

# WESTERN ORGANIZING REVIEW

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## “Coal Mine Cleanup Works,” Says Report

In October, WORC released an updated version of our recent report, “Coal Mine Cleanup Works,” which includes coal mine reclamation job potential in the Intermountain West. The report’s expanded scope includes mine reclamation work on Navajo Nation and Hopi Tribal lands, New Mexico, Utah, and Arizona (though it should be noted that these Arizona mines are actually on Navajo and Hopi lands). WORC expanded the report to provide valuable information to our Southwestern and Native allies in the region, and plans to amplify a coordinated message with these allies to important federal decision-makers.

Our original report found that the workforce needed to complete surface mine reclamation in our four-state region (Colorado, Montana, North Dakota, and Wyoming) would be between 4,893 and 9,786 job-years. And because end-of-life mine reclamation takes approximately two and three years to complete, between 1,631 and 4,893 full-time equivalent workers would be needed for each year of cleanup.

These numbers jump up quite a bit when the new states and Tribal lands are added into our analysis. Now, our report shows that reclamation work will create between 6,000 and 12,000 job-years, which translates to between 2,027 jobs and 6,081 full-time jobs per year.



Our report also highlights the egregious situation at the Kayenta Mine, located on the Navajo Nation, where Peabody ceased mining operations in October of 2019, but hasn't done any reclamation work in the subsequent twelve months. This is despite Peabody's legal obligation to reclaim the mined lands and their desire to lay off 250 workers with few prospects for other work. These workers are ideally suited for reclamation jobs and yet, this potential work has languished. The unemployment and poverty crisis on the Navajo Reservation has only worsened with COVID-19, making these jobs even more critical for the Nation and the community.

By highlighting the situation at Kayenta and other mines in the Southwest, WORC is aiming to remind decision-makers that reclamation work is important for our entire country. It also helps us to connect the dots across coal communities. Irresponsible coal operators tend to pull the same shady moves in each coal basin, so our states ought to heed these examples as warnings and do everything they can to hold operators accountable.

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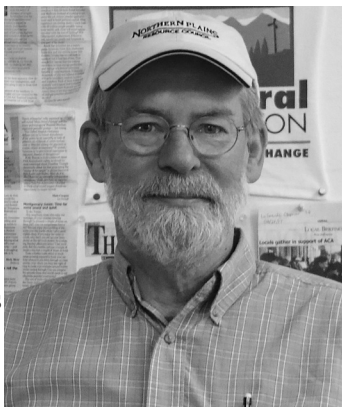
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# The View from WORC

By Mitch Wolgamott, WORC Chair

As 2020 comes to an end, I can't help but reflect on what a year it's been. Although there were uncertainties, I want to thank everyone who helped keep our groups on track during these trying times.

As we prepare for 2021, we all know it is going to be different. Covid-19's spread is predicted to continue in many countries until late 2021. As the entire world readjusts its expectations and timelines, nonprofits are being forced to re-evaluate, well, everything.



As community-driven organizations, WORC's member groups responded to needs during the COVID-19 crisis. In Oregon and Idaho, members came together to create Spanish language alerts so farmworkers and their families have up-to-date safety information. In South Dakota, meatpacking plant employees are being organized around job safety and equitable treatment of essential workers. WORC and our member groups are leading organizing efforts in fossil fuel-producing communities around our region to ensure that as coal and oil markets collapse, mine and well-site reclamation is funded to ensure that pollution is cleaned up and out-of-work crews have good-paying jobs. At the same time, we're working to strengthen bonding policies to ensure that reclamation work is fully funded in the future. And WORC is continuing our fight against the corporate consolidation in agriculture that forces hard-working farmers and ranchers out of business while transnational agribusinesses rake in record profits.

WORC and our member groups are gearing up to do even more in 2021. The upcoming election (as of this writing) is sure to have repercussions for years to come, and while our Grassroots Democracy program is in full swing, we're preparing for what possible changes in the Senate or White House might mean for our states. No matter how the election pans out, WORC will be ready to hold decision-makers and corporations accountable to the people.

But we can't do this work without the support of generous donors. Today, I'm urging you to support WORC or your member group with a year-end donation. Our network is unique in that we're member-led organizations. Our grassroots model allows us to respond quickly to the distinct needs of our communities. Your help means that we can amplify rural voices that are often overlooked by decision-makers, leading to lasting change in our communities.

Have you thought about signing up to give monthly? Small monthly donations go a long way. Monthly donations can be made by credit card or by direct withdrawal from a bank account. You'll never get renewal notices again, and you can change the amount when and if you wish. And, like me, you'll feel good each month knowing you are providing steady support for organizations that give you a voice in the decisions that affect your life. Contact WORC or your member group directly to sign up.

A handwritten signature in black ink, which appears to read "D. Mitchell Wolgamott". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

## WESTERN ORGANIZING REVIEW

The *Western Organizing Review* is published quarterly by the Western Organization of Resource Councils.

WORC is a regional network of grassroots community organizations, which includes 18,532 members and 37 local chapters. WORC helps its member groups succeed by providing trainings and coordinating regional issue campaigns.

## WORC's NETWORK

Dakota Resource Council  
Dakota Rural Action  
Idaho Organization of Resource Councils  
Northern Plains Resource Council  
Oregon Rural Action  
Powder River Basin Resource Council  
Western Colorado Alliance  
Western Native Voice

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Please consider a donation to WORC. Your support enables us to work on tough challenges facing our region

# In Memoriam - Bill Whitaker

It's with great sadness we mourn the loss of Bill Whitaker, long - time member and leader of Oregon Rural Action.

Bill taught community organizing, social policy and planning for 40 years while serving on national social work education boards and state legislative task forces. He and his wife Cheryl retired to La Grande, OR, in 2007.

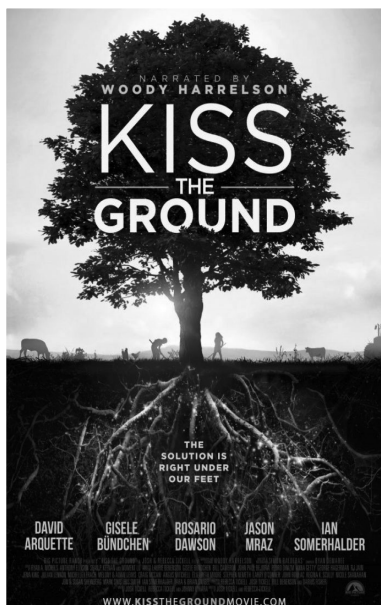
In retirement, Bill was enthusiastically engaged as a community activist in La Grande, Oregon — Oregon Rural Action, Union County Progressives, Union County Democrats, Rural Organizing Project, Health Care for All Oregon, and Western Organization of Resource Councils.

Bill will be remembered for his life-long passion and persistent activism for justice.



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## Join us for a Virtual Screening of “Kiss the Ground” if you’re longing for healthier food, less erosion, and carbon storage, the solution is right under your feet.



A movement to build healthy soil and practice regenerative agriculture (an approach to producing food which has been used for thousands of years by peoples throughout the globe) is seeing a mainstream resurgence as a less chemically-intensive alternative to the dominant industrial system of agriculture and as a way to help solve the climate crisis. An inspiring new film, *Kiss the Ground*, explains the importance of developing healthy soils and lifts up some examples of how we can build a better system of regenerative agriculture today.

Join us for a virtual screening of *Kiss the Ground* (Nov 27, 28, 29) and a virtual panel discussion on the film and soil health (Nov 30, 7:00 pm mountain time). You are invited to watch the film, at no charge, at your own convenience any time during these three days, Friday, Nov. 27; Saturday, Nov. 28; or Sunday, Nov 29. Register for the virtual panel discussion and you will receive a password and instructions for how to stream the film. The film is also available for streaming right now through Netflix.

WORC has connected with the *Kiss the Ground* filmmakers to provide a virtual screening at no charge over the course of three days Friday, November 27 through Sunday, November 29. We will then have a virtual panel discussion on the film and the movement to build healthy soils the following Monday, November 30 at 7 pm mountain time using Zoom. To receive access to the film at no charge and receive an invitation to the virtual panel discussion, register on our website at [www.worc.org](http://www.worc.org).



# Around the Region

## A look around WORC's network

### Dakota Resource Council

Dakota Resource Council launched its newest social media storytelling project, *Farmers and Ranchers in Crisis* ([ndfarmcrisis.com](http://ndfarmcrisis.com)). This project takes a personal look at the stories of farmers and ranchers across the state of North Dakota, who have been affected by multiple economic & weather related crises over the past few years.



The project originally started by looking at the stories of commodity farmers who were affected by the trade war, but, after months of research and interviews, coupled

with the COVID-19 crisis completely destroying the futures market, it became clear that the impacts facing producers are bigger than the trade war with China. Specifically, *Farmers and Ranchers in Crisis* will consist of a series of blogs and social media postings that tell the stories of producers throughout North Dakota impacted by decisions made in places like Washington, DC. In DRC's view, farmers and ranchers are the backbone of North Dakota rural communities. As a result, their stories must be told in order for decision makers in Washington DC to understand the decisions they make impact real people and communities. *Farmers and Ranchers in Crisis* can be found at [ndfarmcrisis.com](http://ndfarmcrisis.com) and DRC's Facebook page



### Dakota Rural Action

DRA members questioned the recent merger of South Dakota's Department of Agriculture and the Department of Environment and Natural Resources.

While the merger indicates a focus on agriculture, it will likely have a very narrow focus on the perceived problem of citizen involvement in the siting of large animal feeding operations, called CAFO's, regulatory oversight and environmental regulations. However, it seems unlikely the new department will address issues like: the long term impacts of climate change on agriculture, persistent low prices or market control by fewer and fewer multinational corporations. In addition, this change likely signals a continued lack of programs or interest in local foods and farm-to-school opportunities.

"Our government is supposed to be a watchdog and focus on the needs of everyone. Although ranchers like me have suffered from low cattle prices for at least the last five years, I haven't heard any concern from the state about my low prices or support for important policies like mandatory Country-of-Origin-Labeling (COOL). This merger appears to be a continuation of the state's focus on the needs and wants of large corporations," said John Harter, DRA Chairperson from Winner, SD.

### Idaho Organization of Resource Councils

The work to protect farmworkers, community members, and the environment from irresponsible uses of pesticides continues in Idaho. Members of IORC submitted a third round of comments voicing concerns on weak rule language proposed by the Idaho State Department of Agriculture and making



sure that regulations are not cut or altered in favor of big agribusiness over farmworker safety. The proposal now heads to the Governor. During the 2020 legislative session, IORC stopped bad legislation sponsored by the Idaho Agricultural Aviation Association, but now the Idaho State Department of Agriculture is holding negotiated rulemaking to alter existing state laws on pesticide use. IORC organized and generated input on earlier rounds of public comments in the summer. Local chapter Vision 2C is playing an important role in this effort and also helped distribute over 10,000 facemasks to vulnerable farmworkers in the Canyon County community.

### Northern Plains Resource Council

The Northern Plains Resource Council – working with affiliates Cottonwood Resource Council (CRC) and Stillwater Protective Association (SPA) – shepherded through approval for Water Quality Adaptive



Management Plans (AMP) for the Stillwater and East Boulder Mines. The AMPs have been years in the making and are part of the Good Neighbor Agreement (GNA), a legally binding agreement between Northern Plains, CRC,

SPA, and the Stillwater Mining Company, which mines for platinum and palladium in the Beartooth Mountains. The GNA protects Montana's Stillwater and East Boulder Rivers and recently celebrated its 20th Anniversary.

The AMP approval is important because it provides a water program that is proactive and precautionary. The goal is to detect and respond to water quality changes at the earliest possible time. The AMP accomplishes much of this by extending the existing surface water program and response requirements to include groundwater. The result is that problems will be detected – and action required – as early as possible to protect our rivers.

### Oregon Rural Action

In collaboration with local allies, Oregon Rural Action's Umatilla/Morrow team is continuing to distribute hundreds of bags containing masks, hand sanitizer and food to essential farmworkers and their families in Hermiston and Boardman. This is a continuation of their work partnering with Oregon Health Authority to support the communities most impacted by COVID-19.



Easterday Farms, a mega-dairy, is seeking a permit to operate near Boardman, OR, which potentially threatens to worsen the existing negative environmental impacts of other large dairies in the area. After public comment from ORA Board Member Mitch Wolgamott, the state of Oregon's "Environmental Justice Task Force" passed a resolution calling on the Oregon Department of Agriculture to extend the public comment period regarding issuing a permit to Easterday Farms. ORA members Abby Obdula and Anna Maria Rodriguez will meet with Oregon governor Kate Brown to discuss how mega-dairies are currently adversely affecting the Hispanic community in eastern Oregon and how the opening of Easterday Farms will only worsen existing environmental problems in the region.

### Powder River Basin Resource Council

In August, Powder River affiliate, the Cheyenne Area Landowners' Coalition (CALC) organized residents to attend a meeting of the Laramie County Planning Commission. At issue was a proposed zoning



change, on behalf of Wyodak Energy, from agricultural to an industrial park on a piece of land surrounded by residential homes, farms, and ranches.

With Powder River's support, the CALC rallied people to send in comments, make phone calls to the

commission, and show up at the meeting. A large group of concerned citizens showed up, and around 15 people gave public comment against this project. They spoke passionately of noise, dirt, dust, lights, road damage, safety issues, property value loss, and the loss of their peaceful rural setting in their opposition to the zoning change and the industrial park.

The Planning Commission unanimously voted it down, and a few days later, the company withdrew their rezoning request, at this time.

### Western Colorado Alliance

Western Colorado Alliance is celebrating a major victory following decades of work.

On September 28, the Colorado Oil & Gas Conservation Commission (COGCC) issued the first in its series of historic rulemakings. The new rules include 2000-foot setbacks, greater transparency in the drilling permit process, legal standing for adjacent landowners and other outcomes our Alliance has been working on for over 20 years. Western Colorado Alliance was present and an active player in these rulemakings, and this followed another victory they joined in before the Colorado Air Quality Control Commission (AQCC) earlier in the month where they won precedent-setting rules for monitoring and reducing methane and hazardous air pollutants. These wins show how grassroots organizing can succeed powerfully against imposing industry interests.



### Western Native Voice

In a lawsuit brought by Western Native Voice and five tribal governments, Yellowstone County District Judge Jessica Fehr found that the Ballot Interference Prevention Act of 2018 infringes on the fundamental right to vote and violates due process rights.

The COVID-19 pandemic heightened concerns about voting access for those with inconsistent mail service, lack of transportation or other barriers.

All ballots postmarked on or before Election Day will be counted for the November election only.

The order reads, in part, "This case and the facts presented at trial turn a spotlight to our fellow citizens that still live below the poverty line with limits to health care, government services, mail services and election offices — those citizens are the Native Americans that reside on reservations within Montana's borders."



# The Fight Against the Beef Checkoff Continues

At the moment, Ranchers-Cattlemen Action Legal Fund (R-CALF) is challenging USDA and some state beef councils in federal court over the constitutionality of the Beef Checkoff. In September, WORC joined allies in the filing of an amicus brief in support of R-CALF and U.S. farmers and ranchers who are forced to pay into the corrupt Beef Checkoff, where their money is used against them. Food and Water Watch filed the amicus brief which is a public legal document containing additional information and relevant arguments related to the issue that the court should consider. In addition to WORC, the “amici” or friends supporting Food and Water Watch’s amicus brief include Dakota Rural Action, Family Farm Action Alliance, Farm and Ranch Freedom Alliance, Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy, Iowa Citizens for Community Improvement, and Rural Advancement Foundation International USA.



Checkoff programs are essentially government-created commodity research and promotion enterprises. At their simplest, they work by collecting funds through taxes on commodity producers — farmers and ranchers — and then funnel those dollars into research and advertising for that specific commodity. For example, you might know the “Beef. It’s what’s for dinner.” campaign. That campaign was funded by Beef Checkoff dollars, the direct result of taxes levied on family ranchers. The National Cattlemen’s Beef Association (NCBA) receives millions of dollars through the Beef Checkoff, directs campaigns like “Beef. It’s what’s for dinner.” while lobbying against the interests of family farmers and ranchers and beneficial proposals such as reinstating mandatory Country-of-Origin Labeling (COOL). This needs to stop.

Since the Beef Checkoff was first implemented in the 1980s, corporate consolidation of the cattle industry has increased, markets have become less competitive, and fewer farmers and ranchers are in production agriculture. Instead of promoting fair prices for ranchers, the Beef Checkoff helps big meat companies and their lobbying allies to squeeze them out of the market.

WORC has long fought the corporate corruption of checkoff programs. In 1999, WORC passed a resolution, in lieu of corporate control of the ag industry, calling for USDA to schedule a farmer referendum vote on the beef and pork checkoff programs. Right now there is a national effort to petition USDA to schedule a vote in 2021.

WORC believes the best checkoff livestock promotion program would not require any legislation, but simply involve producers writing a check to the organization of their choice; a new, legislated program is a second-best option. In 2003, WORC adopted Beef Checkoff legislation principles to guide rulemaking on a fair checkoff. Learn more about these principles and the harm that the current beef checkoff program does to farmers and ranchers here: <https://www.worc.org/the-10-worst-checkoff-program-abuses/>

## Take Action

[www.worc.org/takeaction](https://www.worc.org/takeaction)

**Tell Your Senator to support  
The Oil and Gas Bonding Reform and Orphaned Well Remediation Act!**

*Companies should pay to clean up their oil and gas operations, NOT taxpayers or landowners. With oil and gas demand falling dramatically during the pandemic, thousands of oil and gas wells are being idled, and not all operators are able to properly plug and reclaim them.*



# Increased Support for Local Foods Offers Silver Lining

Local and regional producers have always had the appeal of being more personable and community-oriented, but COVID-19 has revealed just how much more resilient these smaller food systems can be. With restaurants and schools being closed, big meat packing operations saw a huge plummet in demand. On top of that, the virus spread through the meat packing workforce resulting in closures and thousands of animals being euthanized across the country.

“When you throw the current pandemic situation into the mix with the health concerns and the stores seeing a reduction in product availability, all of a sudden folks remembered that there’s local food and the Food Hub has become very popular because of that,” said Lyle Strobel, a farmer with the Yellowstone Valley Food Hub, a farmer owned and operated CO-OP. With COVID-19 shutting down some of the major meatpacking plants, people across the country have been relying on local producers for their food. As a result, the Yellowstone Valley Food Hub is experiencing sales four times higher than before the pandemic.

It usually took Lyle about six weeks to sell the meat from one pig, but now he is able to sell the meat from two pigs in as little as a week. Despite the horrible ramifications of COVID-19, the shift in the agriculture system could be a silver lining. The food system in the United States has been long overdue for a change that better supports regional and local producers. As faults in the current system are being revealed, local and regional producers all over the country have been stepping up to provide for their communities.

“The situation we're dealing with right now, with COVID-19, as sad as it is, has definitely benefited the Hub and brought a lot of things to light. There is a problem with the food system and the solutions not that far away,” said Lyle.

This year, the Food Hub hired a new General Manager, Michele Schahczenski.

Michele has a long history of working on farms and has brought that passion and experience with her back to her home in Montana to work with local producers. “These regional food systems are able to work with small, medium, and large scale farms while working against and combating the industrialization of the food system and the consolidation of small farms,” said Michele.

With stories exposing the problems and fragility of the corporate meatpacking industry consistently showing up in the media, Michele sees this as a time to really take advantage of the public's attention. “This is showing that we need more [meat] processors and more legislation that helps facilitate that process, creating new policies in which it is more manageable for smaller processors to do the work,” said Michele. The food industry’s largest producers can afford the costs of certifications, infrastructure, and inspections required now by law. These requirements often price and regulate small farmers and meat processors out of business.

“The pandemic is showing how these large, centralized, and corporate controlled food systems are vulnerable. People saw this and turned to local food systems. We need regional food systems that are able to adapt to crises,” said Michele.

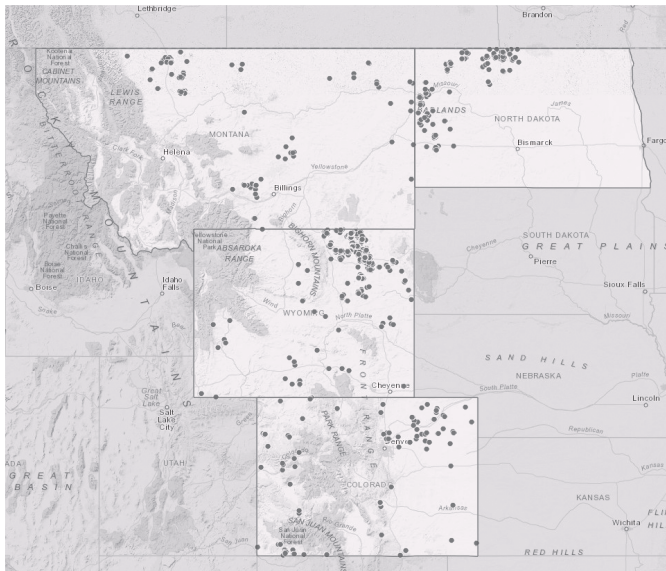


*Yellowstone Valley Food hub farmers gather each Thursday to package orders for distribution and pickup*

# WORC Supports Bill Tackling Unemployment and Orphaned Wells

These days, skilled workers sit unemployed while thousands of leaking, orphaned oil and gas wells litter the landscape of the West. An orphaned well is an unreclaimed well for which no owner or operator can be found, or where an owner or operator is unable to plug and reclaim a well. Orphaned oil and gas wells have been an issue for decades, in large part due to insufficient federal bonding requirements that have not been updated since the 1950s and the 1960s. Senator Bennet's (D-CO) new legislation, The Oil and Gas Bonding Reform and Orphaned Well Remediation Act, will put thousands back to work while enacting measures to protect vital groundwater and

oil and gas wells are being idled and are at high risk of becoming orphaned, and insufficient bond amounts make reclamation of these wells uncertain. These wells sit unplugged, emitting climate-wrecking methane and potentially contaminating groundwater until states and taxpayers are able to fund their reclamation. This legislation will ensure that the government can begin to plug and reclaim orphan wells without using taxpayer money, by eliminating nationwide blanket bonds, increasing statewide bonds and adjusting for inflation, and improving data collection to identify and catalog orphaned wells on federal, state, and tribal lands.



Over 4,000 identified orphaned wells scattered throughout Montana, North Dakota, Wyoming, and Colorado

agricultural land from continued damage. The legislation will establish an official orphaned well clean-up fund and strengthen federal oil and gas bonding requirements, creating a direct solution to the orphan well reclamation crisis that has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

For decades, unplugged wells have been allowed to pollute the land, water, and air of

thousands of Westerners who live near federally managed oil and gas deposits.” said Barbara Vasquez, Chair of WORC’s Oil and Gas Team. “These same communities, who had little input in development decisions, today face widespread unemployment. Senator Bennet’s legislation will not only put these communities back to work plugging wells abandoned by industry, protect groundwater, reduce methane pollution, address the growing crisis of orphaned wells, and ensure broader public participation in future development, it also prioritizes urgently needed bonding reform.”

Members of the WORC network from Birney, Montana, to Rifle, Colorado, helped shape Senator Bennet’s legislative solution. When we join together to rewrite the rules and create new solutions, we can ensure clean land, water, and air for the next generation. Our solution would create reclamation jobs for unemployed oil and gas workers while addressing the orphaned well crisis.

With oil and gas demand falling dramatically during the pandemic, already over-leveraged companies are going bankrupt and leaving behind unplugged and unreclaimed wells for states and taxpayers to clean up. Thousands more

## TAKE ACTION!

Tell your Senator to hold companies accountable and create thousands of clean-up jobs now by going to:  
[worc.org/bennet-bill-action-page/](https://worc.org/bennet-bill-action-page/)



# WORC Takes Trump Administration to Court Over Secretive National Coal Council

On October 15th, 2020, WORC, sued the Trump administration for violating the Federal Advisory Committee Act (FACA) by refusing to make fully public the meetings and records of the National Coal Council (NCC) — an outside advisory group that makes recommendations on federal policies related to the production and consumption of American coal.

“The coal industry has long stacked the National Coal Council with coal industry representatives who meet behind closed doors to try to launder their own interests into federal policy while shutting out the voices of ranchers, landowners, and coal mine neighbors,” said Marcia Westkott, Chair of Powder River Basin Resource Council and member of WORC. “The only solution to this one-sided, secretive decision making is to pull back the curtain and open the National Coal Council’s proceedings to public inspection.”

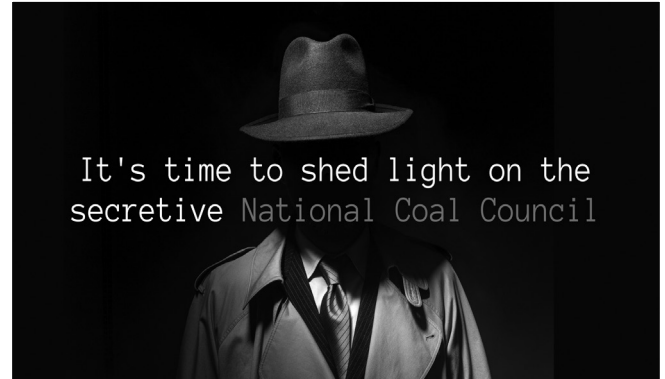
“Under the Trump administration, the National Coal Council has used the imprimatur of the Department of Energy to work exclusively to advance the coal industry’s economic interests, and it has unlawfully kept the American public in the dark along the way,” said Democracy Forward Managing Senior Counsel Travis Annatoyn. “Federal transparency laws are an essential check on the ability of private interests to influence and corrupt public policy. We’re holding the Trump administration to account for its continued violation of the law.”

In line with President Trump’s “Energy Dominance” agenda, the NCC’s focus has recently shifted to advocate for the increased use and financial support of coal. Since 2017, it has issued four reports recommending policies explicitly designed to increase coal extraction, despite the long-term environmental and public health problems such extraction would cause. The recommendations were developed without regard for the environmental and public health consequences for western ranchers, landowners, and outdoor enthusiasts.

The reports were prepared by and in consultation with many NCC coal industry members who have a direct conflict of interest in the contents of the reports because they would financially benefit from the policies proposed.

“With the coal industry’s decline, the future of coal communities is at stake. But instead of planning support for coal miners in the coal towns and counties like where I live in southeastern Montana, the National Coal Council has pushed for taxpayer subsidies and rolling back protections for human health and the environment,” said Jeanie Alderson, a rancher near Birney, Montana, Chair of the Northern Plains Resource Council, and a member of WORC. “It’s heartbreaking that this secretive committee ignores the needs of my friends and neighbors while writing reports funded by shadowy private donors. We need to find out what’s being done in our name.”

Trump’s Department of Energy has so far refused WORC’s recent requests



to grant the public access to NCC, Inc.’s materials and meetings. The Department has likewise not granted WORC access to NCC subcommittee meetings and materials, which collectively undergird most of the Council’s work product.

Without visibility into the NCC’s current work and the opportunity to provide input, WORC cannot inform its members across seven states of the council’s deliberations and proposals, and it cannot advocate on behalf of its members who farm and ranch on lands on or near coal, oil, and gas deposits. WORC’s suit seeks to compel release of the NCC’s materials from 2017 to the present and prevent it from going about its work until it complies with FACA’s requirements.

To learn more visit:  
[www.worc.org/  
worc-takes-trump-  
administration-to-court-  
over-secretive-coal-  
council/](http://www.worc.org/worc-takes-trump-administration-to-court-over-secretive-coal-council/)

# Covid-19 Brings Community Organizations Together

Beyond Grand Junction's stunning red rocks and winding rivers, there is a community of residents that is coming together to lend each other a hand through an unprecedented time. Grand Junction is located on Colorado's Western Slope, and like many cities across the world, it's seeing the impacts of COVID-19 amongst all of its citizens, some more severely than others.

Mutual Aid, at its core, is a community effort. These more informal organizations, run by everyday people and the working class, are better able to identify the main problems facing their communities by looking at the issues from the inside. Nonprofits and community organizations come together under the umbrella of Mutual Aid during times of crisis and have been instrumental in aiding the health and welfare of impacted communities throughout history. Throughout this time of social distancing, it has been the social connectedness of communities that has helped thousands of people through the COVID crisis.

"I think Mutual Aid is our innate ability as humans to feel compassion for other people and to want to help," explained Stephania Vasconez. Stephania has been volunteering for several years with different organizations. When the pandemic hit and grocery stores weren't able to supply restaurants, there was a surplus of produce that was being thrown away because food pantries in Grand Junction were full and soup kitchens didn't have space to store extra produce. Stephania knew that there was available food, and people who needed that food, but saw that there wasn't the coordination to make that exchange. Stephania called around and found the food distribution event that happens every Tuesday with Mutual Aid and has been volunteering there ever since.



*Stephania Vasconez packages masks and other healthcare products to distribute at a community feed.*

The food distributions feed approximately 81 individuals and 129 families each week. Houseless individuals make up a large portion of the people who receive help from Mutual Aid but there are also single parents, teachers, and anyone else who was left without support during the pandemic. The groups have partnered to provide more than just food security but also vaccinations for pets, haircuts, healthcare, and anything else people might need during these times.

"You can't fight for racial justice on an empty belly," said David Hood on the topic of the interconnectedness of the current issues facing the U.S. David began giving aid to a racial justice group called Right and Wrong (RAW) by providing cold water throughout the summer during protests sparked by the murder of George Floyd and many other African Americans in the United States. Western Colorado Alliance was an early fiscal sponsor of RAW and is a continued supporter of racial justice and equity in western Colorado.

RAW sponsors one of the "Feeds" in a city park on the weekends and operates similarly to Mutual Aid by being a collaborative, community-run organization. "There are members of marginalized communities and in every region or district and a lot of those people are the ones that are already at risk for being the most food insecure. We get a lot of that, just in general and I'm speaking as a member of one of those marginalized communities. Sometimes I also have to grab a box of produce, I feel like it is even my duty to grab a box of produce to keep me from going out and shopping at the grocery store because I'm also a low income, black person of color," explained David.

"Mutual Aid is more than physical nourishment, it's made up of other community members that we may have interacted with in other capacities and built relationships with. It's collaborative, perhaps even an exchange of resources," said Stephania, "It's us working together, alongside members of our community from different backgrounds and realizing we're all humans with the same basic needs to survive, to have purpose and to be loved."

# An Election Unlike Any Other

**A**t the time of this writing, Election Day is still around the corner and the outcomes we all have been anxiously waiting for are still unknown. But one thing we can all agree on is that this election year has been one unlike any other. Let's face it, organizing during a pandemic is hard. Registering voters during a pandemic is hard. Having impacting conversations with voters during a pandemic is hard. Fighting to maintain access to the ballot box during a pandemic is hard. Voting during a pandemic is hard. At the forefront of all of our minds is how will COVID-19 impact voter turnout this year? Did we do enough to adjust and adapt to ensure all voters were enfranchised? Groups across the WORC network have been tirelessly working to ensure everyone has safe and equal access to the ballot box this year, voters have information on how and where to vote, and communities are empowered to show up.

Western Native Voice and Montana Native Vote have adapted all of their get out the vote programs in order to continue to protect the safety of their communities. This started by rising as a leader on Indigenous voting rights by bringing forward a lawsuit against Montana's Secretary of State to bring down the Ballot Interference Prevention Act (BIPA), a law that limited the number of ballots a person could collect for voters. This law disproportionately impacted Indigenous communities and would have prevented WNV from providing this critical service to tribal communities. With BIPA out of the picture, WNV has hired up an impressive field team of over one hundred organizers across all Tribal Nations who have been diligently working to safely and securely collect ballots for voters who do not have convenient access to postal services or are unable to travel long distances to drop them off in person. In addition, their organizers have been using all possible avenues to reach voters to provide them with information about how to vote this year. Also in Montana, Montana Rural Voters has been talking to voters about the upcoming election since July. With over 100,000 calls and over 10,000 texts to rural voters under their belt, they are expecting to see exceptionally high turnout in rural communities this year.

Further to the east, North Dakota Native Vote has also been staying resilient and resourceful through the pandemic. With North Dakota being number one in the nation for COVID-19 cases per capita and one of the top states in the country who have cut polling locations by at least 50%, getting out the vote has been no easy task. In spite of it all, NDNV has employed a strong field team across six locations who are finding creative ways to safely spread information about how to sign up to vote by mail or where to vote in person. North Dakota Rural Voters has also been calling people across rural communities to provide information on how their voting options have changed for this election and help voters create a plan to cast their ballot before November 3rd.

To the southwest, Western Colorado Alliance and Colorado Rural Voters are working hard to engage young and new voters in order to increase the record-breaking turnout numbers they are seeing on the Western Slope. Currently 5% of the early votes cast have been new voters and 13% are voters between 18-35 years old. They have been leaving voting information on thousands of voters' doors, sending thousands of handwritten postcards to these same voters, and mailed a voter guide to people all across the Western Slope. Providing people with easy to digest accessible information is key to building a confident voting bloc. One way WCA and CORV are doing this is by creating a ballot issues guide that will inspire voters to show up and vote for issues that directly impact their lives.

**GET OUT  
THE VOTE!**

There is no doubt that COVID-19 has impacted our elections this year. However, with strong resolve and adaptiveness of WORC's groups and leaders, we can be confident on election night that we have done everything we can to ensure access to the ballot for all people.



# WORC

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