

# WESTERN ORGANIZING REVIEW

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## Vilsack Must Commit to Bold Action

**T**om Vilsack will serve again as Secretary of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). Leaders of the Western Organization of Resource Councils (WORC) expressed concern over Vilsack's nomination based on his track record, and urged Mr. Vilsack to commit now to bold action to build toward a vision for a farm and food system and rural communities that are fair, thriving, and sustainable.

As Secretary under President Obama, Vilsack invested in local and regional food systems and promoted the expansion of organic agriculture, but failed to address the rapid consolidation of agribusiness, the decline of family farms, unfair practices by meatpackers, civil rights complaints, and the culture of discrimination at USDA. Since 2017, he has led the U.S. Dairy Export Council, representing large-scale dairy processors while 10,000 family dairy farmers went out of business.

"The COVID-19 pandemic has laid bare the weaknesses and inequities in our farm and food system, and the challenges rural America faces. This is an unprecedented moment for action to provide food to those who are in need during the pandemic and protect the working people who are in the fields and the processing plants. We urge the next Secretary of Agriculture to advance a plan to transform our agriculture and food system and revitalize rural communities and economies. Business as usual won't cut it. I want to know what Tom Vilsack's vision is," said Marielena Vega, a member of Idaho Organization of Resource Councils who lives in Nampa, ID.

One of Tom Vilsack's first actions as Secretary was to launch a series of workshops on competition in agriculture and the need for antitrust enforcement. He heard from thousands of farmers, ranchers, workers, and everyday Americans who catalogued a multitude of problems and called for action to ensure fair prices for farmers, fair wages for workers, and a safe and resilient food system. Then, nothing happened. USDA proposed modest new Farmer Fair Practices rules but didn't get them all of the way through the process, and they were gutted by the Trump Administration.

"President Biden has made strengthening antitrust enforcement his first priority to help family farms thrive. I want to know what Tom Vilsack is going to do to restore competitive markets that's different from his first eight years on the job as Ag Secretary," said David Schwalbe, a member of Dakota Resource Council who lives in Bismarck, ND.

"Montana can't afford another status quo USDA with pro-corporate policies. Under Secretary Vilsack, we

### IN THIS ISSUE:

The View from WORC .....	2
As Coal Plants Close, Colorado Focuses on Transition .....	3
Around the Region .....	4
WORC's Commitment to Equity .....	6
WORC Watchdogs Lighthouse Resources Bankruptcy .....	6
Fighting to Transition Power on Colorado's West Slope .....	7
Members Address Left-Behind Oil Wells .....	8
Online Farmers Market Keeps Community Connected .....	9
Unchecked Oil and Gas Development Threatens National Park .....	10

*"Secretary Vilsack" continued on page 3*

# The View from WORC

By Linda Leeuwrik, WORC Chair

To say the past year has been a difficult one is a gross understatement and we are not out of the woods yet.

Nonetheless, I begin this year as your new WORC Board chair with renewed hope and optimism for all we can accomplish together and I will do my best to inspire you to share my optimism and excitement.

As I began to think about what to say in this column, I started thinking about leadership, specifically, my leadership style and philosophy. Because I am a woman serving in a variety of leadership roles, I have looked to other women leaders especially to determine which qualities, philosophies, and values I want to model. One of my primary heroes and role models is Supreme Court Justice, Ruth Bader Ginsburg. I admire her for many reasons, but most of all for how she approached everything with common sense, fairness, and decency. It seems to me this is not only an effective and meaningful approach to life in general, but to leadership in particular. And while it may be somewhat presumptuous of me to attempt to improve on RBG's philosophy, I would like to add a fourth point: empathy. If I had one crucial takeaway from leading during the crisis of a global pandemic, it would be the utmost importance of having compassion and empathy for others. As your Board chair, I will endeavor to base my new role on common sense, fairness, decency, and empathy.



This discussion of leadership connects directly to an effort of vital importance currently underway at WORC: to become a diverse, equitable, and inclusive organization at every level. Our work began in earnest when the WORC Board adopted an equity statement at its December 2019 meeting. Intended as a living document to guide policy and planning, the statement commits to building a welcoming, inclusive network and to acting decisively to dismantle racism and other forms of oppression within our network. In 2020, a consultant conducted an Equity Assessment to determine our progress, opportunities, and necessary actions with regard to systemically advancing equity. In 2021, we have begun drafting an Equity Action Plan drawing on recommendations from the assessment to develop a blueprint for transformation, for building an equitable, diverse, powerful, and inclusive network.

It is exciting to serve at the helm of the WORC Board in our role of helping to guide and oversee the organization's important work—grassroots organizing, managing issue campaigns, furthering our political influence, developing a new strategic plan, and so much more—but it is even more moving to see us making progress towards becoming a more equitable and inclusive organization. It is an honor to be part of this process of becoming and doing better. Lastly, I would like to express my gratitude for your support of and partnership in our work to effect meaningful change in our Western communities and I hope all of you are looking forward to continuing this work as much as I am.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Linda Leeuwrik".

## 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 19,949 members and 38 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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lost mandatory Country-of-Origin-Labeling (COOL) for beef and pork and now are stuck with a loophole that allows meat from other countries to be labeled Product of the USA, though this meat is not necessarily born, bred, and fed in the U.S. This is fraudulent. Ranchers deserve a fair price for their quality meat and consumers deserve to know where their food comes from. Reinstating Mandatory COOL needs to be a top priority of the Biden Administration," said Jean Lemire Dahlman, of Forsyth, MT, and a member of Northern Plains Resource Council.

"Though we are disappointed in the choice of Vilsack as Secretary of Agriculture, we hope that he and the Biden Administration will take the criticism as a challenge to take bold action, not only to fix what's been broken, but to transform the USDA into an agency that fights for family farmers, ranchers, and working people of this country," said Kathryn Bedell of Grand Junction, CO and a member of Western Colorado Alliance.

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## As Coal Plants Close, Colorado Focuses on Transition

In 2019, the Colorado General Assembly passed a series of bills focused on reducing carbon emissions, which have hastened the closure of coal-powered plants and mines across the state. Western Colorado Alliance (WCA) has been focused on how to implement a "just transition" as workers and communities prepare for a future without coal, and how to ensure the clean energy future builds widespread prosperity and resilience.

In January, Western Colorado Alliance hosted a series of webinars on Colorado's energy future and a Just Transition for communities. WCA held three webinar events on a variety of topics which brought in an attendance of approximately 60 people. More are expected to attend a fourth webinar event in early spring 2021. The goals of this series are to share knowledge and information about the Just Transition movement in Western Colorado; to broaden the base of Western Coloradans interested in Just Transition policy issues; and finally, to continue to build a narrative of "homegrown prosperity" for Western Colorado, beyond just coal country. The webinars are part of WCA's larger work to address the changing community needs emerging during a shifting energy economy.

The first webinar featured a presentation and discussion on the Action Plan report from Colorado's new Office of Just Transition (OJT). The panelists discussed the OJT's Action Plan, the recommendations within the report, and the critical need to track the impacts of energy transition, including coal retirements, oil and gas busts, and the growth of renewables.



The second webinar focused on the potential of the cleanup economy in the West, and especially in Colorado. WORC organizers Dan Cohn and Kate French reviewed findings and

recommendations from their recent research into coal mine reclamation labor needs. Also, WCA organizer Brian Williams and WORC organizer David Weiland presented on the potential economic impacts of oil and gas reclamation and remediation on the Western Slope. These presenters highlighted the need to pass the RECLAIM Act, oil and gas bonding legislation, and for residents to get involved at the state legislature on these issues.

The third webinar focused on the opportunities and limitations of clean technology jobs creation in fossil fuel transition communities in rural Colorado. This webinar featured front-line thinkers and practitioners from across Colorado, a menu of options for local policymakers and residents, and an update on 2021 state legislation that can help bring clean technology jobs to rural communities.

Finally, WCA will be partnering with other local ally organizations to hold a Spanish language webinar this spring focused on the impacts of coal plant closures and fossil fuel transitions on disproportionately impacted communities.



# Around the Region

## A look around WORC's network

### Dakota Resource Council

Dakota Resource Council (DRC) is fighting back against a suite of coal bailout bills, working to get better bonding and reclamation rules for oil and gas wells in ND, pushing to deregulate hemp, opposing legislation that helps CAFOs gain traction in ND, working to improve soil health, and lastly, trying to provide more opportunities via financial incentives for homeowners and landowners to install rooftop solar.



With regard to the happenings in Washington DC, related to Congress and the Biden Administration, they're also working to

reinstate many of the federal environmental protections that were rolled back by the Trump Administration, ensure that key cabinet nominees, like Deb Haaland at the Department of the Interior, are confirmed by the Senate, and working to pass laws that will fix issues related to our broken agricultural system.

### Dakota Rural Action

South Dakota House Bill 1121 is a "Food Freedom" bill introduced in this year's SD Legislative Session. It is being pushed by a national organization called Institute for Justice that is also attempting to pass some version of it in other states, but without having asked local



producers, consumers, and organizations for input on what changes in existing law would be most helpful. As a result, we believe the bill has some serious flaws.

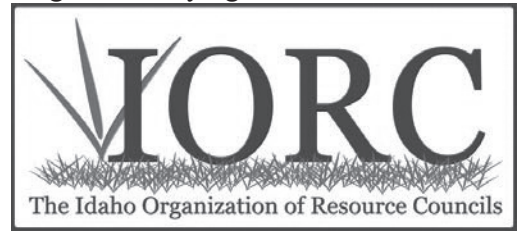
The idea behind these types of bills is that they would open up sales of homemade foods in the broader marketplace. However, this bill has a proposed amendment that drops a number of the so-called "freedoms" the original bill had promised, but still keeps the "poison pill" of local control-busting language that says no county, township, and municipality can pass stricter laws. DRA has repeatedly questioned the necessity of this language. Local governments have not aggressively undermined cottage food laws (including raw milk) crafted by DRA members in the past. However, the legislative sponsors (and this bill has also gone through the Governor's office) are dead-set on retaining language

to undermine local control, while changing language to lessen the bill's potential positive impacts for local producers.

Because of these issues (and having had numerous conversations with producer-members), DRA will likely oppose this bill. At the same time, it provides a good starting point to re-open conversations on the current home-processed foods law and bring forward well-thought-out changes in next year's legislative session that reflect the real needs of cottage food producers.

### Idaho Organization of Resource Councils

IORC held a legislative training for members and supporters on January 20. The session discussed tips for navigating the Idaho Legislature website, how to craft an effective message for testifying before a committee or lobbying a lawmaker, the issues IORC is monitoring and why, as well as the plethora of resources



available to help guide grassroots action-takers. This training has been put to good use this legislative session as they have faced a slate of bills that aim to diminish our ability to manage and respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, unforeseen emergencies, and natural disasters.

Four members of the IORC and Visión 2C Resource Council family have been accepted into the HEAL Food Alliance School of Political Leadership 2021 cohort. Sidney, Samantha, Benjamin, and Marielena form a team who were selected for their demonstrated commitment to racial, economic, and environmental justice and the strength of their campaign ideas, which center the knowledge, wisdom, and leadership of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) who have been on the frontlines of the fight for food sovereignty, climate justice, worker justice, and environmental justice for decades.



### Northern Plains Resource Council

The saga to stop the Keystone XL pipeline has had more twists and turns than the 1,200 mile route proposed for this would-be climate clogging behemoth. After more than a decade of organizing and legal challenges, it was sometimes hard to imagine a light at the end of the tar

sands tunnel. That all changed on the first day of Joe Biden's presidency.

Late last year, a group of Northern Plains Resource Council members drafted an open letter to Biden telling him to keep his promise to stop KXL. Hundreds of Montanans signed on in support.

On January 20, Biden rescinded the cross-border Presidential Permit for Keystone XL! This appears to put a moratorium on the project for the next four years, and may even be the final nail in the coffin for the ill-conceived project. No doubt, this victory is the result of people power.

## Oregon Rural Action

Oregon Rural Action (ORA) partnered with the Oregon Food Bank, regional organizations and community members to address an increased need for food in the midst of the pandemic through a series of FEAST conversations.

FEAST is an opportunity for community members to engage in an informed and facilitated conversation about their food system and begin to work towards solutions that will help build a more equitable and resilient local food system.



ORA continues their work to protect the environment, health and rural communities as a member of the statewide coalition, Stand up to Factory Farms (SUFF). In January, SUFF introduced legislation to enact a moratorium on the state issuing permits to new and expanded mega-dairies.

They've also partnered with the Oregon Latinx Leadership Network as a part of their COVID-19 Spanish and Indigenous-language outreach to provide free access to mental health resources online and general information to immigrant communities through local churches.

## Powder River Basin Resource Council

Amidst an unusual hybrid legislative session, Powder River has beat back yet another attempt by anti-renewable legislators to repeal Wyoming's net metering statute. Last November, the Joint Corporations Committee brought a bill that would have been detrimental to solar owners, but due to overwhelming public outcry and testimony, the committee switched the bill at the last minute. This poorly written and little-understood bill, which would repeal net metering and turn the issue over to the Public Service Commission, then made its way to the full legislative session.

Working with allies, Powder River has been able to stall the bill in its crossing over between houses. While it

narrowly passed the Senate, the House will not take it up until the second part of the legislative session in March. House committee members were getting emails "every 10 minutes" about the bill and decided to hold it back. Meanwhile, Powder River and allies are keeping up a strong campaign to defeat it in March.

## Western Colorado Alliance

Western Colorado Alliance is celebrating a huge local victory; For years, the Alliance has joined residents of Battlement Mesa in fighting a particularly reckless gas pad development known as "A Pad," which was being built just 900 feet from the Colorado River, and only 500 feet away from the homes of low-income residents. In 2019, they joined a lawsuit to try to stop Ursa Resources from continuing the development. The suit was dismissed in district court and was currently facing appeal. Ursa filed for bankruptcy protection in September of last year and then, in December, its holdings were sold to Terra Energy Partners. As a result of the changes made by the Colorado Oil & Gas Conservation Commission (COGCC) in 2020's historic rulemakings, Terra has now announced it is abandoning all pending permits for oil and gas wells within Battlement Mesa's Planned Unit Development, meaning A Pad is finally dead.

"This is an unmitigated victory for our community," said Dave Devanney, Alliance member and the former chairman of Battlement Concerned Citizens. "It just goes to show that when passionate people organize and work together, anything is possible."

## Western Native Voice

In 2020, Western Native Voice (WNV) partnered with We Are Montana (WAM) and raised over \$153,000 to help aid more than 2,000 individuals, organizations, health workers, and families.

In December, ten \$1,500 Caregiver grants were awarded to community members who went "the extra mile" to bring relief to families dealing with COVID-19. In early February, through their Tipi Talks program, an additional ten \$500 grants were awarded to individuals with unmet needs due to the pandemic. Tipi Talks is a Facebook event series that streams live every Tuesday morning at 9:00am MST which features COVID-19 updates, safety information, legislative updates as well as other topics that affect Montana's tribal nations.



# WORC's Commitment to Equity

**W**ORC's mission is to advance "a vision of a democratic, sustainable, and just society through community action." Currently, disparities of power continue to exist in our communities across lines of race, class, gender and other identities, due to centuries of choices which continue to center power among a select few and perpetuate pervasive systems of oppression.

Our organization is not immune to these systems of oppression -- racism and other forms of discrimination show up in our office, policies, trainings, campaigns, alliances, and more. The WORC Board of Directors adopted a statement on equity, as a living document to guide our policy and planning, at its meeting on December 7, 2019. The statement articulates a clear commitment to build a network that is welcoming and inclusive to all and can be found in full on WORC's website. In order to build a just society, we must look within and take clear action to dismantle racism and other forms of oppression in our network. To support this work, WORC engaged an outside consultant in 2020 to conduct an organizational equity assessment. A summary of findings and recommendations from the assessment were shared by WORC's consultant with staff and leaders from across the network during a listening session on December 3, 2020.



In late January, a group of staff and leaders met for two action planning-sessions to begin setting priorities to put WORC's commitment to equity into action in 2021 and beyond. The outcomes of these conversations are informing a draft Equity Action Plan that will be presented to the WORC Board in April 2021. The action plan will include short-term goals for implementation in 2021 and longer term goals as well as questions and conversations to be included in WORC's Strategic Planning process, currently in progress.

WORC's statement of equity can be found on our website at [www.worc.org](http://www.worc.org).

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## WORC Watchdogs Lighthouse Resources Bankruptcy

**S**ince the bankruptcy of coal company Lighthouse Resources last December, WORC has retained bankruptcy counsel and developed a strategy with Powder River Basin Resource Council and Northern Plains Resource Council to protect the public interest in successful mine-site reclamation and the payment of back-taxes for the company's mine on the Montana-Wyoming border.

The stakes are high. Lighthouse is the first coal company in the West to outright close a coal mine through bankruptcy, and their plan will create a template for future mine closures.

Our concern is with the company's proposal to create a reclamation trust. Will the trust be properly funded? Will the mine continue to be regulated under strip mine law as during mining?

Although final details are yet to be released, Lighthouse's plan to close its mine in an orderly fashion is a significant improvement over other recent coal company bankruptcies. Since the coal company Blackjewel filed for bankruptcy in July 2019, it has attempted to abandon its unsold mines in Kentucky and force the state government to clean up the mess.

To avoid a similar situation, Lighthouse must ensure that its reclamation trust remains subject to state and federal mining law, as would any coal company, and the trust must be adequately funded.



# Fighting to Transition Power on Colorado's West Slope

All politics are local. No place is this more true than Colorado's Western Slope.

Colorado Rural Voters (CORV) was first established in 2008 to focus on building political power locally on the West Slope. Our initial work included county commission elections in Garfield County but then following the 2008 election, CORV largely remained dormant for years. Between 2008 and 2020, little changed in the political landscape, but last year CORV was reinvigorated with a longer-term vision in mind. Local politics contribute to the lifeblood of the success of the West Slope. Each community has its unique needs, but knitted together, our towns determine the success of many rural Coloradoans.

We also know that presidential election years cause down-ballot races to often be overlooked and undervalued and 2020 was no exception. Across the region, local races struggled to break through the national noise. CORV focused on bringing local elections "to the top of the ballot" and driving the narrative that these equally important races deserve time and attention. In 2020 we learned that local races like state legislative seats or county commission seats are not the bright shiny object for voters. Most people are foggy about the direct role that these elected positions play in shaping their daily lives or their communities. However, when we broke through the bustle and had an opportunity to share the vision of local candidates, voters were more apt to set partisan politics aside and support someone who shared their vision.



We're determined to build off the inspiring record-breaking voter engagement from 2020, starting with 2021 municipal elections in Grand Junction. And, we're testing a new approach for 2021! We're surveying 5,000 voters in Grand Junction to determine what issues are most important to them (they even have a chance to win a small prize for participating!) and then taking these priorities to candidates to hear their stance on these same issues. We plan to then share the candidates' visions and all the necessary voting information with the same 5,000 voters. And viola, we have 5,000 motivated and educated voters ready to fill out their municipal ballot! We know some of you are thinking "it can't be that simple," and we would agree, but we know that if we're going to transition power in Western Colorado, we must build a strong base of voters who are engaged and informed about our local democracy and we must build a strong bench of elected officials who are committed to working toward our shared vision for the West Slope.

CORV is committed to a long term vision of fighting for the not so shiny wins that make a hell of a difference. They say, the secret to getting ahead is to just get started. So here we go, just getting started.

NEWS

**WORC SUPPORTS REPRESENTATIVE DEBRA HAALAND FOR SECRETARY OF THE INTERIOR** DECEMBER 17, 2020  
Above: Representative Deb Haaland (NM-D17) by storm Clean Air Force. Below: Representative Haaland's leadership as Interior Secretary BY NC-SA 2.0 Representative Haaland's leadership as Interior Secretary transformative step towards repairing relationships with Indigenous communities and correcting the course. ... Continued

**WESTERN NATIVE VOICE COMMUNITY SPOTLIGHT** MARCH 2, 2021  
Stepping Up Through Volunteering We are excited to share with you Community Spotlight, designed to highlight grassroots organizing change from across Indian Country. This month we would like to highlight Blackfoot tribal member, volunteer, ... Continued

**FIVE THINGS VILSACK MUST DO TO REVIVE PEOPLE'S DEPARTMENT** FEBRUARY 26, 2021  
Tom Vilsack was once again confirmed as Secretary of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) by the Senate. 92-7 Vilsack served as Secretary of the Obama Administration and is likely to become the longest serving ... Continued

**HOW GOOD STATE POLICY HELPS WYOMING THRIVE** FEBRUARY 18, 2021  
These stories are part of WORC's Homegrown Stories Narratives. Powder River Basin Resource Council. These two Homegrown producer show how good policy helped bolster a local food ... Continued

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# Members Address Left-Behind Oil Wells

There's no question that the past year has been difficult for Americans living across the mountain West and across the country. But the crises of public health, inequality, and unemployment are not new challenges; they're simply the most recent evidence of systemic problems we need to address in our communities. The failure of our leaders to address these broken systems has left us with few easy decisions ahead of us.

The looming crisis in the oil and gas industry is a prime example of how the biggest threat to our livelihoods is our leaders' failure to see these larger challenges and take action. While the Biden administration's announcement to pause and review oil and gas leasing will have no immediate impact on our states, some leaders and corporations would have you believe that the sky is falling. Permitting and development will continue on valid existing oil and gas leases, with 26 million acres currently leased, and oil and gas companies are already in possession of approximately 7,700 unused, approved permits to drill.

For decades, the industry has been stockpiling leases and permits at bargain-basement prices, fleecing state budgets that rely on the revenues, while leaving behind unplugged wells for taxpayers to clean up. The situation is so bad that our members support a pause on leasing and wholesale reform of the program to ensure fair returns on what's left. The federal government itself has serious concerns about the program—it has been on the US Government Accountability Office's (GAO) "high risk" list for nearly ten years, in part because the program's outdated fiscal structure has cost taxpayers billions in revenue.

Even before the pandemic, hundreds of thousands of unplugged oil and gas wells, with no operator existing to plug them, sat across the country leaking gas and causing problems for rural communities. Nearly a year ago, as oil and gas prices went negative for the first time in history, wells were idled or orphaned, and thousands of workers were laid off by large corporations, our members already had a solution in mind. By prioritizing the plugging and cleanup of orphaned federal wells left behind by bankrupt companies, we could mitigate the harm being done to our land while putting thousands of skilled workers back on the job.

If lawmakers want to plug the known 56,600 orphaned wells nationwide, non-partisan think tank Resources for the Future estimates it will cost \$1.4 billion to \$2.7 billion and create 13,500 jobs. Unfortunately, it's too late to hold these companies liable for these wells, as most have declared bankruptcy. But this kind of investment by taxpayers needs to come with a guarantee that this won't happen again. Residents need financial assurances, not just promises.



According to GAO, as many as 99% of the bonds for wells currently operating on federal lands are insufficient, meaning the bonds would not cover remediation costs if any of these wells were to become orphaned. That's why we're pushing to make sure that while these leaking and dangerous wells are addressed quickly by skilled workers, corporations will be required to post bonding at the full cost of reclamation, similar to other industries.

Bureau of Land Management's (BLM) outdated and inadequate bonding requirements are the root cause of the current orphaned well crisis. Decades of leaders have failed to address this broken system leaving us with a massive challenge. The combination of higher cleanup costs from new drilling technology and antiquated bonding amounts that haven't kept up with inflation leaves taxpayers footing a multi-billion dollar difference. Today, visionary leadership is desperately needed in order to strengthen bonding requirements so that taxpayers are not left cleaning up wells for years to come.

As the US Department of the Interior pauses federal oil and gas leasing to review the program and ensure fair returns for taxpayers, our members will be leading the effort to ensure leaking, orphaned wells are cleaned up by skilled workers and that corporations will be held responsible for their damage in the future.



# Online Farmers' Market Keeps Community Connected

**D**riving through Sheridan, Wyoming, in early November, most of the roadside fields seem to be retired for the year. Winter looms around the corner and Wyoming has already seen it's first snow, browning the remaining crops and closing the growing season. Despite this natural cycle in the outdoor growing season, on the weekends, Sheridan has a unique farmers' market that runs throughout the winter where you can find fresh lettuce year round.



*Joe and Adam at Joe's farm outside of Sheridan, WY.*

Five years ago, when Joe Wesnitzer first started bringing his lettuce to the market throughout the winter, he was met with big eyes and curiosity. "People would just ask, 'how?'" recalled Joe. Joe uses a system of growing called hydroponics. Hydroponics is a method of growing plants, usually crops, without soil, by using mineral nutrient solutions in an aqueous solvent. Hydroponics is a sustainable, effective method of growing — especially for people who live in areas with short growing seasons and harsh, cold winters.

Joe started Papa Joe's Produce as a hobby and a way to keep himself engaged in the community with the idea that he would just bring the produce to the farmers' market on the weekends. Adam was working in web design with hopes that in retirement he could start growing his own food, when this opportunity came up. "My favorite part is coming in on Monday mornings and seeing how much everything has grown just over the weekend," said Adam. Now, they have the goal of adding one new greenhouse each year, for the next ten years.

Several months into Adam's time working with Papa Joe's, the COVID-19 pandemic began to spread across the United States. As farmers' market attendance began to plummet, the two knew that they would need to figure out a solution to the decrease of in-person customers. Adam and Joe worked with other local producers to set up an online farmers' market through the Papa Joe's website. The online orders began with eight orders the first week and grew to approximately fifty orders by the fourth week. The online orders ran for 21 weeks until markets began to open again. Working with eight other local producers, the online market offered over 50 different products, ranging from fresh produce to beef, milk, homemade salsas, and coffee. "It wasn't an easy task between coordinating with all the producers and driving around to make the drop offs," said Adam, "but we made it work and it was a really successful way to get people our products during a challenging time."

The Wyoming Food Freedom Act enabled producers to sell directly to consumers and encouraged the expansion of agricultural sales by farmers'

markets, ranches, and farms. The Food Freedom Act lets producers market their products to customers with the disclaimer that the products are not licensed, inspected, or registered with the state. This allows producers to sell their goods as professional or semi-professional food producers instead of hobbyists.

"It's better for everyone when people are able to support local producers," said Joe, "It means fewer trucks on the road transporting produce from all over the country, the produce tastes better and is fresher and the money goes directly back into the community."

Adam and Joe have added a new greenhouse as their consumer base has expanded. Their first greenhouse utilized a vertical growing system but their second greenhouse uses a deep water culture system where the plants float on a raft. This has enabled them to grow significantly more plants at a time. As the operation continues to expand, they hope to start growing vegetables, including tomatoes, cucumbers, and peppers, in addition to the leafy greens that they currently produce.

Papa Joe's frequently gets visitors who are captivated by the lush greenery in the greenhouses year round, including some of the local schools. "I think it's really important for kids to see that there are other opportunities outside of college, more in the trades, to find a fulfilling career," said Adam.

# Unchecked Oil and Gas Development Threatens National Park

Roger and Pat Ashley moved to North Dakota in 1997. Originally from the midwest and west, both Roger and Pat fell in love with the expanse of North Dakota along with the access to public land. “It’s nearly impossible to feel claustrophobic out here,” said Roger. They settled down on a homestead in between Belfield and Dickinson, just a half hour from Theodore Roosevelt National Park.

North Dakota’s unique beauty might be lost on some, but the Ashleys have grown to appreciate the parts of the state that are often overlooked. “In the spring, it is a sea of green and just to see the wind blowing the grass and the crops, it’s like waves on the ocean,” described Pat. The west brought the Ashleys a sense of solitude and freedom, however, the peace they once knew has since been disrupted by an oil well that was put in at the base of their driveway.

The Ashley’s house was the only home within a mile of that well, but because their home was just inches from being considered directly adjacent to the well site, they were not notified about the construction. “It was rather shocking for us,” said Pat.

Their home is located on a narrow road with blind hills that was quickly overrun by oil trucks and equipment. Feeling unsafe, the Ashleys brought their concerns to the County Road Commissioner and a new road was built. Thinking they had avoided the worst impacts, the Ashleys quickly learned that the lights that were meant to light up the rig illuminated their home 24/7. Trucks that serviced the well began using the original road again to haul off oil and byproducts, causing the road to degrade. “We could only go less than 10 miles an hour down this road [to our house] because the road was deeply rutted,” explained Pat. Once fracking began, the disruptions continued with trucks traveling on their road throughout the night and jet engine-like sounds of flares roaring. “When we moved out here, it seemed like there was a certain sense of freedom. And I think we’ve lost that freedom,” reflected Roger.

The Ashleys’ personal experience with oil and gas development in their backyard has taught them to be more skeptical of the impacts of proposed development. Roger and Pat have been working with the Badlands Area



*Roger and Pat Ashely at home in North Dakota.*

Resource Council (BARC) to investigate and mitigate the impact of a proposed large-scale refinery, sited directly outside of Theodore Roosevelt National Park,

outside of Belfield. “I think it should be a main concern of a lot of people because it will affect not just those that live right around the refinery but also anybody that goes visit the National Park, which is the number one tourist attraction here in North Dakota,” said Roger.

The traffic that disrupts the rural way of life for the Ashleys would be intensified around the proposed refinery, changing the experience of entering the National Park, a journey that is meant to take people out of the hustle and bustle of everyday life, as well as disrupting the lives of neighbors. The air and sound pollution would not only have a negative impact on the visitors to the park but could also disrupt the wildlife that inhabits the park and the surrounding areas. Theodore Roosevelt National Park sees nearly 700,000 visitors each year, is North Dakota’s only National Park, and is responsible for the majority of tourism revenue to the area.

The refinery, proposed by California-based Meridian Energy Group, is nearly five years behind its original timeline and has only bulldozed the lot during that time. Part of the Ashley’s skepticism is a result of the failure of the neighboring Dickinson Refinery. The refinery, which broke ground in 2013, was 40% over cost once finished and consistently failed to turn a profit. It’s failure resulted in higher taxes for the residents. Oil companies receive tax breaks when moving into a county on the promise of paying back the tax once they are profitable. If they fail, like the Dickinson Refinery, the residents’ taxes increase to

support the infrastructure impacts, such as replacing roads damaged by heavy truck traffic, similar to the Ashley's narrow hilly road leading to their house. The refinery is currently being retrofitted as a renewable diesel facility, which will process refined soy oil and other organically derived feedstocks.

"William Prentice, the head of Meridian, said that there were two places that they were looking at, but they decided on Belfield because it was right along the rail line. And they were going to use the rail to take the product away but they couldn't come to an agreement with the railroad. And so that reason went away. And I'm just wondering, where was that other location? Because if it was further from the park, it would be ideal, and we would all go for it," said Roger. Pat agreed that while neither of them are big fans of refineries and they understand that oil refining is needed, that there is no reason for one to be built within three miles of a National Park. "It's our park, we all own that park. Everybody, every person in the United States owns a little piece of that park. It's up to us to protect it. The National Park is limited in its ability to determine what is developed outside of its boundaries. And so it's up to us," said Pat.

The Ashleys have a deep respect for the public lands and National Park Service. When they travel, the destination is almost always to one of the National Parks. "In a way, it's kind of like going to church. A lot of people go to church to fulfill their spiritual innate need, going to a national park, in a way, fulfills my spiritual need," said Pat. Where the prairie meets the badlands there is an abundance of wildlife; buffalo roam amongst open fields and pronghorn antelope and deer dot the hill sides. There is no direct monetary value on the grazing bison at the edge of the National Grasslands or the golden eagle population that frequents areas near the Ashleys' home and because of that, these places frequently come in second to powerful industries.

"I think the community will need to be more aware of what the situation is at the refinery, whether it's operating properly or not. An agriculture community is more stable, with farming and ranching, they're going to be around for a while. Now industrialization brings more instability to the community, because you have people coming and going and the [Dickinson] refinery only sold for pennies on the dollar," said Roger.

The Ashleys have continued to try to relocate the refinery further away from the park. Working with grassroots organizing groups like Dakota Resource Council (DRC) and Badlands Area Resource Council (BARC), the community is informed of the current happenings with the refinery and show up to speak at hearings about potential air quality issues. "We had no clue how to even begin to try to get them to move the refinery elsewhere," said Pat. "DRC organizers



would keep us informed on the permitting process and where those permits are. Now, it's the lawsuits that they're keeping us informed on. That's a lot of work to keep track of. Individuals can't do it. But as a group, we can keep up to date on where all the lawsuits are and what all the permits were needed. Being a member of BARC is empowering."

If oil and gas development is inevitable, the Ashleys and many others want to see more thoughtful placement of the infrastructure that is being built, with the resident's and the visitor's quality of life being central in the process. "I think about any place I've lived, I've had some attachment to it and we try to make the best of what we are faced with," said Roger. "We just think the state could have been more sensitive about how they located wells, especially with the technology that's available today. That well could have been two miles away, rather than on our doorstep and the refinery could go somewhere that's not three miles from the National Park."

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