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Survey finds majority of Montanans support measures to protect water resources

Montanans favor protecting all water and regulating hydraulic fracturing

Montanans support increasing protections for water resources from pollution, according to a survey conducted for the Western Organization of Resource Councils (WORC) by Harstad Strategic Research. The survey was released today by WORC and the Northern Plains Resource Council, a grassroots agricultural and conservation group.

The survey of 605 registered voters in Montana found strong support for protecting all water under the Clean Water Act (CWA) and for regulating hydraulic fracturing, or fracking, a process that injects water, sand and chemicals into oil and gas wells to release the oil and gas trapped inside.

By nearly a 2-to-1 majority, Montana voters agree the Clean Water Act should protect all bodies of water from pollution. Support extends to majorities among all key voter blocs in the state:

- Voters of all political persuasions: Democrats (76% say the CWA should protect all bodies of water), Independents (57%), and Republicans (50%);
- Voters in Montana's seven more urban counties, Cascade, Flathead, Gallatin, Lewis and Clark, Missoula, Silver Bow, and Yellowstone (63% say the CWA should protect all bodies of water), and voters in the remaining more rural counties (55%);
- Men (61% say the CWA should protect all bodies of water), and women (60% favor);
- Young and old: age 18-39 (58% say the CWA should protect all bodies of water), age 40-59 (60%), and age 60+ (63%);
- Voters who consider themselves to be environmentalists or conservationists (66% say the CWA should protect all bodies of water), voters who go fishing or hunting (62%), and voters who work in farming or ranching (50%).

“The Clean Water Act must protect all water sources to prevent mining, oil, and gas companies from dumping chemical pollutants into headwaters or areas with

intermittent streams during spring run-off or heavy rainfall,” said Julia Page, a Northern Plains board member and former owner of a whitewater rafting business based in Gardiner. “We must protect all water sources to ensure Montanans have clean drinking water for our children and families.”

Congress is considering legislation to restore full protection of America’s waters, including many wetlands and small streams, under the CWA. These wetlands and streams are important for drinking water, agriculture, flood control, pollution control, fishing and other outdoor recreation. The Senate Environment and Public Works Committee approved the Clean Water Restoration Act in June. The bill is awaiting consideration by the full Senate.

Congress enacted the Clean Water Act in 1972 to clean up and protect the country’s water, including wetlands and headwater streams. Two recent U.S. Supreme Court cases, *Solid Waste Agency of Northern Cook County v. Army Corps of Engineers* in 2001 and *Rapanos v. United States* in 2006, are viewed as narrowing the scope of the act. In those cases, the court ruled that CWA applied only to “navigable” waters.

More than two-out-of-three voters favor the *Fracturing Responsibility and Awareness of Chemicals Act* (FRAC Act), while only 18% of voters oppose it. Strong majorities of voters across key voter groups in the state support the FRAC Act:

- Voters in Montana’s seven more urban counties, Cascade, Flathead, Gallatin, Lewis and Clark, Missoula, Silver Bow, and Yellowstone (70% favor the FRAC Act), and voters in the remaining more rural counties (65%);
- Men (66% favor the FRAC Act) and women (70%);
- Young and old: age 18-39 (70% favor the FRAC Act), age 40-59 (68%), and age 60+ (67%);
- Households that work in farming or ranching (57% favor the FRAC Act);
- Voters who go fishing or hunting (68% favor the FRAC Act), and voters who consider themselves to be environmentalists or conservationists (78%).

The FRAC Act would amend the *Safe Drinking Water Act* (SDWA) to repeal an exemption given to the oil and gas industry from regulation of fracking fluids. The bill would also require disclosure of chemicals used in the fracking process. The oil and gas industry is the only industry exempted from complying with the SDWA.

“Underground drinking water sources are precious, especially for people in rural areas,” said Francis Blake, a Northern Plains member who owns a nursery and ranch north of Big Timber. “We need to protect of groundwater from fracking. Without controls, fracking may contaminate water wells, groundwater, and drinking water with toxic chemicals. The poll numbers affirm Montanans’ expectations that gas companies be

good neighbors and be accountable for operating in a way that is transparent and subject to public oversight. We need to make that happen.”

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) is investigating complaints by residents near Pavillion, Wyo., of water contamination and health problems associated with oil and gas drilling. Preliminary EPA tests have identified contaminants associated with oil and gas drilling in 11 of 39 drinking water wells in the area.

“Montanans want to protect the rivers, lakes, aquifers, headwaters, and mountain streams of Montana,” Page said. “They strongly support applying the protections of the *Clean Water Restoration Act* to all bodies of water, and Montana voters favor *Fracturing Responsibility and Awareness of Chemicals Act*. We urge Congressman Rehberg, Senator Tester, and Senator Baucus to stand up tall for clean water by supporting these bills.”

A copy of the survey report is available at www.worc.org.

WORC is a network of grassroots organizations from seven states that include 10,000 members and 45 local community groups. WORC helps its member groups succeed by providing training and by coordinating regional issue campaigns. Members are farmers, ranchers, and consumers.

For 35 years, the Northern Plains Resource Council has been committed to organizing Montana citizens to protect our water quality, family farming and ranching, and our unique quality of life.

Harstad Strategic Research is a national public opinion research firm in Boulder, Colo.

Survey methodology

Harstad Strategic Research conducted the telephone survey of 605 active registered voters in Montana, August 3-5, 2009. The random sample of 605 has a worst-case 95% confidence interval of plus or minus 4.0% about any one reported percentage.

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