

High Country News



THE PROMISED LAND

Where the
Garbage Goes

Wolves Return
to the West

Making Art
about Glaciers

Vol. 57 / June 2025
No. 6 • hcn.org

HIGH COUNTRY NEWS

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Artist Jill Pelto's painting of the Skykomish River Watershed. Pelto's recent work focuses on moving beyond loss alone to show how glaciers fit into a larger context. (See the full story on page 45.) **Jill Pelto**

Know the West.

High Country News is an independent, reader-supported nonprofit 501(c)(3) media organization that covers the important issues and stories that define the Western U.S. Our mission is to inform and inspire people to act on behalf of the West's diverse natural and human communities. High Country News (ISSN/0191/5657) publishes monthly, 12 issues per year, from 119 Grand Ave., Paonia, CO 81428. Periodicals, postage paid at Paonia, CO, and other post offices. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to High Country News, Box 1090, Paonia, CO 81428. All rights to publication of articles in this issue are reserved. See hcn.org for submission guidelines. Subscriptions to HCN are \$45 a year, \$47 for institutions: 800-905-1155, hcn.org. For editorial comments or questions, write High Country News, P.O. Box 1090, Paonia, CO 81428 or editor@hcn.org, or call 970-527-4898. For correspondence addressed to High Country News, HCN or to the editors, permission to publish will be considered implicit unless specifically stated otherwise.



On not turning away

LET'S BE HONEST — it's difficult to be a consumer of news right now. The barrage of actions taken by this administration and by Congress that will do harm to species and ecosystems is relentless. Hard-won legal protections for human, plant and animal communities are being eroded daily, while longstanding programs that employ scientists to analyze data are rapidly dismantled. Many Americans are limiting the amount of news they consume, given how emotionally taxing it has become to pay attention. And yet turning away is not the answer. You can't protect the people, places and things you love if you don't know that they are threatened. So thank you for reading *High Country News* and remaining engaged.

It's also not an easy time to be a journalist, spending your working days covering these acts of sabotage, reporting on the speed and zeal with which this administration is attacking so much of what you, our readers, value and hold dear. It has exacted a toll. And though keeping our readers informed is of the utmost importance, some of our recent focus as a staff has been on taking care of each other as human beings, because this, too, is important — turning to the person next to you and saying, *Are you OK? It's a lot.*

Make no mistake, *High Country News* is doubling down on covering the areas we know best and continuing our tradition of going where other outlets might not think to go. But we are also doubling down on sharing stories of wonder, resilience, justice and awe. We see a need to highlight how people are coping with all this, and accept that part of our role is to help them cope. We believe that covering the beauty and power of the land is part of caretaking it, and the same is true for vulnerable communities. Therefore, we promise to keep doing accountability journalism and covering the impacts of this administration. At the same time, we will do our best to keep your hearts full, because humans need joy to leaven the anger and the anguish, stories of beauty and resilience to nourish our souls.

This is true not only for you, our readers, but also for the people working to create those stories. It's a difficult time to be in journalism if you care about the well-being of the land, about justice, and about having a habitable climate. But we are here for it, dear readers. It is *HCN's* mission to both inform and inspire, and both have never been more essential.

Jennifer Sahn, editor-in-chief



Thom Bridge / Independent Record

A new Montana majority defangs the far right

Disaffected Republicans and resurgent Democrats just took over the Montana Legislature and spent big on education and health care.

By Gabriel Furshong



Luna Anna Archey / HCN

Trump asks Congress to cut at the heart of the West

The White House wants to alter life for U.S. hunters, anglers, RVers, off-road-vehicle drivers, backpackers, birdwatchers and hikers.

By Christine Peterson



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ON THE COVER

Full moon over Juárez,
Mexico, looking
towards El Paso; Luna
llena sobre Juárez,
México, mirando hacia
El Paso, 2021

Lisa Elmaleh

Tractors compact garbage on the working
face of Oregon's Coffin Butte Landfill while
workers get the cell ready to receive it.

Evan Benally Atwood / HCN



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#iamthewest52

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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.

BUSINESS COSTS

So, let me get this straight: We decimate the wildlife that used to live here by taking over their land to raise cows so we can eat far more meat and dairy products than we need or that is healthy, and then we get all up in arms if we lose a few animals to the apex predators that were here to begin with, as they dare to hunt what's still around after we replaced their original prey with cows? ("The true cost of wolves," May 2025) That's just ridiculous. When humans and livestock outnumber wild mammals, it's no wonder we're on the verge of losing our entire web of life. Loss to predators should be part of the cost of doing business. If you can't take the stress, find another way to make a living.

Julie Smith
Golden, Colorado

Just the fact that ranchers pay practically nothing to graze their cattle on public land that's government-subsidized tells me they are in the wrong business if it ain't working out.

Karen Byington
Ogden, Utah

MANIFEST THIEVERY

In her May 2025 editor's note ("The social contract") Jennifer Sahn said that transferring public land, or any "public good," to private hands should

be considered "un-American." As a student of American history, I have learned that such transfers are quintessentially American and have been since before our nation's founding.

HCN should spend even more time educating Westerners about the thefts, not just of land but of culture as well, that Western expansion has entailed. Knowing our history will help us better understand the events of today and their implications.

Felice Pace
Klamath, California

NO RENAISSANCE FOR NUKES

As a water protector and anti-nuclear activist, I was disappointed in "Is a nuclear renaissance coming?" (April 2025).

We are woefully uneducated about the nuclear narrative that began in WWII with atomic bombs made at places like Washington's Hanford Nuclear Reservation, one of the most toxic sites in the Western Hemisphere. It is shrouded in Department of Energy and nuclear industry greenwashing saying we need new small modular nuclear reactors to fight climate change. People misunderstand what nuclear energy is and how dangerous it is — for thousands of generations.

Jonathan Thompson's mild reportage of nuclear power's "renaissance" omits many

important aspects of a technology that has changed the planet's DNA. His rendering of the gravity of the situation is so misleading it hurts.

Many people and landscapes have been harmed by nuclear energy since the splitting of the atom. This simply is not the way forward. Besides, renewables like solar, wind and water are already outperforming nuclear and fossil fuels.

"Lasting scars" are living scars that thousands of generations will have to deal with. And if we don't tell the truth about nuclear energy, those who follow us will be none the wiser.

Laura Feldman
Portland, Oregon

PUBLIC HANDS HELP PUBLIC LANDS

I appreciate your coverage of these turbulent times ("Another form of love," April 2025).

It is well-known that our public lands enable millions of people to engage in a wide range of recreational activities. What is not talked about nearly enough is the investment thousands of people make every year in the places they care deeply about.

Through much of my 44-year career with the Forest Service, I worked side-by-side every field season with hundreds of volunteers: campground hosts, members of the Back Country Horsemen clearing equestrian trails, OHV enthusiasts adopting motorized trails, Boy Scout and church groups seeking service projects, American Hiking Society members building retaining walls, AmeriCorps crews protecting wetlands, climbers mitigating impact to famous bouldering and sport-climbing destinations. The list could go on.

Many of the volunteers I worked with are fortunate to live near their public lands. Others

came from communities across the nation. Their work is significant and helps federal land managers address land-management responsibilities.

Their sweat equity and concern for public land are not only invaluable, but inspirational. Current proposals for transferring or selling public land are not only selfish and short-sighted, but painfully dismissive of those who volunteer to care for the places they love.

Bill Broadbear
Salem, Utah

TIME TO WAKE UP

"Industrial Revolution" (March 2025) was devastating to read. I grew up in West Weber in the '70s and my grandparents had a house on 3500 West for decades.

In those days, we'd pick and cook the wild asparagus that grew between the edge of the road and the ditches that ran through West Weber. It was a quiet place with great birds.

Reading about the Utah Inland Port Authority's disregard for the wetlands and the Great Salt Lake is disheartening. What will it take for governments and developers to understand that we need to care for the Earth and ALL its inhabitants, not just wealthy developers looking to get even wealthier?

Marnie Lansdown
Castle Rock, Colorado

"Selling public land is selfish and short-sighted."

REPORTAGE

The return of Xvlh-t'vsh

The Siletz Tribe receives a \$1.56 million grant to reintroduce sea otters to Oregon and Northern California.

BY ANNA V. SMITH

IF YOU COULD WALK THE ocean floor off the coast of Cape Arago in Oregon in the summer, you'd find yourself in the mysterious green depths of a forest of kelp. Look up, and you'd see sunlight filtering through the fronds waving in the current; look down, and you'd see the plants anchored to an ocean floor covered with life. But if you walked a little bit farther, you'd come to a barren clearing, no sign of kelp or much else — just a carpet of purple sea urchin, a creature that is devouring kelp at an alarming rate.

The disappearance of kelp forests is widely felt here; gray whales have changed their foraging patterns, and the red abalone fishery in Northern California closed after swarms of urchins and warming waters destroyed more than 90% of the kelp forests there. In Oregon, a 2024 study by the Oregon Kelp Alliance found that over a 12-year period, the kelp forest off the coast declined by up to 73%, primarily due to an out-of-control population of purple sea urchins, which graze on the kelp. This system is out of balance largely owing to the absence of a keystone species: *xvlh-t'vsh*, which means “sea otter” in the Athabaskan language of the Confederated Tribes of Siletz Indians. For more than 20 years, the Siletz Tribe has been working to reintroduce sea otters.

At the end of last year, the Siletz Tribe and its partners got a major boost in this effort: Through the Biden administration's America the Beautiful grants they received a \$1.56 million grant over three years to reintroduce the species to Oregon and Northern California — the second such attempt since the 1970s, when a state attempt at reintroduction failed.

The return of sea otters to the coast of Oregon will not only impact the broader ecosystem of animal and plant life, it will also affect a cultural ecosystem as well: The Yurok Tribe, Tolowa Dee-ni' Nation and Confederated Tribes of Coos, Lower Umpqua and Siuslaw Indians will work together to renew their long relationship with the sea otter once it has returned.

SEA OTTERS HAVE BEEN ABSENT from the Oregon Coast ever since the early 1900s, victims of the voracious fur trade, but their relationship to coastal tribes is long and special. The Siletz and Coos tribes tell of a Coos woman who marries Sea Otter and goes to live with his people in the ocean. Her family and village then find gifts left on the beach for them. That sense of abundance translates directly to sea otters' cascading impacts on the ecosystem around them, Robert Kentta, an elected member of the Siletz Tribal Council, explained. “There's a connection there between our tribal people's understanding of what all sea otters do for the environment that leads to that prosperity,” Kentta said.

In April, for the first time, Kentta saw sea otters in the wild at a successful reintroduction site in Elkhorn Slough in California. The animals frolicked, ate crab and held hands as they slept, forming rafts of furry bodies that gently bobbed up and down in the water. (Their penchant for holding tight to each other is how they got their Siletz name, *xvlh-t'vsh*.) The Elkhorn Slough reintroduction has shown that sea otters benefit estuaries and sloughs, in addition to near-shore ocean habitat. Healthy

eelgrass beds have increased and invasive green crabs have declined because of them. Researchers at the U.S. Geological Survey say the otters could be consuming up to 120,000 green crabs, which are also invasive in Oregon, every year.

But sea otters and kelp forests affect more than the localized ecosystem, said Chanel Hason, director of outreach and community relations for the Elakha Alliance, a nonprofit that works in partnership with tribes, the state and other nonprofits to reintroduce sea otters. “Just because you don't live by the ocean or live along the Oregon coast, you should appreciate breathing the oxygen in your lungs,” Hason said, noting that oceans produce about half of the Earth's oxygen, something that kelp plays a large role in. The Alliance has also worked to educate the general public about sea otters and address any concerns that Dungeness crab fishermen and oyster farmers might have about reintroduction.

“We feel a real responsibility to bring them back as a moral obligation,” Kentta said. “But also in the furtherance of climate change resilience, and bringing back the diversity and abundance of species that our ancestors knew.” 🌸

Anna V. Smith is an associate editor of High Country News. She writes and edits stories on tribal sovereignty and environmental justice for the Indigenous Affairs desk from Oregon.

Two sea otters hold onto each other's paws to sleep off the California coast. **Erin Donalson / Getty Images / iStockphoto**





REPORTAGE

Public-land advocates rally

Some Western Republicans break with colleagues over land transfers.

BY ZOË ROM

IN EARLY MAY, House Republicans took the dramatic step of including sales of Western public land in a massive federal budget bill. The surprise proposal, which passed out of the House Natural Resources Committee, authorized the sale of nearly 500,000 acres of public land in Nevada and Utah.

Introduced by Rep. Mark Amodei from Nevada and Rep. Celeste Maloy of Utah, the amendment generated immediate outrage from Democrats and conservation advocates.

“Republicans’ plans to sell off our public lands to pay for tax handouts for their

billionaire donors is an outrageous slap in the face to all of us,” New Mexico Sen. Martin Heinrich, D, who sponsored an amendment blocking federal land sales, told *High Country News* in a statement.

Several Western Republicans joined in the backlash, enough to torpedo the budget bill in a powerful demonstration of the bipartisan popularity of public land in the West. On May 21, House Republicans stripped the public land sales from the legislation. “I do not support the widespread sale or transfer of public lands,” said Montana Rep. Ryan Zinke, R, in a statement. “Once the land is sold, we will never get it back.

The public-land sale fight emerged as part of a broader GOP effort to cut taxes and ramp up domestic energy production. Republicans in Congress are hoping to avoid the Senate filibuster and pass the budget bill via reconciliation, in a process that is likely to continue into the summer. The current iteration of the bill also includes expanded oil and gas exploration, new drilling leases in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge and what critics describe as a “pay-to-play” permitting scheme. Under this provision, companies could pay a fee to fast-track a given project’s permitting and environmental reviews.

“Unfortunately, even without selling off

public lands outright, this budget reconciliation proposal remains the most extreme legislative attack on public lands in our nation’s history,” said Lydia Weiss, senior director for government relations at The Wilderness Society, in a statement.

In the wake of mass layoffs that weakened public-land agencies earlier this spring, the new bill proposes further cuts by rescinding funding from the Inflation Reduction Act designated for the National Park Service, the U.S. Forest Service, and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

The bill would also mandate a 25% increase in timber production on lands managed by the Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management, while lowering the royalty rates that coal, oil and gas companies pay to lease public lands.

But even as these ideas gain speed in Washington, D.C., the threat to public lands has created an energetic opposition movement, especially in the West. Mass support for public land crosses the two-party divide, which has forced some Republicans to break with the national party on the issue and created the potential for some unusual political alliances.

The attacks on public lands began immediately after Trump took office in January.

Canyons along the Owyhee River in Oregon, on Bureau of Land Management land. **Bob Wick / BLM**

Staffing cuts implemented by the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) have disproportionately impacted land-management agencies. Critics say these staffing reductions are part of a deliberate strategy to undermine the agencies' ability to manage their lands effectively, thereby paving the way for privatization.

"I'm really concerned about what I see as a deliberate effort to set federal land management agencies up to fail. Once they fail, it's not such a stretch to say, 'Well, someone else could do a better job,'" said Susan Brown, a lawyer at Silvix Resources, a nonprofit legal group that focuses on public lands and environmental governance.

The Trump administration — working with Interior Secretary Doug Burgum and Housing and Urban Development Secretary Scott Turner — has launched a joint task force to identify "underutilized" federal lands suitable for residential development, arguing that selling off these acres could help solve the nationwide housing shortage.

Critics argue that this idea is simply an excuse to open the door to privatization, as well as being a poor solution to the housing crisis. An April report from the Center for American Progress found that in the Western states with the most BLM-managed land, less than 1% of that land is located within 10 miles of a major population center, and much of it is unlikely to be suitable for sale or development. Another recent study, this one from Headwaters Economics, found that nearly half the federal land near communities with housing needs faces high wildfire risk.

Opponents also note that the Republican-led efforts risk alienating a bipartisan base that supports public lands. Recent polling from Colorado College shows that 72% of Westerners prioritize conservation over energy development regardless of political affiliation. Public opinion has been consistent on this for years.

Over 70% of Republicans and more than 90% of Democrats consider conservation and public-land issues to be important factors when determining their vote, according to the same poll of Western voters. Even in conservative-leaning states like Wyoming and Utah, strong majorities oppose the idea of selling public lands or reducing their protections. Another recent poll, this one from YouGov for the Trust

for Public Land, found that 71% of Americans oppose the sale of public lands, including 61% of the Trump voters polled.

The knowledge that so many of their constituents favor keeping public lands public has put Western Republicans repeatedly at odds with the national party. In March, Montana's Republican Sens. Steve Daines and Tim Sheehy voted with the Democratic minority in the unsuccessful attempt to block sales of federal land. Around the same time, Idaho Rep. Mike Simpson, a Republican, introduced the Public Lands in Public Hands Act, a bill that would prevent the Department of the Interior from selling or transferring most public lands.

In May, Zinke and New Mexico Democrat Rep. Gabe Vasquez launched a new congressional caucus. The caucus is built around opposition to public-land sales and includes representatives from both sides of the aisle. Zinke has called the fight against public land transfers his "San Juan Hill," referring to a battle won by Teddy Roosevelt, a Republican champion of conservation.

This isn't Zinke's first defection from the national party on the issue. In 2016, the former Interior secretary withdrew as a delegate to the Republican National Convention, citing his objection to the party's platform, which proposed transferring federal public lands to state control.

Across the West, Democrats and conservation advocates have used the threat of public land transfers to galvanize support. Protests against potential sales have erupted in various state Capitols, including Idaho and Colorado, as well as at Arches National Park. Meanwhile, major outdoor brands are trying to rally recreationists around the issue. This spring, more than 60 businesses launched an initiative called Brands for Public Lands, headlined by Patagonia and Black Diamond. The group is helping people contact their congressional representatives and urge them to oppose public land sales.

"It's all of our backyards," said Land Tawney, executive director of American Hunters and Anglers, a nonpartisan network of public-lands advocates, "and I have confidence that the people will stand united." ❀

Zoë Rom is a freelance journalist based in Carbondale, Colorado, covering the intersection of policy, outdoor recreation and public lands.

POEM

After Anchorage

By Joan Kane

Told to put a light in my lamp,
I turned from a daughter's work
to take a tabular rock in hand
then struck as hail would strike,
as a man who has grown sick
of his wife will scrape and grind
as if he no longer hells infants
world-ward in their blood-rush,
hollowing a cup to hold the oil
I would otherwise have swallowed:
I trust in nothing near, hungering
for the light of the leaf as it unfurls,
tending what I can, beguiling none.
I tangled my neck in tresses, cutting
the necks from my dresses, snarling
what I knew, what I know I learned
down through my dirt floor. I could
have burned the smear of bear tallow
I once felt forced to eat on an arm
of the sea whose waves but wrought
their white across and up into wind
when what should harbor winter
now darkens down to parch.

WEB EXTRA Listen to Joan Kane read her poem at hcn.org/after-anchorage

Scientific field season in jeopardy

Forest Service researchers describe chaos and uncertainty as they prepare for summer fieldwork.

BY SHI EN KIM

THE RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT team at the U.S. Forest Service employs about 1,500 people full-time, a small but mighty faction inside an agency that, until recently, was 35,000 strong. The research it conducts spans everything from managing visitors at recreation hotspots to understanding the pulse of life and land on the 193 million acres the agency manages.

Since President Donald Trump took office, his barrage of executive actions in the name of curbing waste have imperiled the basic functions of federal agencies. At the Forest Service, the result is a climate of fear and uncertainty that's stymieing the scientists working to fulfill the agency's mission — sustaining the nation's forests and grasslands for the public's long-term benefit — just as the summer research field season ramps up.

"Science and research are critical to maintaining public lands," said Jennifer Jones, the program director of the Center for Science and Democracy at the nonprofit Union of Concerned Scientists. Federal scientists intimately understand the ecosystems of the

public lands they study. Their institutional position and on-the-ground knowledge make them uniquely suited to translate study findings into effective management. "If we lose a few months — a few years — of science and science-led management of those natural resources, it could take decades and generations for ecosystems to recover if they're poorly managed," she said.

Forest Service workers describe the last few months as an emotional roller coaster. First came the freezes of congressionally approved spending, followed by confusing resignation offers for federal employees, firings that were reversed almost as quickly as they were ordered and promises of further workforce culling through planned downsizing. The Trump administration has even called for eliminating Forest Service research stations, according to reporting by *Government Executive*; three of the five stations are located in the West.

Spring and summer are usually an all-hands-on-deck time of year for field-going scientists. As the snow melts and the



days lengthen, researchers head outdoors for fieldwork they've been planning for all winter. This year, however, they are grappling with uncertainty regarding funding, labor and logistics. "I don't know what I'm going to do on Day 1," said a Forest Service aquatic biologist, who requested anonymity, citing fear of retribution for speaking publicly, just four weeks before their field season was set to begin. "I wish I had a plan. I just show up every day and see if there's any news."

Most of the planned field projects in that scientist's district have been suspended indefinitely. Still, one study, with the Fish and Wildlife Service, may happen: a survey of the movement of threatened bull trout along a western Montana river. The goal is to see how local populations are faring so that future recovery efforts can target problem sites.

But whether the team can execute it is another matter. The biologist needs a minimum of two extra hands to help install fish traps and tag captured trout, and at least \$10,000 to install transponders for tracking the fish. But that support is now uncertain, so the biologist is making contingency plans, building their own fish traps and calling in favors to see if other groups can help with personnel or equipment. "We'll have to get really creative — and beg and borrow from other agencies," they said. In theory, the project could be delayed until next year, but the team is acutely aware of the ticking clock of the trout's survival. "The sooner you intervene, the better your results," the biologist said.

Research also helps federal agencies cultivate community relationships. One Forest Service scientist leading an effort to map aquatic biodiversity across the West is hounded by job insecurity: If they lose their job, no one will be left to analyze and interpret the two years' worth of field samples that state and tribal collaborators have already gathered. "When I can't be accountable to my partners in holding up my end of the research, that doesn't have a good look," said the researcher, who requested anonymity because they weren't authorized to speak publicly about their work. At the time of the interview, the scientist had no plan B to salvage the project if they're let go.

Forest Service research often involves repetitive environmental monitoring and inventorying. This allows scientists to catch anomalies, such as the initial appearance of an invasive species. The eradication of the



invasive European grapevine moth from California's wine country in 2016, for example, was due to early detection and rapid action. Still, it took federal and local agencies seven years to eliminate the berry-munching pest.

"If you just stop a program in the middle, that's insane," said Elaine Leslie, a former agency chief for biological resources at the National Park Service who is currently on the executive council of the Coalition to Protect America's National Parks. "That is waste and fraud, right there. Years and years that people have spent protecting things are about to go down the tubes."

In response to an email from *HCN* asking about federal cuts to science, a spokesperson for the U.S. Department of Agriculture, which houses the Forest Service, sent a general statement that did not address concerns about what the changes mean for research. Instead, it read in part, "We have a solemn responsibility to be good stewards of Americans' hard-earned taxpayer dollars and to ensure that every dollar is being spent as effectively as possible to serve the people."

OTHER AGENCIES ARE also under assault. The Trump administration has proposed dissolving the research divisions of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and the Environmental Protection Agency, as well as slashing NASA's research budget. Some remaining scientists are taking on non-research duties: With a hiring freeze for seasonal custodians in place

Fisheries personnel perform stream surveys in Cooper Creek in Chugach National Forest, Alaska, in 2006 (opposite). **Ron Niebrugge / Alamy**

A bull trout in Quartz Lake, Glacier National Park, Montana (above). **Jim Mogen / USFWS**

at Yosemite National Park, scientists are on the roster for cleaning toilets.

All this translates to a chaotic period for agency employees. Delays and uncertainty are eating into the valuable hours of the limited field season. Getting field-ready takes time: hiring seasonal staff, training new recruits, setting fieldwork schedules and ensuring that everyone is paperwork-compliant. "From A to Z, there's a lot to do before you ever put a boot in the field," Leslie said. "Everybody's behind, because of this debacle."

At first glance, the science at the Forest Service — from studies on the foraging behavior of fish to the rhythms of coastal fog and the properties of river bedrock — might seem esoteric. But scientific breakthroughs often occur only after years of investment, when scientists finally put together enough pieces to reach a larger understanding.

"You never know where the leaps and bounds are going to come from," said the aquatic biologist researching bull trout. So, field season after field season, "you just have to keep looking." ☀

Shi En Kim is an editorial fellow at HCN covering science, environment and society.

Wolves return to the West

After they were driven to near-extinction, the animals, and the politics around them, are back.

BY JONATHAN THOMPSON
ILLUSTRATIONS BY ALEX BOERSMA

“AVINTAQUINT IS DEAD! May he never have a successor,” Utah’s *Duchesne Record* proclaimed in September 1910. “The crafty leader of one of the wildest bands of pillagers of the cattle range that ever roamed the west” had finally met his end. Avintaquint was not a human outlaw, but a canine one — a giant gray wolf that gained notoriety by feasting on sheep and cattle throughout eastern Utah, stubbornly eluding traps, bullets and poisons for well over a decade.

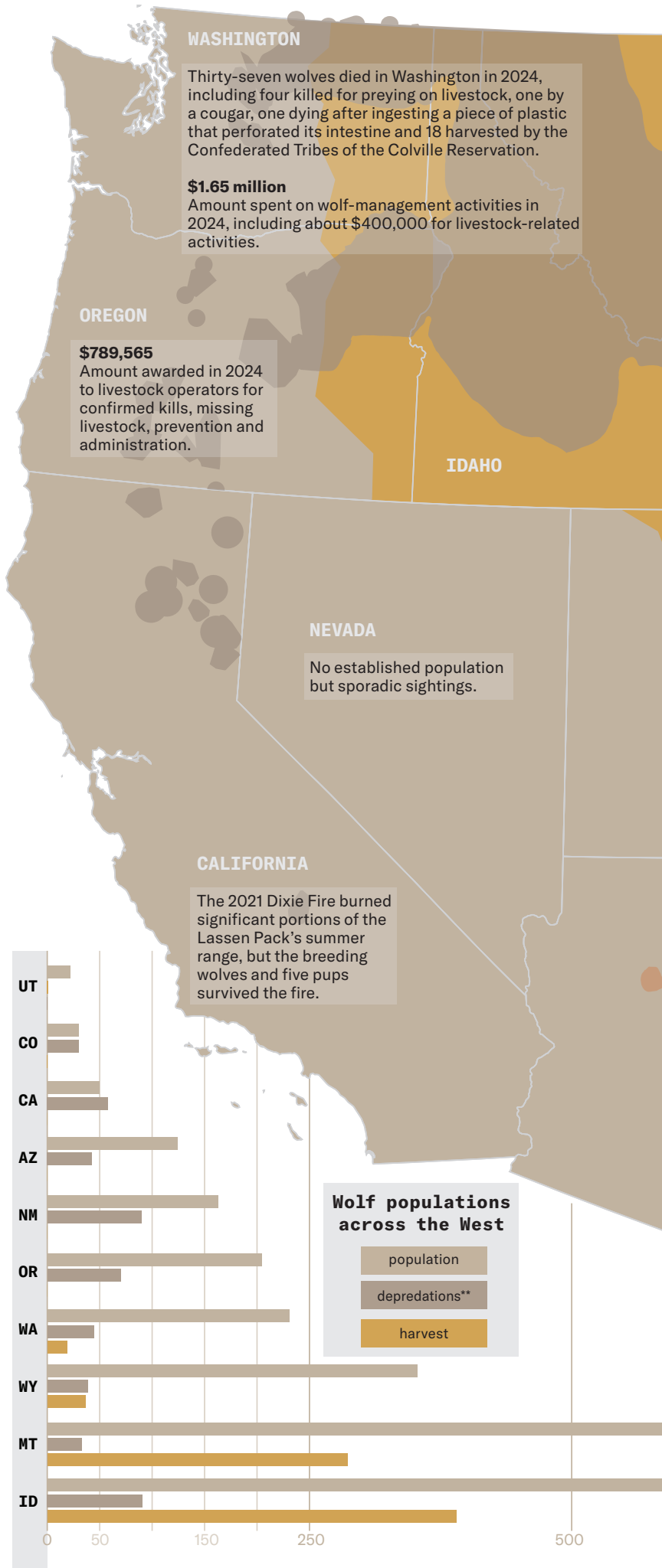
Accounts like this were not uncommon at the time: As wolf populations declined, reporters started focusing on individual animals, christening them and giving them celebrity status. The “pure white” Lady Snowdrift haunted Montana stockmen until a hunter shot her in 1923; the Great White Wolf of Sycan Marsh roamed southern Oregon; and in 1923, a hunter finally trapped Old Three Toes in southern Colorado. The wolf was notorious not just for preying on livestock, but for seducing domesticated ranch dogs, her only dating option since most of Colorado’s male wolves had already been slaughtered.

Old Three Toes was among the last wolves in the state, and within the next couple of decades, “Uncle Sam’s War on Varmints,”

as one headline called the U.S. Biological Survey’s methodical massacre of predators, had eradicated wolves from most of the West. With the exception of occasional visitors from Mexico and Canada, the region remained mostly wolf-less until the animals received Endangered Species Act protection in the 1970s. Over the ensuing decades, wolves began to return, migrating by themselves or with the help of reintroduction efforts. There are now healthy populations in the Northern Rockies — where the wolf is no longer listed as endangered — and smaller, more tenuous pockets in other Western states.

Now ranchers, hunters and right-wing politicians are reviving the war-cries of a century ago, once again raging at wolves, accusing them of threatening pets, livestock, wildlife and even oil and gas drilling. Wolf hunting is back in Wyoming, Montana and Idaho, and lawmakers in other states are trying to rescind federal protections for the animals. 🌱

Map & graph by Luna Anna Archey / HCN
SOURCES: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, Colorado Parks and Wildlife, Arizona Game and Fish, Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks, Wyoming Game and Fish Department, New Mexico Game and Fish, Utah Division of Wildlife Resources, California Department of Fish and Wildlife, American Kennel Club.



MONTANA

This spring, Montana lawmakers killed a bill that would have mandated an unlimited wolf-hunting season throughout the state.

\$285,282

Revenue generated from selling 17,735 wolf-hunting licenses for the 2023-2024 season.

WYOMING

124

Estimated number of wolves in Yellowstone National Park in 2023, where hunting is not allowed.

This March, a wolf that had been re-introduced in Colorado wandered into Wyoming's "predatory animal area" and allegedly attacked five sheep. Federal Wildlife Services agents then killed the wolf.

COLORADO*

Colorado Republican Rep. Lauren Boebert introduced the "Pet and Livestock Protection Act," which would revoke Endangered Species Act protections for wolves nationwide. Boebert claims they not only imperil cattle and chihuahuas, but also — somehow — the oil and gas industry.

UTAH

Utah lawmakers have called on the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to delist wolves throughout the state, to no avail, and have tried to keep wolves from wandering from the northeast into the rest of the state, where they have federal protections.

ARIZONA

In April, federal hunters killed a pregnant female of the Bear Canyon pack after mistaking her for another wolf that allegedly preyed on livestock. Local school-children had named the 7-year-old wolf Asiza.

NEW MEXICO

Following the lead of some Northern California and southern Oregon communities, Catron County declared a "wolf state of emergency" and asked the governor to send the National Guard to defend pets and livestock from what commissioners called increasingly brazen wolves.

A Mexican gray wolf was spotted north of Interstate 40 near Grants, New Mexico, suggesting the species was making its way toward Colorado and Utah. But Ella, as schoolkids named her, was found dead at the end of March.

Alaska is an outlier. The state's 2024 wolf population was between 7,700-11,000. On average, 1,200 wolves are harvested annually.

*Colorado range data is at the watershed-level.

**Depredations include confirmed incidents in which wolves kill or injure livestock and/or guard dogs.

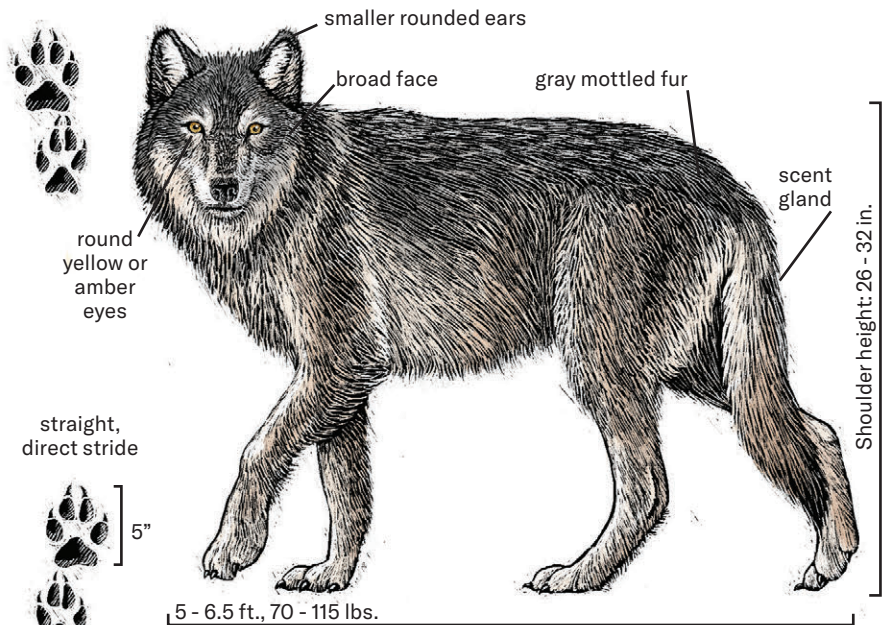
Current wolf range and endangered species status

endangered

delisted

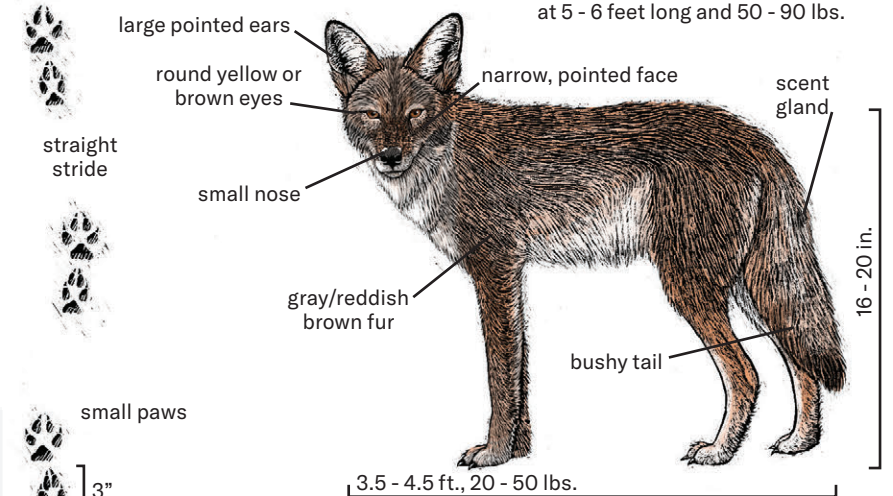
Gray wolf range

Mexican wolf range

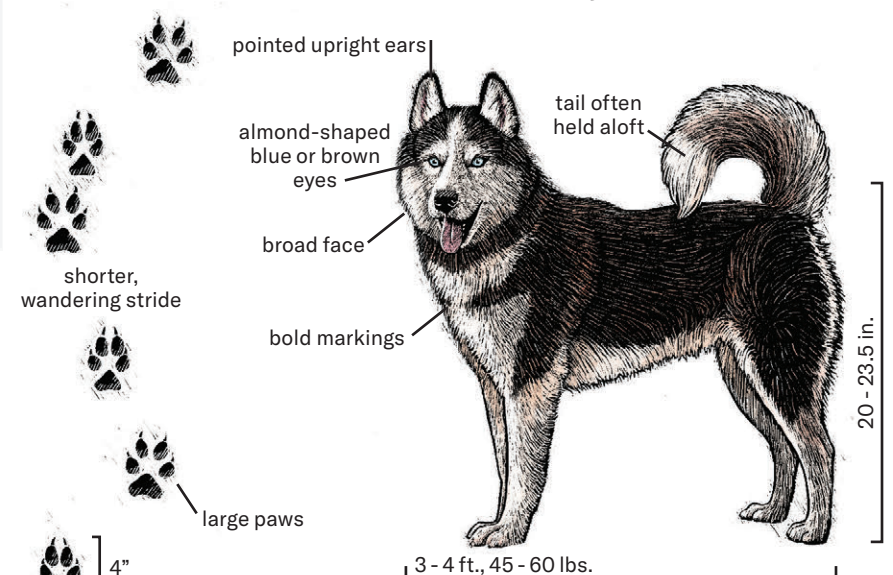


Gray wolf (*Canis lupus*)

Mexican wolves are slightly smaller, at 5 - 6 feet long and 50 - 90 lbs.



Coyote (*Canis latrans*)



Husky (*Canis lupus familiaris*)



REPORTAGE

Collective power

Creating resiliency and good jobs, one solar panel at a time.

BY BROOKE LARSEN
PHOTOS BY ANDRI TAMBUNAN

ON AN EARLY spring day, California Solar Electric Cooperative workers gathered at a local food co-op in Grass Valley, California, for a company meeting. Posters celebrating cooperative principles decorated the walls; one, proclaiming “Democratic Member Control,” showed ants working together to carry a bright green fern leaf. Some of the electricians filtered in late, having come straight from a job site.

“We want to take a moment to recognize some amazing people in our co-op,” said Melanie Duggan, a senior project manager at Cal Solar, which installs rooftop solar and battery systems. Duggan and other managers then praised their colleagues’ “commitment to craft” and “pure fucking magic” — core values of the company. Workers cheered and clapped after each shout-out.

This supportive culture is at the heart of Cal Solar. “I haven’t run into any other construction environments where you have construction workers saying, ‘Love you,’”

Lars Ortegren, the company’s co-founder and director of construction services, told me.

Cal Solar has been installing panels on homes and businesses in Grass Valley and surrounding Nevada County for the past 25 years. In 2019, it became a worker-owned cooperative, and Ortegren went from being sole owner to an employee-owner.

Today, Cal Solar’s worker-owners spend their days constructing solar systems and managing sales. But they also run a company. They make decisions, share profits and have a financial stake: \$5,000 invested up front, or \$1,000 down and \$4,000 financed through paycheck withdrawals. Any employee may buy in, though currently only 46% are owners. Not everyone wants the additional responsibilities, Ortegren said, but all workers benefit from the cooperative culture.

Ortegren has wanted to create well-paying solar jobs and a collective workplace since he first entered the industry over two decades ago. “I had this whole fantasy of

creating an anarchist labor union for solar installers,” he told me. Previously, Ortegren and Angel Niblock, Cal Solar’s general manager, were members of the Industrial Workers of the World. They believe in “the dignity of labor, in democratic workplaces and in the idea that those who do the work should have the say and a stake in how it’s done,” as Niblock put it at the company meeting.

In recent years, the solar industry has ballooned: It employs nearly six times more workers than the coal industry, according to a 2024 report from the Department of Energy. Solar jobs vary, though. Employees at rooftop solar companies like Cal Solar install panels in their own communities, while installers on large utility-scale projects travel between remote sites and rarely see their families, though they may earn more money. In California, for example, contractors often partner with labor unions and must pay prevailing wages on large projects. In states with weaker labor laws, however, some utility-scale facilities contract with temporary hiring agencies that have notoriously bad labor practices.

Meanwhile, Cal Solar’s worker-owners shape company policies and generate wealth for themselves and their colleagues.

A FEW HOURS before the company meeting, Alejandro de Necochea and his crew installed racking and wires on a home in Grass Valley. Panels leaned against the ranch-style house and power drills buzzed, echoing above the gentle ripple of a nearby stream.

“Every two or three days, I have a new job site that’s beautiful, just like this,” de Necochea said, gesturing toward the cedar, ponderosa and oak trees surrounding the property.

Solar first caught his interest over a decade ago, when he moved to Grass Valley to live with his parents in an off-grid home.

That’s not unusual in Nevada County, which has attracted people interested in hippie, back-to-the-land lifestyles since the 1960s. De Necochea’s family relied on solar panels for electricity, so he learned the basics. Then, 10 years ago, he started working at Cal Solar. He’s now a lead journeyman electrician, worker-owner and board member with additional governance responsibilities.

De Necochea enjoys being a worker-owner, but “it’s not all sunshine and rainbows,” he said. “You definitely feel the pressure of it being your company.” For 10 hours a day, four days a week, he climbs on roofs and installs solar systems. But if there’s a board meeting in the evening, he doesn’t get to clock out when his shift ends. He could probably make more money on utility-scale projects, but he’s committed to Cal Solar.

That commitment creates a sense of accountability: During the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, worker-owners took pay cuts to keep the business afloat. “You really feel like people got your back going through ups and downs,” he said.

Industry insiders call those ups and downs the “solarcoaster.” Companies must contend with shifting state and federal incentives, changing building codes, new technologies and global economic trends. “We’re at a low point right now on that solarcoaster,” Niblock told me.

Current challenges include the Trump administration’s tariffs, inflation, a potential rollback of a 30% federal tax credit for residential solar and reductions in California’s rooftop solar incentives. Right before California’s policy changed in April 2023, sales spiked. “We booked like a year’s worth of work,” said Casey Tomasi, Cal Solar’s design manager, “and then it immediately fell off a cliff.”

But Grass Valley homeowners still want solar, partly for independence from Pacific Gas and Electric. In recent years, PG&E has shut off power during periods of high wildfire risk, and Ryan Harris, who owns the home where de Necochea worked this spring, wanted a more reliable system. “Going without power for 14 days in the middle of winter or in the middle of a 115-degree heat storm in the summertime — it’s absolutely miserable,” he said. Now, his family will have electricity even when the grid shuts down.

THE CO-OP MODEL has helped Cal Solar and other residential solar companies stay resilient. “You have multiple sources of people working on these problems and solving them together, versus like one single owner sitting in his or her office trying to solve all this on their own,” said Stephen Irvin, co-founder and CEO of Amicus Solar Cooperative, a purchasing co-op that shares best practices and pools the collective buying

California Solar Electric Cooperative members Gerrad Powers and Alejandro de Necochea install solar panels on a Grass Valley, California, home in April (opposite).

Lars Ortegren, co-founder of Cal Solar, at the co-op’s headquarters (right).



power of small companies like Cal Solar to reduce equipment costs.

Today, 22 of Amicus' 85 member companies have some form of employee ownership. Irvin himself was a co-founder of Namaste Solar, an early worker-owned solar company in Boulder, Colorado. Other employee-owned

solar companies include Technicians for Sustainability in Tucson, Arizona, and Positive Energy Solar in northern New Mexico.

The collective brainstorming Irvin speaks of was visible at Cal Solar's company meeting this spring. "What do you envision for the

future of our co-op?" Niblock asked her co-workers.

"My biggest thing is staying lean right now and not growing too fast," de Necochea replied.

"I'm interested in working for low- to mid-class people," Ortengren said later. "I would love to not work for rich people anymore." Ortengren sees himself and his co-workers not just as electricians but as educators, explaining how to use solar efficiently and effectively.

"As a co-op, it's our vision," Niblock said. "We have to have imagination. We have to be the creators of our own destinies." ✨

Brooke Larsen is a correspondent for High Country News and a freelance journalist writing from Salt Lake City, Utah. Formerly, she was the Virginia Spencer Davis Fellow for HCN.

This report was made possible in part by the Fund for Environmental Journalism of the Society of Environmental Journalists.

"I haven't run into any other construction environments where you have construction workers saying, 'Love you.'"

Members of Cal Solar after a meeting at their Grass Valley, California, office.



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"I've been a reader of High Country News for decades, so it's a real honor to step in as interim director of philanthropy and work alongside such a passionate team of staff and board members. And, of course, none of this work happens without you — our readers and donors — who keep HCN going with your subscriptions and support. At a time when thoughtful, independent journalism about the West is more important than ever, I'm proud to help steward this reader-supported magazine that truly deserves your continued backing."

— Mia Axon, HCN interim philanthropy director, Boulder, Colorado

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HCN welcomes our newest board member

The members of the *High Country News* Board of Directors recently welcomed Chris Winter to their ranks. Chris is an attorney and heads the Getches-Wilkinson Center for Natural Resources, Energy and the Environment at Colorado Law School, an environmental law center at CU Boulder with close ties to Indigenous communities.



Chris, who grew up in Seattle, founded a public-interest environmental law firm in Portland, where he worked on conservation and environmental justice issues, including collaborations with Alaska Native communities. He's also a climber; his last job was heading the Access Fund, a nonprofit dedicated to keeping climbing areas open to the public and "protecting the climbing environment." He told us he appreciates our work "at the intersection of public lands, equity issues and climate change."

Chris has a personal connection to one of our recent cover stories: His grandparents moved to Corinne, Utah, to avoid being placed in a Japanese incarceration camp, and later settled in Brigham City. (Some Japanese Americans avoided government lock-up by accepting "voluntary evacuations" to communities outside the government-designated "military areas" along the West Coast, and several of those were in Utah.) We're thrilled to have Chris on our team.

You're invited to apply!

If you're new to *High Country News*, or have never had a chance to look behind the scenes, *HCN* is a registered 501(c)3 nonprofit. Our board of directors works with the senior management team to ensure that the business is responsibly managed and financially sound. Our board members, who are drawn from across the West, provide expertise, insights, and personal and professional networks that help us stay resilient and relevant to diverse communities around the region.

Board responsibilities include:

- Setting *HCN*'s mission, and helping to articulate our vision and values

- Hiring, overseeing and supporting the executive director
- Participating in strategic planning and monitoring *HCN*'s progress toward organizational goals
- Determining which programs are consistent with *HCN*'s mission and monitoring each program's effectiveness
- Assisting in developing the annual budget, approving it, and ensuring that proper financial controls are in place
- Ensuring that the organization's activities conform with all applicable laws, rules and ethical norms

It's worth noting that board members do not get involved with the practice of journalism on the level of individual stories, though they do help set *HCN*'s editorial direction through strategic planning and the hiring and oversight of the executive director. Board members are also welcome to share story ideas and provide feedback (negative or positive) to our executive director and editor-in-chief. But decisions about which stories to pursue and publish, as well as how to execute them, are made by the staff.

Much of the board's work is done in committees that meet regularly (some monthly, some only a few times each year) to discuss *HCN*'s governance, finances and fundraising, and to oversee our annual audit and our 401k retirement plan. The entire board meets three times each year — once or twice in person at different locations around the West, and the rest over video conference.

At present, we are particularly interested in prospective board members with expertise in:

- Business development, digital media or journalism
- Organizational governance, strategy or leadership
- Fundraising, finance or investment

In order to create a board that represents the West's diverse geography and communities, we are currently looking for board members who reside in Alaska, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, Utah, Washington and Wyoming. And we welcome applicants from traditionally underrepresented backgrounds, including Black, Indigenous and people of color, women, people with disabilities and LGBTQ+ people.

You do not need prior experience in nonprofit news or significant philanthropic resources to make a meaningful contribution.

For more information, and to apply, go to hcn.org/about/jobs. To learn more about our current board members, go to hcn.org/about/board-of-directors. And if you know someone who would be a great addition to the board, email us at dearfriends@hcn.org with your recommendation.

— Greg Hanscom, executive director & publisher

Hoisting a glass to HCN

In mid-April, a group of *HCN* editors and writers attended the Society of Environmental Journalists' annual conference, which is basically old home week for *HCN* staff, freelancers and alums. Several of our editors moderated panel discussions or spoke at the conference, which was held in Tempe, Arizona, and had a special focus on heat, water and growth. The team capped it all off with a "Friends of *High Country News*" happy hour at a local brew pub. (Naturally!)



TIERRA PROMETIDA

The **promised land** remains elusive for asylum seekers stranded at the U.S.-Mexico border, causing some to risk their lives attempting to cross the desert.

PHOTOS & TEXT BY **LISA ELMALEH**

I HAVE CROSSED THE BORDER with ease more times than I can count. Nothing I have done in my life, except for the accident of being born, has given me this ability. I am the daughter of a refugee, a first-generation American. Since 2020, I have traveled along the U.S.-Mexico border, volunteering with various humanitarian aid organizations. Armed with my 8x10 large-format camera, I have seen every landscape this man-made line runs through and lived in community with those waiting for asylum in shelters in Mexico.

Many people who migrate have been forced to leave their homes because of gang violence and political persecution, extortion and threats. When they arrive at the border of the United States, they find that asylum is no longer an option due to an executive order on “Securing Our Borders,” implemented on Jan. 20, 2025. Families cannot return to the homes they fled, yet they have nowhere else to go.

I think about the faces of the mothers I have befriended in shelters in Nogales. Blanca. Chelo. Sara. I think about their children, the way they would paint in the art classes the shelter offered. Brows knitted in concentration, they created landscapes, night skies, flowers for their mothers. Sometimes they painted families crossing the desert. I remember one boy who made a painting of a family walking through the desert: Jesus is walking past them, carrying the cross, and they hand Jesus their only bottle of water. The number-one cause of death for people migrating through the Sonoran Desert is dehydration.

Water is life — even children understand that.

And yet grown men, filming themselves for their social media accounts, will vandalize, shoot at and dump out the water left in the desert for people who are migrating. A representative from Humane Borders said in March that the water stations the group leaves in the desert have been vandalized at least once a week since President Donald Trump took office.

Without a legal pathway to asylum, the only other option is to attempt to cross the desert. During Title 42, the COVID-19 era provision that halted asylum long after lockdowns were lifted, I went on a search in the Sonoran Desert with the nonprofit group *Aguilas del Desierto*. This was in November 2022. We found seven sets of human remains in one day. One of them belonged to a young boy, his bones still entangled in his pants and shoes. He was about the same age as the boy who painted the picture.

As a documentarian, my intent is to communicate the necessity for compassion. The large-format camera I use is entirely relevant to this: The time it takes to set up and make a photograph allows for conversation and collaboration with the person, or people, in front of my camera. The media continues to churn out sensationalized and dehumanizing narratives, reducing migration to spectacle and politics. The work I do stands in opposition to this narrative. It is an act of witness — a way to affirm the dignity, humanity and resilience of those caught in an unrelenting cycle of forced migration, punitive detention and deportation.

Family from Michoacán, Mexico, Sasabe area, Arizona, USA; Familia de Michoacán, México, área de Sasabe, Arizona, USA, 2024







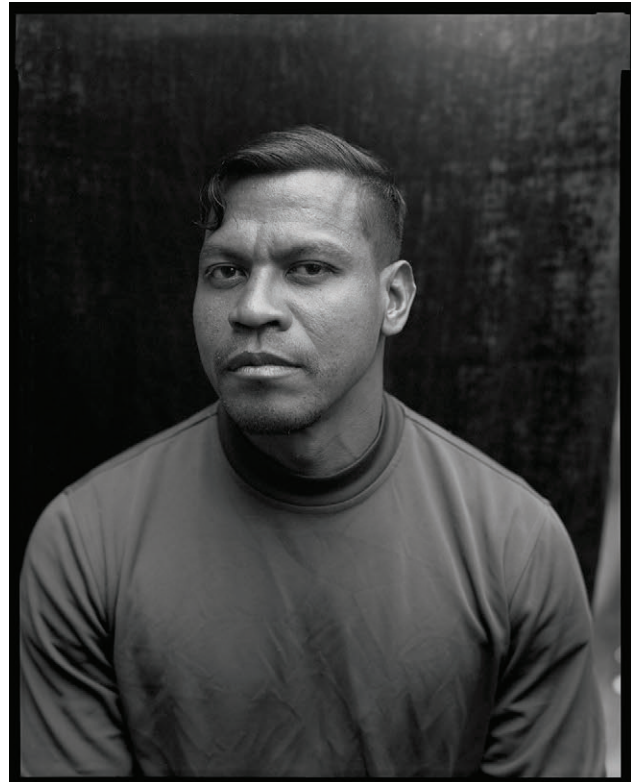
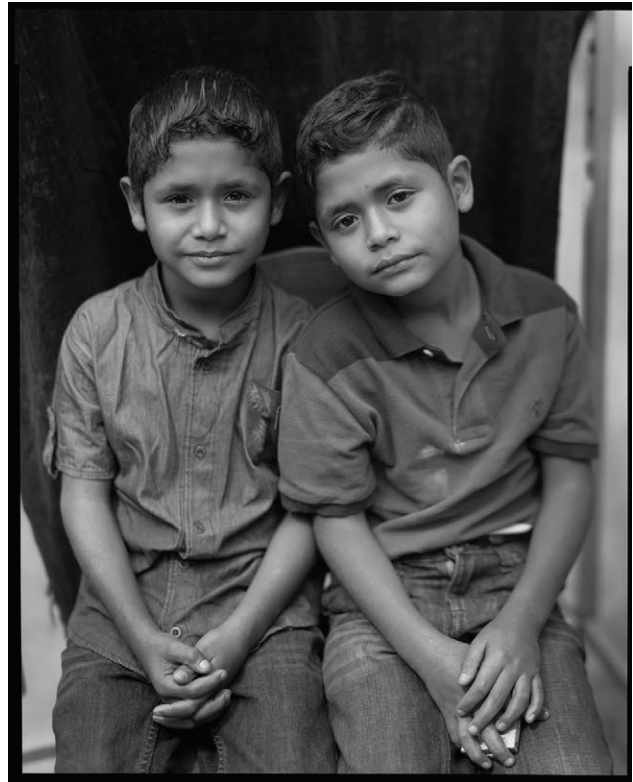
Far left, top: *Good Luck Charms, House of Hope, Sasabe, Sonora, Mexico; Amuletos de buena suerte, Casa de la Esperanza, Sasabe, Sonora, México, 2023*

Far left, bottom: *Missionary Sisters of the Eucharist, Nogales, Sonora, Mexico; Hermanas Misioneras de la Eucaristía, Nogales, Sonora, México, 2022*

Center: *Playing on the playground, House of Mercy, Nogales, Sonora, Mexico; Jugando en el patio de recreo, Casa de la Misericordia, Nogales, Sonora, México, 2024*

Below: *Boys on the stairs, House of Mercy, Nogales, Sonora, Mexico; Niños en las escaleras, Casa de la Misericordia, Nogales, Sonora, México,*





Clockwise, from top left: Marisela, Kino Border Initiative, Nogales, Sonora, Mexico; Marisela, Iniciativa Kino para la Frontera, Nogales, Sonora, México, 2022; Julio and Fernando, Kino Border Initiative, Nogales, Sonora, Mexico; Julio y Fernando, Iniciativa Kino para la Frontera, Nogales, Sonora, México, 2022; Maichol, Kino Border Initiative, Nogales, Sonora, Mexico; Maichol, Iniciativa Kino para la Frontera, Nogales, Sonora, México, 2023; Hansel, Roman, Alan, and Sara, Kino Border Initiative, Nogales, Sonora, Mexico; Hansel, Roman, Alan, y Sara, Iniciativa Kino para la Frontera, Nogales, Sonora, México, 2023

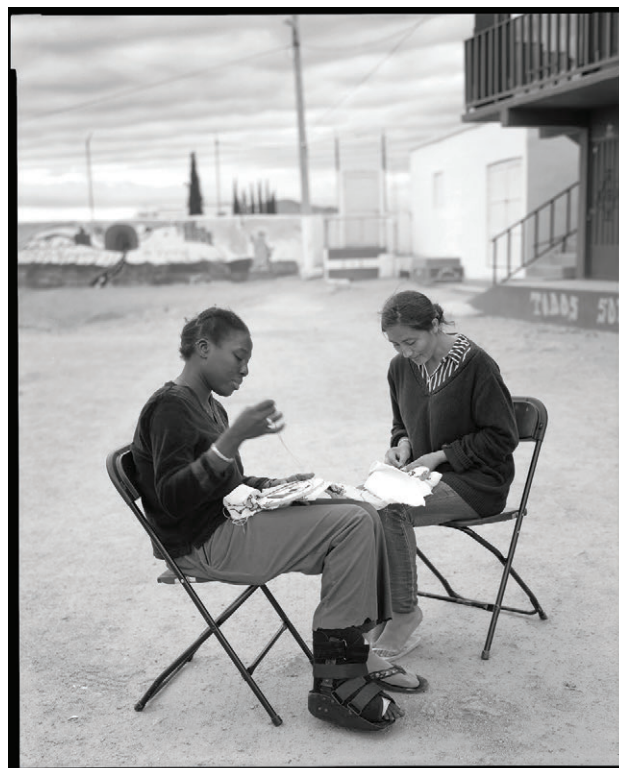


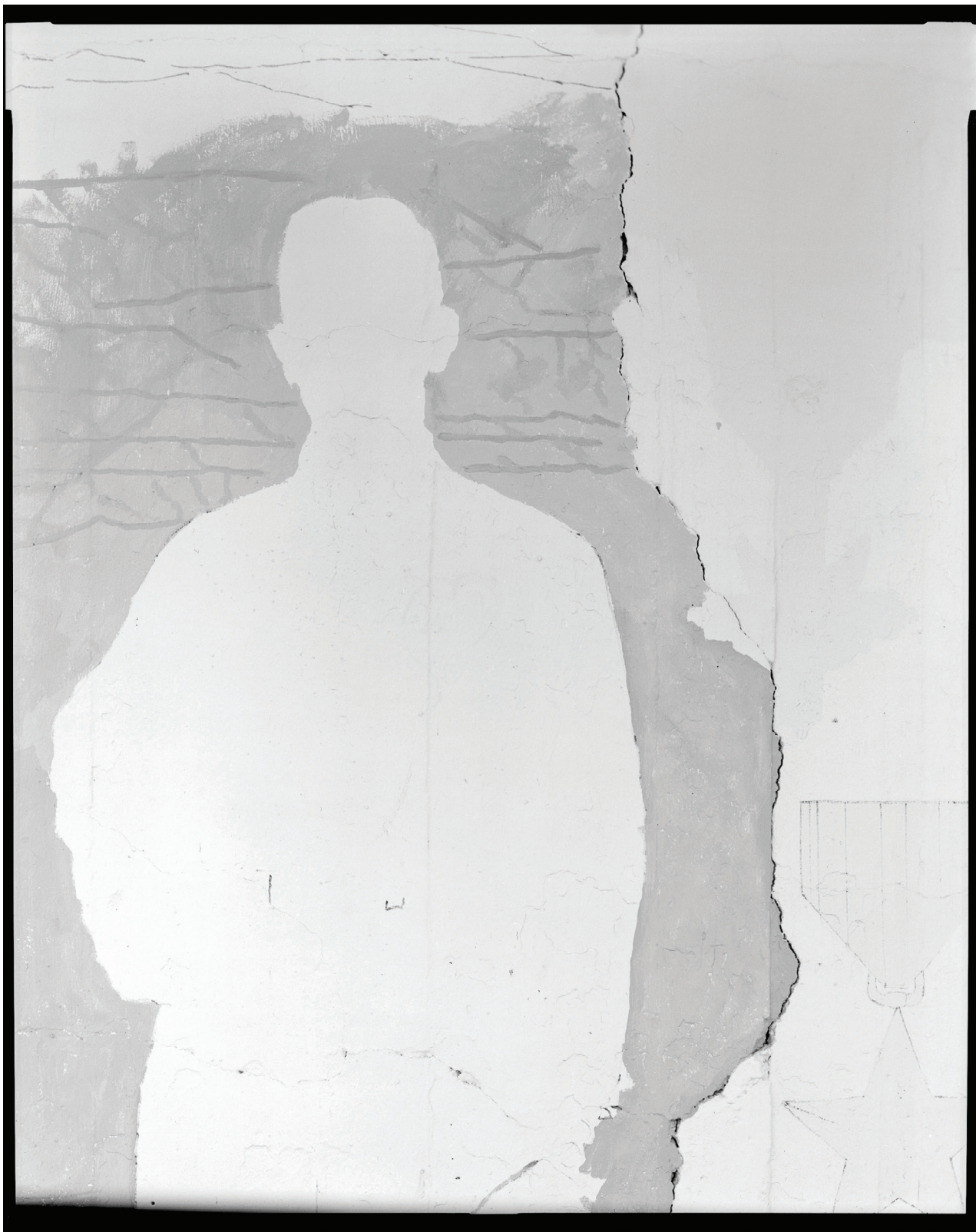
Lorena and Sandy, House of Mercy, Nogales, Sonora, Mexico; Lorena y Sandy, Casa de la Misericordia, Nogales, Sonora, México, 2024

Top: *House of Mercy, Nogales, Sonora, Mexico; Casa de la Misericordia, Nogales, Sonora, México, 2023*

Bottom left: *Braids, House of Mercy, Nogales, Sonora, Mexico; Trenzas, Casa de la Misericordia, Nogales, Sonora, México, 2023*

Bottom right: *Embroidering together, Yandé and Carla, House of Mercy, Nogales, Sonora, Mexico; Bordando juntas, Yandé y Carla, Casa de la Misericordia, Nogales, Sonora, México, 2024*





Mural of a person who isn't there, Ajo, Arizona, USA; Desconocido, Ajo, Arizona, USA, 2020

Lisa Elmaleh is an analog photographer, teacher and humanitarian. She has been active in the migrant justice community since 2020 and is the recipient of a 2024 Guggenheim Fellowship.

An aerial photograph showing a large-scale landfill expansion project. The foreground and middle ground are dominated by dark, uneven terrain of waste material, with several sections covered in white plastic liner. To the left, a green hillside with some trees and a dirt path slopes down towards the waste area. In the background, a more developed landscape with green fields, trees, and a winding road is visible under a clear sky.

WHERE THE GARBAGE GOES

Amid severe rollbacks of federal environmental protections, a community battling a local landfill expansion seeks to safeguard its own backyard — and everyone else's.

BY JACLYN MOYER

PHOTOS BY WILL MATSUDA

DRONE PHOTOS BY
EVAN BENALLY ATWOOD



■ The Coffin Butte Landfill, located near the community of Soap Creek in Oregon's Willamette Valley, takes in nearly a third of the state's trash.



IN THE SPRING OF 1987, Cathy Holdorf and her husband, John, drove to the end of a gravel road in Soap Creek, Oregon, a rural community 10 miles north of Corvallis. Here, where the smooth spread of the Willamette Valley begins to buckle against the Coast Range, they'd come to look at a property for sale: 30 acres of oak savanna draped over a south-facing hillside. They parked at the foot of the hill and set out walking. The lower land was intriguing — iron-doored bunkers from a World War II-era training camp cut into the earth and a creek ran nearby — but it wasn't until they climbed the slope that they knew they'd found what they were looking for.

On a knoll partway up a ridge called Poison Oak Hill, they stood to take in the view: Slender meadows wove through a tumble of foothills. Beyond, wooded ridges stacked deep blue into the distance. Even before starting back down, they'd begun to dream of a home here: a woodshop, a house, a garden.



The property was owned by Robert and Daniel Bunn. Known around town as the Bunn Brothers, these siblings also owned the local landfill, which was dug into the south face of Coffin Butte just across the valley from Poison Oak Hill. Despite its proximity — less than a mile north — the dump

didn't immediately concern the Holdorfs. From where they stood that day, it was out of sight. It was relatively small, locally owned, and, they'd been told, soon to close. Besides, over 100 undeveloped acres, also owned by the Bunnns, spanned between the dump and the property for sale. This land, the Bunnns

■ Cathy and Rose Holdorf, at their home in Soap Creek Valley, Oregon, next to the proposed landfill expansion site.

assured the Holdorfs, would always serve as a buffer: No trash would ever be placed there.

"We were just so convinced that it was a small dump, that it was being run well and would sunset soon," Cathy told me recently. "Maybe it was naive, but we didn't even consider that all of that could change."

The Holdorfs bought the property and began to build a home for their family. Cathy hand-drew the blueprints. John built nearly everything himself, picking through stacks of lumber at the local mill for the best boards. After the house was finished, the couple bought the adjacent 30 acres of pastureland, which they would later reforest with native pine, ash, cedar and fir. "We thought of it as a legacy home, something we'd pass on to our children," Cathy said. The place was the embodiment of a dream long held, and the

Holdorfs expected to spend the rest of their lives there.

The first decade the family lived in Soap Creek, relations with the landfill were just as they'd been promised. The Bunns regularly tested the Holdorfs' well water. When the brothers began a composting operation, they gifted the family truckloads of mulch. The Bunns even allowed the Holdorfs to lease the buffer acreage to graze cattle, charging an annual fee of \$1.

The dump on Coffin Butte, however, showed no sign of closing. Then, in December of 1999, the Bunn Brothers announced they'd sold the landfill to Allied Waste Industries, the second-largest waste-management corporation in the world.

A century earlier, Coffin Butte looked like any other ordinary hill: A swell of land stewarded by the Kalapuya people for thousands of years rising some 500 feet above the valley floor. The hill's north side was forested with oak and fir while the southern slope bore open grassland where, in the early 1900s, a farming family ran cattle.

In those days, no designated trash disposal site existed in the region. Settlers simply dumped their garbage into a river or a roadside ditch. Before plastics and disposable packaging, there was much less to throw away. Still, as the town grew, casual dumping became a problem. "Don't dump your trash, dead cats, dogs, and other rubbish onto the vacant lot just over the fence," counseled the *Corvallis Gazette* in 1906. Later, the paper recommended burning garbage. In the 1930s, a sanctioned dump site was established south of town, but by 1950 it had become horribly infested with rats — an estimated 200,000 — which were aggressively poisoned before authorities burned the place to the ground.

Meanwhile, in 1941, at the start of U.S. involvement in WWII, the federal government acquired Coffin Butte and the surrounding 56,000 acres to establish a military base called Camp Adair. To deal with the trash generated by the camp's 40,000 residents, the military set up a burn pile on Coffin Butte's southern slope. When the war ended, the camp was dismantled but the burn pile endured, becoming the county's designated disposal site after the rat-infested dump was shuttered.

Camp Adair marked the beginning of the transformation of Coffin Butte, but this

wasn't the only way WWII would alter the future of the hill: During the war, military demand for synthetic materials like nylon and plexiglass drove a 300% increase in plastic production. When the war ended, these materials migrated into consumer goods, and their production barreled onward.

The Bunn Brothers bought the Coffin Butte disposal site in 1952. Dan Bunn, the elder of the two, had a history in waste management. When he was 14, he started a garbage service in his hometown, Wishram, Washington. Too young for a driver's license, he hired a 16-year-old to do the driving. In the Willamette Valley, Bunn's entrepreneurial spirit persisted, and after buying Coffin Butte the brothers established several waste-management businesses across the region.

By this time, the garbage problem in Oregon and beyond had ballooned. In 1965, the average American was generating 3 pounds of waste each day and pollution caused by the prevailing methods of dealing with all this garbage — open burning, unlined dumps — led to the first federal standards for landfills: the Solid Waste Disposal Act of 1965. After the establishment of the Environmental Protection Agency in 1970, this regulation was expanded into the Resource Conservation and Recovery Act of 1976, which remains the nation's primary law governing waste disposal.

To ensure compliance with emerging federal regulations, in 1971 the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) began requiring permits for landfills. In turn, many casual dump sites around the Willamette Valley closed and officials representing several counties were tasked with finding an appropriate site for a regional landfill. This proved difficult: The Willamette Valley is made up of floodplains and prime farmland, receives heavy rainfall and has high water tables, all characteristics ill-suited to landfills. Plus, nobody wanted a dump in their backyard.

After years of deliberations, the group chose Coffin Butte. During public hearings, locals balked, citing the risk of groundwater contamination, inadequate regulatory oversight, and the impact on surrounding property values. Nevertheless, in 1974, Benton County allowed the Bunn Brothers to expand their dump into a regional landfill.

In the ensuing decades, waste generation

continued to grow alongside an industry eager to profit from its disposal. As companies competed for hauling contracts, national waste-management corporations began buying up local and publicly owned landfills — for whoever controlled the dump controlled a crucial keystone of the trash market. By the time Allied Waste bought Coffin Butte Landfill in 1999, Americans were tossing out 5 pounds of trash every day, and Allied Waste was bringing in \$6 billion a year. In 2008, Arizona-based Republic Services merged with Allied Waste, further consolidating the industry and taking over the Coffin Butte dump.

In the years immediately following the dump's sale, Cathy and her neighbors in Soap Creek noticed few changes. The new corporate owners didn't come around like the Bunns had, but the dump remained a benign presence. Then, in the mid-2010s, things started to shift. The roadsides were often littered with trash and truck traffic thundered along, seemingly without pause. Unpleasant odors grew more frequent, sometimes driving families indoors. The smell was difficult to describe — some likened it to rotting cabbage, others to bug spray — but people found no shortage of adjectives to lob at it: *Acrid. Hideous. Offensive. Nasty.* The dump's visual presence, too, swelled. Residents recall the Bunn Brothers promptly covering landfilled trash with soil, even planting grass and wildflowers, but now dozens of acres of hillside lingered for years under black plastic tarps.

A growing unease about the landfill began to ripple through the community, but it wasn't until July of 2021, when some residents received an unsettling notice in the mail, that people began to ask: What was really going on up there?

The notice informed residents of Republic Services' intent to expand the landfill from its current location on Coffin Butte across the county road and onto the northern slope of Poison Oak Hill — where the Bunns had assured Cathy Holdorf no garbage would ever be placed. Essentially, Republic wanted to fill the entire valley with trash. It wasn't just the Bunns' word that designated this land off-limits to dumping; Benton County's land-use code prohibits disposing of solid waste here. However, an exception can be granted via a conditional use permit, which Republic Services was now applying for.

The first thing that alarmed locals about

the expansion proposal was Republic's plan to close Coffin Butte Road, a vital fire escape route for the community. As neighbors shared their concerns about this, other common experiences began to emerge — eye irritation, worsening odors, headaches, nausea, cancer. To the shock of many, they learned that Coffin Butte had quietly grown to become the second-largest dump in Oregon, the repository for nearly a third of the state's trash. Each year, it took in over 1 million tons of garbage from more than 26 counties, including some in Washington.

The community organized a meeting at the historic Soap Creek Schoolhouse, where people occasionally gathered for picnics and rummage sales. "Our main aim was to find out what particular talents people had," Joel Geier, one of the organizers, told me. "It turned out there were really diverse abilities in the neighborhood." Geier himself is a hydrogeologist specializing in groundwater flow and contaminant transport. There was an environmental engineer. A labor movement organizer. A fire chief. Artists. Farmers. Birders. Parents.

The group formed an organization called Valley Neighbors for Environmental Quality and Safety, or VNEQS (pronounced "V-necks," like the T-shirt), and set out to research the potential impacts of the proposed landfill expansion. "It was very grassroots and still is," Ken Eklund, a Soap Creek resident and game designer, told me. "There's no hierarchy, just a lot of people who are concerned and have particular skills and interests."

Eklund's own interest lay in climate change. When the expansion proposal landed, he and his wife, Debbie Palmer, an active VNEQS member who stewards the organization's website, had lived in Soap Creek for five years and Eklund was looking for a local way to engage with the climate crisis. When organic matter decomposes in anaerobic conditions, it produces methane, a greenhouse gas 80 times more potent than carbon dioxide. In the U.S., where nearly 40 million tons of food ends up in landfills each year, dumps are the third-largest source of human-generated methane, following livestock and oil and gas production.

In addition to methane, landfill gas contains carbon dioxide, hazardous air pollutants, volatile organic compounds, and the "forever chemicals" known as PFAS. To

mitigate public health and climate change impacts, federal regulations require large landfills to collect these gases via a system of wells and pipe them to flares or gas-to-energy facilities. Because these systems are prone to leaks, operators are required to conduct quarterly surveys for "fugitive emissions." Any methane leaks above 500 ppm (parts per million) violate the Clean Air Act and must be reported to regulatory agencies — in Oregon, its Department of Environmental Quality — and mitigated immediately.

At Coffin Butte, Eklund learned, employees survey emissions by walking the landfill's surface with handheld methane sensors. The landfill covers 125 acres. Inspecting the whole thing on foot with a hand sensor struck Eklund as ludicrous, especially when he learned that a landfill operator can legally exempt any areas deemed too dangerous to traverse. (Republic Services exempts more than half the surface of Coffin Butte.) "I thought, surely that can't be the way they monitor?" he said. "But indeed it was."

Though this technique is common in the landfill industry, Eklund soon learned there were other ways to monitor dump sites. In 2016, NASA's Jet Propulsion Lab began using aircraft to track methane emissions across California. These surveys found landfill emissions were in fact far worse than previously reported, revealing dozens of dumps to be persistent super-emitters — sites that consistently released more than 100 kilograms of methane per hour. In 2020, collaborators from this project founded the nonprofit Carbon Mapper and began utilizing aircraft and satellite technologies to monitor emissions around the globe.

When Eklund began looking into it, Republic Services reported that Coffin Butte's gas collection system captured an impressive 91% of gases; 60% of these, they said, were piped to a gas-to-energy facility to generate electricity, while the rest were flared off. The company's recent monitoring reports identified hardly any leaks above the 500 ppm limit.

Methane itself is odorless, but many of the gases that accompany it produce a strong stench. Considering the widespread complaints of foul odors — "as if every cleaner under your sink were mixed together" — Eklund had doubts about Republic Services' figures. He wondered: Might Coffin Butte's actual emissions also

be far higher than reported?

While Eklund dug deeper into methane issues, other VNEQS members explored the impacts the expansion might have on groundwater, wildlife, public infrastructure and fire danger. When the county hearings were held in November 2021, four months after that first meeting at the schoolhouse, the community delivered such an impressive heap of testimony highlighting health and safety risks associated with the proposal that the Benton County Planning Commission voted 6-0 to deny the expansion request. Republic Services immediately appealed the decision, then withdrew its application and informed the county it would be filing a revised version in the future.

For VNEQS, celebrations were tempered. The process of compiling testimony had unearthed far more questions than answers, but one thing was clear: The dump was worse than anyone had thought. For many, this marked the beginning of what would become an all-consuming endeavor to understand the many ways the Coffin Butte Landfill was bound up with the lives of people and ecosystems, both nearby and faraway.

FORTY MILES NORTHEAST OF COFFIN BUTTE, a community in Marion County was fighting a different waste-disposal site: a trash incinerator. The last remaining incinerator in Oregon, the ReWorld Marion facility was polluting nearby neighborhoods with toxic emissions produced by burning municipal and medical waste, and activists had been working for decades to shut it down. They'd recently begun collaborating with Beyond Toxics, a Eugene-based environmental justice nonprofit, to develop legislation to strengthen emissions monitoring requirements for incinerators. (In 2023, Oregon passed SB 488, the strictest incinerator emissions monitoring regulation in the country. Shortly thereafter, ReWorld Marion announced it would stop incinerating waste at the end of 2024; however, it has yet to fully do so.)

When VNEQS members learned of these efforts, they were inspired, and also wary. If the incinerator shut down, where would all that trash — some 550 tons per day — go? The most likely answer was Coffin Butte.

VNEQS reached out to Beyond Toxics to



■ The working face of Coffin Butte Landfill, where some 127,000 vehicles — an average of one every 78 seconds — haul in over 1 million tons of garbage annually.

IN ADDITION TO METHANE, LANDFILL GAS CONTAINS CARBON DIOXIDE, HAZARDOUS AIR POLLUTANTS, VOLATILE ORGANIC COMPOUNDS, AND THE “FOREVER CHEMICALS” KNOWN AS PFAS.

express these concerns and ask if the organization might consider working with them on the landfill, in addition to the incinerator. “At first, the issues were seen as kind of at odds with each other,” Lisa Arkin, executive director of Beyond Toxics, told me recently. But it turned out the landfill and the incinerator were deeply entangled, and the two communities quickly came to see each other not as adversaries, but as allies in the same fight for a better waste-management system.

When trash is incinerated, it produces not only toxic emissions but also toxic ash — some 30 tons for every 100 tons of garbage.

This ash, concentrated with heavy metals and dioxins, must go somewhere. Landfills are required to cover exposed garbage at the end of each day with 6 inches of soil or an approved alternative material. At Coffin Butte, Republic Services had been using ash from the Marion County incinerator as daily cover, spreading some 25,000 tons across the landfill’s working face — the open section where incoming trash is dumped — each year. Though DEQ allows this practice, it concerns residents and landfill workers who worry about the implications for local groundwater and report wind-blown ash dust drifting over

the surrounding landscape. (Republic told me ash arrived in a wet, cement-like form.)

“So we started with the realization that we had this shared problem: The incinerator ash is polluting two communities,” Arkin told me. Beyond Toxics began collaborating with VNEQS, and it soon became clear that the contamination extended far beyond these two neighborhoods.

When water percolates through a landfill, it accumulates chemicals leaching from decomposing garbage and, in the case of Coffin Butte, incinerator ash. Imagine the contents of every trashcan within a city

block — half-empty bottles of air freshener and bug spray, plastic bags slimy with rotting food, scraps of foam insulation and broken PVC pipes, nail-polish remover, corroding batteries, cracked smartphones, pharmaceuticals — layered with the ashes of burned waste, then steeped in rainwater. The result is leachate, a toxic brew containing heavy metals, solvents, ammonia, dioxin and PFAS. Landfills that receive more rainfall produce more leachate. Coffin Butte, located in one of the wettest parts of the rain-drenched Willamette Valley, produces 40 million gallons — about 60 Olympic swimming pools' worth — each year.

Federal regulations require landfills to install liners and collection pipes to capture leachate and prevent it from contaminating groundwater. Landfills are under no obligation, however, to treat what they capture; instead, many dumps, including Coffin Butte, haul leachate to public wastewater treatment plants where it is processed alongside household sewage.

On a gray morning in January, I visited the Corvallis Wastewater Reclamation Plant, which receives half of the leachate produced at Coffin Butte. (The other half goes to Salem's plant.) There, plant operator Doug Rumpel led me on a whirlwind, *Magic School Bus*-style tour of the steps involved in transforming raw sewage into clear water destined for the Willamette River.

We began at the headworks, where landfill leachate is trickled into the flow of raw sewage entering the plant. This slurry then gushes through a metal screen to remove shreds of cloth (diapers, napkins, wipes) which are rinsed and loaded into a dumpster destined, of course, for Coffin Butte. Next, the sewage enters a tank where "grit" (coffee grounds, sand) quickly sinks. This, too, ends up in the dump. From here, the murky liquid flows into primary treatment tanks where solids gradually settle out. These are piped to an 800,000-gallon anaerobic digester where they're broken down by microorganisms to produce sludge. The digested sludge — rebranded as "biosolids" in a 1991 public relations naming contest — then sits in open lagoons where it undergoes further biological processes for a year or more before it is ultimately hauled off to farms and spread as fertilizer.

Meanwhile, the liquid portion is sprinkled



“THERE WERE TIMES I HAD TO WALK THROUGH HUNDREDS OF YARDS OF GARBAGE TO GET TO A MACHINE,” ROBERT ORTON, FORMER MECHANIC AT THE LANDFILL, TOLD ME. THE MACHINES — TRACTORS, TIPPERS, BULLDOZERS — WERE COATED IN CORROSIVE MATERIALS, FECAL MATTER AND GARBAGE OF EVERY KIND.

over a giant tank filled with rocks — just plain rocks. Covered in microorganisms, these help remove organic matter before the water flows onward to an aeration basin where a robust community of bacteria further clarifies it. The water is then chlorinated. Finally, the chlorine is removed with sodium bisulfite and the water is piped under the highway and out into the Willamette River 5 miles upstream from the drinking-water intake for the community of Adair Village. Farther downriver, Sherwood and Wilsonville also source public drinking water from the Willamette.

It's a mesmerizing process, the transformation of raw sewage into clear water and nutritious fertilizer via a sequence of processes performed by the humblest of actors: stones, gravity, bacteria. It seems almost magical, too good to be true. In part, that's because it is.

While the water leaving the plant appears clear and is free of many conventional contaminants found in human waste, such as fecal coliform, the facility is not equipped to remove the modern-day synthetic chemicals concentrated in landfill leachate — most notably, PFAS. These chemicals persist indefinitely in the environment and are linked to cancer, reproductive harm and other serious illnesses. Some are harmful at such low concentrations that the EPA has found there to be no “risk-free” level of exposure.

Joel Geier and Mark Yeager — a Soap Creek resident, environmental engineer and active member of VNEQS — wanted to better understand how leachate from Coffin Butte was impacting water discharged from wastewater plants. Through a public records request, they obtained data on PFAS levels in the Corvallis plant's influent, effluent and leachate. As expected, the PFAS levels in the leachate were off the charts. But when Geier crunched the numbers, another troubling finding emerged: PFAS levels in the effluent — the “clean” water sent to the river after treatment — were actually higher than the levels in the influent — the untreated municipal sewage. Similar results were found at the Salem plant.

The simplest explanation for this, Mason Leavitt, data analytics specialist for Beyond Toxics, told me, is that adding leachate — so highly concentrated with these chemicals — into the wastewater stream raises the overall concentration of PFAS in the water going out.

This may not be the only cause of the elevated PFAS levels, but what these numbers make clear is that wastewater treatment plants do not effectively remove PFAS.

Instead, the chemicals pass through these systems intact. Some pour out into the Willamette River with the “clean” effluent. Others end up in the sludge and are spread across hay and grass-seed fields. Dispersed into the environment, these toxins bioaccumulate, concentrating in the bodies of the animals who drink the water or eat the hay. Which is to say: Us.

ROBERT ORTON, a heavy equipment mechanic, grew up in Monmouth, Oregon, just up the road from Coffin Butte. “I’ve been going to that dump since I was a child,” he told me one January afternoon in his living room in Albany, Oregon. In 2021, after he was laid off from a civil contracting company during a pandemic-induced restructuring, Orton applied for a mechanic position at the dump. Before taking the job, he looked into Republic Services and learned it had recently made *Fortune*'s list of most admired companies. Orton assumed a business like that would run a clean shop with high safety standards. So when he got to Coffin Butte, he was shocked.

At first, working at the dump felt exhilarating in a “Wild West” sort of way, he said. “It’d be 100 degrees out and I’m working in shorts with my shirt unbuttoned, getting a suntan, arc-welding and just praying I don’t go down from heatstroke.” The experience reminded him of working on farms in his youth, where, if a piece of equipment broke during harvest, you did whatever you had to do to make it run, safety considerations aside. But at Coffin Butte, the novelty soon wore thin.

“There were times I had to walk through hundreds of yards of garbage to get to a machine,” Orton told me. The machines — tractors, tipplers, bulldozers — were coated in corrosive materials, fecal matter, and garbage of every kind, he said. The unlined ground around the shop where equipment was washed was constantly inundated with contaminated liquid that ran off the slopes with the rain. Clouds of dust wafted over the shop when loads were dumped. Workers used outdated PPE, Orton said, and were often half

a mile from the nearest running water where they could wash their hands. “There were times I contemplated urinating on the gearbox that I had to tear apart because I knew my urine was at least sterile.”

After expressing his concerns to managers, and later, OSHA, DEQ and the EPA, to no avail, Orton suggested the mechanics unionize. “I was never a union man,” Orton told me. “My father was a logger. If you weren’t being treated right, you just went somewhere else.”

But as a mechanic, he said, holding out his hands, “This is all you got. You start losing digits, that’s it.” All seven mechanics joined the union and, in September 2023, they went on strike demanding safer working conditions and better health care.

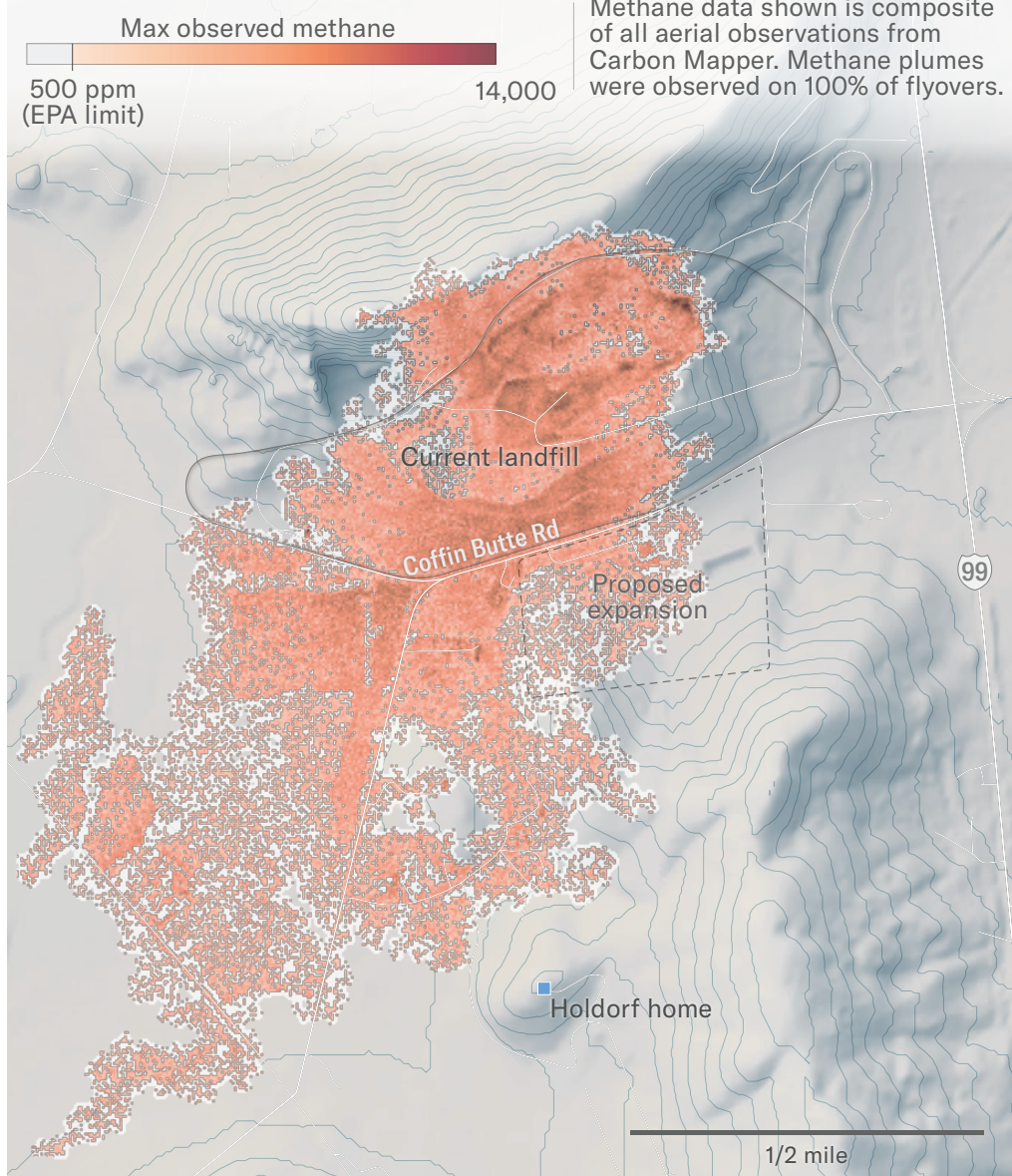
By this time, VNEQS had grown to include hundreds of members, and many came out to support the strikers. “God bless those people who were fighting this landfill before we went on strike,” Orton said. “They really got the word out.” The striking workers, too, had a lot to offer the activists: They witnessed firsthand what went on at the landfill and had been documenting what they saw. “The workers were sounding the alarm about methane,” Lisa Arkin told me. “The onsite videography they had was jaw-dropping.”

In Orton's living room, he showed me one of the videos. The day he filmed it, he'd just finished working on an excavator when he heard a loud hissing. “I thought I’d punctured a tire,” he said. But the sound was coming from below. At his feet, landfill gas was visibly bubbling up through mucky gravel, as if the ground itself were boiling. “I thought, ‘Wow, we’re working *right on top of this?*’”

Midway through the strike, Beyond Toxics received a report from an EPA surface emissions inspection of Coffin Butte. Though the inspection was conducted more than a year earlier — in June 2022, after locals like Ken Eklund had been raising concerns for months — the report had just been released through a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request from the nonprofit Industrial Labs.

During his announced visit, EPA inspector Daniel Heins retraced the path Republic Services employees had walked during their own surveys (the most recent one conducted just 14 days prior), in which the company found no more than six exceedances of the 500 ppm limit. Heins found 61, so many that he ran out of flags to mark them. Twenty-one

Methane emissions at Coffin Butte



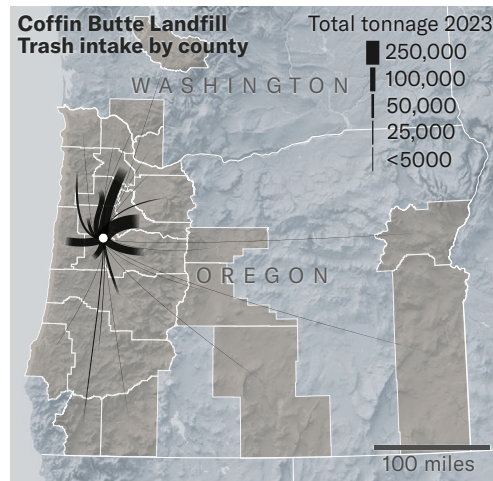
Maps by Nick Underwood / HCN

were over 20 times the limit. In some places, the tarp was visibly inflated with gas. According to the report, when Heins asked Republic if it viewed the inflated tarps as a concern, the company claimed the wind had blown them up, to which Heins pointed out the high methane concentrations near the inflated tarps, the fact that they were in a static inflated state, and the lack of any steady wind.

When exceedances are found during inspections, federal and state laws require landfill operators to take action to bring them below 500 ppm within 10 days. I asked Republic Services' communication manager,

Melissa Quillard, what the company had done to fix those 61 leaks. She told me they "immediately took corrective actions ... including patching tears in the cover tarps and expanding the landfill's gas collection and control system."

Nevertheless, Orton continued to see evidence of gas leaks: holes in tarps, poorly laid and busted pipes, bubbles coming from the ground. In March 2024, he left work early and drove to the Benton County Commissioner's Office. He told the commissioners that he'd emailed them a video of the bubbling gases at Coffin Butte, and encouraged them to reach out to talk further. He



SOURCES: Leachate disposal; Oregon Department of Environmental Quality and localities (map is not comprehensive). Trash intake; Coffin Butte Landfill 2023 Annual Report

never heard from the commissioners. A week later, he was fired. (Republic Services told me the company has a zero-tolerance policy toward retaliation.)

In June 2024, the EPA returned for another inspection, this time unannounced. The report from that visit, also accessed through FOIA, was released a few days before I visited Orton. Despite the two years since the previous inspection, the report revealed continuing gas leaks at Coffin Butte. In a survey covering only a small portion of the landfill, EPA inspectors identified 41 exceedances. Ten were more than 20 times above the limit, including some measured at

explosive concentrations. The inspector also noted significant odors, an observation that shouldn't have surprised him — locals had been reporting this for years. The mandatory 10-day follow-up survey indicated that the leaks had not yet been resolved.

By this time, Carbon Mapper had also surveyed Coffin Butte from the air and observed persistent methane plumes, some extending for miles and emitting more than 10 times the threshold of a super-emitter. Landfill operators, however, are not required to respond to leaks detected by third parties. “An aircraft can look down on Coffin Butte Landfill and see a huge methane plume, inform Republic Services and pinpoint exactly where the leak is, and — nothing happens,” Eklund told me. “Republic just shrugs.”

I asked Dylan Darling, public affairs specialist for the Oregon DEQ, what consequences Republic Services would face for the repeated violations, or how emissions regulations would be enforced going forward. He told me to ask the EPA, since it was leading the enforcement. EPA representative Mathew Vanourek told me he couldn't comment on ongoing compliance evaluations. Benton County Solid Waste Program Coordinator Bailey Payne told me the county has no authority to enforce state and federal air quality regulations. Thus far, no agency has issued Republic any fines, penalties or notices of violations regarding methane leaks at Coffin Butte.

In July 2024, Republic Services submitted its long-awaited revised expansion proposal. In response to community concerns about methane leaks, the new application stated that it is Republic's “priority and practice” to comply with all laws regulating methane: “The appropriate regulatory authorities have and will ensure that (Republic) remains in compliance.”

When I mentioned the findings of the latest EPA inspection to Orton in his living room that day, he was unsurprised. He only looked at me squarely and said, “Ma'am, they can't fix the methane problem out there.”

After Republic Services fired Orton, he was unemployed for four months. “I didn't know whistleblowing brought on a kind of PTSD,” he told me. “You have the photos, the emails, and still you're getting gaslit, they're saying, ‘No, these things aren't happening.’ Sitting around waiting for an unemployment

check, you start questioning yourself. It's just hellish.”

A scrawny black cat climbed onto the arm of Orton's chair as he spoke, pressing her forehead into his shoulder. “This is Luta,” he told me. “She was wild at the dump for years, and we got to be friends.” When Orton left Coffin Butte, he took the cat with him.

FOR KEN EKLUND, who'd first raised questions about Coffin Butte's methane emissions more than three years ago, the findings of the EPA reports and Carbon Mapper surveys were both validating and maddening at once. They confirmed what he and the local community had long suspected — Coffin Butte was leaking gas at rates wildly beyond what Republic has reported — and also revealed that very little was being done to fix the problem.

“We're on the receiving end of an incredibly big machine that's been set up economically and politically so there isn't a clear way to stop it,” Eklund told me on a foggy January morning at his home in Soap Creek. While we talked, Palmer updated the VNEQS website with fresh news: Benton County had deemed Republic Services' new expansion application complete, public hearings would soon be announced.

Now semi-retired, Eklund spent his professional career working at the intersection of game design and future studies.

When playing games, he said, people must constantly think and strategize about what will happen next. In turn, they become better at conceptualizing the future. His games — like the Peabody Legacy Award-winning alternate reality game *World Without Oil* — use real-world scenarios to invite players to imagine, and play out, alternative futures.

The proposed landfill expansion, Eklund said, “is a perfect example of where the future is completely missing from the equation.” Rather than asking how we can create a new waste management system that no longer relies on landfilling — and all of its attendant environmental harms — expanding Coffin Butte would only make it easier to perpetuate the status quo.

Near the end of 2024, after years spent digging into the landfill's environmental and public health impacts, Eklund and Palmer found themselves worn thin. The task devoured most of their free time while other passions fell by the wayside. Bemoaning all this one day, Eklund wondered: What if he could design a game about the dump? At first, all he could imagine was a dreary game of bureaucratic warfare. But over time, a new vision emerged.

The day I visited, Eklund explained the basic concept of a cooperative board game he was tentatively calling “Dump Monster”: A town dump has grown into a formidable and sentient living creature



■ The Willamette River flows past the Corvallis Wastewater Reclamation Plant.



“STOPPING THE LANDFILL EXPANSION IS THE FIRST STEP IN DEMANDING A NEW WAY FORWARD.”

— MARK YEAGER, MEMBER OF VALLEY NEIGHBORS FOR ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY AND SAFETY, OR VNEQS

capable of influencing adult brains. It seeks to grow ever larger by consuming more and more garbage. The players are kids on bikes. Unbound by the rules of adulthood but old enough to have freedom and mobility, they snoop around to discover where the dump gets its power and which humans it controls. Through the game, Eklund hopes, players will learn how waste management systems work, why so much garbage ends up in landfills, and who's profiting from it. “That huge

trail of trash may seem inevitable, but it's not,” Eklund said. “Once you begin to understand the system, you begin to understand how to defeat it.”

After the idea for the game began to take shape, Eklund told me, a liberating thing happened. “All of the sudden, the whole fight against the landfill became less drudgery.” The game had transformed a frustrating situation into a story. And unlike a book or movie, how a player engages with a game can

determine what happens next. “A game is a story you're inside of,” Eklund said. “One you can help write.”

THE FAQ PAGE OF COFFIN BUTTE LANDFILL'S WEBSITE READS: *Can I take a tour of the landfill?* To which Republic replies: *Of Course!* I dialed the number listed, but got an out-of-service message. I called the main line and was directed to an online

scheduling link, which led to an error page. I was then given an email address to query. When I didn't hear back, I asked Quillard, the communications manager who had been fielding my questions, for a tour. She told me there were currently none available.

In lieu of an official tour, I met VNEQS' Mark Yeager at a gas station on the outskirts of Corvallis. Yeager has lived in Soap Creek since 1987 and has spent countless hours wading through the legalese of dump-related documents — the expansion proposal, land-use codes — and translating it into engaging public presentations.

From the gas station, Yeager and I drove over a forested ridge and down into the south end of Soap Creek Valley, where houses stood amid snug meadows and signs reading "Stop the Expansion" adorned front yards. Soon, the valley broadened and the dump swung into view: gouged hillside, sheen of black plastic.

At Coffin Butte Road, we turned east and traced the foot of the landfill past the leachate storage ponds and the steel cylinder housing the methane flare. Near the entrance, Yeager pulled over and we watched traffic as he narrated. Here, a 90-cubic-yard tractor trailer hauling in trash. Here, a dump truck carting out rock from the quarry. Here, a local hauler with a load of construction debris. Here, a tanker truck carrying leachate to the wastewater plant. Yeager identified the purpose and contents of every vehicle that passed, and I wondered how many hours he'd spent doing just this. For many locals, the dump presents not only physical risks but also the psychological burden of living alongside a neighbor who had lost their trust.

We drove on, heading west. The landfill's working face was out of sight from the road, and only a vast slope of black tarp reached skyward. That day, rivulets of liquid cascaded down parts of the tarp. This, Yeager suspects, was leachate escaping the collection system to trickle into the surrounding soil. Republic Services, however, had assured him it was in fact just rainwater runoff. "Rainwater?" Yeager said, keeping his gaze ahead. "It hasn't rained in days."

On the north side of Coffin Butte, we parked on a piece of property that extends to the ridgetop, where the owner — who allows VNEQS access — operates a ham radio station

out of a geodesic dome painted like a soccer ball. It's a great location for transmitting radio waves, and also a lucky resource for VNEQS, offering one of the only vantages from which a layperson can view the dump's working face. VNEQS has brought legislators, including state Sen. Sara Gelser Blouin, and community members here to take a look at what most of us never see: the place garbage goes when we throw it "away."

Yeager and I set out switch-backing through a forest of oak and fir. Sword fern and snowberry filled the understory, and if it weren't for the smell, I'd have found it hard to believe we were on the backside of a dump. But the stench was impossible to ignore: a singularly offensive fusion of sulfur and rotting fruit and singed plastic, caustic and sickly sweet at once. Though my instincts implored me to hold my breath, the path was steep. By the time we reached the top, I was huffing, the stench thick enough to taste.

At the summit, trees gave way to grassland and the view stunned. Dark-bellied clouds roiled overhead while hayfields and pastureland spread bright green across the Soap Creek Valley below. To the west, fog pooled between forest ridges. To the east, the peaks of the Cascades, snow-covered and sun-struck, glowed like beacons beneath the bruised sky.

More stunning, even, than the view, were the birds: Hundreds of seagulls, white wings winking silver, wheeled over the landfill. Flocks of European starlings darkened patches of sky. A bald eagle perched on a nearby oak. Two red-tailed hawks circled overhead. All these birds, come to feast on garbage.

Below us, two working faces bustled with activity. At the nearest site, a semi steadily extruded a load of compacted garbage while smaller trucks came and went. Tractors marched across the growing heap, spreading and compressing the garbage. Yeager had brought binoculars and I aimed them towards the farther working face where a "tipper" was tilting a 90-cubic-yard container vertical to drop its load into the dump. Each year, some 127,000 vehicles — an average of one every 78 seconds — haul over 1 million tons of garbage to Coffin Butte. Less than 7% of this comes from Benton County. Republic Services would not provide revenue data specifically for Coffin Butte, but in 2024, disposal fees from the

company's 208 landfills generated roughly \$1.76 billion. I watched truck after truck climb the hill, and thought: *One man's trash, another man's treasure.*

Suddenly, a loud pop followed by a sharp squeal pierced through the drone of machinery. I pulled the binoculars away to watch a ribbon of smoke curl upwards and hundreds of gulls flap into the air. A moment later, another pop sent more birds rising in an uproar of squawks. A landfill worker was shooting off small pyrotechnics to shoo them. This struck me as comically absurd until Yeager reminded me that, according to the last EPA report, explosive levels of methane were leaking from this dump.

We stayed for longer than expected. By the time we left, I'd missed lunch and on my way home I stopped to pick up a snack. Inside Trader Joe's, with the stench of the dump lingering in my nostrils, all I could see was garbage — every product haunted by its future ghost: nylon onion sacks, chip bags, waxed milk cartons, yogurt cups. I lost my appetite and left empty-handed.

LANDFILLS ARE OFTEN DEEMED A NECESSARY EVIL, a symptom — even a solution — to a problem rooted elsewhere, in individual behaviors. Dumps, after all, don't generate garbage, nor do they manufacture the chemicals found in it. Instead, Republic Services asserts, dumps are "essential community assets" that provide a "safe and secure location to dispose of solid waste that humans produce."

But this is only partly true. Dumps like Coffin Butte don't produce garbage, but neither do they securely confine it. Instead, the residue of buried trash seeps out, into air, groundwater, rivers and farms, ending up, ultimately, in all our bodies. Nor are dumps irrevocably essential. For the near future, we'll need them to dispose of the things we produce that can't go anywhere else. But most of what ends up in landfills can — and should — go elsewhere. Food waste, which makes up the biggest proportion of landfill contents by weight (24%) and is responsible for most of the methane they produce, could be diverted to composting facilities, along with yard waste (7%). Plastics (18%) could be recycled or banned and replaced with durable materials. Paper (12%) could be recycled

or composted.

But as long as dumping remains cheap for consumers and profitable for corporations, there's little incentive to enact new policies or invest in the infrastructure necessary to pursue these alternatives. Most recycling services are operated by the very same waste management giants, including Republic Services, which profit more from landfilling than they do from recycling. Thus, implementing a truly effective recycling system that significantly reduces the amount of material going to dumps creates a conflict of interest. In its most recent annual report, Republic Services named, as a profit risk factor, "the negative effect that trends toward requiring recycling, waste reduction at the source and prohibiting the disposal of certain types of wastes could have on volumes of waste going to landfills."

In places where landfills are owned publicly, such as Benton County's southern neighbor, Lane County, different incentives apply. Here, the county's landfill is not a profit generator but a limited public resource that must be managed to last as long as possible. For this reason, the county is building a state-of-the-art resource recovery facility that uses advanced technology to remove all organics and recyclables from garbage, not only greatly extending the life of the landfill but dramatically cutting its methane emissions and leachate production. Publicly owned landfills, however, are less and less common. Today, two corporations — Republic Services and Waste Management — control half of all landfill space in the country.

Nearly everyone I spoke to who opposed the expansion of Coffin Butte emphasized the urgent need to enact upstream solutions to curb waste generation — right-to-repair laws, bans on disposable containers and products containing PFAS, organics diversion programs. "But stopping the landfill expansion," Yeager told me, "is the first step in demanding a new way forward."

ON A BRIGHT JANUARY AFTERNOON, I met Cathy Holdorf and her youngest daughter, Rose, at their home on the knoll beneath Poison Oak Hill. Winter sun flooded the kitchen where the three of us sat at a cherry-wood table built, like almost everything else

in the house, by Cathy's late husband, John, who died of cancer in 2013.

Rose grew up here, and after moving away to study traditional crafts, she returned in 2018 to revive her dad's woodshop. "Growing up, kids would say, 'You live by the dump, doesn't that stink?'" Rose said, laughing. "I remember always proudly saying, 'Actually, you really can't tell, and look at the place I get to live, it's so beautiful.'"

The place is still beautiful, and Rose's love for the land and buildings is palpable. But the dump is no longer so easy to ignore. The mountain of trash is now high enough to be seen through the winter-bare oaks behind the house. When she wakes early for work, the predawn sky glows with lights and rings with the sound of heavy equipment. And often, especially on foggy days, it does, in fact, stink.

I asked the Holdorfs: If the expansion is approved and the dump moves even closer, would they leave? Rose looked out the window, toward the same view of the Soap Creek foothills that had captured her parents' imagination nearly four decades earlier. "My dad dedicated years to restoring this land," she said. "The house is his life's work." The question wasn't easy for the Holdorfs to answer, and they felt hopeful they wouldn't have to. Instead, like many VNEQS members, they were focusing on writing testimonies for the impending public hearings.

A few months later, in mid-March, Benton County at last announced the dates: The hearings would begin in April and conclude in May. A decision would be made in June. With this announcement, VNEQS ramped up efforts to spread the word, organizing testimony workshops and delivering presentations to anyone interested — high school science clubs, community organizations, neighborhood groups.

One evening, I joined a few dozen people gathered in a cozy house in north Corvallis for a testimony-preparation pizza party hosted by a community member who'd recently attended one of VNEQS' presentations. The dump was 7 miles north — close enough to smell, the host said. Most attendees had only recently learned about the issues at Coffin Butte, and Yeager and Eklund had come to field questions and share information. Eklund had also brought along a new game: "Pin the Plume on the Dump-key."

Simpler than most of his games, this one involved a poster of a satellite photo of Coffin Butte and eight cut-out images of methane plumes from various landfills documented by Carbon Mapper. Eklund set the poster in front of the crowd, then held each plume over Coffin Butte and asked people to guess the true match. When he revealed the answer — not only did the largest plume belong to Coffin Butte, but three of the smaller ones as well — a murmur of gasps moved through the crowd. "What's in the plume?" someone asked. "Have they stopped it?" another inquired. To which someone else responded: "They'd first have to admit it exists."

When the uproar quieted, Eklund explained that Republic Services was not required to address these plumes, since the company's on-foot surveys had not detected them. Nor were they mandated to use the far more effective airborne monitoring tools that had. But that, he said, could soon change.

Earlier this year, Sen. Gelser Blouin introduced SB 726 to the Oregon Legislature. If passed and signed into law, it will require Oregon landfill operators to utilize the now widely available remote-monitoring technologies pioneered by Carbon Mapper (aircraft, satellite and drone) to survey landfill emissions.

VNEQS members are hesitant to claim credit for SB 726, but their dogged research and refusal to stop asking questions about Coffin Butte has played a crucial role in illuminating the regulatory system's failure to keep dumps in compliance with standards and in kindling lawmakers' interest. Many are hopeful the bill will lead to better emissions enforcement, not only at Coffin Butte but across the state. Coffin Butte's methane leaks are egregious, but underreported landfill emissions are common. According to a recent study from Carbon Mapper and the EPA, methane emissions measured by aerial technologies average 40% higher than otherwise reported. "We're fighting expansion of *this* landfill," Palmer said, "but we're fighting on behalf of a much bigger thing."

By the end of the night, folks were fired up and eager to write testimonies. Eklund and Yeager seemed buoyed by the numbers of new people becoming involved. The Trump administration's recent rollback of national environmental regulations proved the federal government could no longer be counted on



■ Debbie Palmer and Ken Eklund in their front yard in Soap Creek Valley, Oregon (above).

In his living room, Ken Eklund explains his game, “Dump Monster,” which was inspired by the Coffin Butte Landfill (left).

to address climate change or protect clean air and water. These responsibilities now fell squarely on the shoulders of regional governments and local communities, elevating the necessity — and potential impact — of just the kind of organizing VNEQS had been doing for years. “Locals see this as a chance to actually influence something,” Yeager told me. A woman nearby nodded. “Who knows what will happen to the EPA?” she said. “It’s on us now.”

In a time of stark political divides, the movement to halt the expansion of Coffin Butte has also built solidarity across party lines — Benton County Republicans, Democrats and the Pacific Green Party have all passed official resolutions endorsing the rejection of the expansion request.

Despite the groundswell of local opposition, plenty of uncertainty remains. “It’s very difficult to permit new landfills,” Melissa Quillard of Republic Services told me. Thus, expanding existing dumps is essential to perpetuating the current waste management system. “We know Republic has poured a lot of resources into this expansion attempt,” Yeager said. “So it’s hard to tell how it’s all going to play out.”

Not long after the party, I drove past Coffin Butte in the wake of a storm. The low-slung sun cast the sky an otherworldly shade of pink, and I pulled over to take in the view. The great shoulder of black plastic, slick with rain, glinted in the spectral light as if shuddering. For a moment, it appeared imbued with life. Two trash trucks climbed the face, then disappeared over the crest to drop their loads into the dump’s ever-hungry gut where the processes of decay were churning on, exhaling gas and leaching liquid. Watching this scene, I couldn’t help thinking of Eklund’s Dump Monster game: Perhaps the landfill really was less an inert facility, and more a living body.

When I’d last seen Eklund’s game, it was still a work in progress. He’d laid a sketch of the playing board across his kitchen table, and I’d puzzled over it for a moment before asking: “But how do you win?”

Eklund folded his hands over the board and grinned. “You stop the expansion.” ☀

Jaclyn Moyer lives in Corvallis, Oregon. She’s the author of On Gold Hill, which won the 2025 Oregon Book Award for Creative Nonfiction.

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Rose McAdoo at Denali base camp, Alaska.
Rachel Heckerman

A panna cotta made with water from the Easton Glacier, Washington. **Rose McAdoo**



CULTURE

Inspired by ice

Artists are capturing the life and death of glaciers up close.

BY KYLIE MOHR

WHEN ROSE MCADOO visits a glacier, she doesn't just bring a harness, rope and crampons. She brings a portable camp stove, sugar, powdered whole milk and heavy cream, and a gelatin substitute called agar. The glacier will also become an ingredient.

McAdoo is a dessert artist, and one of her favorite desserts to make on, and with, a glacier is panna cotta. First, she mixes glacial runoff with her ingredients, then brings the mixture to a boil before letting it cool and adding spirulina — a blue algae powder — to achieve various shades of blue. The surrounding snow acts as McAdoo's refrigerator, where the mixture sets in molds for up to two days.

Once it's ready, McAdoo whips egg whites, sugar and cream of tartar by hand into a stiff meringue and coats the top of the layers of set panna cotta. Tart blackberries, black currants

and chocolate form a base that resembles a moraine, the soil and rock left behind by a moving glacier. When she's finished, three layers of custard — white at the top, lighter blue in the middle and darkest blue on the bottom — illustrate how glaciers compress under their own weight, becoming denser and bluer. Finally, to signify climate change, McAdoo torches the meringue.

McAdoo, who splits her time between Alaska and Antarctica, is one of several artists who create art on and about the West's glaciers. The World Glacier Monitoring Service estimates that around 9 trillion tons of glacier ice have melted since 1975 — an astonishing loss that gives the artists a sense of urgency. "As an artist, it feels like our art has the potential to tell really important stories, but those stories have to be told right

now," McAdoo said.

Creating glacier-inspired art is not a studio-bound practice: These artists do at least some of their work on or near the ice, surrounded by the reverberating thunder of ice calving and the babble of runoff — natural activities, but also signs of rapid melting.

Emma Mary Murray, who lives on an island in Maine, sews with fabric, needles and thread. Oakland, California, multidisciplinary artist Caroline Landau gravitates toward glass. Bellingham, Washington, artist Jill Pelto uses watercolor. And McAdoo, of course, prefers sugar.

All grapple with similar challenges: capturing a moment in time with a glacier that is both living and dying before them.

All the landscapes Murray embroiders are in flux, she said. Even though mountains don't melt away like glaciers, the light or clouds above them shift. A new development might block the view. But Murray's glacier-inspired work matters more than other subjects, she said, "because we can act, and we need to act."

Every year, scientists with the North Cascades Glacier Climate Project go deep into the mountains to measure the boundaries and size of glaciers, among other data points. In 2024, Murray joined directors Mauri Pelto and his daughter, Jill, on an expedition.

Murray brought a small art supply tote filled with needles, thread, yarn, white canvas, denim scraps and paint. On the glaciers, she sat on her backpack and all her extra layers to



stay warm and dry, then began to stitch.

After 10 days, she left the expedition with a series of white flags depicting the six glaciers she visited. The sixth, Ice Worm, has shrunk so much it is no longer considered a glacier. According to the North Cascade Glacier Climate Project, all 47 monitored glaciers in the North Cascades are retreating, while four, including Ice Worm, have disappeared.

All of Murray's flags show glacial details in painstaking stitches. Many include a stitched black line crossing white space, denoting the glaciers' previous boundaries. Individually, each flag is a tribute to the glacier it depicts, but strung together — which is how she displayed the work for an art show and on social media — the flags are “symbolic to me of both the sorrow and everything we cannot change, in a white-flag-of-surrender way,” Murray said. “And representative of a hope, a prayer, a wish for unity and climate action.”

Her art grapples with the loss that has already occurred, and with humanity's addiction to fossil fuels, and its consequences.

Last September, Caroline Landau recruited scientist Madison Sankovitz, photographer Oliver Rye, several friends and a mule to hike their supplies into the Palisade Glacier, the continent's southernmost glacier. The central Sierra Nevada trek is arduous, over 16 rugged miles with 4,750 feet of elevation gain. The crew hauled several pounds of wax for mold-making, plus multiple stoves to melt the wax. “Everybody takes in information in different ways, and so to add art to that conversation and help people take in information is my way of communication,” Landau said.

Landau makes molds of ice chunks in the field, painting melted wax on fragments of ice, encasing them and carrying out the pumpkin-sized hunks, carefully keeping them from becoming too hot or too cold. If

one is dropped, it could shatter.

Back in their studio, Landau uses plaster and silicone goo to make positive and negative space molds, creating detailed containers to blow clear glass into. The Palisade sculptures resemble translucent tinfoil, intricately crimped and folded. Glass sculptures inspired by icy hunks from Newfoundland capture and refract the light, giving off a soft glow. In the face of the ongoing climate crisis, “the goal of this project is to really show its liquid loss and the transformation of melt,” Landau said.

Jill Peltó, who has visited Washington's glaciers since she was a teenager assisting her father's fieldwork, earned a master's degree in science focusing on the Antarctic Ice Sheet. Now, she communicates science through her paintings, playing with color, pattern and form to “show the dimensionality of glaciers and water.”

Her light, airy watercolors show layers

and movement, created by dipping the tip of her paintbrush into nearby meltwater. Peltó said she's drawn to the magic of glaciers, regardless of their fate. Her recent paintings focus on moving beyond loss alone to show how glaciers fit into a bigger context: feeding river ecosystems and eventually, the ocean.

Glacial art feeds the soul and the stomach. McAdoo sometimes serves her desserts on or

near the glacier they came from, a sweet, spirited treat for the researchers, mountaineers and guides she works alongside. "I think that's one of the powerful parts of dessert and cake," she said. "It's inherently celebratory." ✨

Kylie Mohr is an award-winning freelance journalist and correspondent for High Country News. She lives in northwest Montana.



Jill Peltó paints the Chickamin Glacier on Sinister Peak and Dome Peak in the North Cascades, Washington (opposite). **Jill Peltó**

Glass artist Caroline Landau (back right) and their team carry molds of ice chunks from the field (left). Landau at Glow Glass Studio (above). **Oliver Rye**

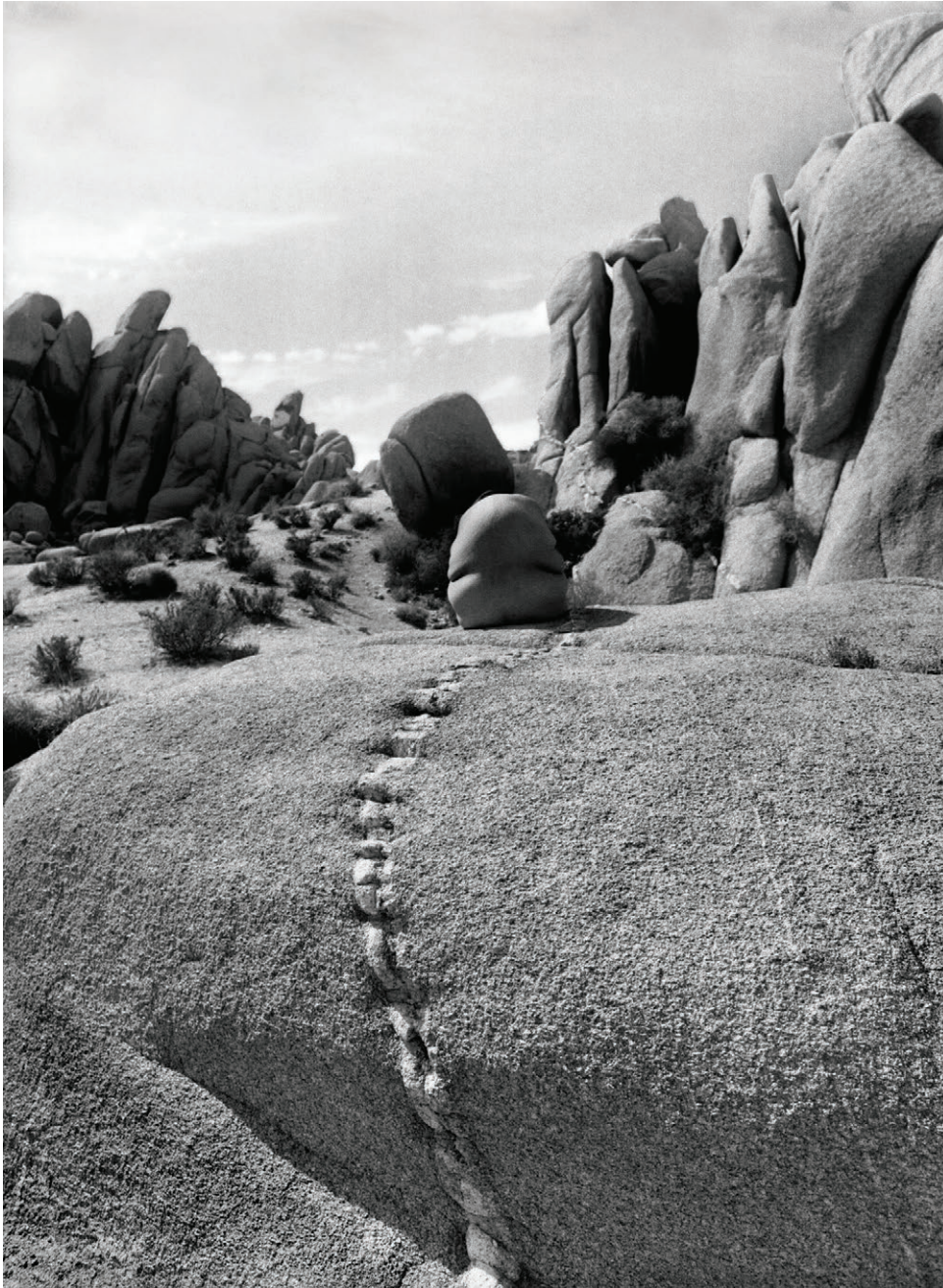
Emma Mary Murray began stitching a flag depicting the Lower Curtis glacier on Mount Shuksan as she sat on the glacier in the morning, then continued stitching at camp (below). **Jill Peltó**

The completed flag shows data scientists collected on the trip (below, left). **Emma Mary Murray**



CONFETTI WESTERNS

Exploring the queer natural and cultural histories of the American Southwest.



Notes on becoming a rock

Laura Aguilar's nude self-portraits provide a dose of geologic inspiration.

BY MILES W. GRIFFIS

THE IGNEOUS DIKE CUT through the enormous monzogranite boulder gleaming in golden hour rays. I followed the neat geologic line in the Jumbo Rocks area of Joshua Tree National Park, thinking about the late photographer Laura Aguilar.

The quartz intrusion sent me 20 yards up a wash into the sweet and spicy needles of a piñon pine tree before it vanished underground. As I walked by the blooming bladderpods, I imagined Aguilar positioning herself atop the molten rock intrusions for one of her famous self-portraits, posing nude with her back to the camera. In these photographs, she blends into the landscape like a boulderstone weathered by time.

Aguilar's portraits captured her harmony with nature, blurring the line between human and desert. As a naturist, I've been drawn to her nude imitations of rocks, trees and wind. What knowledge do we gain by sitting still? By exploring our own thrusting orogenous zones and crystallizing into the landscape?

Inspired by Aguilar, I wanted to be a rock. I wanted to escape my human form and the fragility of my own failing body, even if just for a moment, as our country crumbles further into fascism. In the time- and space-bending, award-winning film *Everything Everywhere All at Once*, a mother and daughter transform into rocks with googly eyes. They rest on the edge of an escarpment in Anza-Borrego Desert State Park, near Joshua Tree, where they have an emotional but silent conversation in subtitles. *Just be a rock*, the queer, nihilistic daughter says to her mother. I repeated it in meditation, imagining myself structurally rearranged, googly-eyes hot-glued onto my potassium feldspar.

Aguilar's debut work documented lesbian Chicana culture and other marginalized queer communities in East Los Angeles in the 1980s and '90s. Today, her photographs hang on the walls of international museums, from the Getty to the Tate Modern. Drawn to the desert Southwest, she also completed a series of nature nudes, beginning with *Nature Self-Portrait* (1996) and ending with *Grounded* (2006-2007), her first digital color series set in Joshua Tree.

Grounded mirrored "respite and revolution in its wild hinterland of quiet intensity... every bit of broken skin blooming in liberated relief," wrote author Raquel Gutiérrez. "What the body wants is the earthliest of desires

and in Aguilar's bodily charge the desire is as immense as the rock formations it mirrors."

Christopher Velasco, co-trustee of the Laura Aguilar Trust and a friend of Aguilar, said that the *Grounded* series was significant not only because it was a spectacle in color but because the use of color allowed Aguilar to better merge with the landscape and rocks. Photographed in the place where her ashes would rest more than a decade later, Velasco said that *Grounded*, in an eerie way, foreshadowed how Aguilar's body would return to and

*"I wanted to escape my
human form and the
fragility of my own
failing body, even
if just for a moment,
as our country
crumbles further
into fascism."*

become one with the Earth.

Aguilar wasn't prescribing meaning when she pressed the shutter, Velasco said, and though she inserted humor into her work, it wasn't always there. Still, there was often a sense of playfulness in the images.

That playfulness titters in *Grounded #120* (2006/2007), where Aguilar cheekily bends before a crack in a towering boulder, lining it up with her own intergluteal cleft. I smile, thinking of *Grounded #106* (2006-2007): a queer woman positioning herself beside a geologic feature that, in its British spelling, bears the same name as a widely reclaimed term for butch lesbians. As Sabrina Imbler, author of *Dyke (Geology)*, wrote: "Geologists

consider dykes intrusive formations, in part because they were formed underground until exposed."

Despite the many nature nudes that came before her in art history, Aguilar fractured the genre like a fault line, sending aftershocks that have reverberated for decades. Her compositions and performative self-portraits were timeless, allowing admirers to draw a wide breadth of interpretations. On social media, many have attempted to recreate her poses, but Velasco says most of them miss the mark: Instead of blending in with the landscape, many vainly focus on their own bodies. Velasco, who manages the Laura Aguilar Instagram account, said that usually gay men are the worst offenders.

Before she died from complications from diabetes in 2018, Aguilar told Velasco that he'd better not take any nude photographs of himself in Joshua Tree in tribute to her after her death. If he did, she told him she'd come back and "haunt your ass" from the grave.

I'll never attempt to re-create an Aguilar, but like many millennials, I'm guilty of thirst traps, or stripping down for attention on social media. In my early 20s, I posted photos of my unclothed body and moon-white butt skinny-dipping in remote alpine tarns and running across desolate sand dunes. Most of it was to get attention from strangers around the world as I came to understand my own sexuality. But I also wanted to document the simple joy of being nude in nature and hoping to find others to share the sensation of sun on skin.

Here lies the duality of the human experience: There are times when we want to expose our bare human bodies to the elements, and there are other times we long to leave them altogether, by staring into the eyes of Medusa. To completely avoid being perceived. To turn into strata, a dike splitting me in two, exposing neat quartz. To become an unassuming boulderstone, watching billions of years pass before my googly eyes. ☀

Miles W. Griffis is a writer and journalist based in Southern California. He is the co-founder of The Sick Times, a nonprofit news site covering the long COVID crisis.

Laura Aguilar's *Grounded #106*, 2006-'07, archival pigment print, 22 by 17 inches.
Courtesy of the Laura Aguilar Trust

IDAHO

Keep your shirts on, Idahoans, and better remove those dangling faux scrotums called “truck nuts” from your trailer hitches, or else find them some little truck-hitch briefs. Gov. Brad Little, R, signed House Bill 270, an update to Idaho’s indecent exposure law, and it went into effect almost immediately — through an *emergency clause*, mind you — back in March. If you’ve ever needed clarification about what cannot be bared in public — at least in Idaho — the revisions are specific, if somewhat fixated on certain secondary sexual characteristics, i.e., “female breasts, male breasts altered to look like female breasts” and/or “artificial breasts,” as well as “toys or products that resemble genitals,” the *Idaho Capital Sun* reports. Breastfeeding in public is still legal (for now, anyway). The updates were prompted by the inaugural Canyon County Pride event held in Nampa last June, where Nampa City Councilmember Sebastian Griffin saw a topless woman. He promptly reported it to a police officer, who indicated that it wasn’t against the law “for a man with breast enhancements to walk around topless,” and so Griffin co-crafted the bill. Opponents, like Idaho Senate Minority Leader Melissa Wintrow, D, argued that it would unjustly punish transgender citizens of Idaho and violate the First Amendment by criminalizing expression that “we don’t like.” At least the right to open-carry firearms remains lawful, provided they don’t have truck nuts hanging off them — and yes, “Gunsticles” are a thing. Look it up. Or better yet, don’t.

COLORADO

What cocky canine wouldn’t want to be mistaken for its noble ancestor, the wolf? Seems rather flattering, no? Meet Bonnie, a



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

shepherd/husky mix and foster resident of Gunnison County who became involved in a case of mistaken identity after photos and posts on social media misidentified her as a recently relocated wolf. Colorado Parks and Wildlife investigated and released updates over several days, ultimately identifying the “canine as an unleashed foster pet whose pink collar was covered by her thick scruff,” the *Crested Butte News* reported. The agency’s Facebook page posted several photos of Bonnie, off-leash and emanating major *Call of the Wild* vibes, which inspired some mixed responses. Some believed Bonnie to be a wolf hybrid, while others equated the so-called wolf sightings with the notorious

Patterson-Gimlin footage showing Bigfoot. But mostly, people were relieved that Bonnie was safe. The takeaway: This is not the dire wolf you’re looking for. This is one Very Good Girl.

NEW MEXICO

As if we didn’t have enough to worry about, what with truck nuts and all, another threat arises, this time from an “Albuquerque man caught smuggling meat across the border — again,” *Albuquerque Journal* reported. According to a Customs and Border Protection (CBP) spokesperson, a 52-year-old man was caught at the El Paso border trying to import 22 “large rolls” of pork product weighing 242 pounds. The man, who was caught in January sneaking 55

rolls “of undeclared bologna,” could face fines up to \$10,000 if found guilty in this latest episode. He was also carrying 60 undeclared tablets of tramadol, an opiate, in his vehicle’s center console. CBP El Paso Director of Field Operations Hector Mancha stated that “pork products have the potential to introduce foreign animal diseases to the U.S., which can have a devastating impact to the U.S. economy and to our agriculture industry.” Special CBP canine “Agent” Harlee, a handsome black Lab, detected the contraband cold cuts in the vehicle’s rear cargo area, and from the photo appears to be showing remarkable restraint. The lesson for visitors? Always declare your bologna, but if you’re in Idaho, best not display it publicly.

CALIFORNIA

It’s a pinniped pup boom! At Drakes Beach on Point Reyes National Seashore, elephant seals have given birth in historic numbers, a welcome boon attributed to the season’s clement weather. In recent years, storms interrupted the breeding season and severely impacted the survival of newborns. But things are looking great for the seals this year, *The San Francisco Chronicle* reported. Sarah Codde, who directs Point Reyes’ monitoring program for elephant seals, estimated that by the second week of January, 1,200 elephant seals had gathered, and 320 pups had been born. “It’s totally a successful conservation story,” Codde said, adding that “it’s a rough life”: The moms apparently don’t teach their kids to swim or even eat, though they seem to get by somehow. Meanwhile, visitors can watch females give birth, males fight, and best of all, adorable pups at play — everything you’d hope for from an elephant seal community. ☀



STORIES CONNECT US

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MACKENZIE ENGLISHOE

MACKENZIE ENGLISHOE
Mackenzie Englishoe's great-grandparents taught her to live off the land, using Gwich'ya wisdom passed down through centuries. Englishoe's great-grandfather dedicated his life to the land.

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#IAM THE WEST

**S'EILTIN JAMIANN HASSELQUIST
(SHE/THEY)
(LINGÍT)**

**Healer, aspiring Íxt'
Áak'w K'wáan, Juneau, Alaska**

I developed a three-layer system to help people connect with the land and the people of the land. One: Learn whose land you are on. Two: Learn how to say their traditional name, and what that name translates to. Three: Learn how to say “thank you” in that language. Lingít, Oyate, Diné — all of our names mean “people.” Indigenous people are older than the terms Native or Indigenous. We are the people; we are human. With this three-layer learning system, the message I am trying to get through asks you to see us as human, and to say, “Thank you.” Picking up those words shows that you respect us and want to learn — that you see us, and you hear us.

Do you know a Westerner with a great story?
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Kaa Yahaayi Shkalneegi Muriel Reid / HCN