't hear it from me, she's gonna hear it from the guy sitting next to her on the Senate floor. So we were doing what we always do, going around the table, around and around and around."

Eventually, Gore took a quarter out of her wallet and flipped it. Heads, Murkowski would run. Tails, she wouldn't. No one could look. Finally, Sturgulewski pried open Gore's fingers, looked down and smiled: Heads.

Murkowski swiftly put together a \$1.7 million budget and a staff of 20. Ted



After voting in the 2010 election in which she was a write-in candidate, Lisa Murkowski walks with her husband, Verne Martell, and sons Nick and Matt Martell in Girdwood, Alaska. JOHN MOORE/GETTY IMAGES

Stevens had died in a plane crash just weeks before, and his staffers rallied to her side. Her chief political strategist was Cathy Allen, who generally works for Democrats, and many Democratic voters, fearful of what would happen if Joe Miller won the election, backed her. A super PAC of Alaska Native Corporations formed and donated more than a million dollars to Murkowski's write-in. Oil companies chipped in a quarter-million.

On Sept. 17, wearing a royal blue blazer, her chestnut hair perfectly coifed, she stepped in front of a podium plastered with the words "Let's Make History" at the Dena'ina Center in downtown Anchorage. As chants of "Run, Lisa, Run!" died down, someone in the audience yelled, "Love you, Lisa!"

"I love you," she replied, grinning incredulously. Her usual stiffness and poise seemed to melt away. In the heart-felt 25-minute speech that followed, she described the overwhelming support that prompted her decision, took a few digs at the Tea Party, and led the crowd in an exercise spelling her last name: M-U-R-K-O-W-S-K-I! The response was uproarious.

Murkowski finished by quoting the late Sen. Stevens. "The hell with politics," she cried. "Let's do what's right for Alaska. Let's win!"

Murkowski won. By 13,000 votes.

THE 2010 VICTORY marked a turning point in Murkowski's political career. Though she ran as a Republican, Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell told her she no longer had the support of the Senate's GOP leadership, and the Alaska Republican Party refused to acknowledge her. In some ways, it was the best thing

that could have happened: No longer shackled to her party, Murkowski had even greater freedom to forge her own path.

The timing, however, couldn't have been worse: Democrats had lost their filibuster-proof majority, and the next four years marked one of the worst stalemates in congressional history. Democrats refused to pass energy bills, while Republicans, led by Rep. Doc Hastings of Washington, blocked one wilderness bill after another. The 112th Congress became notorious as the first since the passage of the Wilderness Act in 1964 to not designate a single acre of new wilderness.

By the time Republicans swept the 2014 election, hundreds of bills had piled up, and lawmakers on both sides were ready for action. Hastings was about to retire, though not without first seeing some of his pet measures passed, and Democrats, about to lose their majority, had impetus to dust off long-stalled legislation. As one Republican negotiator told the Brookings Institution, Murkowski saw the opportunity and ran with it.

While the media and her fellow senators were distracted by the threat of a government shutdown, Murkowski helped negotiate a massive back-door compromise, wrapping dozens of development and land-protection bills into a 169-page package. It created 250,000 acres of Western wilderness and 140 miles of wild and scenic rivers, and halted mineral development on hundreds of thousands of acres of public lands. It also streamlined permits for grazing, oil and gas development and opened an additional 110,000 acres to logging and mining.

Though it was the biggest lands deal Congress had passed in years, it "was not one of those heralded mega-deals announced by proud lawmakers at a triumphant press conference," writes Jill Lawrence for Brookings' Center for Effective Public Management. Instead, it was a "profile in negotiation," a "collection of mini-deals affecting people and places in 36 states in myriad different ways."

Murkowski's personal triumph in the package was a bill known as Sealaska, which transferred 70,000 acres of the Tongass National Forest to an Alaska Native corporation (which was owed the land), to be logged without lawsuits or federal environmental regulations. Tim Bristol, then-director of Trout Unlimited's Alaska program, says that while he and other environmentalists were initially opposed, the final bill was swallowable. In addition to the land transfer, Murkowski agreed to put 152,000 acres of old growth into conservation. "The original bill and what ended up passing were quite a bit different," Bristol says. "There were a few places where common sense took hold."

The entire deal was attached to a must-pass defense bill and signed into law on Dec. 19, 2014. It was by far the biggest thing Murkowski had negotiated in her 12 years in the Senate. But by then, she had won her twin gavels, and the public-lands compromise was mere practice for what was to come.

THIS JANUARY, AS THE 114TH CONGRESS got underway, Murkowski faced a dilemma. Her rise to power coincided with a fiscal crisis in Alaska, where a precipitous drop in oil prices — combined with

"I support the right of all Americans to marry the person they love and choose because I believe doing so ... keeps politicians out of the most private and personal aspects of peoples' lives — while also encouraging more families to form and more adults to make a lifetime commitment to one another."

—Murkowski in the Alaska Dispatch News, 2013

"Compromise does not mean you're giving up on your principles or convictions. It means being humble enough (to realize) that others might have something to contribute."

—on the CBS Evening News, 2010

"I also believe Keystone XL is a test ... of whether we, as a nation, can still ... build large-scale energy infrastructure. ... If we can't even do it in the Lower 48, then opponents of energy production and energy infrastructure will be further emboldened in Alaska."

—in the Alaska Dispatch News, 2015



A brown bear in the coastal plain area of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge that's temporarily protected from drilling.

STEVEN J. KAZLOWSKI / GHG/AURORA PHOTOS

"I think what we're seeing in Alaska is a warning for those in the West."

—Murkowski at an Energy Committee hearing, 2015

low production — led the state to slash funding for education, transportation and other sectors. Murkowski in part blames the federal government, and she's angry. Angrier than she's ever been.

Yet to pass the kind of energy reform that could become her legacy, Murkowski needs her moderate bipartisan roots more than ever. Though the 2014 deal unclogged the glut of public-lands bills that had built up in the congressional pipeline, an equal number of energy bills are still languishing — like the Shaheen-Portman energy efficiency bill, a measure about as uncontroversial as any in Washington. It would improve energy efficiency without imposing federal mandates, but because it got caught up in the (unrelated) fight over Keystone XL, the bill has been unsuccessfully introduced in each Congress since 2011.

If anyone can pass Shaheen-Portman and the dozens of other measures that have fallen victim to partisan politics, Murkowski believes it's her. The last time Congress comprehensively updated America's energy policy, in 2007, the landscape looked entirely different than it does today: It was twice as expensive to put solar panels on a roof, and the U.S. only produced about 5 million barrels of crude oil a day, compared to around 9.5 million now. "The world has changed," Murkowski told Brookings last year. "The energy world has changed. And what hasn't changed are many of the policies."

In the West, this disconnect means — among many things — that the grid isn't prepared to accept all the renewable power that could come online, and that innovative utilities wanting to reduce the need for new power plants by sharing electricity are stymied by outdated technology or policies. So this January,

Murkowski set out to do what previous chairs have been unwilling or unable to: revamp America's energy policy. She kicked off her chairmanship in Energy and Natural Resources by gathering input from environmental groups, oil companies and everyone in between on what they consider America's most pressing energy needs, then gave committee members a month to introduce bills. She held vigorous debates on everything that flooded in, and weeded out measures that members couldn't agree on.

In the end, she was left with a 357-page package of bipartisan energy bills. She unveiled it in July, passed it through committee in September, and hopes to have it on the president's desk before long. J. Bennett Johnston, a conservative Louisiana Democrat and energy-policy insider, says the package offers the best opportunity in years to update America's energy laws. "It's not very controversial," he says. "It's not world-shaking. But it's got a lot of things in it they've been trying to pass for a long time, and I think it's got a decent chance."

As with the 2014 public-lands deal, many of the measures in Murkowski's energy package seem inconsequential. But taken as a whole, the thrust is clear: The senator wants to increase every source of energy — wind, solar, geothermal, oil, natural gas, coal, marine hydrokinesis, biomass, nuclear and others — largely by removing federal restrictions that hinder their development. Her energy spokesman, Robert Dillon, says the senator would never do so in a way that compromises environmental safeguards, but at least 11 major environmental groups have come out against Murkowski's package. A section that deals with expanding hydropower is particularly grating, an

"industry wish list" that will roll back environmental protections for rivers and fish, says American Rivers' John Seebach. Another section will speed up exports of natural gas, further tying the economy to fossil fuels "at a time when we should be transitioning away from their use," according to the Natural Resources Defense Council.

Nonetheless, the package goes a long way toward updating the West's electric grid and making room for more renewables. It sets up a noncompetitive leasing program for geothermal energy on public lands, improves efficiency standards, and permanently reauthorizes the Land and Water Conservation Fund. It's not perfect, but it moves the ball forward.

It also provides a glimpse of what Alaska's senior senator can do when she's at her best. But Murkowski's nine months as chairman offer a look at another side of her, too.

ON THE DAYS WHEN TED STEVENS felt most "pumped up" to defend the great state of Alaska, he showed up for work wearing a tie featuring The Hulk, the Marvel Comics character who explodes in size and smashes anything in his way when angry.

Murkowski inherited Stevens' fondness for The Hulk; she keeps a figurine in her D.C. office, and when she's ready for battle, drapes a scarf printed with the green-hued hero over her shoulders. But while Stevens pounded his fist and raised his voice when he felt the feds were slighting Alaska, Murkowski stays unnervingly calm, even venomous. "Channeling my inner #Hulk while meeting with the press," she once posted on her Instagram account.

Murkowski has had plenty of reasons to channel her inner Hulk this year. Six months after she passed the Sealaska provision to expedite logging in the Tongass, the U.S. Court of Appeals struck down an effort that both Murkowskis had championed since the 1990s: exempting the Tongass from Clinton's roadless rule. The environmental community cheered the decision as a final blow to old-growth logging in the Tongass, but for Murkowski, it was another sign that the federal government was abandoning its commitment to Alaska's resource development.

Further proof, she says, lies in the state's oil production. The Trans-Alaska Pipeline, built in the 1970s to transport Arctic oil from Prudhoe Bay, is currently moving 500,000 barrels of oil a day, compared to the 2 million it was designed for, and dropping by 5 percent annually. If Arctic production continues to decline, keeping the pipeline running may not be economically feasible. And with state lands getting tapped out, Murkowski believes the most surefire way to keep Alaska's economy afloat is for the federal government to let oil companies begin drilling.

Since 2004, Murkowski has introduced eight bills to allow drilling in the coastal plain of the Arctic National Wild-



HCN correspondent Krista Langlois lives in Durango, Colorado, and frequently covers Alaska. @KristaLanglois2

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life Refuge, an area estimated to hold the largest unexplored onshore oil reserves in the United States. None have passed. But when she assumed her chairmanship in January, it offered fresh hope to her allies that she might be able to force the president's hand.

And then, without warning, Obama crushed those hopes. On the morning of Jan. 25, his administration released a minute-long YouTube video of sweeping vistas, herds of caribou and regal polar bears. The Arctic Refuge's coastal plain, the president announced, would be managed as wilderness. The longest-running battle of oil versus wildlife was settled, at least for now, in favor of wildlife.

Murkowski's Hulk was unleashed. "Folks back home woke up Sunday morning to the news that this president effectively declared war on our economic future," she told the Senate floor that week. "When our economic opportunities as a state, which lie in our natural resources, are denied us ... there is no other way to describe it (than) as a war."

"We are left with no choice," she added in a later statement, "but to hit back as hard as we can."

Since then, Murkowski has introduced legislation, separate from her energy package (*see sidebar at right*), to facilitate offshore drilling in the Arctic, end the ban on crude oil exports and make it easier to transfer federal public lands to state control. She's convinced the Environmental Protection Agency to exempt Alaska from the 2015 Clean Power Plan and is helping other senators fight for the same in their states. And according to the Center for Responsive Politics, three of the five biggest contributors to her 2016 campaign are oil and gas-related groups.

"I think 'worried' would be a more-than-fair classification of how we look at Sen. Murkowski," says Dan Ritzman, the Sierra Club's Arctic program director. "She's always been a loud advocate for drilling and development, and this year she's found a way to turn up the volume."

Most significantly, Murkowski has made it clear that if Obama continues to restrict development in the Arctic, she won't hesitate to use her new power to squeeze the Interior Department's budget, affecting land management across the West. Already, she's dismissed the department's 2016 budget request — which includes extra funds for fighting catastrophic wildfires — as "wishful thinking."

"I'm seeking to defund the administration's wilderness grab through the appropriations process," she explained to *HCN* in an email.

With an upcoming election in Alaska — her first since nearly losing in 2010 — we may be seeing more of the same as Murkowski fights to preserve her state's economy and satisfy its conservative voters. When asked about how else she plans to "hit back," Murkowski replied: "I have a lot planned on this, but am not ready to share all of it publicly." □



Chairman Lisa Murkowski, R-Alaska, smiles as she whispers to Sen. Maria Cantwell, D-Wash., as the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee holds a markup of the Energy Policy Modernization Act of 2015 on Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C., last July. AL DRAGO/CQ ROLL CALL/GETTY IMAGES

Murkowski has left her most ambitious initiatives to be battled over separately

Lisa Murkowski wants to revamp America's outdated energy policy. That's why she's shepherding a package through the Senate that could have lasting effects on how energy in the West is developed, stored and brought to our homes and cities. The 357-page package is a testament to negotiation — an example, the Alaska senator says, of what Republicans are capable of when they're in control.

What's most striking, though, is what it's lacking. There's no mention of drilling in the Arctic, transferring public lands to state control or ending the ban on crude exports.

Murkowski personally believes that such measures are key to America's energy future, but she also knows they're controversial enough to derail her energy package's chance of passing. Still, that doesn't mean she's giving up. In addition to her bipartisan energy package (S.2012), Murkowski has introduced dozens of additional bills and amendments this year — more in the past nine months than in any of her previous 24-month-long Congresses.

Among them is a bill (S.1312) that would end the 40-year-old ban on crude oil exports. At first glance, it seems straightforward: Big Oil and its GOP supporters want to lift the export ban to encourage more domestic drilling. Environmental groups counter that doing so would cause the release of more planet-warming carbon into the atmosphere.

But beneath the surface, the debate is complicated. Though oil producers support exports, oil refiners oppose them, because exports would likely drive up the price of the domestic crude that refiners currently get at a discount. The effects of this on consumer prices at the gas pump are also uncertain,

and the politics are murky, too: While many Democrats oppose the measure, some, like Sen. Michael Bennet, D-Colo., would lift the ban in exchange for renewable energy legislation. (For a more in-depth look, see "*A crude oil export ban primer*," hcn.ws/crude-ban.)

Another of Murkowski's bills (S.2011) seeks to open more of the Arctic Ocean to drilling by forcing the federal government to offer additional leases there. And an amendment that's already passed the Senate would facilitate the process of transferring lands managed by the Bureau of Land Management, the U.S. Forest Service and the Fish and Wildlife Service to state control. National parks and monuments would still be managed by the federal government, but drilling, mining and logging on 530 million acres would be decided by states — many of which are ravenous for development and less than stringent on environmental protection.

The amendment, which offers few specifics, is largely symbolic. But that doesn't mean it's innocuous. Micha Rosenoer, a Conservation Colorado organizer who's fighting the land-transfer movement, notes that it's helped amp up anti-federal sentiment among groups like the Oath Keepers and encouraged more concrete measures that may be introduced this fall.

Yet despite all the debate they've incited outside Capitol Hill, most of Murkowski's bills have yet to be considered by the full Senate — and with Congress' current focus on passing a 2016 budget, many may never make it that far. There's no date for Murkowski's energy package to be heard by the floor, but spokesman Robert Dillon says that when the time comes, the senator will be ready. KRISTA LANGLOIS

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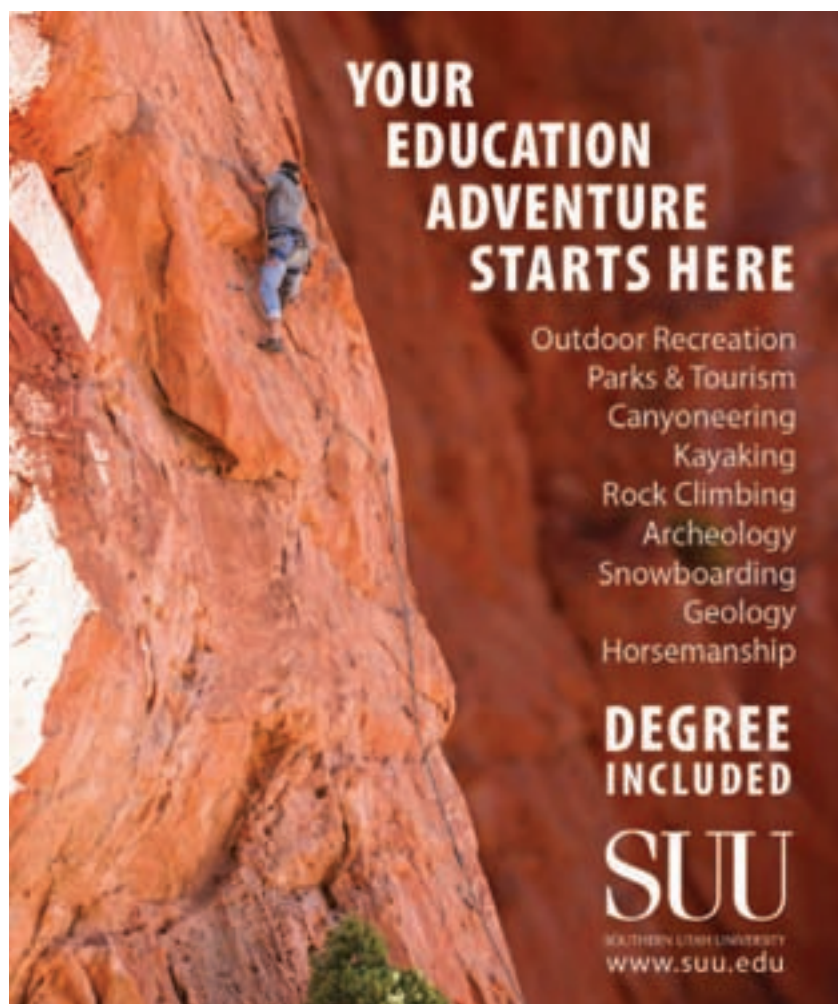
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Program Coordinator - Cedar City, Utah

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Minimum Qualifications: A High School diploma/GED required. **Preferred Qualifications:** Degree in a related field preferred • Strong interpersonal communication skills • Professional leadership experience • Ability to complete physically demanding conservation projects in remote locations with variable weather conditions • Two years of related field experience, including chainaw certification/training and technical rockwork • Wilderness First Responder certification (minimum) • Experience with national service, conservation corps, and/or environmental education programs preferred • Experience with Windows and Mac • Experience with Microsoft Office Suite.

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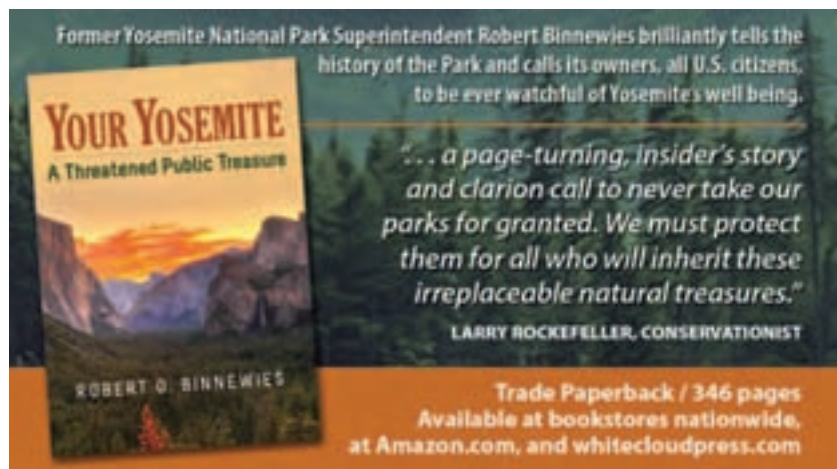
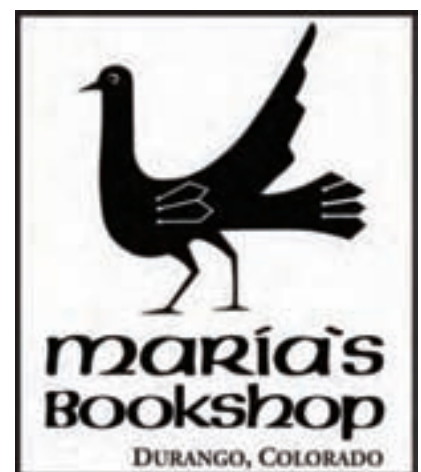
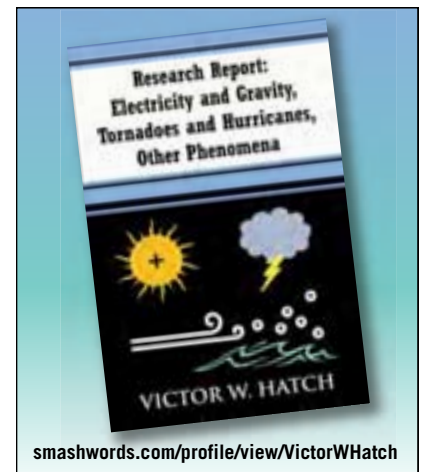
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Happy 100th Birthday, Dinosaur National Monument



OPINION BY
ANDREW
GULLIFORD

We launched our rafts on Colorado's Yampa River at Deerlodge Park, and then ran Little Joe and Big Joe Rapids. On the second afternoon, we pulled into Mathers Hole Camp under an overhung cliff wall that towered 500 feet above us. As I set up my tent, I thought about the 100th birthday of Dinosaur National Monument, which we celebrate this year, and remembered the life of Stephen Mather, the first director of the National Park Service.

A successful businessman, Mather helped brand the legendary company known as 20 Mule Team Borax in Death Valley, California, to sell soap. To entice customers, he wrote letters to newspapers all across the country, posing as a

nian, wrote back to him: "Dear Steve, If you don't like the way the national parks are being run, why don't you come to Washington and run them yourself?" And that's what Mather did.

Tall and handsome, with piercing blue eyes and a rugged outdoorsman's physique, Mather had a commanding presence. Although Congress had voted for national parks and presidents had established national monuments, there was no unifying system of management. Mather campaigned to change that, and in 1916, his campaign succeeded. President Woodrow Wilson signed the Organic Act, creating the National Park Service. A key element of the law is its language, which clearly states that

Yampa River canyons to the monument, whose boundaries now include 210,000 acres of some of the nation's wildest river and canyon country.

Fifty-nine years ago, Dinosaur found itself making national news. After federal dams were proposed for Dinosaur through Echo Park and Split Mountain, many people — led by the Sierra Club's David Brower — protested, and the dams were blocked. The successful effort helped mark the birth of the modern environmental movement.

In our time, two major actions would further protect and enhance the monument, but only if the U.S. Congress is willing to make it happen. Congress could designate as wilderness the 90 percent of the monument in Colorado and Utah that is roadless, and Congress could also designate the Yampa River, which begins and ends in Colorado, as a wild and scenic river, which would protect its flow through the monument.

The Yampa is the last undammed river on the entire 240,000 square miles of the Colorado Plateau. Four endangered fish — the pikeminnow, razorback sucker, humpbacked chub and bonytail chub — desperately need the pulse flows and warm-water cobble bars of a natural flowing river to survive. For Dinosaur's 100th birthday this year, and for the centennial of the National Park Service next year, let's do more than just celebrate past achievements. Let's take decisive action to preserve one of the West's unique ecosystems.

As stars poured over the cliff that night in Mathers Hole, the Yampa's lapping sounds echoed off the canyon wall. I thought again of Stephen Mather — his vision and his fierce determination to get things done. His legacy was the creation of an outstanding national park system that's the envy of European countries and a magnet that attracts tourists from all over the world. Now, in the 21st century, it is our turn to further protect our parks. Wilderness and wild and scenic river designations for Dinosaur would be wonderful achievements. □

Andrew Gulliford is a professor of history and environmental studies at Fort Lewis College and can be reached at gulliford_a@fortlewis.edu.



Rafting in Echo Park, where the Yampa and the Green rivers merge beneath Steamboat Rock. COURTESY ANDREW GULLIFORD

happy housewife extolling the virtues of Borax. His marketing scheme worked, and he became a millionaire at a youthful age. But Mather was restless and continually sought outdoor experiences. When he visited Yosemite National Park in the early 1900s, however, he was appalled by what he saw.

Cattle tromped along rivers and streams. Sheep skinned off the high country. Car campers parked everywhere and anywhere, leaving their trash strewn about. Outraged, Mather wrote Interior Secretary Franklin K. Lane to complain about the poor condition of the national parks. Lane, a fellow Califor-

nian, wrote back to him: "Dear Steve, If you don't like the way the national parks are being run, why don't you come to Washington and run them yourself?" And that's what Mather did.

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WEB EXTRA

To see all the current Writers on the Range columns, and archives, visit HCN's Web site, hcn.org

Writers on the Range is a syndicated service of *High Country News*, providing three opinion columns each week to more than 70 newspapers around the West. For more information, contact Betsy Marston, betsym@hcn.org, 970-527-4898.

The self in perpetual motion

The Spirit Bird: Stories, winner of the Drue Heinz Literature Prize, is Kent Nelson's latest collection of short fiction. Nelson's stories feature diverse protagonists — a young single mother, a rabble-rousing Southern lawyer, a restless empty-nester — as well as an unusually vivid sense of place — the chile fields of New Mexico, the resort towns of Colorado, suburban Seattle — that establishes the land as an essential character in the stories. The people in *Spirit Bird* are trying to break out of their lives, and they share one major trait: dissatisfaction. They're exploring, pushing boundaries, looking seriously at their own lives and asking, "Really? What now?"

In "Race," Hakim, a Kansan of Egyptian heritage, is a glassblower living in Colorado. He is middle-aged, divorced, misses his daughter, uses his talent to make tourist baubles, and is viewed with suspicion by many locals even though he's been a member in good standing of the local chamber of commerce for 15 years. After Hakim collapses during a half-marathon and is revived, strangers seek him out — what did he see? What did he learn? "I learned how easy it was to die, but how hard it was to go back to the beginning," he tells them.

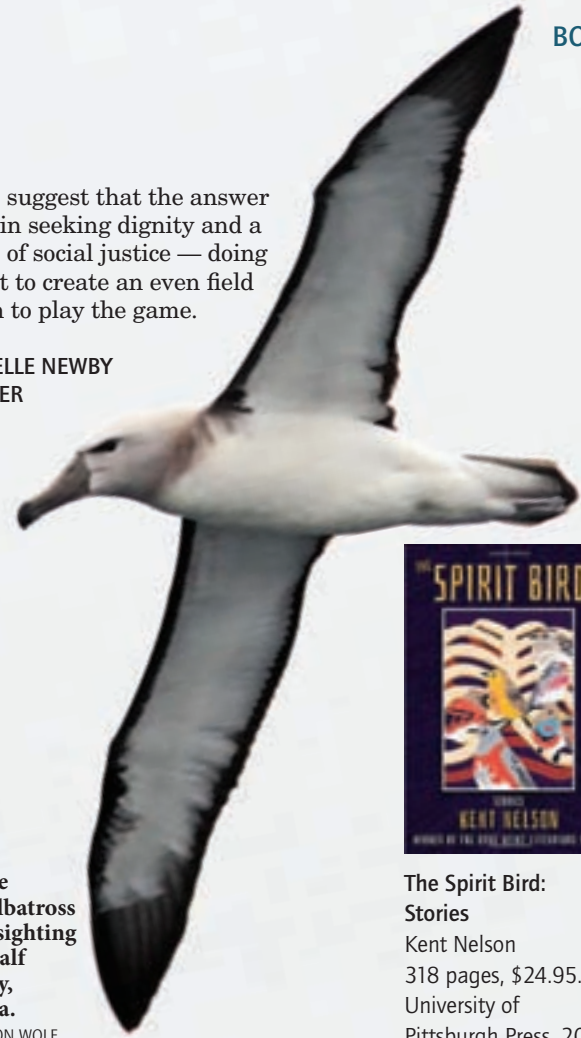
In "La Mer de l'Ouest," Scott Atherton is a white South Carolina lawyer whose new clients, a black couple, want a straw buyer for a house in an exclusive white enclave. Atherton is a liberal in a town where he's tolerated by the local conservative establishment — until he crosses a line and becomes an activist. His wife accuses him of "glamorizing criminal behavior" but he defends himself by replying, "The Boston Tea Party was a crime. So was Rosa Parks's getting on that bus. ... Did we not have an obligation to resist what we thought was evil?"

Adult siblings with childhood grievances spend a weekend divvying up their father's possessions in "Seeing Desirable Things," a scenario guaranteed to end in catastrophe. Allen, contemplating birds on the beach in the aftermath, stares at one and wonders: "How did it know of danger? ... How did it know where to go in winter, when to leave, how to navigate?" Would that we humans could know those things, too.

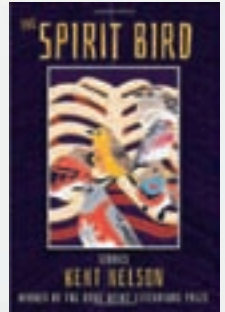
Birds in this collection represent the self in perpetual motion, forever seeking. Lauren, the birder in the title story, asks what might be the question that underlies the volume: "When the spirit is always on the move, how can it settle?" Nelson

seems to suggest that the answer is found in seeking dignity and a measure of social justice — doing your part to create an even field on which to play the game.

BY MICHELLE NEWBY
LANCASTER



A juvenile
Salvin's albatross
in a rare sighting
west of Half
Moon Bay,
California.
COURTESY RON WOLF



*The Spirit Bird:
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Kent Nelson
318 pages, \$24.95.
University of
Pittsburgh Press, 2014.

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Stacking Out

You may believe them fixed on conquest and plunder, but the nation's sleepless oilfields are sometimes at peace. Though brief, I have seen it. Last October, for instance, seems like a meditation retreat to me now where we reached financial nirvana. We earned hand-over-fist on a 70-day wildcat well, the kind that few operators would risk exploring now. On a firm perch of \$90 oil, we worked without fear of dismissal, not when another company would hire us the next hour.

That changed in November. Oil prices sank. I was servicing a work-over rig in western Michigan that the crew had retooled into a hybrid to drill short wells at a bargain. The well pad was cut into a corner of a rancher's snowy pasture. He ran a small packing plant, and at dusk his workers tracted a line of blood-waste through the field behind our work trailer. A murder of crows would wake in the sugar maples and spend the daylight sipping from that burgundy edge. Were the packing plant to close, they'd learn to struggle again.

Derrick, the directional driller I partnered with, lost his optimism in Michigan. He grew up in man camps, listening to roughnecks boast around drunken fire rings since age two. "It's gonna get bad," he said. He sounded knowledgeable, but I couldn't trust him, primarily because he said a lot, and I've met every kind of liar out here.

"We're not in any hurry, you know?" the rig manager told me. "We're all trying to get a paycheck." His crew was slow, and in Michigan they took what they could get for as long as they could get it. The company stacked the rig out after I left. "It's kind of sad," my replacement said on the phone. "These guys have been together for two years."

Weeks passed and rumors spread. Politics in the oilfield get played out among crews on a pad and from one pad to another. Derrick told me to drop his name to my coordinator so I could work on his follow-me rig, a home rig in Colorado. We shared a trailer that was split in half. I had my own kitchen, bath and bedroom. Derrick brought his wife and 2-year-old out to stay with him, which was comforting because it shrunk the chance of a sudden violent deviation from rapport, as I've witnessed in some trailers.

Two weeks later, waiting to lay down the drill assembly, I watched Woodrow pulling slips in the frigid morning dusk. He spat curses into the frozen air, firing them to the steel floor like bullets from his beard. Woodrow was a driller yesterday. He was a floor hand today. Demoted. The price of oil had dropped to \$50. His company told him: "Floor-hand, or wait at the house, 'til work picks up."

Woodrow's anger unnerved the company man, who was pacing across the doghouse, threatening to call his supervisor, who needed to keep his mouth shut about their plans, "until people are away from here." The company man knew a no-firearm/no-knife policy got ignored, and that could worsen an already tense environment. The rig stopped operations shortly after.

Before I left that rig, Derrick went shopping for commercial real estate in Colorado Springs. He'd done it during the downturn in 2009. Opened a temporary barbeque joint, not to make a living, but just to have a wheel to spin his money in. Inventory in, food out, bills paid, savings safe. Others haven't thought that far ahead. A few have sold their trucks.

This spring, with rigs stacking out in my wake, I drew a solid hand, working with an operating company that hedged against oil prior to the plummet and could continue selling at \$75 per barrel despite global declines. But the supervisors no longer tolerate mistakes. The threat of replacement looms. Too many wolves yap at the fences. Too many workers need a job. Two well-positioned hands have been "run off," as they say, meaning your company doesn't have to fire you, but you can't work here.

Tonight, oil sags below \$50, and in the safety meeting, desperation staggers the tool pusher's voice as he lines up chores for the roughnecks. "Please ... just ... the president of the whole fucking company is coming out tomorrow. Let's not give him an excuse to stop drilling because he walks into a shit show out here."

I do floor stretches in the morning. While diesel engines hum outside and steel pipes clank in the derrick, I take a deep inhalation, expanding my lungs into a vessel that I imagine gathers particles of anxiety and gloom, and as I exhale, a ship molts from inside my chest and sails out upon my exhalation, leaving behind a persistent light. □

Neil LaRubbio is an MWD field operator, a writer and a documentarian in Colorado. Names have been changed to protect personal identities.

Floor hand racking back drillpipe.
STREETER WRIGHT

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HEARD AROUND THE WEST | BY BETSY MARSTON

THE WEST

It's almost a rule: If you live in the rural West, you need a dog, preferably a big dog like a Lab, ideally a rescue mutt. Some dogs relish posing in the beds of pickups, noses elevated to sniff the wind; others run barking back and forth along fences, desperate to break free and chase after deer or perhaps bring down the occasional cyclist. Then there are the small-town dogs who think they own the alleys, and like to pick on newbie dogs. Two years ago, Ruth Pettigrew moved to Hotchkiss in western Colorado, population 1,400, in part because it bills itself as the “friendliest town around.” To her surprise, she discovered a pattern of unfriendliness when she and her leashed pets encountered other canines in town, she told the *North Fork Merchant Herald*. “My own dogs have been attacked three times — unprovoked — all by dogs that were without supervision,” she reports. This led to her neighbors offering lots of suggestions for avoiding a fourth doggy dustup. But their advice seemed peculiar, ranging from “get bigger dogs” and “carry a weapon,” to “drive elsewhere,” or keep her dogs “inside a fence.” So Pettigrew realized it wasn’t enough for her to walk her own dogs to keep fit; she (and her dogs) needed to be in “combat-fitness” shape already. What does the well-dressed dog walker wear when expecting trouble from aggressive dogs? Pettigrew suggests that you and your dogs don Kevlar bulletproof vests, strap Tasers and Mace to your arms, and hang a bat or club from a belt. And wear steel-toed boots on your feet — it’s a jungle out there.

WYOMING

Maybe it's a trend: “Dog owners have been behaving badly” on the Bridger-Teton National Forest, reports the *Jackson Hole News&Guide*. Their bad behavior involves letting pets go off-leash, with the result that running-around dogs bit five people walking on trails during just one month. Wandering dogs ignore hikers if there’s nearby wildlife to hassle, though sometimes this doesn’t end well: “Three moose trampled a terrier to death.” Then there’s the “dog poop problem,” caused by dog owners who can’t be bothered to collect a canine contribution on the



COLORADO “They wouldn’t dare.” LISSA HOWE

trail. A leash law looks like it’s in the offing, though a town-county task force first intends to study that and other possibilities.

COLORADO

A jet pilot who flew so low through western Colorado that he sheared off seven power lines, sending them snapping into traffic on Interstate 70, was identified several months later by the *Grand Junction Daily Sentinel* as Brian Evans, 45, a consultant for U.S. “expeditionary forces.” After the accident, which damaged three cars, Evans wanted to know why the cables he severed were “unmarked.” He should have known the answer: He was flying about 100 feet off the ground, well below the Federal Aviation Administration limit of 500 feet. In his narrative of the accident for the National Transportation Safety Board, Evans described his unfortunate ride in oddly cinematic terms. Surprises were constant as he raced along at a brisk 287 miles

per hour: “There were small and large canyons forming while on this course ...” and “as I rolled out, the river continued in front of me ...” Then “A split second before impact, I saw cables, wires or power lines in front of the aircraft. Before I could react, the aircraft struck these wires.” There’s no word on whether Evans faces any consequences for his reckless flight.

IDAHO

“It is a mistake to ever over-estimate the ignorance of the Idaho Legislature,” herpetologist Frank Lundberg told The Associated Press. He had just testified in support of a bill designating the Idaho giant salamander — a foot-long amphibian found only in the state — as “state amphibian,” but once again, the bill failed to pass. Some Republican representatives feared that state recognition would lure the federal government into declaring the endemic animal “endangered.” But Ilah Hickman, a disappointed 14-year-old who has tried for years to get a bill passed, vowed to keep pushing until a bill “either passes or I can’t get hearings again.” She’s up against entrenched negativity. Republican Rep. Ken Andrus, for example, explained his “no” vote by recalling his childhood: “(Salamanders) were ugly, they were slimy, and they were creepy. And I’ve not gotten over that. So to elevate them to the status of being the state amphibian — I’m not there yet.”

YELLOWSTONE NATIONAL PARK

All’s well that ended well for Jade, the Australian shepherd pup that bolted from a car accident in Yellowstone National Park. The 15-month-old dog was lost for 42 days but finally found close to a park road by his still-recuperating owner, David Sowers. Fifteen pounds lighter, the skinny dog apparently survived by eating roadkill, reports the *Jackson Hole News&Guide*.

WEB EXTRA For more from Heard around the West, see hcn.org.

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



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“ Perhaps that’s why the national parks and campgrounds of the West overflow all summer. **People are searching for some kind of refuge in what is left of our country’s wild places, each seeking a personal geography of hope.** ”

Marcia Hensley, in her essay, “How visitors get hooked on the West,” from *Writers on the Range*, hcn.org/wotr