



Wyoming Outdoor Council

ANNUAL REPORT

2020

A MESSAGE FROM THE DIRECTOR

Rising to New Challenges

It goes without saying that 2020 was defined by its challenges. Though they may have been national or even global in scale, their impacts were felt in our state, our communities, and even in our own homes.

There were not always easy answers or quick resolutions. In some ways, it became clear that things might never be quite the same again: This wasn't an interruption of normal life, this was a transition to something new.

At the Wyoming Outdoor Council, 2020 was also a time of transition. We adapted. We found new ways to connect with one another, and formed new perspectives about what it means to be part of a community. We supported one another and welcomed many new faces.

I like to think we rose to the challenge — all of us. Thank you.

Through it all, your support and engagement made 2020 a successful year for conservation in Wyoming. These are your successes, and I'm so proud to be part of it.



LISA MCGEE
Executive Director

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Lisa".

WOC held

16

online events in 2020...



that were attended by

680

people...



who represented

41

Wyoming communities...



and

21

other U.S. states.

KEEPING US CONNECTED

The COVID-19 pandemic brought a dramatic shift in the way many people worked, studied, and socialized. Early on, it became clear that you were looking for ways to stay connected with one another and the outside world, and were still eager to be involved with the Outdoor Council. And importantly, we wanted to hear from you as well. With your support, we quickly launched a number of online engagement initiatives to help bridge the gap while we were unable to be together in person.

First up was something new: the Live from the FIELD series, designed for kids who were home from school but eventually enjoyed by all ages. These live, online courses brought in experts on topics including mule deer, healthy streams, wildlife disease, and sagebrush.

The enthusiastic response to these early virtual events inspired us to create a regularly scheduled series, Conservation Cafeteria, where we continue to gather virtually every month to provide greater insight into conservation issues, discuss current events, answer questions, and have conversations with you. And we held a number of one-time Zoom events as well, including Beers & Bills legislative discussions and a Zoom variety show on the National Environmental Policy Act.

We also shifted to an all-virtual format for FIELD Training, our 8-week conservation leadership program, which had the added benefit of bringing together a cohort from all corners of Wyoming. And, we provided resources to help citizens stay involved in online public meetings and navigate the challenges of the Wyoming Legislature's virtual interim.

Communities that engaged with us online:

LANDER
JACKSON
CHEYENNE
LARAMIE
CASPER
WILSON • CODY
PINEDALE
GREEN RIVER
DUBOIS
ROCK SPRINGS
SHERIDAN • GILLETTE
WAPITI • POWELL
AFTON • ALBIN • ALPINE
BUFFALO • CHUGWATER
CLARK • DANIEL • ETNA
EVANSTON • EVANSVILLE
FT. LARAMIE • FT. WASHAKIE
GREYBULL • HILLSDALE
HULLET • KELLY • KINNEAR
LUSK • MADISON
MEETEETSEE
MOUNTAIN VIEW • PAVILLION
RANCHESTER • RIVERTON
ST. STEPHENS
THERMOPOLIS

PREPARING WYOMING FOR

In Wyoming, as in much of the United States, 2020 was distinguished by a broadening acceptance of the need to combat global climate change and the realization that fossil fuel workers and communities are increasingly vulnerable to shifts in the energy economy.

The Outdoor Council supports development of renewable energy in Wyoming — provided that, as with any other industrial development, it's done right and avoids or minimizes impacts on our public lands and wildlife.

Our work related to renewable energy during the year was focused largely on laying the groundwork for responsible siting of future wind and solar projects. That included research, lobbying, sharing expertise with state agencies, and — most importantly — building relationships with local climate activists (particularly through the Lander Climate Action Network) and blue-collar workers to facilitate future collaboration.

John Burrow's expertise, communication skills, and youthful vitality have helped launch amazing new efforts to reduce carbon emissions immediately in Lander and, more broadly, Fremont County and Wyoming at large.

— MELANIE O'HARA, WOC & LANDER CLIMATE ACTION NETWORK MEMBER



THE FUTURE OF ENERGY



IN-HOUSE. Outdoor Council staff conducted in-depth interviews with several dozen stakeholders, including state agencies, industry representatives, county officials, conservation groups, and academics to learn how Wyoming can best guide the development of wind and solar over the coming years.

OUT FRONT. We envisioned a statewide renewable energy siting collaborative and worked with faculty from the University of Wyoming's Haub School of Environment and Natural Resources to develop a framework and recruit stakeholders to participate. A wide range of interests are represented in the collaborative — now being facilitated by UW — and they have worked on policy recommendations to help Wyoming proactively address renewables development and minimize future siting conflicts.

BEHIND THE SCENES. We submitted comments for several public processes, including scoping for Raven Solar, a planned utility-scale solar energy project, and a review of the plan that will guide how Rocky Mountain Power adds more renewable generation to its portfolio. In the former, we asked the Bureau of Land Management to avoid impacts on the resident pronghorn herd. In the latter, we supported the utility's proposal to keep consumer energy costs low by replacing retiring coal plants with renewables. We also urged the state Public Service Commission to develop transition plans for affected coal workers and communities.

Over the last 10 years, the cost of utility-scale wind energy has dropped roughly **70%**, while utility-scale solar energy has dropped nearly **90%**.

— Lazard's annual Levelized Cost of Energy Analysis

SAFEGUARDING PRECIOUS GROUNDWATER

The hundreds of citizens who submitted comments and spoke up at public meetings to say “Don’t Poison Boysen” were heard by the Wyoming Department of Environmental Quality when the agency denied Aethon Energy’s request to drastically increase the amount of oil and gas wastewater it discharges into Boysen Reservoir and the Wind River. The new permit also includes stronger controls on salts and other pollutants, and requires Aethon Energy to clean up damage caused by years of discharging this wastewater into Boysen’s tributaries.

Aethon then shifted course, seeking to inject some of its contaminated produced water into the Madison formation, an aquifer protected under the Safe Drinking Water Act. Outdoor Council members and other citizens again showed up in force, with more than 100 written comments and public testimony before the Wyoming Oil and Gas Commission that were unanimously opposed to this idea. In November, the commission voted to allow the injection, but the EPA will review this decision and has the power to override it. At a time when climate change is bringing increased drought and wildfires, and municipalities and irrigators across the West clamor for water, we aren’t willing to sacrifice a source of fresh water that could be invaluable in the future.



Dan Heilig’s encyclopedic knowledge of water law, unparalleled research skills, seasoned style of advocacy, and creative solutions have led the way on efforts to protect water quality in Jackson Hole.

— PAUL HANSEN, WOC MEMBER & FORMER EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF THE IZAAK WALTON LEAGUE

The Wyoming Water Development Commission said that “the

Madison aquifer

is the

highest yielding aquifer

in the planning area with

excellent water quality.”

— Wind/Bighorn River Basin Plan, January 2003

PUSHING FOR MODERN WASTEWATER POLICIES

Water quality issues continued to bubble up in Teton County, where nitrate pollution in drinking water has been on the rise. A patchwork of small wastewater plants, independent sewer districts, and private septic systems serve Teton County's growing population and steady stream of tourists — and some are unable to keep up with the demand or are not functioning properly. Added to the mix are no fewer than 114 public drinking water systems, all of which draw from the Snake River Aquifer.

In Hoback Junction, south of Jackson, the DEQ launched an investigation into the source of the nitrates following a request from WOC. Most likely, this process will confirm that a proliferation of inadequate septic systems is to blame. The toll on residents is already adding up: Water in parts of the area is unsafe to drink, and the owners of the Hoback RV Park gave eviction notices to their residents after an inspection revealed liquid sewage seeping up from a failed septic system, among other wastewater violations. Meanwhile, the DEQ listed all of Fish Creek and a portion of Flat Creek as “impaired” by *E. coli* in 2020, meaning the water isn't safe for swimming.

The Outdoor Council, together with partners at Protect Our Water Jackson Hole, advocated a number of county-level changes including: modernized regulations for small wastewater facilities; requiring septic system inspections when property is bought and sold; creating a management plan to address the high levels of recreational use on rivers and lakes; and requiring the Teton County Public Health Department to notify the public when elevated levels of nitrates are detected in a public water system.

The Teton County Board of Commissioners and Jackson Town Council took a number of encouraging steps to update the county's comprehensive land use plan, including the commitment to develop a wastewater management plan. Still, much work remains to be done.

ADVOCATING CONSERVATION

The arrival of COVID-19 in the waning days of the Wyoming Legislature's 2020 budget session, and subsequent special session where legislators convened to grapple with a simultaneous revenue shortfall and influx of federal economic relief dollars, quickly took center stage.

But before the public's attention was diverted to these crises, the legislature had already navigated a hectic budget session marked by many important conservation bills. The Outdoor Council's legislative team — together with our citizen lobbyist interns and the many WOC members who contacted their legislators, testified in committee, or attended events — worked day in and day out for positive outcomes on these pieces of legislation. And as usual, citizen voices carried the day and made a difference in Cheyenne.

A few highlights from the successful legislation the Outdoor Council advocated:

HB 159, Monthly payment of ad valorem tax on mineral production, holds companies accountable and provides a more reliable tax revenue stream for counties that have been hit by mineral tax delinquencies.

The legislature codified **an important aspect of the state's Greater sage-grouse executive order** by creating a mitigation credit system.

SF 36, Large scale solar and wind energy facilities, was an important step toward regulating siting of utility-scale solar and wind energy development.

Three bills created systems for **funding wildlife highway crossing mitigations**.

A bill soliciting proposals for parcels of state land in Teton County opened the door to conversations about the **economic values of conservation, wildlife, and recreation on state lands**. Along with partner organizations we later submitted recommendations on these parcels to the Office of State Lands and Investments.

AT THE STATE CAPITOL

As usual, there was no shortage of bad bills. Among those we worked to help defeat:

Three separate bills that would have **weakened or invalidated Gov. Mark Gordon's migration corridor executive order**, which he signed in February 2020. The executive order created a process for the state to designate and manage big game migration corridors.

A perennial effort to weaken the state's net metering law.

SF 110, Evaluating the tax equivalency of federal land in Wyoming, which would have required the state to conduct an appraisal of all federal lands within Wyoming's borders and evaluate the economic impact that would result if these lands were privatized and taxed.

SF 125, Electricity production standard, designed to penalize utility companies for providing renewable power from wind and solar to Wyoming customers.



STANDING UP FOR WILDLIFE & PUBLIC LANDS

Throughout 2020, the Outdoor Council continued to push back against a spike in oil and gas lease sales in sensitive wildlife habitat. We explored this issue, as well as the rise in noncompetitive and speculative leasing, in part one of a lease report we published in June.

In federal court, weaknesses in the Bureau of Land Management's approach to leasing were revealed. In March, a federal court voided two 2018 Wyoming lease sales, totaling more than 500,000 acres, which the Outdoor Council had protested because they included vast swaths of sage-grouse priority habitat as well as mule deer winter range and migration corridor habitat. The court found the BLM had illegally cut short the public comment period, and a later ruling determined the BLM had failed to prioritize leasing outside core sage-grouse habitat as required by 2015 land management plan revisions. This led the BLM to defer 330,000 acres of sage-grouse habitat from its September 2020 Wyoming lease sale.

WOC also protested a Converse County oil and gas project, which was approved in late 2020, that has the potential to destroy sage-grouse leks and harm hawk, falcon, and owl populations.

Altogether, this built a strong case for reforming the federal onshore oil and gas leasing program, which will be a priority in 2021.

As of April 2020,

4.8 million

acres of public land leases in Wyoming were idle and not producing any oil or gas.

The acreage leased in Wyoming for oil and gas development includes

15%

of core sage-grouse habitat,

14%

of mule deer crucial winter range, and

15%

of Wyoming's designated mule deer corridors.

CELEBRATING A WYOMING HIDDEN GEM

One source of solace during the tumult of 2020 was time spent in the Northern Red Desert — considered by many to be one of Wyoming’s best-kept secrets. In order to raise the public profile of this special place to help guide future protections and land management planning, we published a driving tour map, the first of its kind, highlighting the many values of the desert. This is now available at retailers and tourism offices in central and southwest Wyoming. We also led a number of desert tours for stakeholder groups, including a trip for Gov. Mark Gordon and his staff. Most importantly, the Outdoor Council also became involved with Citizens for the Red Desert, a coalition of groups and individuals representing a wide range of interests who have a shared love for the Red Desert and want to see it protected in its current state.

FINANCIALS

Conservation Programs: \$784,760 **Administration & Management:** \$212,321 **Fundraising:** \$148,348*

TOTAL EXPENSES: \$1,195,429

*In addition to these ongoing fundraising expenses, WOC invested \$50,000 in 2020 for comprehensive campaign planning.

WYOMING NEEDS YOU

The Wyoming Outdoor Council needs you to help safeguard our wild places and way of life for the next generation. **Will you consider joining the Tom Bell Legacy Society by leaving a gift to WOC in your will?** We've teamed up with FreeWill so you can write your will for free. And if you'd like, you can choose to leave a gift to the Outdoor Council. Your legacy gift ensures a voice for conservation into the future.

VISIT: wyomingoutdoorcouncil.org/the-tom-bell-legacy-society

