

# FRONTLINE



Working to protect Wyoming's environment and quality of life since 1967

## INSIDE: WHY THE WHOLE OF IT MATTERS



*plus*



## Wyoming Outdoor Council

Founded in 1967, we are a statewide advocacy group, working to protect public lands, wildlife, and clean air and water in Wyoming. We believe conservation is not a partisan issue, and that informed and engaged citizens matter.

262 Lincoln Street, Lander, WY 82520  
wyomingoutdoorcouncil.org  
307.332.7031 | info@wyomingoutdoorcouncil.org

What's your favorite under-appreciated part of Wyoming's whole?

### STAFF

**LISA MCGEE** **TYLER CESSOR**

*Executive Director* *Development Director*

**ERA ARANOW** **KYLE ELMQUIST**

*Legislative Advocate* *Red Desert Advocate*

**KRISTEN BROWN** **MISTI HAASE**

*Associate Director* *Office Manager*

**JOHN BURROWS** **LETARA LEBEAU**

*Energy & Climate Policy Director* *Administrative Assistant*

**MICAH "BIG WIND" CARPENTER**

*Tribal Engagement Coordinator* *Communications Manager*

**MEGHAN RILEY**  
*Public Lands & Wildlife Advocate*

**CLAIRE CELLA** **ALEC UNDERWOOD**

*Graphic Designer* *Program Director*

**YUFNA SOLDIER WOLF**  
*Tribal Conservation Advocate*

### BOARD OF DIRECTORS

**PAUL HOWARD** **LARAMIE CUMMINGS**

*Cheyenne, President* *Casper*

**CAROL BILBROUGH** **SABRINA KING**, Lander

*Laramie, Vice President* **PORGY McCLELLAND**, Wilson

**SEAN STAUTH** **DAY SCOTT**, Idaho

*Jackson, Treasurer* **SEAN STAUTH**, Jackson

**TOM CHRISTIANSEN** **ORVILLE ST. CLAIR**

*Green River, Secretary* *Ft. Washakie*

**CAROLINE BYRD**, Montana **CHRIS PFISTER**, Cody

**DARREN CALHOUN** **HAP RIDGWAY**, Cody  
*Thermopolis* *Give Wyoming Campaign Chair*

**SHANNON ROCHELLE**, Lander

I love that a trail, river, or outdoor escape in Wyoming is never more than a few minutes away!

I love hearing the Western Meadowlark's flute-like voice as it echoes across the grasslands, carrying effortlessly through the wind like roving tumbleweed.

# A MESSAGE from the BOARD PRESIDENT

---

**PAUL HOWARD**  
President of the Board

---

**TODAY IS AN INSPIRING TIME** to be part of the Wyoming Outdoor Council. Our committed volunteer board of directors, our talented and effective staff, and you — our engaged and supportive members — continue to come together to keep Wyoming, Wyoming.

Much of the Outdoor Council's progress during the last six years has come under the guidance and leadership of Lisa McGee, our executive director. As I shared with you this spring in an email, it's my bittersweet responsibility to announce that Lisa has decided to step away from WOC this fall.

From legal intern to executive director, Lisa has been a constant at the Outdoor Council for the last 18 years. Lisa joined the staff full time in 2005 as an attorney leading our national forest work. Over the next decade, she and our partners secured lasting protections for the Wyoming Range and parts of the Shoshone National Forest. She took the helm as director in 2017, the year WOC celebrated our 50th anniversary. She and our board of directors set some ambitious goals around this milestone, most of which we'll realize by the year's end.

While her departure will be felt by all of us, Lisa is leaving the organization on solid footing. Our conservation advocates are driving meaningful change to protect the Red Desert and big game migration corridors, support Indigenous-led conservation efforts, and help Wyoming communities respond to

climate change. We've committed to becoming a more diverse and equitable organization, we've strengthened our fundraising capacity, and this winter we look forward to moving into our "forever home" in Lander.

Please join me and the entire Wyoming Outdoor Council board of directors in wishing Lisa good fortune with her next endeavor — she'll be pursuing a master's degree in mental health counseling this fall — and thanking her for her leadership, service, and friendship through all of these years.

As you know, our conservation work is more important than ever. Wyoming still has some of the most intact wildlife habitat and robust wildlife populations on the planet. From our mountains and high-elevation deserts to our still-thriving sagebrush steppe and working ranchlands, there is still time for us to get it right. But it takes strategic and creative thinking, vigilance, effective advocacy, and a big tent of people who care. We couldn't do it without you.



# Toward a WHOLEWYOMING

---

**LISA McGEE**

Executive Director

---

**LAST YEAR**, a longtime Outdoor Council supporter renewed her membership and thanked us for our efforts to “keep Wyoming whole.” I’ve been thinking about her comment and the concept of wholeness ever since.

When I first started in 2005, my job was to keep oil and gas development off the Bridger-Teton and Shoshone National Forests. There was tremendous public support for these efforts: the threats to wildlife habitat and clean air and water were evident, and most people — including elected officials along the political spectrum — agreed that places like the Wyoming Range and the Absaroka-Beartooth Front were simply “too special to drill.” Success, as measured by the number of acres kept free from industrial development, was clear.

I am proud of the work WOC and our partners did to safeguard these lands. Our efforts also begged the question: If some places in Wyoming are broadly understood to be worthy of protection, what about the rest of it? In other words, what’s our responsibility to the majority of public lands in this state — our sagebrush steppe, grasslands, and high-elevation deserts — which shoulder the demands of “multiple use” management with far less attention or stewardship? How “whole” can Wyoming be if we’re defining conservation so narrowly?

Since the creation of the national parks in the United States, a familiar metric for conservation success has been the number of

acres set aside or protected. But even as we work diligently within this existing framework, we’re also interested in thinking beyond it. What would it take to truly make and keep Wyoming whole?

## **WESTERN CONSERVATION:**

### *An Imperfect Model*

The Outdoor Council’s Red Desert conservation efforts have been a mainstay since our founding in 1967 by Tom Bell, who sought respite in this landscape after serving in World War II. In recent years our approach has tended toward a “something for everyone” model. As the thinking goes, conservation is one of many uses on the landscape. To achieve the goal of acres permanently protected — especially through congressional legislation — negotiating with stakeholders who want different and often conflicting things is required.

This approach is understandable within a framework that protects some places and not others. But we know the approach itself is flawed. People have lived in and stewarded what we call the Red Desert for millennia. And yet their descendants — the Indigenous people who still live here today — have not



been at the table in meaningful ways. Their deep knowledge of this place has not genuinely been taken into account by those in power. How whole can Wyoming be if the people whose ancestors have been here for thousands of years aren't leading conversations around stewardship?

As Wyoming's oldest independent conservation organization — which has seen close to six decades of growth and change and which so many of you have supported along the way — we have a responsibility not only to ask questions like this, but to use these questions as a springboard for tough conversations about where we've been, where we want to go, and who, collectively, we want to be as advocates of a “whole Wyoming.”

### **MIGRATION CORRIDORS:** *A Case Study in Why the Whole Matters*

Few of the traditional frameworks we have to work within as a conservation advocacy organization allow for truly big-picture, holistic thinking. Nowhere is that more apparent than in efforts to protect big game migration corridors.

For many pronghorn and mule deer herds, long distance migration is part of an elegant survival strategy that works only if animals can move freely between seasonal ranges and if all the habitat along the way is intact. Mule deer especially have tremendous fidelity to



# THE BIG GAME CONSERVATION PARTNERSHIP

Close to half of the land in Wyoming is held in private hands, and much of that is used for agriculture. Between the deference private property rights are afforded here and the natural tendency for farmers and ranchers to adopt some form of a land ethic on their properties, incentivizing voluntary conservation efforts is a natural fit in our state.

In 2022, the U.S. Department of Agriculture and state of Wyoming established the Big Game Conservation Partnership to help spur conservation efforts on private lands within Big Game Habitat Priority Areas. The pilot program is investing millions of dollars to help safeguard habitat in designated corridors, the Absaroka Front, and the Wind River Reservation.

**Landowners have multiple opportunities to participate.** They can:

- Establish long-term conservation easements to protect prime farm and ranchlands from conversion to non-compatible uses, such as residential subdivision, through the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program
- Integrate prescribed grazing systems, wildlife-friendly fencing, and cheatgrass control into working lands through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program
- Enter into 10–15 year habitat leases to maintain sustainable grassland habitats through the Grassland Conservation Reserve Program



their seasonal routes and habitats. If the path is blocked — or if habitat along the way is impaired — the deer don't just “go around” or find a different path. They struggle and this can impact the health of their fawns.

Despite our understanding that connected migration routes are essential to wildlife survival, the legal structure we've created — of private, county, state, tribal, and federal land ownership — prioritizes economic interests over intact natural habitats. The multiple uses public lands are asked to sustain — recreation, grazing, oil and gas, wind and solar energy, just to name a few — are not actually sustainable. There is a tipping point, and if we're not careful, approval of the next project or use could be the end of a functional corridor.

In western Wyoming, the migration routes of two iconic big game herds — the Sublette pronghorn herd and the Sublette mule deer herd — are severely impaired on their southern ends. Roads, subdivisions, commercial resorts, fences, oil and gas fields, cell phone towers, seasonal human recreation in bottlenecks, industrial-scale solar arrays, and wind turbines all threaten to permanently sever these ancient corridors. More development and new uses

are proposed every day.

Three years ago we had reason to believe that Governor Mark Gordon's big game migration corridor executive order would be a sound first step to ensuring a process that would result in protection of the most sensitive habitats within these corridors. But its implementation has been disappointing.

Despite compelling science, instructive maps, and tremendous public support for big game herds in Wyoming, not one newly identified corridor has been designated under the governor's order. People lobbying for their economic interests have convinced decision makers in this state that designation is a four-letter word.

What's more, the order doesn't apply to private land. So even if the EO were flawlessly implemented — and additional corridors designated — we still rely on private landowners to do the right thing for wildlife. Thankfully, many do, especially with new federal financial incentives on the table for landowners who keep the lands they steward intact. But it's not enough. Even if nine out of ten do the right thing, it takes only one outlier to sever a corridor. Protecting part of a wildlife migration corridor simply doesn't work. It's

**If some places in Wyoming  
are broadly understood to  
be worthy of protection,  
*what about the rest of it?***

akin to having no protections at all.

And the fiscal incentives haven't kept billionaires and others from pushing development proposals in Sublette County that will further degrade migration habitat. Strong county-level planning and zoning is an essential backstop. But even when county planners make pro-habitat decisions, those decisions are typically easier to undo than to uphold. The flaws are structural. By design, it's easier to destroy the whole than to keep it intact.

## THE WAY FORWARD

New models for thinking about land conservation and stewardship are emerging, and not only among advocacy groups.

Many leaders and decision makers are starting to recognize that the status quo is neither the best nor the only way forward. Federal policies now seek to incorporate Indigenous Traditional Ecological Knowledge in addition to Western science into decision making. Co-stewardship agreements are being forged where tribes and the federal government work together to steward public lands. On private land, in addition to conservation easements, which last in perpetuity, shorter-term habitat leases provide annual payments to landowners for land-use practices that support wildlife habitat. And markets for carbon credits, which incentivize keeping our forests and grasslands intact, are also gaining traction.

At WOC, we're working to imagine new models, too. One of the most exciting is an initiative — the Indigenous Land Alliance of Wyoming — that's amplifying Indigenous knowledge and tribal sovereignty to better steward lands and improve our climate and wildlife work. We also continue to champion a conservation leasing program for state lands, and we're tracking planning and zoning in Sublette and Park counties, urging members to influence wildlife regulations at a local level.

We will keep thinking of new ways to bring people together to tackle tough issues. Last year, for instance, we co-hosted a climate summit featuring speakers with backgrounds in Western science and Traditional Ecological Knowledge, and we're now applying lessons from that summit to climate work around the state. And this spring, in an effort to improve coordination around protecting big game migration corridors, we invited colleagues from land trust, landowner, conservation, and sportsmen/women organizations, as well as researchers, decision makers, and elected officials, to participate in a two-day summit to identify opportunities where we can all work effectively in service of the wildlife we love.

As WOC looks toward the future of conservation in Wyoming, my hope is that we continue to think beyond the status quo — challenging ineffective systems, questioning long-standing models that only serve the most powerful, and dreaming big to imagine what else is possible for this incredible place. ■

# THE INDIGENOUS LAND ALLIANCE OF WYOMING

ILAW is an alliance of Indigenous partners, community members, and organizations that unite conservation advocacy with Traditional Ecological Knowledge to support tribal leadership, community, and policy priorities. ILAW is committed to advocating for Traditional Ecological Knowledge systems and Indigenous stewardship rights to be included in policies that affect ancestral homelands and waterways.



# NEW TO THE TEAM

*Recent additions to the Outdoor Council staff!*



**Alec Underwood**  
*Program Director*

For well over a decade, I've had the privilege of exploring some of the most wild and beautiful landscapes in the interior West — whether that's fishing for cutthroat in glacial cirques or hunting pronghorn in the sagebrush steppe.

Although I've only recently become a resident of Wyoming, some of my fondest memories have been made in this state. That's why I'm excited to join WOC's team to help advance our mission. Before I moved to Lander, I lived in Montana where I worked to advance public lands and wildlife policies for the Montana Wildlife Federation. There are parallels between our two states: wide open spaces, abundant wildlife, and iconic mountain ranges just to name a few. But just like in Montana, protecting these values for current and future generations is no easy task.

Wyoming is not immune to change, and that's why our work at the Outdoor Council — keeping Wyoming, *Wyoming* — is more important than ever.

*When not working, Alec enjoys fly fishing, hunting, backpacking, woodworking, playing guitar, and photography.*

I first came to Wyoming in 1997 to climb Gannett Peak and I've been drawn to Wyoming's environment and quality of life ever since. I finally moved to Lander in 2012 to lead trips and teach wilderness medicine for NOLS. I also interned at the State Legislature with the Outdoor Council in 2018.

Playing in the backyard growing up and a semester spent in the wilderness with NOLS drew me to work in the fields of conservation and environmental science. I started teaching environmental science after college and have applied that in many ways — this legislative advocate position being the latest.

I've enjoyed learning the ins-and-outs of the legislature and I'm looking forward to connecting further with members, legislators, state employees, and other groups working in the same space.

*When not in the office, Era is enjoying open spaces, chasing wildflowers, or volunteering for the Lander Search and Rescue team.*



**Era Aranow**  
*Legislative Advocate*





## **LeTara LeBeau** *Administrative Assistant*

I am a member of the Northern Arapaho and Eastern Shoshone Tribes of the Wind River Reservation, and I've lived in Crowheart most of my life. You can say the outdoors has been a part of my life from birth.

I am a small-business owner, a member of both the Wyoming and Presidential Missing and Murdered Indigenous Persons Task Forces, chair for the Global Indigenous Council, and just this year was the recipient of USA TODAY's Women of the Year award for my advocacy work. I've studied tribal management, economic development, and nation building, and graduated from the Advanced Native Political Leadership program with the hope of passing this education along to my local community. As a community leader on the reservation, I am always looking for the opportunity to help develop more great leaders. I find there is never a dull moment in my life and this fills me with a sense of adventure when I wake up.

*In her free time, LeTara loves to get outdoors: hunting, fishing, hiking, kayaking, and camping. Any time she can connect with mother nature, she always seizes the moment!*

Soaring granite spires. Boundless hills of balsamroot and lupine. Twisting trails, braided rivers: These are the things I fell in love with on visits to Wyoming — but it was the warmhearted and engaged community that kept me coming back. Now, I can't imagine calling anywhere else home, a fact that makes me feel endlessly fortunate.

My background is varied: I've worked in research labs, video production studios, and as a backpacking and llama-packing guide. In some way or another, though, all my work has helped me solidify a passion for sharing the beauty of our wild places. As a writer, I have the utmost respect for the power of language to drive positive change in the world and I knew I wanted to put my words to work for good. As WOC's communications manager, I'm excited to do exactly that in Wyoming — where wildness is plentiful and wonder exists around every bend in the trail.

*On his days off, you can find Max running local trails, dipping his toes into chilly alpine lakes, and rock climbing on the white limestone cliffs around Lander.*



## **Max Owens** *Communications Manager*

# GIVING SAGEBRUSH

---

**MEGHAN RILEY**

Public Lands & Wildlife Advocate

---

**IF THERE'S ONE THING** we have a lot of in Wyoming, aside from wind, it's sagebrush. Chances are, if you've taken any road trips or long drives around the state, you've been treated to seemingly endless vistas of Wyoming's sagebrush rolling into the distance. From this vantage point, it can be hard to believe that the sagebrush steppe ecosystem is actually in fairly dire straits.

In the West, we have lost more than half of the sagebrush ecosystem that existed in pre-colonial times and the region is currently losing an average of 1.3 million acres of sagebrush habitat every year. This destruction is largely due to infestations of invasive annual grasses, wildfires, and conifer encroachment — with human activities and development playing a part, too. States like Nevada have been particularly hard-hit, while here in Wyoming, we are fortunate to retain the largest remaining swaths of healthy, intact sagebrush habitat on the planet. For the sake of all the species that depend on this habitat — from pygmy rabbits and sage thrashers to our iconic Greater sage-grouse and pronghorn — we have a responsibility to ensure the sagebrush in our care stays vibrant and life-giving.

There's more to taking care of the sagebrush steppe ecosystem than simply safeguarding the remaining pristine stands. The widely accepted approach for sagebrush conservation is to “defend the core, grow the core.” This means engaging in sagebrush restoration efforts in areas adjacent to intact,

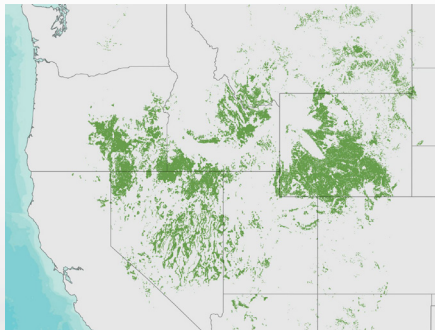
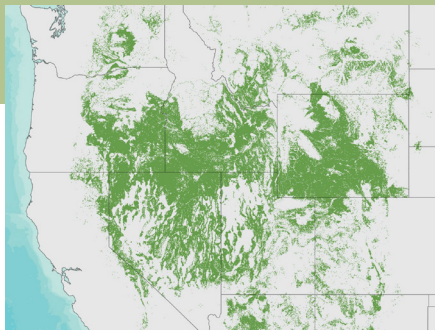
core habitat to help staunch the losses and increase resilience of the sagebrush ecosystem on a landscape scale. Luckily for us, it is easy to lend a hand in these restoration efforts right in our backyard.

This June, the Outdoor Council helped host a stewardship day in partnership with the Lander Bureau of Land Management Field Office to tend to sagebrush seedlings planted in eastern Fremont County. Since 2016, the Abandoned Mine Lands Native Plants Project has been working to grow sagebrush seedlings and get them established at old mine sites undergoing reclamation. The project's tireless champion, Gina Clingerman of the Lander BLM, was gracious enough to invite Outdoor Council members to the Day Loma complex and Andria Hunter mine to remove protective cages from sagebrush seedlings that have grown large enough to withstand browsing by pronghorn. It was gratifying to see healthy, young sagebrush plants bursting out of the mesh that kept them safe through the winter. As it turns out, sagebrush seedlings planted through the project enjoy a 90 percent survival rate, which far-and-away exceeds what can be achieved from sowing seeds directly on the ground. If the abundance of species we saw out there that day are any indication, these field sites are being brought back to health and folded seamlessly into the mosaic of established sagebrush stands.

If you missed out on the day with the AML Native Plants Project, rest assured there are more opportunities coming up! This fall, native seeds will need to be collected and the year's sagebrush seedlings will need to get

# A LEG UP

planted. We will keep you posted when the call for volunteers goes out. Nothing beats a day outside and it's even better with the sense of purpose that comes from helping to restore sagebrush to the landscape. The camaraderie, birdsong, and incomparable scent of sage leaves we enjoyed this June weren't too shabby either. ■



Sagebrush once stretched across almost 500,000 square miles from the Dakotas to California (top map). Yet today, the sagebrush steppe is a shadow of its former self (bottom map). Courtesy of The Nature Conservancy

**In the West, we have lost more than half of the sagebrush ecosystem that existed in pre-colonial times and the region is currently losing an average of 1.3 million acres of sagebrush habitat every year.**

Can you donate today to ensure *rapid response* to Wyoming's most pressing conservation needs?

## THE CONSERVATION ACTION FUND

lets us be nimble and responsive to an ever-changing conservation landscape. It is used to fund a range of activities, such as:

- Hiring a short-term organizer to rally citizens in support of a fast-moving campaign
- Sending citizens to Washington, D.C. to meet with decision-makers
- Contracting with experts such as scientists, GIS mappers, or attorneys
- Stipends and/or travel expenses for experts or resource specialists for their testimony before committees or at public meetings, field trips, or other events

To donate, visit the link below, scan the QR code, or mail a check with "CAF" in the memo.

[bit.ly/conservationactionfund](https://bit.ly/conservationactionfund)

