

High Country News

THE ART
OF THE CRUISE



Bozeman's only
homeless shelter

The true cost of
wolves in the West

Charting DOGE's
path of destruction

HIGH COUNTRY NEWS

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A solar project in Colorado's San Luis Valley. **Abby Harrison / HCN**

Know the West.

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The social contract

FOR SEVERAL YEARS I served on the board of a rural school district, and every year, when our draft budget was presented at our monthly public meeting, the audience would fill with people concerned about higher taxes. Seniors on fixed incomes spoke about the precarity of their budgets, while people of significantly greater means railed against “irresponsible” spending. As a board, we were trying to keep class sizes small enough for good learning outcomes and to avoid having to cut art and music and Spanish classes. I typically let the more senior board members handle the tough questions, but one year, as a young mom, I felt compelled to speak on behalf of the intergenerational social contract: the idea that when we were in school, we benefited from the investment of the generations before us, and it is therefore our moral obligation as adults today to invest in schools for the generations coming after us.

The intergenerational social contract is an old idea, far older than the U.S. government, Social Security and Medicare. It is not about entitlement. It’s about intergenerational caretaking — the recognition that there are no isolated moments of history, that we are obliged to pass on a world of hope and possibility to future generations. Indigenous communities have always understood this, which is why traditional ecological knowledge is increasingly being looked to for ways of managing the land for long-term health and sustainability. It’s a line of thinking that respects, and assumes a responsibility to, future inhabitants of Earth.

The intergenerational social contract also applies to public lands. Land-management agencies in the U.S., including the Bureau of Land Management, Department of the Interior and the Forest Service, have a legal responsibility to manage lands and resources with the future in mind. The words “to the benefit of present and future generations” are all over the charters and laws governing these agencies. Current proposals to sell off public land are not only a blatant violation of the social contract, but a violation of the very idea of public land. Transferring a public good into private hands is a crime against future generations.

The reckless actions of the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE), as charted by Jonathan Thompson in this issue, are another blatant assault on the public good, slashing budgets for public land and firing its caretakers. Cutting funds for cancer and climate research is an assault on present and future generations, as is defanging the Endangered Species Act and the National Environmental Policy Act. This activity should be considered un-American: enriching the wealthiest while stealing from the everyday Americans of today, tomorrow and as long as our republic shall stand.

Jennifer Sahn, editor-in-chief



Evan Vucci/AP Photo

Trump halts historic orphaned well-plugging program

Western states were using funds from President Biden’s Infrastructure Act to clean up pollution left behind by industry.

By Nick Bowlin



Michael Maierhofer

The horses and mules that moved mountains and hearts

Forest Service stock animals are indispensable to public-lands trail work. Now, President Trump is accelerating the death of a dying art.

By Shi En Kim



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A snowy road in Bozeman, Montana, where unhoused people often park the vehicles they live in. **Will Warasila / HCN**

ON THE COVER

Lou Varela hops his 1984 Cutlass Supreme down Central Avenue as a storm rolls into Albuquerque, New Mexico, in June 2024.

Gabriela Campos / HCN

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LETTERS

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

HEARTBREAKING AND HEALING

Thank you for this outstanding article on the Wakasa monument and the issues surrounding its discovery, excavation and future (“The Topaz Affair,” April 2025).

Kori Suzuki did a thorough and sensitive job researching and reporting an emotional and volatile subject, and he photographed the story beautifully.

It’s not clear that Mr. Wakasa, his relatives and the Wakasa Stone will ever find peace and resolution. But I expect any resolution will come, in part, from Suzuki’s fine reporting.

Tom Graves
San Francisco, California

ANOTHER SIDE OF THE STORY

It would be easy to read “No helping hand here” (April 2025) and walk away with the sense that the Veterans Park Neighborhood doesn’t care about the needs of the unhoused community in Boise.

Interfaith’s current location sits in west downtown Boise, which is prime for development as the city grows and property values are high. This site was sold before Interfaith purchased the new property.

The Veterans Park Neighborhood is already home to several shelters and services for unhoused veterans in recovery, a women and children’s shelter,

supportive housing for impoverished seniors and others. The neighborhood is not against helping others but is questioning why this low-barrier shelter needs to be placed in the residential area as well.

Relocating Interfaith to Veterans Park will remove this population from the services they require that are located downtown, nearly three miles away, and they will need to cross a busy six-lane road to access a bus stop.

Veterans Park Neighborhood, a lower-income neighborhood in Boise, is being targeted and sacrificed for developers’ pocketbooks. The article has vilified a working-class neighborhood that, when given a fair hearing, was supported by planning and zoning, the law and common sense.

John Olson
Boise, Idaho

BE WARY OF ‘WILDCRAFTING’

“The Berry Fields” (March 2025) is precisely why I’m extremely cautious, even opposed, to commercial “wildcrafting” or foraging. It’s commoditizing the wild for the financial benefit of the few.

The current “foraging craze” is sending hundreds, probably thousands, of people out into the forests, deserts, meadows to get as big a “haul” of things

as possible, usually as Facebook trophies or to sell, as I saw during the recent mushroom season, when dozens and dozens of posts were showing up all over social media advertising various wild-harvested mushrooms for sale, with more than a few showing misidentified species. Commercial “wildcrafting” and foraging takes it to another level, where “product” is often measured in hundreds of pounds.

It is a gift to just be in the woods, let alone to draw sustenance from the forest and land and ocean. I try to spend my time when I’m not in the woods working to figure out ways to heal the land, teach people ethics and understanding, and allow myself to continually be in awe of the gifts the forest and land offers to us.

What I have been taught is there is almost always a sense of reciprocity in a gift. An obligation for both the giver and recipient that keeps our world in balance. Without, we live in a lopsided world that increasingly is off-balance, or *koyaanisqatsi*, as the Hopi put it. No further proof is needed than looking at our forests and lakes and rivers and ocean to see just how out-of-kilter we’ve truly become.

I hope the folks in this story succeed in stopping commercial harvest of the huckleberries. I’d be happy to see all commercial foraging brought to an end.

Tripp Mikich
Via Facebook

Editor’s note: On March 31, the U.S. Forest Service temporarily paused commercial huckleberry picking in Gifford Pinchot National Forest. See our coverage online.

BULLISH ON BUFFALO

What a fascinating story! (“The art of moving a buffalo,” March

21, 2025) I particularly was impressed with the photography. Owen Preece shows a sense of time and place. I sincerely hope we see more of his work.

Patsy Thompson
Snellville, Georgia

MANIFEST HISTORY

“The Indian education of Charles Sams” (February 2025) had many salient points, but I was totally amazed at one particular phrase: “larger-than-life monument to Indian killer Abraham Lincoln.” Wow! Most people don’t have a clue about the magnitude and scope of these incidents. References to this holocaust just never make it into print; no one wants to hear about it and therefore they don’t. Couple that with a few other very American attitudes and habits, and that cryptic piece of history remains just that: cryptic.

David Glaeseman
Phoenix, Arizona

YES, WE CAN!

Kudos to Michelle Urrea for her wonderful illustrations in the February issue of (“A Fight We Can Win,” February 2025). She captures the unique light of the West — and the dark — with her beautiful images. They’re frame-worthy, for sure!

Kris Cloud
Chicago, Illinois

In “A Fight We Can Win,” (February 2025) Alexander Lemons shows what needs to happen in our country — a nationwide restoration program for our ecosystems. We can do this — we have the ingenuity, expertise and manpower. We must do this. It will take great courage and leadership, and I hope to see Lemons on an election ballot soon.

Amy Gulick
Clinton, Washington



Osvaldo Franko (left) during his show at the Radio Campesina studio in Phoenix, Arizona, last year.
Roberto (Bear) Guerra / HCN

REPORTAGE

The subversive power of Spanish-language radio

For decades, immigrant communities have used the airwaves to educate and protect themselves.

BY ANNIE ROSENTHAL

ON A FEBRUARY MORNING, the broadcast studio at Radio Campesina in Phoenix, Arizona, feels frenzied: Drive-time DJs relinquish their seats to incoming guests, trading jokes over a norteña song's jaunty accordion. But at 10:18 a.m., a producer gestures for silence. Mics go on, and Osvaldo Franko starts the show: "Vámonos, from coast to coast and border to border!"

Franko's voice reaches some 750,000 people — many of them Latino workers, from bellhops in Las Vegas to farmworkers in California's Central Valley. Every weekday morning for more than 25 years, Spanish-speaking listeners around the West have tuned into *Punto de Vista* for casual but curated conversations on topics ranging from national politics to romance.

Today's segment, though, is something new: *Conoce Tus Derechos*, or "Know Your Rights." Radio Campesina launched the

weekly program soon after the election, as President Donald Trump's campaign promise to initiate mass deportations turned tangible.

In recent weeks, lawyers and activists have joined Franko to share advice on interacting with Immigration and Customs Enforcement. Today's guests are here for a grim follow-up: how to make sure your family and belongings are cared for after you're detained.

"Did you know that if you need to let someone take care of your house, you have to leave them certain specific documents so they can make decisions?" Franko asks in Spanish.

His first guest is Juliana Manzanarez, an immigration lawyer. At Franko's urging, she lists the paperwork an undocumented listener ought to compile: A power of attorney authorizing someone to take your kids to the doctor. Another for accessing your bank accounts. One for the title to your house, and

a general one they could use to sell your car.

Franko, 45, has a short swoop of salt-and-pepper hair, squarish glasses, and the disciplined ease of someone who runs several miles before work. He's from Mexico City, where he developed a colloquial, assertive radio persona (and replaced the "c" in "Franco" with a "k"). Two years into hosting *Punto de Vista*, he's practiced at fielding questions that come through Facebook and WhatsApp. Some are general: *Where should I keep those documents? How long do I have after I'm detained before I'm deported?* Others are more specific: *If I'm married to a U.S. citizen but don't yet have my own papers, what should I do if I'm stopped by ICE?* In a voice message, a man asks, "Franko, can a work permit protect me?"

The answers, from Manzanarez and two community organizers sitting beside her, are friendly but direct. Make several copies of those documents, and give them to the people you're leaving in charge. The timeline after you're detained depends on your record and what country you're from. If you're stopped, remain silent. A work permit alone will not protect you from deportation.

"They're sending greetings from Tempe and say, 'God bless you and take care of you,'" Franko tells the guests, reading from his phone. Addressing the audience, he paraphrases Cesar Chavez: "The struggle does not end until we stop fighting."

"It's not the first time we've been in a moment like this," he adds.

The comment likely resonates with listeners here in Maricopa County, where notorious former Sheriff Joe Arpaio targeted Latinos for decades. But it's also true of the radio station itself. Chavez and the United Farm Workers founded Radio Campesina in 1983, hoping to connect and educate migrant workers confronting abuse. And La Campesina is not alone in that effort: For nearly a century, at stations large and small, Spanish-language radio has proven a powerful tool for defending immigrant communities across the West.

DURING THE GREAT DEPRESSION, as Americans sought a scapegoat for their financial woes, more than a million people

After visiting Radio KDNA's studios in Granger, Washington, Cesar Chavez was inspired to start the Radio Campesina network.

Photo courtesy Rosa Ramón via the Feminista Frequencies archive

of Mexican descent — a majority of them U.S. citizens — were forced to leave the U.S. for Mexico. In Los Angeles, a veteran of the Mexican Revolution took to the airwaves to protest. From 4 to 6 a.m., Pedro González and his band, Los Madrugadores (“The Early Risers”), serenaded KMPC listeners heading to the factories and fields with a combination of corridos and political commentary. The show was so popular that authorities tried to revoke González’s broadcasting license — and eventually sent him to prison on trumped-up charges before deporting him. The border made a poor sonic barrier, though — González quickly got back on the air in Tijuana.

In the 1970s, with the advent of public broadcasting, Chicano organizers were able to start their own Spanish-language radio stations. The first were located in agricultural communities: KBBF in Santa Rosa, California, and KDNA in Granger, Washington. As historian Monica De La Torre wrote in a recent study of KDNA (pronounced “cadena,” the Spanish word for “chain”), radio was a uniquely effective medium for reaching farmworkers: cheap to produce, free to access, no reading required. Workers could listen to portable transistor radios while they picked wine grapes and Red Delicious apples.

Beyond entertainment and a sense of community, the stations provided a safe and anonymous forum for listeners to ask questions about navigating the immigration system. They also shared urgent news in real time. When immigration raids hit Washington’s Yakima Valley in the 1980s, KDNA designated lookouts to keep watch — and created a covert alert system. “They used a song called ‘La Cosecha de Mujeres.’ When that song went on the air, the farmworker community knew there was migra action,” Francisco Rios, the station’s news director, told *HCN*.

Cesar Chavez visited KDNA in 1980. Dolores Inés Casillas, a radio scholar at the University of California, Santa Barbara, writes that he was particularly impressed with the station’s DIY counter-surveillance efforts. Soon after, Chavez invited one of



KDNA’s producers to help start a new station in California: KUFW, Radio Campesina’s flagship station. (Four decades later, KDNA still broadcasts from a small community station in Granger; Radio Campesina now operates a network of several commercial stations around the country.)

Not everyone was a fan of the migra alerts, of course. According to De La Torre, agents with the Immigration and Naturalization Service complained that hosts were aiding illegal activity. But the broadcasts were unrecorded, and their fleeting nature made investigation difficult. Besides, even if regulators tuned in, few of the Federal Communications Commission’s employees spoke Spanish.

Today, it’s not so easy to fly under the radar. Radio broadcasts are less ephemeral; many stations, including Radio Campesina, post shows on social media. And the Trump administration is aggressively working to suppress live immigration reporting: In February, the newly appointed chair of the FCC, Brendan Carr, announced the agency was opening an investigation into California station KCBS for its coverage of raids in San José.

First Amendment experts broadly agree that law enforcement operations are a matter of public interest. Still, KDNA and Radio Campesina are taking a cautious approach: These days, rather than broadcasting alerts themselves, staff at both stations said they’re sharing information about local grassroots groups that offer real-time warnings and legal support.

But in Phoenix, Radio Campesina is still building on the other strategy that inspired Chavez in Washington. When staff hear rumors about a raid, the company’s outreach team drives out to independently

verify them. Ruben Pulido, a member of that team, said in early February that the vast majority of the reports they’d received so far had been false. “The most important thing is to know if it’s really happening, to not alarm people,” he told *HCN*.

Maria Barquin, the network’s program director, said this kind of work is central to La Campesina’s mission: “How we’re going to make sure people understand their value, make people understand that *unidos somos más*, that there’s light at the end of the tunnel.”

As immigrants around the West steel themselves for a dark political era, Barquin hopes they’ll look to both the technologies and the activists of an earlier generation. In her office, she pointed to a box of red “Know Your Rights” cards, just below a larger-than-life poster of Chavez. “There’s some good tactics that they need to learn from the past, and I think that’s the opportunity,” she said.

PUNTO DE VISTA ends before 11 a.m. — but ever since the inauguration, Osvaldo Franko has been getting messages from worried listeners at all hours. On the Wednesday Manzanarez joined his show, he’d organized an evening event for people trying to assemble all the paperwork she’d recommended. The venue was an office building downtown where Franko broadcasts a side project — an internet station called *Frecuencia Alterna* (“Alternate Frequency”).

By 7 p.m., the station’s studios had been transformed into a makeshift legal clinic, sound equipment pushed back to accommodate a table covered in power of attorney forms. Franko and a smiling woman who hosts an ’80s pop show were organizing the

documents into folders. They kept having to print more: Dozens of people were lined up to talk to an attorney in the break room.

Adriana Cota, a blonde woman in leopard-print boots, helped distribute the folders. Cota is a legal document preparer and Franko's wife. (They met when Franko asked her to be a guest on his show.) In the hallway, she was stopped by a young pregnant woman in a pink dress. Sofia (a pseudonym) told Cota her baby was due soon, and that she had a toddler at home. She'd come to Arizona from Mexico three years ago.

"I'm afraid they're going to come and take me," Sofia said. She wanted to know whether she could authorize her 18-year-old nephew, the only adult in the family with U.S. citizenship, to take responsibility for her kids if she were deported. Cota assured her that she could.

Sofia was accompanied by her older sister, Elena (also a pseudonym). Elena's son was the 18-year-old — and she said he was scared, too. Earlier that week, he'd gone to the store but left without buying anything when he saw what looked like immigration agents.

"What responsibility for a kid to feel," Cota said quietly. "That if I go out, they're going to take my parents."

"We have to do what's possible to leave them with someone and be prepared. Like right now, with the packet," Elena said, holding up her folder. She told Cota even this thin pile of documents brought some comfort: "We didn't have any idea what to do."

"I had no idea there were places like this, that give you advice," Sofia added.

Cota explained that Franko, standing in the corner, had organized the event — and that he hosts *Punto de Vista*. Elena seemed surprised and impressed. "My husband listens to La Campesina all the time," she said.

"What's your husband's name?" Franko asked. If Elena had a message for him, he said, he'd share it on the air the next day.

Elena thought for a second. "Tell him I love him," she said. ☀

Annie Rosenthal is the Virginia Spencer Davis fellow at High Country News, reporting on rural communities, migration and life in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands.

WEB EXTRA Lea éste reportaje en español en hcn.org/radio-espanol

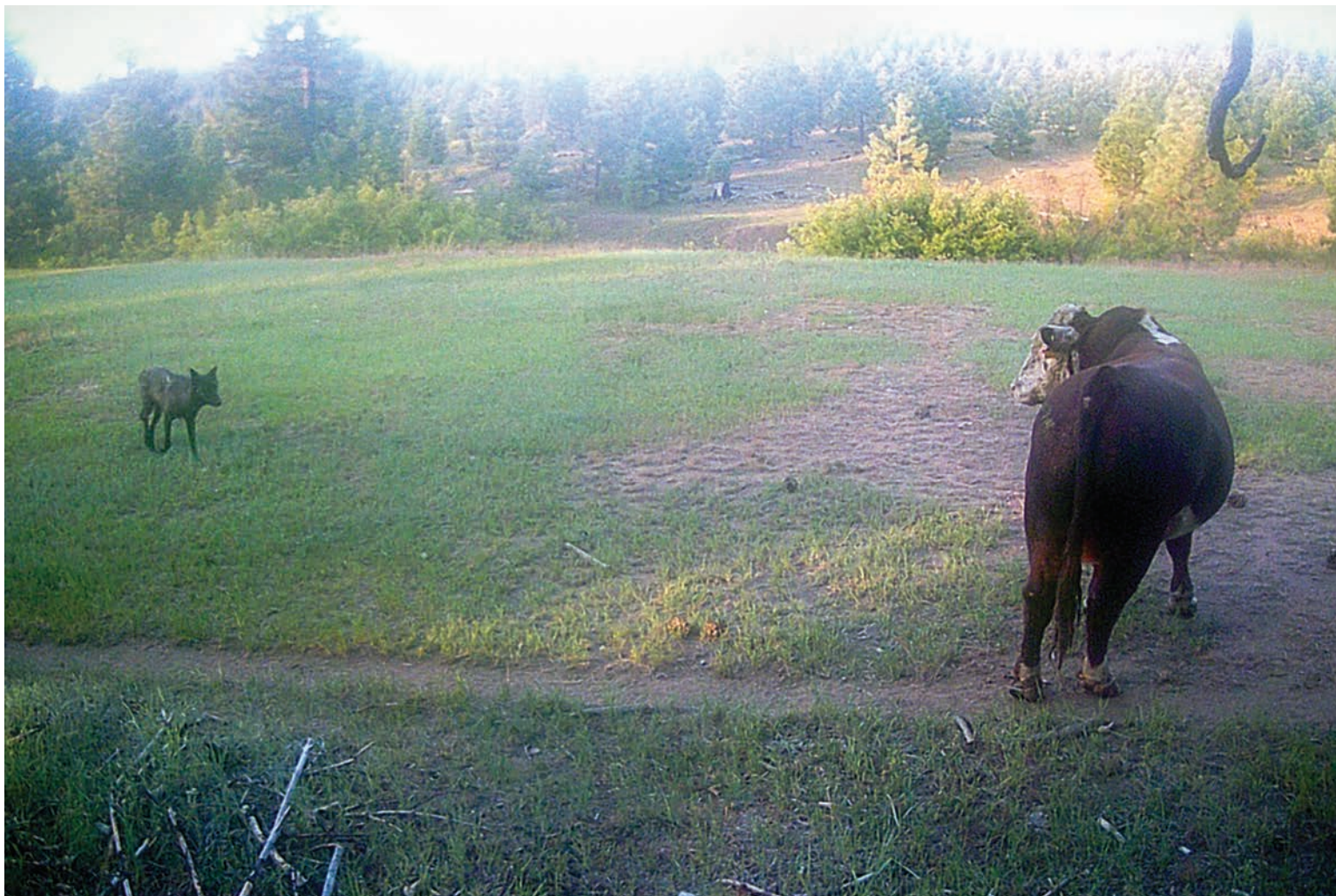
POEM

Coyote

By David Roderick

With lunar phrases I cry to diorama houses—
adrenaline, scorn—on your hills I prowl
to the frisk of minor keys, Ha,
a "gullible vermin"—lecherous, deceitful, immoral, vile,
remembering towns before rivers bequeathed them to highways, Ha,
Roosevelt's "beasts of waste and desolation," Ha,
Nelson's Denver-to-Disappointment-Valley kill machine, Ha,
5 million scalps, 7 million,
strychnine and thallium sulfate, Compound 1080, Ha,
recommissioned Jeeps, mounted rifles with high-powered scopes,
a map's crisp elevations,
peripherals and foolproof systems, Ha,
Predator & Rodent Control Branch of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
(joke sister of the "Bureau of Indian Affairs") Ha, Ha,
aerial hunting from copters, Ha, dying rabbit calls, Ha,
rabbit calls leading to hounds,
sterilizations, bait carcasses
with cubes of poisoned animal fat stuffed inside, Ha,
toxic collars on sheep, Ha, beyond, Ha,
beyond Bering Strait and shamanic ledge, beyond *coyotl*, *iisaw*, *Canis latrans*, Ha,
Guatemala, Alaska, Ha,
Gary Snyder, Ha,
mad druggists, bounties, self-made gurus, Ha,
heil my tongue of action,
my tail-flag, maw, and muzzle,
on terrain claimed with your reared-and-ready bodies, Ha,
your grief, your boundaries, your so-called wound
and wounded, Ha, Ha, Ha, Ha, Ha.

WEB EXTRA Listen to David Roderick read his poem at hcn.org/coyote



REPORTAGE

The true cost of wolves

How California tried to remedy the toll wolves take on ranchers and their animals.

BY ALIX SOLIMAN

EVERY SUMMER, rancher Richard Egan grazes about 400 cattle on private and Forest Service land in northeastern California. Since 2017, the rolling grasslands and pine forest have also been home to the Lassen Pack, which has produced nine litters of pups. In 2023, the state paid Egan \$5,550 to compensate him for the loss of a cow and calf to the wolves, but he says there are other, less tangible costs of operating in their territory: The stress of living with predators, for example, can cause cows to put on less weight or give birth to fewer calves.

Two years ago, the California Department of Fish and Wildlife tested the “pay for presence” concept, which attempts to tally — and at least partially cover — these hidden costs. While most Western states offer compensation only after official inspections of slain cows determine wolves are responsible, the “P4P” approach pays ranchers simply for sharing the landscape with wolves. Supporters argue that it’s a fairer way to distribute the

costs of wolf recovery.

Through the pilot P4P program, Egan received about \$30,000, an amount he says was “in the realm” of the actual cost of living with wolves. “Pay for presence, on my landscape, is by far the most important because it’s just impossible to locate and find the direct kills,” he said, adding that searching an expansive rangeland like his is “fool’s play.”

Before the program ran out of cash last March, it awarded 27 grants totaling nearly \$1 million to livestock producers in wolf zones. Though its future is uncertain, the concept of pay for presence has survived — and continues to evolve.

DATA ON THE INTANGIBLE EFFECTS of wolves on livestock is scarce: Lacking any California-based studies, the wildlife department used research from other states to set compensation amounts for the pilot program. Tina Saitone, an agricultural economist at

A moment of mutual contemplation in northeastern California. **Courtesy of Tina Saitone**

the University of California, Davis, who served on a stakeholder advisory committee while the P4P pilot was being developed, is now studying the financial impact of wolf presence on California ranchers.

One of the eight herds in Saitone's study belongs to Egan. Saitone's team deployed about 120 game cameras across 850,000 acres to track wolves, then fitted more than 100 cows with GPS collars. She and her colleagues are comparing the results from ranches outside wolf zones, looking at variables like conception rates and cow and calf weights. They estimate stress levels by measuring the amount of cortisol, a hormone in the animals' hair samples.

Saitone will wrap up her fieldwork next year, but her observations have convinced her that the mere presence of wolves negatively affects cattle. While they cannot yet "quantify the dollar values," she said, ranchers are losing money "in real life on the ground."

FOR NOW, CALIFORNIA has resumed compensating ranchers only for confirmed livestock deaths. Some in Washington, however, are developing a different version of paying for presence.

The state's Wolf Advisory Group, which includes livestock producers and wolf advocates, has proposed that the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife pay ranchers based on a tiered risk assessment rather than just for confirmed losses. Ranchers who raise cattle in wolf territory but have not lost livestock would be in Tier 1; those with confirmed losses within the past three years would be in Tier 2; and those currently losing animals would be in Tier 3. Unlike participants in the California pilot, Washington ranchers would have to use non-lethal predator deterrents — fencing, guard dogs, or other measures — to qualify for initial payment.

"Very few people would actually fall in that higher expense, Tier 3, because not everybody who runs cattle is losing cattle to wolves," said Amy Porter, director of conservation at Wolf Haven International and a member of the Wolf Advisory Group.

Pay for presence, said Porter, is one way wolf advocates can "contribute to absorbing" the costs of wolf recovery — though she doesn't think it's a complete solution.

Washington's current budget for compensating ranchers is \$50,000 per year. Based on the Wolf Advisory Group's estimates, the state's pay-for-presence program could cost as much as \$5.5 million in the first year, if every eligible rancher applied. (New data on the cost of running cattle in wolf territory could change that estimate.)

"The Department does not have an adequate budget appropriation, staff capacity, or technical expertise needed to support

*"It's probably not going
to convince a rancher
who lost cows or lambs
to a wolf that it's an
all-positive step in
terms of policy."*

and administer a P4P program," Subhadeep Bhattacharjee, the wildlife department's wolf and grizzly bear policy lead, wrote in an email to *High Country News*. Francisco Santiago-Ávila, science and advocacy director for Washington Wildlife First, said the program is unlikely to be sustainable, given the state's large wolf population and "delicate budget situation." Taxpayer dollars, he said, are better spent on non-lethal deterrents.

SOME RANCHERS IN WASHINGTON and elsewhere think that state officials should track more wolves so that they can more consistently notify ranchers when the animals are near cattle.

In Washington, 17 of the 43 state-managed packs include wolves with GPS collars, and ranchers can enter into agreements with the state to see wolf locations in their area. Since 2022, however, at least

20 Washington wolves have been illegally killed. Some fear that sharing wolf locations increases the danger of poaching.

California Department of Fish and Wildlife staffers often notify ranchers when wolves are nearby, usually via text, but only four of the state's seven packs currently include collared animals. Axel Hunnicutt, the state's gray wolf coordinator, said that because packs can split up and travel widely, notifications may not help — though the department plans to release an online tool that allows the public to see approximate wolf locations. "The reality is that wolves are not going away," he said. "We can just keep paying people out forever, but ideally, we get to a place where perhaps we can decrease conflict in certain areas." One possibility, he said, is to make non-lethal deterrents a prerequisite for payments, as the Washington proposal does. The effectiveness of deterrents, however, varies widely with their type and location.

Dan Macon, a livestock and natural resources advisor at the University of California's Central Sierra Cooperative Extension, was an early supporter of the P4P concept, believing it would promote peaceful rancher-wolf coexistence. Though it can help spread the cost of wolf recovery, "it's probably not going to convince a rancher who lost cows or lambs to a wolf" that compensation will solve the problem, he said.

Macon raises sheep, and that has made him realize that no compensation program can cover all costs. The genetic potential of animals bred over generations can't be easily replaced, nor can the emotional impact of losing animals be easily measured. "I look at the flock of sheep that I've created over the last 20 years — it's almost a body of work," he said. "There's this deep sense of connection with decisions we've made over the course of a lifetime." ❀

Alix Soliman is an environmental journalist based in Juneau, Alaska. She previously covered climate science from Washington, D.C., and worked at conservation nonprofits in California and Oregon. @alix.outdoors on IG or alixsoliman.com

This story is part of High Country News' Conservation Beyond Boundaries project, which is supported by the BAND Foundation.

Stay wild or go home?

Jackson Hole tries a new plan to manage the impact of tourism.

BY SARAH TORY

FOR YEARS, Crista Valentino felt uncomfortable about how Jackson, Wyoming, her adopted home, promoted itself as a tourist destination. Ads showed cringe-worthy montages of frolicking bear cubs and jagged peaks in nearby Grand Teton National Park. “I always felt a little bit icky, like we were marketing Jackson as a commodity,” she said.

The Jackson Hole Travel and Tourism Board was primarily responsible. Established in 2011 to promote tourism during the slower months, it ran ad campaigns funded by 60% of Teton County’s portion of the state’s lodging tax. By the time Valentino became a board member in 2017, tourism was booming even as complaints about “over-tourism” rose among Jackson’s roughly 10,700 year-round residents.

When the pandemic hit, tourism reached record highs, with 50,000 daily visitors — nearly five per resident. Traffic soared, long lines formed outside restaurants and workers were overwhelmed and exhausted. Tourists thronged the outdoors, hiking and camping in non-designated areas and leaving behind human waste and trash.

In August 2021, the board started working on a Sustainable

Destination Management Plan (SDMP), the first in the state to focus on sustainable tourism. Other Western mountain towns — like Park City, Utah, Breckenridge, Colorado, and Big Sky, Montana — have faced similar booms and developed similar plans to address overtourism. Meanwhile, outnumbered locals find themselves wondering who benefits from the hordes of visitors — and whether they are wanted at all.

VALENTINO, WHO BECAME the Tourism Board’s executive director in 2023, jokes that on Monday, she’ll get a call complaining about tourists, while on Tuesday, someone else will call grumbling about business and lamenting a lack of visitors. The big challenge of the SDMP planning process, she says, was to thread the needle between those two camps. Like it or not, tourism drives a large chunk of the local economy, generating \$1.7 billion in travel-related spending and 8,198 tourism-related jobs in 2023. Local businesses feared the SDMP might put a cap on the number of tourists.

“We had to do a lot of work to say, ‘No, no, no, we’re not anti-tourism at all,’” Valentino said. “What we’re getting at is actually just better-managed tourism.”

In January 2023, the board adopted its final SDMP. Its initiatives encompassed plans to improve residents’ quality of life by upgrading public transportation to alleviate congestion and building more affordable housing. It aimed to better manage tourists, spurring a “selfie control” campaign to educate people about maintaining an appropriate distance from wildlife. The plan also called for signage and messaging explaining the importance of staying on-trail and extinguishing campfires to reduce wildfire risk.

Recently, Valentino said, Grand Teton National Park’s superintendent told her that this would help land managers weather the summer tourism season, especially in the wake of the Trump administration’s budget cuts, which eliminated 16 of the park’s 17 supervisory positions.

Taylor Phillips, founder and owner of Jackson Hole EcoTour Adventures, believes the SDMP could ultimately benefit the tourism industry. The boom has been great for his business, but, like other locals, he’s noticed the impact. People come to Wyoming for nature, he said, and “if the health and the quality of their experiences dwindle over time, it’s going to have detrimental impacts to the larger (Jackson) travel and tourism industry.”

Critics, however, think the SDMP ignores the root cause of the problem: the millions the tourism board still invests in “destination marketing.” In fiscal year 2024, nearly \$3.7 million went toward advertising, though a portion focused on education. “You’re spending money to create problems that the other hand is going to spend money to try and resolve,” said Alan Henderson, who retired to Jackson Hole in 2005.

A 2022 survey organized by the travel and tourism board suggested that locals agree: Only

26% of the nearly 5,000 respondents said tourism’s benefits outweighed its drawbacks. Even more telling, 61% said they’d be willing to pay more taxes if it meant having fewer visitors. (In 2023, the lodging tax covered \$9,833 worth of public services for each household in Teton County.) At a 2022 public meeting about the survey, Henderson asked about ending advertising spending altogether. A tourism board representative said that wasn’t possible without changing the organization’s bylaws. Henderson left the meeting.

Valentino still believes the solution isn’t ending advertising, but changing it. Over the last several years, she noted, the board has shifted toward educational messaging emphasizing stewardship, with slogans like “Take care of what takes your breath away.” Ultimately, Grand Teton and Yellowstone are “Bucket List” trips. “People are going to come here whether we market or not,” she said. “If you’re not driving the narrative, then someone else will.” ☀

Sarah Tory is a journalist and former HCN correspondent based in western Colorado.

Crowds in Grand Teton National Park, Wyoming, in 2021. **Ryan Dorgan**



Left to burn

How the government abandoned tribes to wildfires.

BY LACHLAN HYATT



ON A LATE SUMMER DAY in 2020, Gina Lawrence stepped onto her porch and spotted fire rolling through the dry grass across the valley from her home on the eastern edge of the Colville Indian Reservation in central Washington.

"It was moving pretty fast," she recalled. "I could see the flames and was like, 'I think we're going down.'"

The fire started about 10 miles away when heavy winds downed power lines. It was one of three fires that broke out that day around the reservation town of Inchelium, nestled between timber stands and the banks of the Columbia River.

When tribal authorities ordered an evacuation later that day, Lawrence and her family packed important documents and valuables into their RV and drove to Inchelium, population 431.

The family spent several excruciating hours watching the hillsides burn, wondering if their own house was still standing. In the evening, Lawrence and her husband could no longer wait, so they drove out to check.

Driving through the smoke-filled valley, Lawrence passed a single red pickup truck belonging to the Mount Tolman Fire Center, the local department that serves the entire 2,180-square-mile Colville Reservation. A fire official who was in the truck spoke to Lawrence.

"He tells us that 'there's nothing we can do,'" she said; the center's firefighters were already tied up fighting another blaze 80

miles away.

"Everybody's so spread out that we don't have anybody to come," the fire official said.

MORE FIRES, LESS MONEY

About 10,000 people — descendants of 12 Indigenous tribes — make up the Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation today. They like to call their land "God's Country," a place of near-divine beauty where sheer cliffs descend from dense timberlands and plunge into the Columbia River. Rugged alpine mountains bisect the reservation, opening onto windswept plains with stands of towering trees on its western edge. Junipers and huckleberries dot the woods along with other culturally significant plants.

The Colville Reservation is one of the many Indigenous tribal communities protected by its own tribal wildfire fighters with funding from the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA). In 2019, about 80% of tribal forests were managed in part or fully by tribal programs funded directly by the BIA. Tribal communities that lack their own programs can opt for direct management by the BIA.

However, these tribal wildfire fighters, who protect some of the nation's most vulnerable communities, are stretched to their limits. Long-term federal land mismanagement and climate change have caused the number and intensity of reservation fires to soar. About 7% of the 4 million acres of tribal lands in the country burned between 2010 and 2020.

Jimmy Timentwa at the site of his house, which was destroyed by the Cold Springs Fire near Omak, Washington, on the Colville Reservation. The fire was one of many that devastated the area in September of 2020. **Colin Mulvany / The Spokesman-Review**

Wildfire-fighting programs across the nation all struggle with low pay, funding and recruitment. But on tribal lands, the pressure is even more acute.

Despite dealing with more fires per 100,000 acres than the U.S. Forest Service does, tribal wildfire programs receive less than half of what Congress appropriates for the Forest Service per acre.

In 2019, tribes across the country received a total of \$176 million from the BIA for forestry and fire programs. Based on estimates by the Intertribal Timber Council, a nonprofit Indigenous organization mandated by the government to audit federal management of tribal lands, tribes need almost double that amount to properly manage their lands and fires.

Under century-old treaties and contracts, the federal government is required to pay the cost of preventing and fighting fires on tribal lands. But fire-preparedness funds, which pay for wages, training and equipment, have remained stagnant for decades despite inflation and the increasing number and severity of wildfires.

"As long as I've been the (fire management



officer), every year our preparedness budget shrinks,” said Don Jones, a member of the Cowlitz Tribe and the fire management officer for the Yakama Indian Reservation in Washington. “When I first started, we were getting a little over \$750,000 for preparedness, which took care of training costs and vehicles, operational stuff.”

Now, he says, they receive around 86% of that.

Many Indigenous tribes are suffering from similar funding shortfalls. Tools and equipment are outdated, and firefighters often leave in search of more lucrative jobs.

Despite decades of repeated calls for the BIA and Department of the Interior to address the funding issue, little progress has been made.

“We’ve been saying the same thing for 30 years now,” said Jim Durglo, a member of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes and a fire technical specialist with the Intertribal Timber Council. “What makes you think that they’re going to listen to us now?”

RED TAPE

Previously, the BIA directly managed tribal wildlands. In the 1970s, a push for greater autonomy led to tribes taking over the responsibility.

A Klamath Tribal elder sets up her own fire line as the 242 Fire rages on the horizon near Chiloquin, Oregon, in 2020 (left). **Paul Robert Wolf Wilson**

Wearing a T-shirt and shorts, Joe Pakootas helps other residents battle flames near Inchelium in 2020 (facing). **Courtesy of Joe Pakootas**

In 1990, Congress passed legislation requiring the government to increase its support for tribal forests. The new law called for routine audits on the government’s progress by an Intertribal Timber Council assessment team. Nearly every assessment since 1993 has found severe funding and staffing deficiencies in tribal and BIA forest management programs.

In recent years, however, some progress toward appropriate funding levels has been made.

In 2021, thousands of wildland firefighters across the U.S. received temporary pay bonuses through the Biden administration’s Bipartisan Infrastructure Law. Tribal firefighters were initially left out, but after weeks of pushing, the law was amended to include them.

In March 2025, these temporary bonuses were made permanent in an attempt to bolster the nation’s firefighting forces. This time, tribal firefighters were included from the start and will continue to get the same bonuses they’ve received since 2021.

“It’s a huge win, not only for tribal firefighters, but wildland firefighters in general,” said Darron Williams, the BIA Northwest Region’s assistant fire management officer. However, Williams acknowledged that the new codified boost wasn’t a “pie-in-the-sky” solution that would fix all the funding issues faced by tribal fire programs.

The formula used to calculate how much money goes to each tribal program hasn’t been updated in more than 20 years, multiple sources from the BIA and tribal wildfire programs told *HCN*. It sets funding based on the prevalence of wildfires and the staff, equipment and training costs needed to fight them.

The formula is “not adequate for what we currently have in 2024, and we’re just trying to figure out a way to bring us up to speed,” said Williams. “Our tribal folks are very frustrated.”

UNDERFUNDED AND UNDERPREPARED

The outdated funding formulas have left tribes across the West reeling.

The Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes of the Flathead Reservation in western Montana have had to cut key wildfire jobs, and recently the reservation decommissioned two of its eight fire engines.

Currently, the Confederated Salish and Kootenai get about 60% of what they received in 1998 to fight fires after adjusting for inflation, according to its fire management officer, Ron Swaney, a member of the tribe.

Swaney said he would need more than twice the amount to properly carry out the work given the rising costs and frequency of wildfires.

When Don Jones, the Yakama Nation's fire management officer, first started in 2007, the tribal program had 40 to 45 workers compared to over 100 employees in the 1990s. Now, the Yakama program has 14 employees, including 10 on-the-ground firefighters who at one point handled around 1.2 million acres.

At the Colville Reservation, the Mount Tolman Fire Center faces similar challenges: Its fire-preparedness budget is the same as it was in the late 1990s, according to its fire management officer.

Between 2014 and 2024, the Mount Tolman Fire Center added four employees to its fire-preparedness team, bringing it to 34, with just nine full-time staffers. During that time, more than half the reservation burned.

In 2021, the Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation sued the federal government, alleging the BIA did not support adequate fuels management on the reservation and failed to adequately suppress the fires that broke out in 2015.

"Had we had adequate resources and funding to do the work that should have been done, those damages wouldn't have been to at least the extent they were," said Cody Desautel, executive director of the Colville Tribe and president of the Intertribal Timber Council. Over half a billion dollars' worth of the tribe's timber was destroyed by fire that year.

70 HOUSES BURNED

While Gina Lawrence waited to see if her property would survive, members of the Inchelium community, long accustomed to the land's intense fires, tried to help.

With Colville's professional wildfire team tied up fighting blazes elsewhere on the reservation, Inchelium residents like Joe Pakootas Jr. stepped up to help their neighbors.

"As soon as those fires hit that first day, there was hardly any resources here," said Pakootas. "My partners and I, we all met out there on the roads, and we just started hitting all the flames we could to protect those houses that were right in that region."

Wearing shorts and a T-shirt and driving his "fire tender" truck, a 1997 Ford F-350 with chainsaws, a 350-gallon water tank and hoses, Pakootas and other residents worked to control the flames.

"There was no contact between us because we are just private owners of our own equipment," said Pakootas. "So it's not like we were working in conjunction with the tribe. We weren't working with fire management. We were just basically working off instincts of what we knew as far as growing up here."

For hours, Pakootas batted down flames and hosed down land next to nine homes, including the Lawrences'.

The flames came within 30 feet of the Lawrences' home, but it survived. The professional wildland firefighters reached Inchelium at around 11 p.m., Pakootas said. Fires still raged around the reservation, though, including two others near Inchelium and an even bigger blaze to the west.

"That thing ran like I've never seen a fire run before," said Desautel, describing a fire that burned on the other side of the reservation. "We threw the kitchen sink at that one."

Desautel, the Colville Reservation's executive director, said that about 70 houses burned that day. In total, those 2020 fires burned 200,000 acres on the reservation.

FIRES ON THE HORIZON

Around the Colville Reservation, nearly everyone has vivid memories of fire. The blazes' names — Devil's Elbow, North Star, Tunk Block, Summit Hill, Cold Springs and Chewah — are recalled and recited even as the fire years blend together.

Every summer, the infernos return, threatening families and damaging the reservation's economy.

The Lawrences' house survived the 2020 fires, but soon after, its roof caved in under heavy snow. The couple lived in an RV until winter 2024, when they finally moved into their renovated shop on the property.

Tribal wildfire-fighting programs continue to work with the same inadequate budgets they've had for decades even as

another fire season begins amid federal tumult and already-historic blazes.

When the devastating Palisades and Eaton fires ripped through Southern California, fire crews from at least eight tribes helped battle the blazes. Mutual aid agreements between federal, state, local and tribal fire crews are becoming customary as the number and intensity of wildfires continue to increase.

On top of everything, this February, the Trump administration terminated thousands of fire-support positions in the Bureau of Land Management and Forest Service.

"Staffing levels were below subpar last year," said Yakama Fire Management Officer Don Jones. "This year, we were not looking too good. We lost two engine bosses since last summer."

"I don't know what we're gonna do about this year."

Looking back to the day in 2020 that nearly cost her family so much, Lawrence remembers the terror of watching the blaze, not knowing if her home would survive.

Year after year, the land continues to burn. She is already dreading the next fire.

"Every year there's been fires along that ridge up there and back over there, and I think, 'What is there left to burn?'" said Lawrence. "It took everything." ❁

Lachlan Hyatt, a New York City-based investigative journalist covering federal politics and international affairs, likes to tell stories about under-reported communities affected by climate change. @hyattjournal



Sixty days of DOGE chaos

Charting the mass culling of the federal workforce.

BY JONATHAN THOMPSON

SHORTLY AFTER PRESIDENT Donald Trump took office for the second time, he created the Department of Government Efficiency to eliminate all the “waste, bloat and insularity” allegedly plaguing federal agencies. Tech billionaire Elon Musk, who has already donated hundreds of millions to Trump and whose businesses have tens of billions of dollars’ worth of government contracts, took the quasi-agency’s helm and set about making the government more efficient, or so he said, even as he pursued his other goal: killing the so-called “woke mind virus.”

But Musk’s approach has been anything but efficient. In fact, it’s done little but sow chaos: Hours after firing federal employees, the administration — realizing it was eliminating critical positions — found itself scrambling to rehire them. And judges and government boards have ruled that some terminations must be reversed, though it’s not entirely clear whether the administration will comply.

Amid the disarray, *High Country News* set out to chart the first 60 days of this DOGE-induced disorder. We found the kind of bedlam that not only destabilizes the government and demolishes the services it’s supposed to provide, it’s also astonishingly cruel to the laid-off federal employees. If continued, it’s likely to do lasting damage to the nation’s public lands and programs and to the communities that depend on them. ☀



Big cut



Trim



DOGE



Backtrack

JANUARY 20-31



Jan. 20:

Trump signs an executive order freezing all new federal government hiring and revoking job offers for about 2,000 seasonal National Park Service workers.



Jan. 20:

An executive order “establishes the Department of Government Efficiency to implement the President’s DOGE Agenda ... to maximize governmental efficiency and productivity.”



Jan. 28: The Office of Personnel Management (OPM) sends its “Fork in the Road” email to about 2 million federal employees, pressuring them to resign by Feb. 6 and be paid until Sept. 30 or else face possible involuntary reductions in force.



Jan. 31: A second OPM email urges employees to resign and even “travel to your dream destination.”

Am I allowed to get a second job during the deferred resignation period?

Absolutely! We encourage you to find a job in the private sector as soon as you would like to do so. The way to greater American prosperity is encouraging people to move from lower productivity jobs in the public sector to higher productivity jobs in the private sector.

FEBRUARY 6-27



Feb. 6: Approximately 75,000 employees — including about 700 Park Service workers— opt for deferred resignation before Feb. 6, far fewer than Elon Musk anticipated.

Feb. 11: Trump signs an executive order “implementing” DOGE and putting Musk in charge of eliminating “waste, bloat and insularity” by slashing the federal workforce. 💰



Feb. 13 & 14: The Trump administration terminates some 200,000 probationary employees, including new hires and people who were transferred or promoted in the last two years.

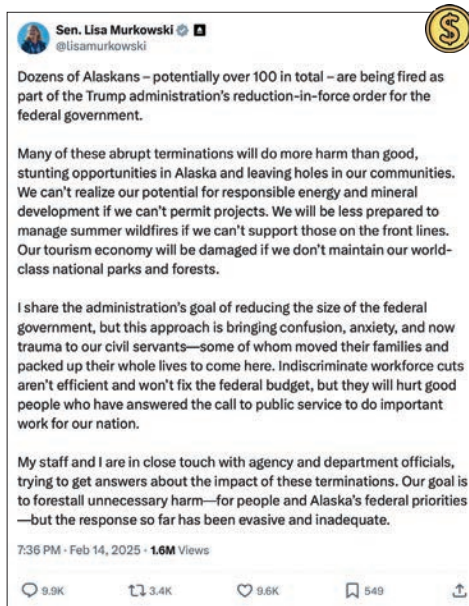
A partial tally of employees terminated Feb. 13-14

2,400:	U.S. Forest Service
2,300:	National Park Service
420:	U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
400:	Bonneville Power Administration
400:	Bureau of Reclamation
6,700:	Internal Revenue Service
22:	Bureau of Indian Education's central and regional offices



Feb. 14: The administration scrambles to rehire about 300 employees after realizing they oversaw the nation’s nuclear arsenal. ⏮

Feb 15:



Feb. 21: Interior Secretary Doug Burgum says the National Park Service will hire more than 5,000 seasonal workers, apparently reversing the Jan. 20 hiring freeze but not the Feb. 14 terminations. In mid-March, however, the USAJOBS website lists only 195 job openings across the department.

Feb. 26: Office of Management and Budget Director Russell Vought orders agencies to slash budgets by significantly reducing their workforces and real estate footprint. 🔪



Feb. 26: The Department of Interior imposes a \$1 spending limit on all government purchase cards, making it difficult for officials to purchase even toilet paper for national parks, much less pay contractors to repair infrastructure.

Feb. 27: The administration fires about 800 National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) employees, including at least 80 from the Boulder, Colorado, facility. 🔪

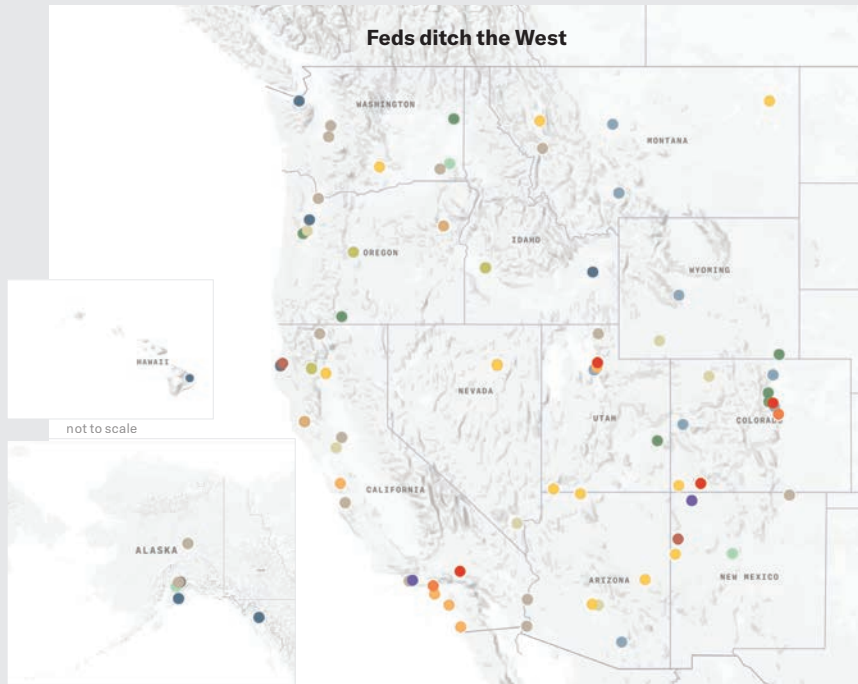
The federal government is costly, inefficient, and deeply in debt. At the same time, it is not producing results for the American public. **Instead tax dollars are being siphoned off to fund unproductive and unnecessary programs that benefit radical interest groups...**

MARCH 4-7



March 4: The U.S. General Services Administration, the government's real estate manager, announces plans to dispose of about 440 "non-core assets" across the nation and cancel leases on more than 800 properties, shuttering dozens of federal offices around the West.

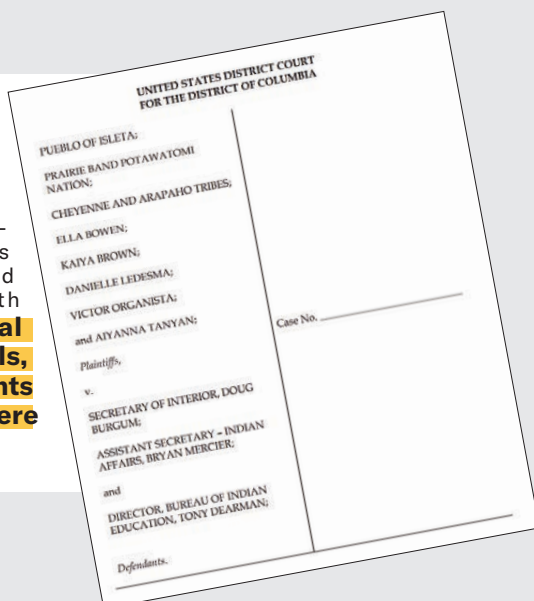
Feds ditch the West



March 5: A federal board finds USDA's mass termination of workers violated proper practices and orders it to reinstate some 6,000 of them, at least temporarily.

March 7: Three tribal nations file a lawsuit seeking to block mass firings at the chronically understaffed Bureau of Indian Education, the Southwestern Indian Polytechnic Institute in Albuquerque and Kansas' Haskell University.

Instructors were laid off, student services were reduced or discontinued, and custodial and maintenance services were degraded throughout both campuses... **Tribal Nations, schools, students, parents and families were affected.**



MARCH 8-13



March 8: The Trump administration fires 1,000 NOAA workers in addition to the 1,300 or so that were already terminated or accepted the deferred resignation.



March 13: Western states sue the administration over its firing of more than 1,300 Education Department employees on March 11, saying it will harm low-income and disabled students in rural Western states that receive more federal education funding per student than the national average.

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515
March 13, 2025

The imminent departure of nearly 20% of BPA's workforce ... poses a direct and immediate threat to the reliability of the electrical grid that serves millions of American families and businesses in the Pacific Northwest. **We do not believe there is currently an energy emergency, but your actions certainly appear to be creating one ...**

March 13: Oregon's congressional delegation asks the administration to reverse its termination of about 20% of Bonneville Power Administration's workforce.

March 13: A federal judge finds the administration acted improperly when DOGE and OMP fired thousands of probationary employees and orders it to reinstate about 200,000 of them — though only temporarily.

MARCH 14-20



March 14: The Environmental Protection Agency submits its plan to eliminate its Office of Research and Development and fire more than 1,100 scientists.

March 17: A federal court votes 2-1 to reject the administration's appeal seeking to block a judge's order to reinstate fired probationary employees.



MEMORANDUM

Please be advised that this notice is **RESCINDED** and your employment with the General Services Administration is reinstated. **You will be placed on paid administrative leave retroactively ...**



March 17: The Interior Department sends an email to staff offering early retirement or "voluntary separation incentive payment" to help it meet its goal of a 30% reduction in payroll.

March 17: Interior announces a plan to transfer "underused" federal land to states and localities for affordable housing development.



March 20: DOGE's website claims its cuts have saved \$115 billion in federal spending, though only about \$12.6 billion has been verified. Musk and his minions have barely begun to wield their chainsaw of chaos, however; before the election, Musk promised to cut \$2 trillion, and despite setbacks and court rulings against him, he's showing no signs of stopping.

SOURCES: The White House, Education Data Initiative, Native American Rights Fund, Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility, General Services Administration, Government Executive, *New York Times*, DOGE, Office of Management and Budget, Musk Watch Doge Tracker, USAJOBS.



REPORTAGE

Colorado's rural electric co-ops are determined to go green

Despite delays of promised federal funding.

BY KEATON PETERS
PHOTOS BY ABBY HARRISON

ERIC ERIKSEN PUTS IN long nights and weekends to keep the lights on in southern Colorado. As the CEO of the San Luis Valley

Rural Electric Cooperative, Eriksen leads a member-owned nonprofit that provides electric service to more than 7,500 people across seven rural counties in the Rocky Mountains — a small cooperative serving a large area.

After Eriksen took over the post in 2023, the utility's members urged him to apply for a flurry of federal funds available through Biden-era legislation. It was a heavy lift for Eriksen's team to take on 150- to 200-page federal grant applications. They had to do it fast, he said, and they had to be good at it. Even then, they knew, the application might be denied.

It paid off: The electric cooperative was awarded \$1.7 million from the U.S. Department of Agriculture in January 2025 to construct two 1-megawatt solar farms. (The co-op's peak electric demand is around 70 megawatts, and it already has one 3 MW solar farm.) But just weeks later, President Donald Trump issued an executive order pausing climate and energy spending.

As of press time, billions of dollars of funding for rural electric cooperatives, including the San Luis Valley co-op, remains in Washington, D.C.

Ratepayers themselves own rural electric cooperatives and elect the board of directors. Co-ops tend to have older equipment than for-profit utilities. They often use less renewable energy than America's electric grid as a whole and typically have fewer financial resources to invest in large projects.

To help fill this gap, the Department of Agriculture launched new programs as part of the 2022 Inflation Reduction Act that altogether mark the largest investment in rural electrification since the 1930s. The \$9.7 billion Empowering Rural America (New ERA) and the \$1 billion Powering Affordable Clean Energy (PACE) offered grants and loans to electric cooperatives and other energy companies to build new clean energy facilities and upgrade infrastructure.

"(Electric co-ops) are often at the center of what is going on in a community, and they need to thrive for rural America to grow and prosper," said Andy Berke, who served as the administrator for the USDA's Rural Utilities Service, overseeing rural electricity programs, from 2022 until January 2025.

At the end of Biden's term, the USDA announced awards for 49 rural electric co-ops through New ERA to fund everything from wind, solar and battery storage to expediting coal plant retirements, upgrading transmission lines and starting programs to help stabilize the grid during high demand. The PACE program funded 59 organizations, including rural electric co-ops and private energy providers, largely to build solar and battery facilities. The plans co-ops submitted would boost energy supply without big price hikes, Berke said.

High Country News spoke with several former USDA officials

and employees or board members at a half-dozen electric cooperatives across Colorado that were set to receive funding from these programs. Some cooperatives met with their representatives and traveled to Washington to urge the new administration to follow through on promised grants.

Then, in late March, the USDA announced that it would release the promised funding. But there was a catch.

In a press release, the agency asked grant winners to submit revised plans within 30 days “eliminating Biden-era DEIA and climate mandates embedded in previous proposals.” The announcement indicates that these revisions are voluntary, and an online form says grantees that do not wish to alter their projects can notify the agency to initiate transfer of funds.

The USDA did not respond to questions from *High Country News*. Although uncertainty remains about project revisions and timelines, electric co-ops are tentatively confident that they will eventually receive the money.

Electric cooperative funding is one part of the IRA that’s apparently getting a green light after initially being frozen. The USDA is also unfreezing \$1 billion for agricultural producers and rural small businesses to generate clean energy, and the Environmental Protection Agency released \$7 billion in solar funding in February. Still, as of press time, the Trump administration was withholding billions more in IRA funds.

AGRICULTURE IS THE CORE of the San Luis Valley’s economy. The 2,800 miles of power lines across sparsely populated terrain cost each San Luis Valley co-op member more to maintain than the grid of any Colorado city or the average rural co-op, Eriksen

said. With the sun providing free power, the project slated for funding through New ERA was expected to save the co-op \$200,000 per year. “It’s huge,” Eriksen said. “Gosh, these are real dollars that are going to change people’s lives.”

Electric cooperatives are especially vital in Colorado, where 22 individual co-ops distribute electricity across most of the state. They largely emerged in the 1930s and ’40s to serve rural regions neglected by investor-owned utilities because expanding across vast areas with few customers was unprofitable. Co-ops prioritize safety — storms can down power lines, and improperly monitored and maintained lines can spark wildfires — reliability and affordability.

But now, the pressure is on for co-ops in Colorado to invest in renewable energy, following passage of state laws starting in 2019 that require utilities to slash their greenhouse gas emissions by 80% by 2030. Ten rural Colorado co-ops were collectively awarded \$800 million in New ERA and PACE funding, the most recipients of any state.

The federal investment represents a “generational opportunity to make progress in the clean energy transition space,” said Ted Compton, board

president of La Plata Electric Association, another Colorado co-op that was awarded \$13.4 million through PACE to build solar and battery storage.

Few co-ops generate all their electricity, relying instead on Tri-State Generation and Transmission Association, a large nonprofit active in Colorado, Arizona, Nebraska, New Mexico and Wyoming, which owns coal-fired power plants and utility-scale solar installations. In an email, Lee Boughey, vice president for strategic communications, said Tri-State is forecasting significant electricity load growth and needs infrastructure upgrades. Reliable, affordable power is the “lifeblood of rural communities, farmers, ranchers” and other industries, he wrote. Tri-State was also awarded \$2.5 billion through New ERA to add more than a gigawatt of renewable energy and help offset the cost of closing down several coal-powered units. Without that money, the consequences — in the form of dirtier energy or a more costly transition to renewables — could ripple across the West.

Experts have questioned the legality of the Trump administration’s attempt to withhold federal dollars. “Only Congress has the power of the purse,” said Jillian Blanchard, a lawyer and the vice

president of climate change and environmental justice at Lawyers for Good Government, a nonprofit that supports pro-bono attorneys. Many grant winners already have a signed legal agreement with the federal government, and in addition to infringing on Congress’ authority, Blanchard said withholding those funds violates the Impoundment Control Act of 1974.

In the San Luis Valley, beginning solar construction without the \$1.7 million would be slower, cost ratepayers more and, in the meantime, require burning more fossil fuels. Eriksen said he intends to forge ahead; he already has designs, a contractor and a shovel-ready location, though he can’t take the next step until the funding question is settled.

“We’re waiting and seeing to get some certainty before we move forward,” Eriksen said. ☀

Keaton Peters is a freelance journalist based in Austin, Texas, covering climate change and the energy transition. keatonpeters.com BlueSky and X: @keatonpeters

Near Moffat, Colorado, where the San Luis Valley Rural Electric Cooperative is waiting on funding to build a solar array (facing). CEO Eric Eriksen at the co-op’s office outside Monte Vista (left). The co-op’s Penitente Solar Project (below).



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DEAR FRIENDS

Help us reach more people who care about the West

First, a heartfelt thank-you to all who have contributed to our spring fund drive — and a quick nudge to get in on the action if you haven't done so already! In a year when journalism is under attack and an administration in Washington is spreading chaos, your notes and contributions renew our sense of purpose. We've said it before, but it's absolutely true: The West has never needed *High Country News* more.

Fair-minded reporting by journalists with a deep understanding of the people and places they cover is like a miracle drug for our communities. Research has shown that it can reduce polarization, increase civic engagement and decrease government waste and corruption. *HCN's* journalism gives readers a sense of agency and empowers them to become a part of the conversation about the West they want to see and how we might achieve it.

With that in mind, we have renewed our efforts to put *HCN* in the hands of more people who care about this region. Our latest initiative is called "Roots & Range," and we need your help to get it going. Here's how it works:

We're asking *HCN* readers to identify friends and colleagues who should be *HCN* readers, but aren't. Sign up, and you become an *HCN* ambassador, giving gift subscriptions — at half the normal price — to people you know who are active in your communities, involved in like-minded

nonprofits, or able to help support *HCN* financially. Think:

- Leaders at your local conservation group or environmental justice organization
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Photo illustration by
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If you're interested, go to the Roots & Range page on our website at hcn.org/outreach-partner. We'll make it easy for you, and, to show our appreciation, we'll send you free *HCN* swag like mugs, hats, stickers, as well as discount codes that you can share with friends and an early heads-up about upcoming events.

— Greg Hanscom, executive director & publisher

Farewell, beloved board members

The list of people who have served on *HCN's* board of directors over the years is a truly remarkable one. It includes community and conservation leaders, scholars, award-winning authors and journalists and two current Western state governors. And now, with a lot of gratitude and a little sadness, we're adding four more names to that list.



John Belkin leaves us after more than a decade on the board, years in which we saw leadership changes and a doubling of *HCN's* budget. A former congressional staffer, he served as town attorney for Crested Butte, Colorado, and now practices law over the hill in Basalt. John was of particular help when it came to thorny legal questions. He helped us through one dispute by advising this writer to control his penchant for pointed prose: "Avoid the poison pen," he said.

Always extremely busy with his day job and raising two young boys, he often took calls while riding his mountain bike.

Dina Gillo-Whitaker and **Andrea Otáñez** are both stepping aside to write books, but we're keeping them on tap as advisors to help with special projects.

An educator and scholar, Dina (Colville Confederated Tribes) lectures on American Indian Studies at California State University San Marcos. She already has several books to her



name, including *As Long as Grass Grows: The Indigenous Fight for Environmental Justice from Colonization to Standing Rock and Who Gets to Be Indian? Ethnic Fraud and Other Difficult Conversations About Native American Identity*. Dina is also a surfer and has much to say about the sport's Indigenous roots.

Andrea got her start in journalism at the *Salt Lake Tribune* and later worked at the *Seattle Times*. She's now a teaching professor at the University of Washington and has developed curricula in Chicano studies, Latinx representation in media and the ethical imperatives of journalism in a diverse society. A student describes her on "Rate My Professor" as "knowledgeable, experienced, cool" — a judgment with which we fully concur.

Finally, happy trails to **Wendy Fisher**, the long-time executive director of Utah Open Lands. We'll always be grateful for her wicked sense of humor and knack for summing up big messy conversations with a simple, enlightening turn of phrase. After a wide-ranging strategic planning meeting in Seattle in 2023, Wendy concluded that *HCN* is more than a magazine: "We're in the business of building community." We're grateful that she and the rest of our departing board members will always be part of that community.



An intimate
look at the
vehicles and
people driving
New Mexico's
lowrider culture.

Photos by Gabriela Campos
Text by Don J. Usner



DROP IT L



ow

Fernando Ortega drives past colorful murals in downtown Albuquerque, New Mexico, in his 1978 Pontiac Grand Prix. Ortega custom-built the car, which he calls "Mi Carruca," for his wife, Francine.

THERE'S MORE THAN GLEAMING metal surfaces and a sexy street presence in Gabriela Campos' photographs of lowriders in New Mexico.

Dagger fingernails and polished glass, swirls of blue ink wrapping muscled torsos, tough-guy biceps cradling newborn babes — the images capture quintessential New Mexican culture, one that boldly proclaims its stature among lowrider communities in Los Angeles, Phoenix and Tokyo.

Her lens cruises like the cars, a magic carpet ride with kick-ass *orgullo*.

Campos rode in the New Mexico scene for years, getting to know the unabashedly proud drivers whose vehicles are a personal expression of life in the streetlight glare in New Mexican towns like Burque, Spaña and Chimayó. Her long familiarity with the culture enables her to capture the celebratory atmosphere and shared love of pageantry. She illuminates the badass drivers, tattooed chicas strutting alongside Impalas and Regals and Caddies alive with dizzying lines and Chicano-themed murals. Dancing cheek-to-cheek down Burque's streets and scattering light from radiant metallic spokes, lowriders speak to a cultural identity that cannot be subverted or stereotyped or captured by any meme.

In her eyes, lowriders are poetry in motion, statements in style that shout in bold double-underlined letters, *"I'll show you who I am! Stand back, heads up, look at me!"*

The don't-mess-with-me attitude of the drivers is accompanied by a warm invitation to join them for a ride beneath the vast New Mexico clouds. Campos shows that lowriders are so much more than colorful cars and rebellious tough guys; she shows hometown heroes, a cadre of spirited *vatos* and everyday fathers and mothers and children, all empowered by cruising the streets in their artfully crafted and lovingly cared-for behemoths. ✨





James Valdez and his family drive their Impala toward the Cathedral Basilica of St. Francis of Assisi in Santa Fe, March 2017 (*left*).

Jay Sanchez wipes the raindrops off his 1999 Lincoln Town Car, which goes by the name “Hustler’s Ambition,” as it sits on three wheels on Albuquerque’s Central Avenue, June 2024 (*below*).



A view looking out of Amor Bustamante’s 1980 Oldsmobile Cutlass at a Chevrolet Fleetmaster, November 2023 (*above*).

Laura Peralta looks out the window of Joseph “Star” Vigil’s 1985 Cutlass Supreme while cruising on three wheels through downtown Albuquerque, April 2023 (*left*).

A young man navigates his lowrider out of a parking spot after a cruise in the Barelas neighborhood following the Albuquerque Lowrider Super Show, June 2023.



A group of women pose for a photo while cruising their lowrider in downtown Albuquerque, May 2021.



Paula Jaramillo lifts the bed of her custom mini-truck while cruising down Central Avenue with Steve-O Garcia, August 2021.



Matthew Cordova holds his newborn daughter, Ava, during a Sunday evening cruise in the Barelás neighborhood of Albuquerque, July 2022.



Lillyana Martinez leans on George and Amor Bustamante's 1959 El Camino while hanging out in the Barelás neighborhood, April 2023.



Gabriela Campos, born and raised in Santa Fe, New Mexico, is a photojournalist who documents the people and traditions of the Southwest. She's on staff at the Santa Fe New Mexican, and her work is held in several collections and has been published widely.

Don J. Usner is an author and photographer who documents the culture he inherited and his upbringing in the northern New Mexico communities of Embudo, Los Alamos and Chimayó.





Clockwise from top, facing page:

A lowrider hops during an informal competition while spectators look on in an Albuquerque parking lot, August 2021.

A young woman looks out from a lowrider during a Sunday evening cruise in downtown Albuquerque, January 2023.

Guillermo and Alicia Jimenez park their 1964 Impala at Albuquerque's iconic Dog House Drive In on Central Avenue in Albuquerque, September 2023.

Anthony Miramontes stands atop his 1980 Buick Regal and lifts a plaque for the Superior Car Club after an impromptu hopping competition on Central Avenue in Albuquerque, February 2023.



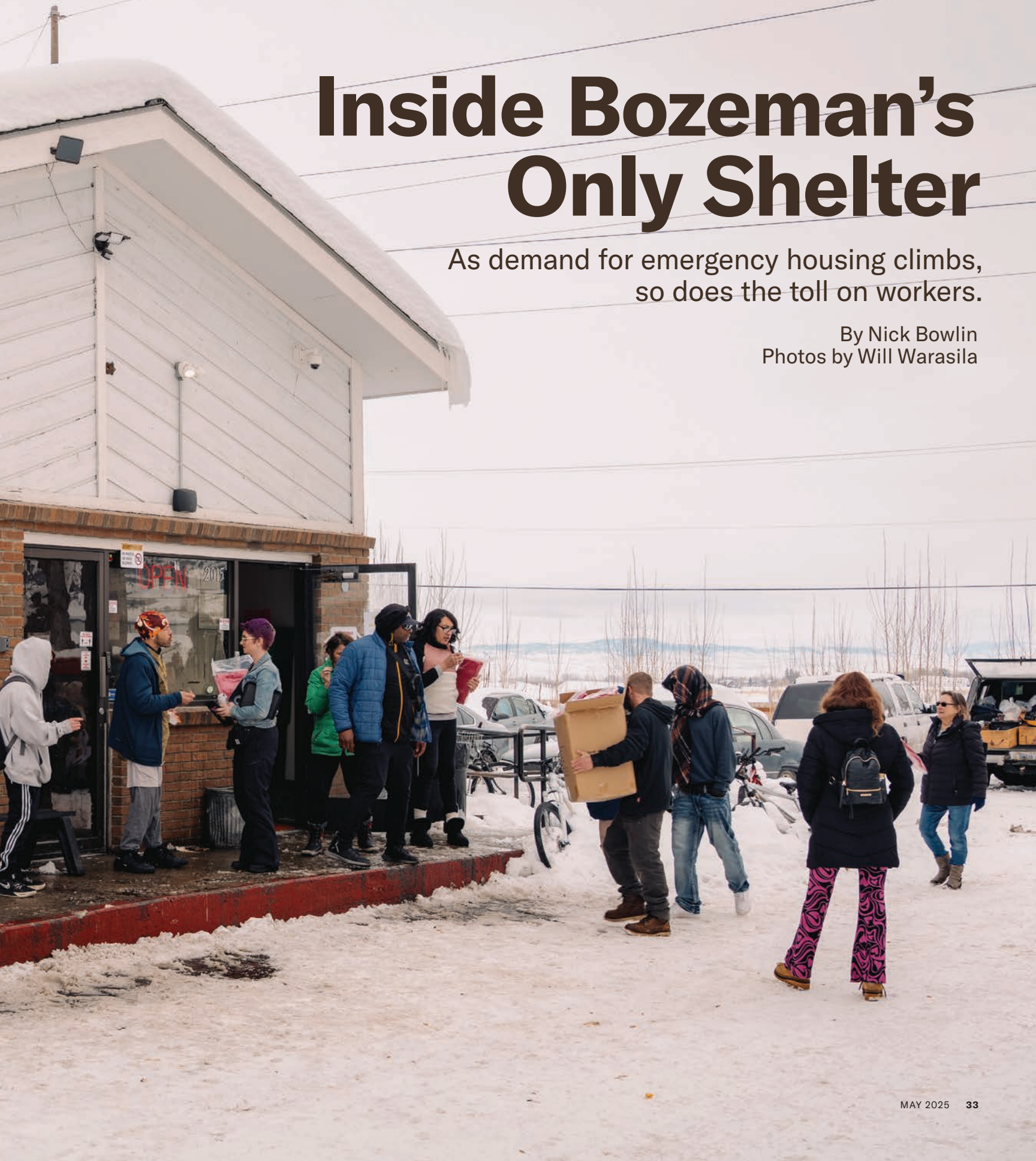
Staff and guests gather to receive boxes of donated blankets at the Warming Center, Bozeman, Montana's only year-round homeless shelter.



Inside Bozeman's Only Shelter

As demand for emergency housing climbs, so does the toll on workers.

By Nick Bowlin
Photos by Will Warasila





LAST YEAR, A MASS OF ARCTIC AIR sent temperatures in Bozeman, Montana, plummeting to minus 30 degrees Fahrenheit — temperatures at which exposed skin can develop frostbite in less than half an hour. Massive snowstorms might be welcomed by Montana’s recreational skiers, but for people sleeping outdoors, cold weather can kill. And for years, Bozeman’s unhoused population has ballooned alongside its housing prices, with campers and RVs congregating along undeveloped streets on the city’s fringes. Surrounded by mountains and located near famous ski resorts and the Yellowstone area, the city has rapidly become one of the region’s most expensive places.

As the temperature dropped, staff at the Warming Center, Bozeman’s only year-round homeless shelter, sprang into action. Members of the street outreach team fanned out, warning people sleeping outdoors of the impending cold, urging them to get inside and passing out blankets and food. The shelter is operated by the nonprofit Human Resource Development Council (HRDC), which also runs a smaller shelter in nearby Livingston

and provides food, housing and financial assistance throughout southwestern Montana. The shelter’s leadership decided that the Warming Center would remain open all hours rather than closing for its regular midday cleaning. Volunteers were called in to staff the front desk and help guests. One night, when the shelter was just two occupants shy of the fire marshal’s occupancy limit — 120 people — the staff feared they’d have to turn people away.

Located on the edge of Bozeman, away from the swank city center, just off I-90

near cheap motels and big-box stores, the shelter, a one-time roller rink, is cavernous and echoey. The space is split between men and women, with a set of bunks for those who have special medical needs or require extra supervision. For five days, while temperatures remained dangerously low, the space, which normally feels expansive, was packed, and the crowding, the constant proximity, wore on both staff and visitors. Arguments, mental health episodes and drug and alcohol-related problems increased. But even before the cold snap hit, staff had been dealing with uncommon and disturbing behavior patterns.

For Brian Guyer, HRDC's housing director, the reasons were clear. A local mental health center, which included a crisis unit, had closed. More recently, Gallatin County's alcohol and drug service program shuttered as well. Budget and staffing issues contributed to both closures. And compared to other states, Montana was hit especially hard when the federal government rescinded its COVID-era Medicaid expansion. Guyer, who is in his 40s, with a shaved head and square-toed boots, exudes a noticeable air of calm despite the growing unpredictability of his job and the unprecedented demand for services.

"We're not mental health specialists," he said. "We're not behavioral health providers. We're not medical care providers."

The Bozeman location is meant to be an emergency shelter. Other local organizations provide housing for families and domestic violence survivors, but HRDC's shelter is the sole place where someone without a place to sleep can walk in and get a bed.

In recent years, however, HRDC's employees have taken

on roles beyond their training and capacity. As Bozeman's unhoused population has increased dramatically — up 280% between 2018 and 2024, according to an annual survey — HRDC has tried gamely to keep pace, expanding its services from seasonal to year-round and providing more space at a new location. But the need has outstripped its ability to provide. And for people sleeping outdoors, HRDC's warming shelter is often the only place to turn, the last still-hanging strand in Bozeman's tattered safety net.

"All of these things sort of come to a head at the shelter," Guyer said. "We see the culmination of a mental health crisis, housing crisis, a wage crisis, a drug crisis."

THE WINTER was challenging even before the severe cold hit. At 2:20 a.m. on Christmas Day, a young man was found lying on the bathroom floor, unresponsive. When staff reached him, his face was blue. Suspecting a fentanyl overdose, they gave him two doses of Narcan, a nasal spray designed to reverse opioid overdoses. Emergency services arrived shortly after and administered CPR, but to no effect. Half an hour later, the man, who was only 23, was pronounced dead at the scene.

In February, another man fatally overdosed in his car; he'd been in and out of the shelter and was well-known in that community. His infant twin sons had been staying with their mother at a transitional housing facility also run by HRDC. That same month, a third person died of an overdose at an HRDC site. Shelter staff, overworked and burned out after the cold snap, tried to contain the fallout, checking in with the deceased's friends and



Unhoused men rest at the Warming Center on a February day when the temperature fell below 10 degrees Fahrenheit (*facing page*). Jeanne DiPrima, HRDC employee, fields a call from a lawyer (*top*). Brian Guyer, HRDC housing director, on a bunk at the Warming Center (*above*).

with shelter guests who were struggling with addiction.

"You're talking about well over 100 people that have co-occurring traumas, they're dealing with that loss at the same time," Greg Overman, HRDC's supportive housing manager, said. "And what we're trying to prevent is the domino effect."

But the tragedies continued. In late February, a man who was relatively new to both the shelter and the staff walked outside to a tree near the shelter's front gate, looped a rope around a branch and hanged himself. Mychal Anne Marsolek, the overnight operations lead, was on duty that night. Another worker saw the man hanging from the tree on a security camera feed, and shelter employees rushed outside. Marsolek called 911 while her co-workers took him down, removed the noose and gave him CPR. Eventually, he regained a pulse and was taken to the hospital.

Days after the incident, the man returned, walking in quietly through the shelter's front doors. He was greeted by the same people who, days earlier, had taken him down from the tree. He had sneaked out of the hospital.

"We were just stunned," Guyer said. "It was like seeing a ghost."

Marsolek began volunteering at the shelter a few years ago. She found that she loved the work, and, as she put it, was "not able to stay away." She eventually applied for a full-time job. Months after the suicide attempt, sitting in the empty shelter, Marsolek, wearing a denim jacket and chunky glasses, said that the memories of that night continued to haunt her. "This was absolutely one of the most intense situations that I have been a part of," she said.

THE GAPING ABSENCE of services for Bozeman's poorest and most vulnerable has grown increasingly obvious in recent years, as the city has become a magnet for wealthy people and luxury real estate investment. In the last decade, Bozeman, population 57,300, has been among the nation's fastest-growing small cities, attracting well-to-do

A U.S. Government Accountability Office study estimated that a \$100 increase to the median rent was associated with a 9% increase in the rate of homelessness.

people willing to pay for easy access to nearby mountain ranges and ski resorts. In early 2024, the median home price approached \$1 million in the greater Bozeman area. A 2020 study from the U.S. Government Accountability Office estimated that a \$100 increase to the median rent was associated with a 9% increase in the rate of homelessness.

From 2007 to 2023, the number of people experiencing homelessness in Montana increased by 89%, according to the Department of Housing and Urban Development. (Montana also had the nation's highest suicide rate from 2021-2023.) These statistics and the shelter's own

demographic research refute an accusation that Guyer often sees online or hears: that, by its very existence, the shelter incentivizes unhoused people to come to Bozeman. According to HRDC, the vast majority of its shelter guests have been in Bozeman for over a year, and half have lived in the area for more than five years.

"Our data shows that the guests at the shelter are long-time Montana residents, and they've simply been priced out of homes," he told me.

This myth, though, is pervasive in Bozeman, and it appeared prominently in the Facebook comments of a *Bozeman Daily Chronicle* story about HRDC in May 2024.

"If you build it, they will come," wrote one commenter. "And come, and come."

Dozens of comments expressed similar sentiments: "Build a nice homeless shelter. Guess what you get? Permanent homeless people." "It is time to get the HRDC out of our valley."

At times, this hostility leaves the digital sphere and enters everyday life. Crystal Baker, who runs HRDC's Street Outreach Program, regularly visits people living on Bozeman's streets with her team, offering aid and services. Once, she and a member of a local health clinic were checking on a man in a trailer when a woman drove up, rolled down her window and began yelling.

"She hung out the window and was banshee-screaming at all of us to get a job, that we were a waste of space, that we should just kill ourselves," Baker said.

More recently, the desire to remove unhoused people has taken on the force of policy. In the wake of last year's *Grants Pass* Supreme Court decision, Bozeman's City Commission enacted a ban on sleeping on





Joshua Powell, 41, lives in his car even during sub-zero weather. Here, he uses his car door to clear away snow so he can climb into and out of the vehicle.

public property and created a temporary permitting system for people sleeping in streetside vehicles or campers, which will end on Nov. 1. Violators can be fined up to \$500 or face jail time. In Montana — including Missoula and Helena — and across the West, many municipalities are passing similar restrictions. Nationally, around 150 cities have passed or strengthened anti-camping rules, with dozens more pending, according to *Stateline*. And several other cold-weather cities in the Rocky Mountain West — including Park City, Utah, and Boise, Idaho — have, like Bozeman, only one year-round homeless shelter.

The Trump administration's budget cuts have further complicated things: HRDC relies almost entirely on federal funding for rent aid, veterans' assistance and family-specific programs.

"There are about 670 low-income individuals, families, pregnant women, people with disabilities and seniors across our service area who are receiv-

ing project and tenant based rental assistance," Guyer wrote in an email. "Losing those resources could effectively double the number of unhoused people in our community."

And funding emergency housing here presents its own set of problems. Guyer noted that federal funding supports more than half of HRDC's public transit services. The Warming Center itself receives minimal federal help, less than 5% of its overall budget. But the shelter depends overwhelmingly on private funders and small donations, and the growing backlash against Bozeman's unhoused people and those who aid them has made fundraising increasingly difficult during a time of tremendous need.

"Going out and talking about the need to put a roof over our neighbor's head used to be a pretty easy sell," he said. "That environment has shifted."

LIKE MANY PEOPLE who use the shelter's services, Cindy was managing on the surface

but living one crisis away from financial ruin. (Cindy asked that we use only her first name.) Now in her 40s, she came to Montana from Ohio in the early 2000s to work at Yellowstone National Park as a hotel manager. She liked it so much that she encouraged a nephew and her mother to join her. A decade later, she moved to Bozeman, where she worked as a 911 dispatcher. Housing costs weren't an issue at first, she recalled. Then, in 2017, Cindy suffered an injury at work, leaving her with chronic shoulder and neck pain. Unable to work as a dispatcher, she tried a desk job with the city, then a gate agent position at the airport, only to realize she couldn't carry luggage. For a few years, she and one of her nephews split an affordable apartment.

"We were riding the line, but we were OK," Cindy said — OK until 2023, when her nephew contracted COVID and developed a lung infection, causing him to miss work. Late rent fees piled up, and they were forced to leave the apartment last March. They spent a month in cheap motels before their savings ran out. Then, early one morning, Cindy recalled, they checked out of a room at a Super 8 and made their way to HRDC's shelter, where they waited outside with all their belongings until the doors opened at 7 p.m. "It was really intimidating," she said.

After their time in the motel, Cindy and her nephew spent every night at the shelter. During the day, she would often go to a local library, but in summertime, she would sometimes set up a tent in a permanent encampment for unhoused people not far from the shelter. She and her nephew are trying to save money for an overdue surgery; Cindy has a cyst that presses against her spine.

"I was working on getting (the surgeries) scheduled as we were being evicted, but now that I'm out here, there's just too much," she said. "I can't get it started."

During the day, Cindy's nephew would leave the shelter and head for a shift at the nearby Walmart; many shelter regulars work low-paying jobs in Bozeman's massive service and tourism industry. This became clear one evening in late May, when I observed HRDC's staff doing evening intake. Many of the people who pushed through the doors had just come from work, wearing chain-store uniforms or boots caked in construction-site dirt. One man in a hoodie stamped with a contractor's logo said that he'd been working on a building in the Yellowstone Club, a hyper-exclusive private ski resort 45 miles south in Big Sky. He'd spent the day installing 400-pound wooden ceiling beams, only to return to Bozeman and a bunk in the shelter's crowded men's quarters.

"In a very perverse way, this is what the service industry workforce housing looks like," Guyer told me.

The next day, I returned to the shelter around the time that an older woman shuffled out of a sheriff's vehicle at the front entrance, wearing pink slippers and clutching several overstuffed duffel bags. Guyer and shelter staff spoke with her for several minutes before taking the bags to a storage closet. He returned to his cubicle, shaking his head. The woman had been working a hospitality job in West Yellowstone, on the other side of Big Sky, but was fired after she couldn't handle the job's physical demands. The loss of her job meant the loss of her employer-provided housing.



Versions of this scene are becoming increasingly common: older people who come to the shelter as a last resort. But the shelter isn't set up to serve every visitor. "We can't care for people who can't shower themselves or are incontinent," Guyer said. "But the hospital often won't take them. We're tolerating more than we should, if the other option is outside."

FOR HRDC STAFF, the day-to-day job is full of moments like these — determining how to help people whose needs exceed what they can provide. On most days, the shelter takes in dozens of people, often more than 100. Staff members try to accommodate bunk requests and field complaints — accusations of stolen propane or missing charging cords. Sometimes they break up fights.

But the growing pressure plays out in ways that are sometimes shocking, even dangerous. In late June, early one evening, the phone rang. If the shelter wasn't empty in the next two hours, the caller said, he would "light it up."

Staff immediately began evacuating the building, with 90 or so people inside, hurriedly handing out food, sleeping bags, tents — anything they could to help people get through an unexpected night outdoors. Guyer was checking the shelter's perimeter when he encountered a man he knew who often stayed there, sitting under a pavilion drinking a can of Mike's Hard Lemonade. Several backpacks lay nearby.

Guyer told the man that, due to the threat, he needed to leave, and asked that he pour out his drink. The man complied and left with the backpacks.

That same man was ultimately arrested for the threaten-



"There's no more human experience than being alongside someone in the depth of their troubles."

Greg Overman, supportive housing manager at the Housing First Village, which offers permanent housing in 19 tiny homes (above). A Warming Center resident (facing) who has a job but still can't afford rent in Bozeman.

ing call: Police found him carrying "a Glock 22 .40 caliber pistol, six extended magazines, a drum magazine, a 15-round magazine and 243 rounds of ammunition," according to the *Bozeman Daily Chronicle*.

According to court documents, the man believed that unhoused people in Bozeman were being targeted for sex-trafficking and blamed the shelter.

"He was in the midst of a mental health crisis," Guyer said. "I can't help but think, had the safety nets that used to exist been there, maybe they pick up on this before it becomes this extreme."

Nor are shelter staff immune from the forces that make housing in Bozeman inaccessible to all but the lucky and the wealthy. Guyer and his fam-

ily had to leave for the nearby town of Livingston a few years ago when his landlord asked for a \$1,600 rent increase. Marsolek, who works a second job at a local domestic violence aid organization, has dealt with a 30-day eviction notice and substantial rent hikes in Bozeman's tight rental market, which has had a slim vacancy rate for years. Overman lives in a small town half an hour away.

HRDC staff acknowledge the difficulties, but they still insist they are fortunate to do this work — it's a "privilege," Overman told me, unpacking hot dogs and hamburgers at a picnic table in June.

"There's no more human experience than being alongside someone in the depth of their troubles."

Overman, who is tall and angular and wears a thick beard, witnesses such troubles but also sees slivers of hope in his work with chronically homeless people, those who have lived on the streets for years, sometimes decades. Many are unable to hold jobs. Others have long histories of encounters with law enforcement or profound addiction and mental health challenges.

Led by Overman, HRDC has tried to address this demographic with its Housing First Village project, which opened in November 2021. Between the emergency shelter and the highway sits a collection of 19 tightly packed tiny homes, brightly painted and arrayed around a grassy common area. Known simply as the Village, the project operates on a "housing first" model: Once people have a safe, stable place to live, the thinking goes, good things will follow. HRDC's own data bears it out, Overman said.

"If you look at everybody

that has lived at Housing First Village and the amount of time they've lived here, and then compare that equal amount of time to before they were in housing, what you see is that there's around a 40% decrease in emergency room use," he said. "There's over a 45% decrease of bookings in Gallatin County Detention Center, over an 80% increase of preventative health access ... and over a 50% increase in behavioral health access."

A small party coalesced around Overman as he prepared the grill and hauled out plastic-wrapped cases of soda and water. Residents from the Village arrived slowly, as did a few shelter regulars and people from the encampments. HRDC caseworkers came and went,

"All of these things sort of come to a head at the shelter. We see the culmination of a mental health crisis, housing crisis, a wage crisis, a drug crisis."

and two dogs tussled on the lawn. Overman talked about the country singer Morgan Wallen with a man holding a bottle of vodka. At one point, a Village resident arrived in a car, and the crowd clapped and cheered: She had recently regained custody of her infant daughter, who slept peacefully in her arms despite the noise.

Brittany, a young woman who lives in the Village, stood near the table. Since moving into permanent housing, she rarely interacts with police, who, she said, "lurk around and harass people" who live on the streets. And it's been easier for her to avoid people who encouraged her drug addiction.

"I don't have to go nowhere," she said. "I have power, and I have running water, and I have a door that locks."

I also spoke to James, who lived outside for years before finding housing at the Village. He wore a green hoodie and had a bandage on his hand. For months after he moved in, sleeping indoors felt strange, he told me, so he slept on the lawn.

"Never had a house of my own," he said. "This guy gave it to me," gesturing to Overman.

"I didn't give it to you, you deserve it," Overman replied. In general, Overman speaks quietly, but his reserved demeanor dissolved around the Village' residents. He became voluble, telling jokes and animating the gathering.

Six months later, that festive atmosphere was long gone; Bozeman was again frozen, dark and cold. In January 2025, the temperature dropped precipitously, and the shelter remained open all day. Valentine's Day brought another cold snap, and for several days staff members were once again constantly on-duty. More than 100 people

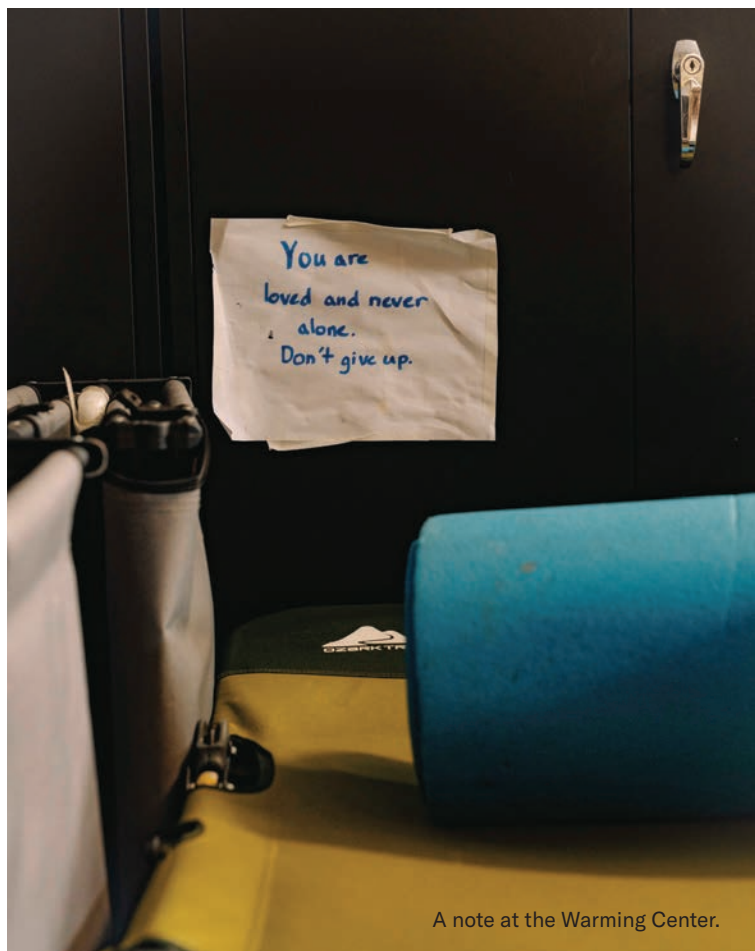
filled the beds each day. A few smuggled in alcohol, and staff suspected that someone was getting high in the bathroom. There were disputes, outbursts and a mental health breakdown. Cleaning was challenging, and by the end, the place reeked of packed-in bodies.

"It's sad to just watch people unravel because they don't have the space that they need," Guyer said, the day after the cold ended and the shelter resumed its normal schedule. It was a difficult few days, but a success, he said: HRDC reached unhoused people at acute risk of dying from exposure, and Guyer said there had been no reported fatalities when the temperature was regularly below zero. And staff diffused the potentially explosive moments.

The relative peace they maintained spoke to HRDC's increasingly practiced and capable employees, Guyer went on, a testament to their training and the calm that comes from hard-won experience — from showing up no matter what, for the intense periods of extreme cold as well as for the pleasant springtime barbecues. It reminded me of something Guyer said months before, reflecting on his co-workers: "The things that seem to drive others away seem to strengthen their resolve." ❁

Nick Bowlin is a contributing editor for High Country News. @npbowlin

Will Warasila is a photographer focused on long-term documentary projects concerning the environment, particularly the slow violence wrought by corporate and political structures. Gnomic Books published his first monograph, Quicker than Coal Ash, in 2022.



A note at the Warming Center.

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Losing the forest

Trump's cuts targeted some of the hardest-working stewards of our public lands.

BY CLAIRE THOMPSON

ON A SNOWY Saturday in February, seven just-fired U.S. Forest Service employees — my partner and I among them — gathered in a small town nestled against the east slope of the Washington Cascades, to mourn, rage and toast the end of an era. Each of us had worked for the Forest Service for at least five years — some for over a decade — and after years of seasonal work, all of us had finally, last year, been promoted to permanent positions. None of us made more than \$23 an hour or ever received a negative performance review.

We sipped whiskey from jam jars. We made a pyramid of Rainier beers on the coffee table and picked them off, one by one. We shared brownies, chips and dips, and stories. Stories that some of us had heard many times already: ill-fated bushwhacks in search of lost trails; unsettling encounters, human and not, deep in the woods. These stories are a record of a way of life, one dedicated to service and stewardship, that our country is on the verge of losing.

Every summer, my trail crew cleared thousands of downed logs from hundreds of miles of trail. We used dynamite to blast away backcountry rockslides. We built bridges by hand in the wilderness. We planned and supervised projects for volunteer groups and youth corps. Our mule packer hauled in supplies and tools for those partner crews, as well as for our own crew, the fire crews and the tree-planting crews. Our wilderness rangers buried thousands

of piles of poop and packed out thousands of pounds of trash every year from fragile alpine ecosystems. They assisted on search and rescue missions, and, by intercepting unprepared hikers, prevented many more rescues from happening at all.

Our work was mentally and physically challenging and never lucrative, but we did it because we believe in the importance of access to public lands. The day-to-day reality of our jobs only reinforced that belief. Spending time in wild spaces is what makes us feel at once more human and more connected to the world outside our individual human selves. Working trails, I experienced this power for myself every day, at the same time that I made it possible for the public to do so, too. The more time I spent doing trail work, the more convinced I was that becoming aware of our interdependence with the land and with each other is crucial to humanity's survival.

Working in the woods wasn't always a "dream job." I worked in driving rain, in shoulder-season snow, in triple-digit heat, in burned forests where trees fell without warning. I took immense pride in all of it, but the low pay got harder to stomach each time I hefted my pack and stepped out, saw on my shoulder, on to the trails I'd come to know like the rooms in a childhood home.

It's a testament to Forest Service workers' belief in the fundamental value of our jobs that so many of us stuck with it, even when cushier options presented themselves, even when our work so often felt invisible. Many hikers don't realize that trails need maintenance on an ongoing basis, especially after wildfires, and that the scale of that work requires experienced professionals with local knowledge. The outpouring of support for fired federal workers has meant the world to people like me, but it's also been a sharp reminder of how much of the important work done in this country is easily taken for granted, until it's suddenly gone.

Some of us have been rehired — for now — but told to expect more cuts. Whatever happens next, we don't want sympathy. We

want our work, and the places we've done it, to be recognized and valued.

A few weeks before we were fired, my partner and I went to see a beloved local band play at a beloved local bar, the kind with old wooden skis and crosscut saws on the wall. During set break, we fell into conversation with a couple on the patio. We tried to describe what we did for a living. The sweaty, dirty days of running saws in shadeless, burned-over forests. The long backcountry trips eagerly awaiting the twice-daily fire weather forecast on our radios. How we met and fell in love as our rawest, stinkiest selves.

"What a beautiful life," the woman said. I rankled at the romanticization of what, in reality, often felt like just another form of thankless, underpaid labor. I launched into a practiced speech about how, yes, it does seem cool at first to get paid to work in some of America's most remote and breathtaking places, but before long you're 35 years old with no savings and creaky knees. Yes, we consider ourselves lucky. We're grateful. But.

My new friend wasn't buying it. "It really sounds like a beautiful life," she repeated. Now that it might be gone, I know — as I've always known, deep down — how right she was. ☀

Claire Thompson led and worked on Forest Service trail crews for eight years. She is working on a book about the impacts of cultural, political and climate change on the public-lands workforce.



Claire Thompson's trail crew uses traditional tools to remove old-growth deadfall from the White River Trail in Washington's Glacier Peak Wilderness.

Walker Basinger

The car that just can't

Tesla's baking sheet on wheels rides fast in the recall lane toward a dead end where dysfunctional men gather.

BY SHAUN GRISWOLD

ILLUSTRATION BY ANTOINE MAILLARD

YOU, CYBERTRUCK, are not just repulsive; you are comical. It's not your fault that you're not really a truck. But if your operating system is listening, I have to tell you: You are the dumbest vehicle ever engineered.

Your sleek, commercial kitchen-shaped exterior, which is called a "cantrail," can't even stay on: It peels off your body at high speeds when the glue holding it together malfunctions. It lives up to its name, because, in so many ways, this car just *can't*.

You and the other 46,906 Cybertrucks manufactured since 2023 have been ordered off American highways for immediate repair. You are a road hazard, a danger to other drivers.

In ordinary circumstances, we would just laugh at you. And I do laugh when I think about the head of the FBI driving to work each morning in a custom-wrapped Cybertruck barely held together by inadequate glue.

At perhaps any other time in U.S. history, you'd have fallen into obscurity as the not-truck you are, a silly thing promoted by an eccentric billionaire crypto bro with a predilection for ketamine. But that billionaire car dealer is currently running around the White House gutting federal agencies and throwing out Hitler salutes. Now every white supremacist or men's rights advocate with a crypto exchange key wants a Cybertruck in their driveway. You've become a symbol, the dead end where bad men drive deeper into dysfunction, shallow masculinity and toxic American disposability.

You are the carpool that ferries toxic waste from around the world into Texas to

be glued together with shiny materials and stamped "American Made."

But to anyone with a job that requires a functioning truck, the Cybertruck is a monstrosity. It cannot haul, lift, climb or build. At its core, it simply does not truck. Most egregiously, it voids the deeper truck experience, severing the vital connections that bond truck-driving humans: wood hauls, fishing and camping trips. Mudding, modding, racing. Cruising in a clean Chevy to Tom Petty's "Free Fallin'" in the tape deck.

At its best, a truck celebrates work-life balance. It is the vehicle of skilled labor. That's what drives so many truck owners: building and strengthening communities, creating legacies, forging connections. That's why we spend hours tinkering with that long-bed four-wheel-drive in the backyard. A little more oil, one more crank, one last job before an adventure down the back roads, where perhaps this time you'll go farther than before.

The Cybertruck, because of that billionaire's politics, is a clearly identifiable symbol of a more infantile masculinity and a badge of fascist imperialism, less a truck than an elaborate performance of a truck that gets stuck in snow and stranded on hillsides, trapped in mud, greeted by raised middle fingers and sprayed with graffiti across the country.

"Motherfucker," I say to its silver rear bumper. I want to flip it off, to toss cockroach poison at it. This metallic lump of excrement needs to be flushed. As many already have: In Las Vegas and Kansas City, Tesla dealerships have been vandalized and Cybertrucks burned, even though the White House has decreed that flushing a Tesla is an act of domestic terrorism.

Outside my hometown, Albuquerque, where the city ends and modular suburban homes climb the hill toward the Santa Fe National Forest, there's a Tesla sales lot, filled with a fleet of the angular silver Nazi Wagons.

There is a painful irony here: That lot sits on Tamaya, on sovereign land with its own sovereign business practices. New Mexico state law prohibits direct car sales from manufacturers, so those trucks would be illegal to sell if the shop was across the street. But this is America 2025, and inventive tribes have learned to leverage money and law. So Santa Ana Pueblo approved its own car sales law, and Tamaya Enterprises, its business arm, arranged a lease with the company. This also happened in Nambé, where a tribe just outside Santa Fe

and Los Alamos has a similar deal. Cybertrucks are sold on tribal land, but they are not in spaces that Native people, or any real truck people, go. They are simply taking our space.

My Indigenous upbringing taught me to give back to this land, which belongs to my ancestors. That value is real and spiritual for me; I remember where I came from. But these cyber-things are made of rare minerals extracted from the land. They give nothing back, only take.

I want a truck for the memories it creates, cold mornings gripping a warm burrito in the tiny back seat on the way to a worksite with my uncles. On those rides I learned how to talk, what to do, where to save my money and how not to spend it. We drove off to build things, creating a legacy, relishing the excitement when my aunt took us to town, piled into a bench seater, shuffling our ankles whenever she shifted gears.

When I first met my niece, Nevaeh, she was huddled warmly in her pink car seat in the wide backseat of my uncle's old extended cab truck. It was a bit roomier than the tiny utility seat I sat on when I was her age.

Recently, at the Sunday truck meetup at Robinson Park along old Route 66 in downtown Albuquerque, where our grandparents once parked, I walked her in her stroller to take in the colors and sounds of classic rides. These trucks are an inheritance for people; they are works of art. Nevaeh, now 9 months old, grins when I seat her behind a white leather steering wheel in a finely crafted truck assembled 50 years earlier. "That's something you've never seen before!" Marco, the truck's owner, says, smiling at Nevaeh's focus as a smooth bass drops on the radio.

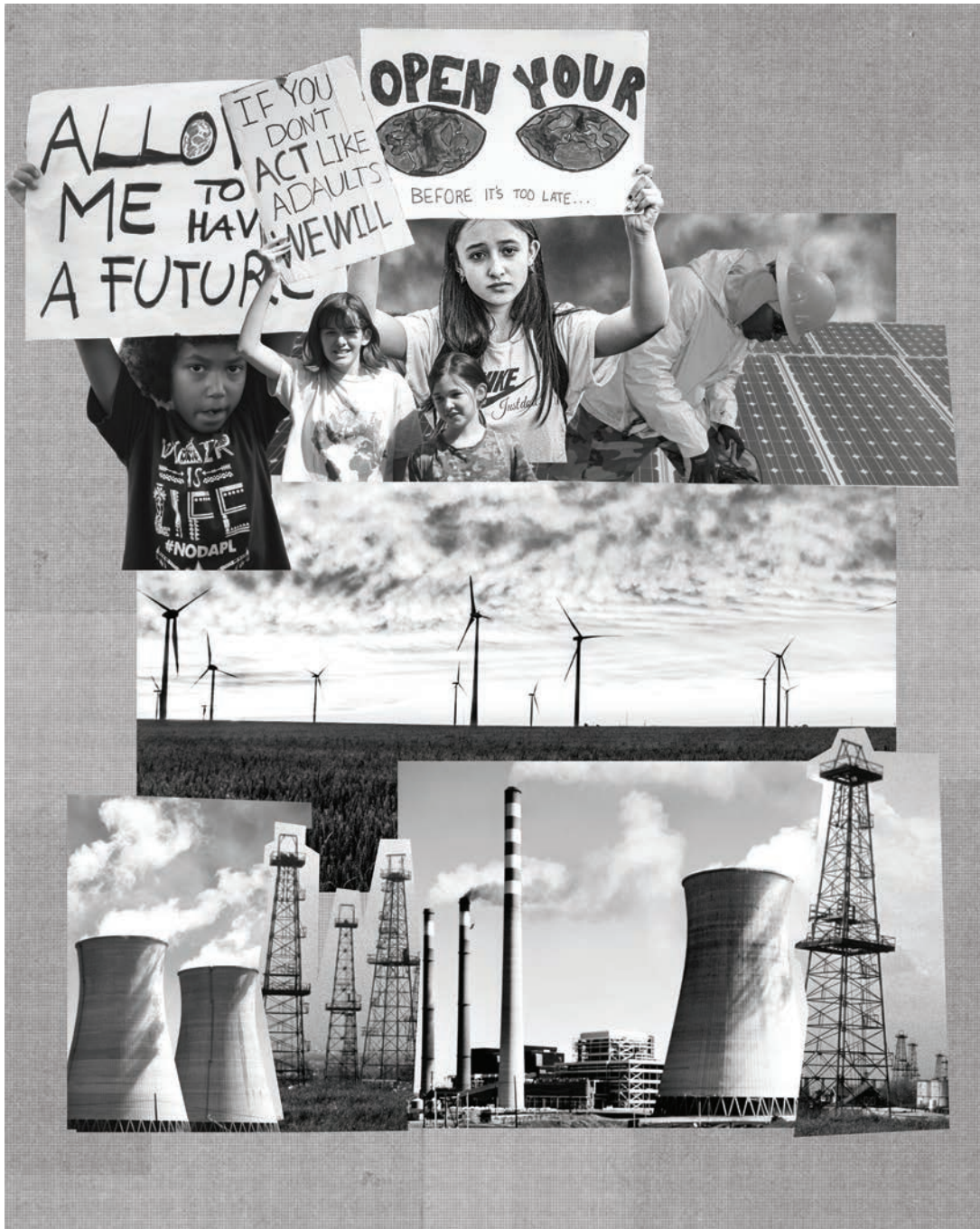
When we leave and I return her to the car seat, I tell her that she can have her own truck one day to drive and haul things and bond with people she loves. Nevaeh growls happily in reply and nestles down, buckled safely in the backseat of the truck that will take her home. We drive past the classic car meetup and that lot where the cyber-things sit on Native Land, back onto the bumpy clay rez roads that rock her to sleep. ☼

Shaun Griswold does journalism from the high-elevation deserts in New Mexico. They're a sovereign citizen from the Pueblos of Laguna, Jemez and Zuni who writes about Indigenous people living with colonialism.



ENCOUNTERS

An exploration of life and landscape during the climate crisis.



Behavior change is society change

How leaders influence our ideas about climate.

BY RUXANDRA GUIDI

IN 1968, Stanford Research Institute scientists Elmer Robinson and R.C. Robbins produced a landmark study for the trade association American Petroleum Institute, which represents the nation's oil and natural gas industry. The rising levels of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere would result in rising temperatures at the Earth's surface, they warned, and in turn that could lead to melting ice caps and rising seas and cause serious environmental impacts. "There seems to be no doubt that the potential damage to our environment could be severe," they concluded.

Their findings were buried, however — dismissed and later denied for the sake of profit. Meanwhile, CO2 levels have continued to grow exponentially. Misinformation — climate denial — took hold even as the impacts of all that CO2 superseded the climate scientists' 1960s predictions.

But what would have happened over the past 50 years if the American Petroleum Institute and Big Oil had behaved differently? What if the industry had chosen responsibility over greed and cowardice? What if, in the face of climate denial, the American Petroleum Institute had stood up for the truth?

Last fall, the scientific journal *Nature* published a study that put those questions into sharp perspective. British researchers Steve Westlake, Christina Demski and Nick Pidgeon, all of whom work at the nexus of human psychology and the environmental sciences, wrote that "visible leading by example from politicians and celebrities significantly increases the willingness" of the public to make high-impact, low-carbon choices. In other words, we look up to our leaders and expect them to guide us in making important decisions. According to the authors, this isn't just true for things like our voting preferences and shopping habits, but also for sustainable activities that sometimes involve the very opposite of shopping — boycotting certain businesses, for example. Such "visible leading," they argued, is a crucial but often missing link

in climate change mitigation.

Obviously, most of us aren't influential celebrities or politicians. But we can bolster our collective power by modeling sustainable behavior to our peers and to younger, and even to older, generations. For the past decade, for example, my family has opted to fly less and to do so only when necessary. We added solar panels to our home after talking to friends who broke down the cost and benefits over the long run; we also returned native vegetation to our yard, which depends on a rainwater catchment system that was largely subsidized by our city, Tucson, Arizona. The more changes we make, the more invested we become in continuing this behavior. And the more we do, the more collective the changes feel: We're not only altering our family's carbon footprint; we are also joining with others and helping to inspire our community.

Behavioral changes have the potential to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, not just from individuals but from entire communities across the West and ultimately across the globe. A 2023 study identified six different interventions to motivate behavior change: educating others by way of providing data; giving feedback on past climate-related behaviors; setting personal goals; urging people to act more sustainably; providing financial incentives; and establishing social comparisons that highlight sustainable behavior wherever it appears. Out of those six, the one with the strongest and most lasting impact has been the last. Social comparison could take the form of witnessing your neighbors' switch to rooftop solar or listening to your favorite celebrity make a case — perhaps publicly vowing — to fly by private jet less often. Legions of sports and pop music fans might reconsider their choices if their heroes not only talked the talk but also walked the walk. Unfortunately, the opposite holds true as well: If we see others tossing recyclables into the trash, we're easily inclined to follow their example.

With the right leadership, we can all be encouraged to help address the climate crisis by flying less, eating less meat, improving home energy efficiency and curbing our reliance on gas-guzzling cars. An estimated 74% of people in the U.S. polled by the Pew Research Center in 2021 said they were

willing to "make at least some changes to the way they live and work to reduce the effects of climate change." I've been particularly impressed by the mayor of Tucson, Regina Romero, who has prioritized climate resilience in one of the hottest cities in the country. She's made rooftop solar more accessible for working-class families, and she's invested in free public transportation while encouraging the restoration of green corridors throughout the city. Many of Tucson's residents, myself included, have been inspired to adopt more sustainable behaviors simply by becoming aware of Romero's priorities.

From California to Utah to Arizona to New Mexico, and particularly among young people, our behavior has been shifting over the past 20 years. According to research led by Leaf Van Boven of the Department of Psychology and Neuroscience at the University of Colorado Boulder, one of the top three states for new solar panel installations is California. Among the top five states adopting electric vehicles are California, Hawai'i, Washington and Nevada. In Wyoming, Republican Gov. Mark Gordon has been promoting wind, solar and nuclear energy. What if instead of trying to save coal and kill green energy, Republican-led states banded together to promote and fund a serious transition to sustainability?

A lot of behavior changes start at home; our kid learned to recycle and conserve energy and water about the time she learned to walk and talk, simply by watching us. These behaviors can and should be further promoted by schools and by local governments and places of worship. But it's one thing to achieve individual behavior change and another to achieve systemic or society-wide behavior changes. Still, it's possible: Imagine if the American Petroleum Institute had acknowledged Big Oil's impacts on the climate instead of burying them. That kind of leadership would have laid the groundwork for a remarkable systemic behavior change, and its ripple effects would have inspired the rest of us to do our part, as well. 🌱

Ruxandra Guidi is a correspondent for High Country News. She writes from Tucson, Arizona.

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LIFEWAYS

An Inuit woman explores living in direct relationship with the land, water and plant and animal relatives of Alaska.



I wish I was ice fishing

City life pales in comparison to the abundance of the sun and the seasons.

BY LAURELI IVANOFF

WHEN MY NEPHEW, Kael, was about 9 years old, that formative age where the world imprints itself upon you, he came to Anchorage from his home in Unalakleet, Alaska, with his auntie, Heidi. It was summer, and he was loving all the diversions of the big city. Movies, shopping at the mall, meals at restaurants, and chocolate donuts with sprinkles at the grocery store. During a moment in the car, I imagine when he was thoroughly appreciating all that city life can offer, he asked his auntie, “Do people go ugruk hunting here?”

“No, they don’t,” Heidi said.

Kael looked down. “Oh,” he said, his voice shallow and quiet. “Then I can’t live here.”

When I heard this story, my eyes and belly smiled and my auntie heart melted.

FOR SOME PEOPLE, like me, moving out of a community in rural Alaska was a choice. A difficult choice. A choice I don’t question or regret or second-guess, though it was still hard-won, because of the exact sentiment Kael expressed. I feel like it’s a redundant message in my writing. In my testimony to governing bodies. In conversations I have with people who’ve never left the road system. Our Indigenous way of life is beautiful. Living in relationship with the land and water is so rich and so life-filling that all the diversions in Western cultivated society cannot hold a candle to a calm day on the water. Feeling the kiss of the spring sun on your cheeks and hearing the water lap and laugh against the hull of the boat. Seeing the orange face of an ugruk and hauling it onto an ice floe, knowing your family will celebrate and be nourished.

Moving away from Unalakleet was an impossible decision full of heartbreak. The land and the water and the way we live and play are central to who we are. This is where our values are born. It’s where we teach our children to respect our plant and animal relatives and the living Earth that gives and

gives. It’s where we stain our fingers with blueberry juice and plunge seal livers into the cold ocean water to wash. Where we haul moose hindquarters to the boat, our legs, belly, back and arms shaking with fatigue but our spirits buzzing and feeling as sweet and light as whipped *akuutaq* made by an auntie from St. Mary’s.

With the changing of the seasons, I’m realizing that living away will always bring moments of heartbreak. The love I feel for the

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driftwood-lined beaches, the green tundra plants growing under the snow in the spring, the sight of the Whaleback Mountains to the east, and the ocean that gives, that loves, that shows its anger in the fall is like the feeling one has for one’s beloved. The ache in my chest when I witness the change of the seasons and acknowledge and listen to Her silent messages is the same ache I feel for my mother. For my grandma. I want to be with them. In moments of missing home, I remind myself to breathe.

In Unalakleet and so many communities throughout rural Alaska, if you want to take a

short four-wheeler ride after work to go pick a gallon of blueberries in late summer, you can. If you want to go for a quick boat ride with a rifle to see what you can see during moose-hunting season, you can. If you’re tired of eating moose meal after meal after meal during those early spring days and you want to drive upriver on sno-go to ice fish for trout for a taste of something fresh, you can.

It’s not so in Anchorage.

This past March, when the sun returned and I once again welcomed its warmth on my cheeks, I felt it. My body was telling me it was time to go ice fishing. It was time for fresh trout. Except this spring, I was in Anchorage, where outdoor spring activity means switching from skis to running shoes. And I wanted more. I wanted to be fed from the water. I wanted to be fed from a day in the sun, to feel life literally tugging at the line on my jig stick.

The shock in the lack of dimension in activity and relationship here is like that feeling when you think there’s one last step on the staircase, but instead of your foot stepping down one more tread, it lands abruptly on the floor where you’re already standing and the force of it reverberates up your femur, thigh, spine and into your head. With the change of winter to spring, my body told me it was time for ice fishing. My body told me to get ready for ugruk hunting. As the season moves along, my body will tell me it’s time to eat grilled king salmon steaks at my dad’s and then check the tundra for ripe *aqpiqs*. My body tells me when to be out, harvesting. Appreciating the gifts. Loving the giver.

With the change of the seasons this year, the last step wasn’t there. I simply switched out my studded winter car tires.

I am in Anchorage. The sun and the season give their signals. I still appreciate my walks among the trees. I look out my window for new birds arriving as they build nests and lay their eggs. One day soon, I’ll drive to Costco for a \$5 chicken in a plastic bag. I’ll make a chicken pot pie and then the boil the carcass into broth for soup the next day. And I’ll think of Kael’s wisdom at 9 years old. ☀

Laureli Ivanoff is an Inupiaq writer and journalist from Unalakleet, Alaska, now based in Anchorage.

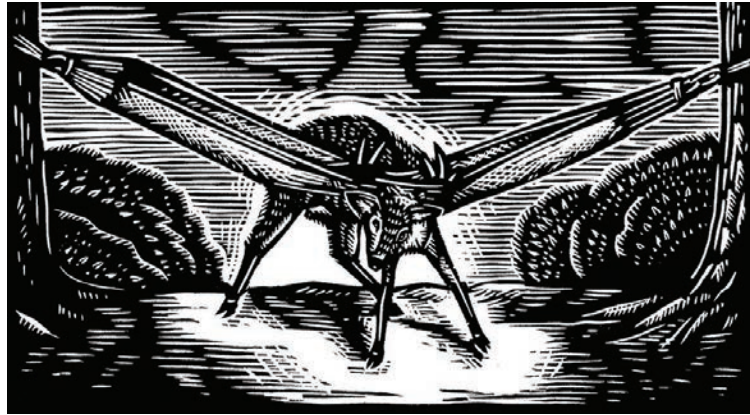
Digital collage: archival photograph from artist’s personal collection hand-sewn with embroidery floss, layered with an original digital photograph.
Jenny Irene

OREGON

If the cost of those items that some “old-fashioned” people call “groceries” has you worried, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has an inexpensive alternative: nutria. Witness its new slogan: “Save a Swamp, Sauté a Nutria,” *The Oregonian* reports. Sounds ... uh ... nutritious — but then again, what *is* a nutria? Visualize a protein bar, but with more fur. Nutria are cat-sized rodents native to South America that were brought to Oregon during the 1930s for the fur-farming trade. Over the next decade, they escaped captivity and ultimately became an invasive species that is rapidly demolishing marshland. According to the Fish and Wildlife folks, “Their nonstop munching and burrowing destroy the plants that keep marshes stable, leading to erosion, loss of habitat and wetlands that look like something out of a disaster movie.” The agency says the meat is lean and mild, and, unlike everything else in the known universe, does not taste like chicken but rather is similar to “rabbit or turkey drumsticks.” For this and other dinnertime delights, check out the agency’s “Eat the Invaders” article. Really.

WASHINGTON

This season, purple hammock headgear was all the rage in the little town of Pullman, Washington. Just ask Walter, the white-tailed deer that became an international internet celebrity after his triumphant tussle with a backyard hammock last September. The Pullman Police Department was able to free Walter from the “backyard booby trap,” i.e., a colorful hammock, the *Spokane Spokesman-Review* reported, but a tangled bunch of purple fabric proved too difficult to remove from one of his antlers. Fortunately, the



Heard Around the West

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

BY TIFFANY MIDGE | ILLUSTRATION BY DANIEL GONZÁLEZ

snarled-up material didn’t interfere with the buck’s ability to see, eat or drink, so the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife adhered to its policy of no intervention absent “truly necessary circumstances.” In any case, the situation was fully expected to resolve itself, since white-tailed deer shed their antlers annually. In the meantime, Pullman resident Judy Willington, created a Facebook group called “Where’s Walter?” so that more than 1,100 people from around the globe could keep track of Walter’s activities through the photos she took, which showed the world exactly where his adventures took him each day. Once Walter shed his antlers, Willington updated the Facebook page to “Where’s Walter’s Antler?” referring to the hammock-bedecked antler that had evolved into a moveable feast of modern art. In February, Dave Gibney spotted the legendary antler while out for a walk near Pullman’s Reaney Park. He

connected with Willington, who retrieved the antler and plans to mount it above her porch with a sign marking the site as “Walter’s Place.” We look forward to seeing similar hammocky headgear on the next celebrity-studded red-carpet event.

COLORADO

The Centennial State has a new official state mushroom: The emperor mushroom, *Agaricus julius*. The noble fungi achieved this distinction despite being initially misidentified as its close relative *Agaricus augustus*, more commonly known as the Prince mushroom, or “the mushroom formerly known as Prince.” Once it was accurately identified as the *Agaricus* known as *julius*, HB 1091 was amended and Gov. Jared Polis signed it on March 31, 2025, making Colorado the eighth state to designate a state mushroom, 9news.com reported. The emperor mushroom is edible and apparently delicious — it’s

described as having a “cherry-almond aroma” — but don’t bother hunting for it thinking it’s psychedelic, although Colorado did legalize psilocybin for medicinal use in 2022. *Agaricus julius* looks nothing like the *Amanita muscaria*, the photogenic white-dotted raspberry beret that starred in the animated Disney classic *Fantasia*. Instead, it looks more like a “toasted marshmallow.” And we’re sure it’s great on the grill paired with honey-glazed nutria.

COLORADO

The Denver Zoo Conservation Alliance proudly announced the birth of a male reticulated giraffe calf, the first child of BB and Jasiri, two 4-year-old giraffes, on March 7, denverzoo.org reported. The labor and delivery lasted just three and a half hours, which seems like no time at all compared to the 444-day pregnancy that giraffes typically endure. (If you think that’s bad, try being an elephant; they carry their young for up to 22 months, which seems like a really long time to carry *anything*, much less another elephant, even a baby one. *Oof.*) Maura Davis, curator of large mammals, said that “delivery went very smoothly, BB is doing a great job.” For a \$5 donation, zoo patrons and the public are invited to vote for one of three names — Daggy, Thorn or Kujali — with the proceeds going to the Denver Zoo Conservation Alliance. ☀

Tiffany Midge is a citizen of the Standing Rock Nation and was raised by wolves in the Pacific Northwest. Her most recent book, The Dreamcatcher in the Rye, was published in December 2024 by Bison Books. She resides in north-central Idaho near the Columbia River Plateau, homeland of the Nimiipuu.

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#IAM THE WEST

BRYCE SPARE (HE/THEY) and TUCK (GOOD DOG)
Lead backcountry ranger in Payette
National Forest (recently fired and reinstated),
ultra runner and backcountry skier
McCall, Idaho

There's this idea that queer, trans, nonbinary and two-spirit people live in urban areas. But they have lived and continue to live all over, and living rurally is where I feel best and most comfortable. As somebody who's transmasculine and white, I have a lot of privilege, so it's important for me to use my voice right now. This administration is literally trying to write us out of existence. It's hard for it to be such a negative focus point. But it's important to continue to find joy and live your life, and that's what I intend to do. The reasons I want to live here are pretty universal: I want to have amazing access to beautiful places, open spaces. I hope that is something across the political spectrum that people can relate to — maybe some kind of bridge to understanding.

Do you know a Westerner with a great story?
Let us know on social.

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