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## Local climate efforts cut costs and carbon in Wyoming

*As the state doubles down on fossil fuels, towns chart their own path.*

Dustin Bleizeffer | Dec. 11, 2020



*More than 250 Laramie residents gathered to participate in the Global Climate Strike on Sept. 20, 2019. Mike Selmer, leader of the Wyoming Climate Activists, speaks to the crowd.*

*Rob Joyce*

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Several communities across the state are breaking with state policy and forging their own plans to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

Earlier this year, the [Laramie City Council signed a proclamation](https://www.laramieboomerang.com/news/local_news/laramie-city-council-votes-for-carbon-neutral-goal/article_15912976-a643-5536-89bd-10b805f4bae1.html) ([https://www.laramieboomerang.com/news/local\\_news/laramie-city-council-votes-for-carbon-neutral-goal/article\\_15912976-a643-5536-89bd-10b805f4bae1.html](https://www.laramieboomerang.com/news/local_news/laramie-city-council-votes-for-carbon-neutral-goal/article_15912976-a643-5536-89bd-10b805f4bae1.html)), committing to achieving carbon neutrality by 2050. The international tourist destination of Jackson aims to be carbon neutral by 2030. In Sheridan, a new “Renewable Energy Assessment” states the town must “showcase a willingness to adapt to changing realities and markets.”

In October, Lander Mayor Monte Richardson signed a proclamation that acknowledges “the adverse impacts of climate change and the risk it poses to the Lander Community.” The proclamation delineated Richardson’s support of a goal to “reduce greenhouse gas emissions to enhance community resilience, quality of life and economic viability for current and future generations.”

These Wyoming towns are in the company of a growing number of U.S. cities resolving to cut greenhouse gas emissions. At least [150 have committed](https://www.liebertpub.com/doi/10.1089/sus.2020.0045) (<https://www.liebertpub.com/doi/10.1089/sus.2020.0045>) to net-zero emissions in coming years. Yet the voluntary efforts in Wyoming — the nation’s top coal producer and among the top in oil and natural gas — stand in contrast to state-level policies which might even inhibit communities attempting to move beyond a boom-and-bust fossil-fuel economy.

[RELATED:<https://www.hcn.org/issues/51.13/coal-with-coal-in-free-fall-wyoming-faces-an-uncertain-future>]

Legislative actions in recent years include a suite of new laws intended to keep coal-fired power plants in the state burning, while other proposals would raise taxes on commercial scale wind energy ([https://trib.com/business/energy/bill-to-lift-wind-energy-tax-grace-period-advances/article\\_df3e9f6d-f595-58dd-89a9-3c7607d53dbe.html](https://trib.com/business/energy/bill-to-lift-wind-energy-tax-grace-period-advances/article_df3e9f6d-f595-58dd-89a9-3c7607d53dbe.html)) and dissuade rooftop solar (<https://www.wyofile.com/critics-lawmakers-solar-bill-switch-silenced-public/>). State policymakers say they will also consider taking on the coal-fired power that other western states are abandoning.

“One of the ideas that’s come up is that since Washington and Oregon decided they’re not going to take any output from coal plants after a certain date, maybe other states — Wyoming, Utah and Idaho — could subscribe to the output of those plants and use them to serve loads in their individual states,” Wyoming Office of Consumer Advocate Administrator Bryce Freeman said.

While there’s plenty of support in towns like Lander, Sheridan, Laramie and even in Jackson for these state-level actions, there’s also a growing sense that the state — in the midst of a historic economic crisis — isn’t coming to the rescue.

## “Communities across Wyoming are waking up to the fact that our fossil fuel energy is no longer going to pay the way.”

“Communities across Wyoming are waking up to the fact that our fossil fuel energy is no longer going to pay the way,” renewable energy advocate and community organizer Monika Leininger said.

The climate change discussion tends to be less partisan at the local level, even in fossil fuel-dependent Wyoming, said Leininger, an organizer for the Sheridan-based landowner group Powder River Basin Resource Council. That’s because the efforts are coupled with the goal of saving taxpayer dollars by seeking energy efficiencies, she said.

Shifting toward more renewable sources of energy to diversify a local economy, according to Leininger, also speaks to Wyoming’s independent, bootstrapping culture. Just as state and regional partnerships lead U.S. climate action in the absence of a national climate and energy policy, Leininger said she sees a growing resolve among Wyoming communities to take actions independent of state policies and politics.

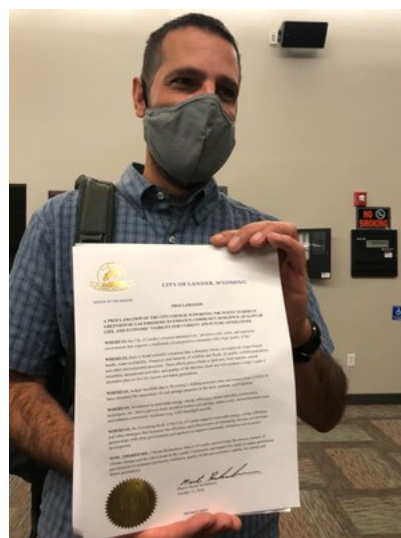
“These communities are just trying to move on,” she said. “They’re listening to markets, they’re seeing what attracts people, they’re seeing what’s working in other states and for other cities to attract business and save money.”

### Towns struggle, state holds purse-strings

Wyoming consumes more energy per capita than any other state, according to the U.S. Energy Information Administration (<https://www.eia.gov/state/rankings/?sid=WY#series/12>). That distinction, however, is owed to its industrial and mineral extraction industries; it takes a lot of electricity to mine coal and produce and process oil and natural gas.

Most of the electricity consumed in Wyoming comes from burning coal. The state’s per-capita greenhouse gas emissions, according to a U.S. Bureau of Land Management assessment ([https://eplanning.blm.gov/public\\_projects/nepa/66551/143342/176067/B11 Wyoming GHG Inventory and Reference C 2020.pdf](https://eplanning.blm.gov/public_projects/nepa/66551/143342/176067/B11%20Wyoming%20GHG%20Inventory%20and%20Reference%20C%202020.pdf)), are more than four times the national average — again owing to its fossil fuel industries and low population.

However, energy consumption remains a top expenditure for local governments — to heat and cool buildings, to treat sewage and power vehicle fleets. Today, towns and counties in Wyoming are slashing budgets in tandem with the state, which still faces a biennium deficit of about \$300 million even after outlining more than \$500 million in



*Ariel Greene, one of the citizen organizers and steering committee members for the Lander Climate Action Network, holds a mayoral proclamation about climate change on Oct. 13, 2020.*

*Courtesy Lander Climate Action Network*

proposed cuts. In Campbell County, for instance, commissioners expect to trim the county budget by 15-25%.



*Laramie's Downtown Clinic's 25-panel solar array offsets 98% of the clinic's energy usage. The project also includes Wyoming's first Blue Sky battery storage system, which will keep medical supplies, such as vaccines, properly stored during an emergency. A \$33,675 grant from the Rocky Mountain Power Blue Sky Program made it possible.*

*Courtesy Powder River Basin Resource Council*

“Everybody is looking to find efficiencies where they can,” Wyoming Association of Municipalities member services manager Justin Schilling said. “(Municipalities are) trying to maintain jobs, but take a hard look at services. It’s not catastrophic yet, but it’s headed that way.”

Finding efficiencies is essential for local governments, Schilling said, because state law restricts how counties and towns can tax themselves and otherwise raise funds — a fixture of Wyoming policy that local governments continually push against (<https://www.wyofile.com/as-legislature-hems-and-haws-19-counties-to-vote-on-taxes/>). Coupled with those limitations, local governments rely heavily on “direct distribution” payments mostly made up of mineral-extraction revenues that the legislature doles out on a biannual basis.

[RELATED:<https://www.hcn.org/issues/51.21-22/coal-wyomings-coal-fired-economy-is-coming-to-an-end>]

Those distributions totaled more than \$160 million — for all local governments — just five years ago. The most recent distribution contracted to \$105 million. Counties and towns expect the payments will continue to shrink drastically as the legislature imposes budget cuts and rejects new tax measures. The body’s long-standing anti-tax attitude was reaffirmed in this year’s elections (<https://www.wyofile.com/wyoming-voters-put-legislature-on-path-to-budget-disaster/>).

Wyoming municipalities, Schilling said, feel captive to the purse-string powers and whims of the legislature. He said he’s not surprised that cities and counties are looking inward to become more self-reliant.

That sense is prominently on display in Albany County and the city of Laramie, Albany County Commissioner Pete Gosar said. Local officials and residents alike, Gosar said, feel like they’re on their own to adapt to new market and cultural realities.

“Many of these counties and cities rely on the state to fill the deficits in their budgets,” Gosar said. “This is an opportunity to try to diversify and move in a direction where there are other sources of income for cities and counties.”

The state’s cuts to direct distribution payments in 2019 included a loss of nearly \$200,000 to the city of Laramie, according to city councilman Brian Harrington.

“So these [energy cost savings efforts] are crucial,” Harrington said. “We need to be doing everything we can to try to offset our own costs so that when the state continues to make cuts we can say we’ve been preparing.”

## **Seeds of climate and renewable-energy action**

Resolutions to measure emissions and to achieve a net-zero emissions target by 2050 have enjoyed unanimous support by the Laramie City Council, Harrington said. The city's resolve, along with buy-in by the Albany County Commission, comes after several years of grassroots support and organizing among interested residents. The movement coalesced into the Alliance for Renewable Energy of Laramie, which formed in 2018 and began working cooperatively with city officials in 2019.

Today, the alliance and local officials, along with others, share data and action proposals via an environmental advisory committee. They're also tapping talent and resources at the University of Wyoming; a group of [UW students is volunteering](https://www.laramieboomerang.com/news/local_news/uw-study-calculates-carbon-footprint-from-city-operations/article_cce5cdaa-b1cd-5352-a4d6-5e9baae9da9d.html) ([https://www.laramieboomerang.com/news/local\\_news/uw-study-calculates-carbon-footprint-from-city-operations/article\\_cce5cdaa-b1cd-5352-a4d6-5e9baae9da9d.html](https://www.laramieboomerang.com/news/local_news/uw-study-calculates-carbon-footprint-from-city-operations/article_cce5cdaa-b1cd-5352-a4d6-5e9baae9da9d.html)) to help measure baseline emissions of local government operations to help identify top cost-saving efforts.

Energy savings programs offered by the local utility are often the natural place for a community to start. Laramie and Albany County are served by Rocky Mountain Power. The Laramie Regional Airport received a grant from RMP's Blue Sky program to add solar panels at two of its facilities. The city is considering the same program to add solar panels to its event center and recreation center.



*Laramie officials and project partners break ground on a new solar array at the Laramie Ice and Event Center Oct. 13, 2020. Rocky Mountain Power, which helps provide community renewable energy projects to nonprofit organizations and public services, helped finance the project.*

*Ed Koncel*

**“Many of these counties and cities rely on the state to fill the deficits in their budgets . . . This is an opportunity to try to diversify and move in a direction where there are other sources of income for cities and counties.”**

One prime emissions source within city government is idling police cruisers, Harrington said. Officers essentially use cruisers as a mobile office for the duration of their shift. He said that, based on input from the citizens' alliance, the city is now looking into battery packs that will allow officers to reduce idling.

“The systems will pay for themselves within just a few years,” Harrington said.

Local officials are also reaching out to other Wyoming communities to explore whether they might jointly invest in new solar energy projects.

“It all began just by folks getting together and meeting and realizing city council members will listen if there's a structure in place,” Leininger said. “The city staff is ready to move to renewable energy to help them balance budgets and not have to remove people from their payrolls.”

It might come as no surprise that Jackson was the first Wyoming town to invoke climate change in a community-driven effort to reduce its own greenhouse gas emissions. Jackson's prosperity is rooted in large part on a pristine peaks-to-plains landscape prone to a warming climate. Making strides to combat climate change is a clear investment in Jackson's economy, proponents say.

In 2007, the city of Jackson and Teton County collaborated to come up with a “10 by 10” goal: reduce electrical consumption and fossil fuel consumption, each by 10%, by 2010. The local governments hit the mark, off by only a few months. In 2010, voters approved a local excise tax of \$3.8 million to invest in a suite of energy saving efforts and to begin adding renewable sources of energy — an investment that local leaders say has already paid for itself.

Today, a public-private partnership between Jackson, Teton County and [Energy Conservation Works](http://www.energyconservationworks.com/) (<http://www.energyconservationworks.com/>) — a collaboration that dates back to the mid-2000s — has helped cut energy use to save an estimated \$1.3 million annually primarily among local government expenditures, according to Energy Conservation Works Executive Director Phil Cameron.



“That doesn’t even capture everything,” Cameron said. “That’s a conservative figure because it’s hard to quantify kilowatts never demanded.”

Among the highlights of the community’s renewable energy efforts is the largest solar array in the state, located at the local sewage treatment plant. It generates approximately 750,000 kilowatt hours per year.

“When I think about it,” Cameron said, “there’s a lot more we can do within the means we already have; there’s still more homes and businesses we can enroll in energy efficiency efforts, and another goal is to renew our residential [energy efficiency] loan program.”

## Lander sees hope in carbon-cutting efforts

The dual goal of economic sustainability and landscapes and ecosystem-functionality preservation resonates in Lander. The Lander Climate Action Network formed after a series of climate discussions earlier this year to explore the community’s risks in a changing climate as well as money-saving opportunities in addressing it.

Taking on the threat of climate change while seeking energy savings has earned buy-in from a cross-section of residents, according to Lander Climate Action Network organizer Kara Colovich. The efforts so far have bypassed partisan inhibitions toward climate action that often steer policy at the Wyoming Legislature.

“It’s not people going out there with picket signs and big banners outside City Hall,” Colovich said. “It’s a collaborative process with the local government here.”

Colovich, a Lander native who moved away from Wyoming to study sustainability models for communities and organizations, moved back to Lander to help lead the National Outdoor Leadership School’s sustainability efforts. She now works at Lander-based [Creative Energies \(https://cesolar.com/\)](https://cesolar.com/), a regional solar installation company.



*Lander Climate Action Network members Ariel Greene, Adam Keifenheim and Katie Orem introduce their organization and vision to the Lander City Council in September 2020.*

*Courtesy Lander Climate Action Network*

Because of broad buy-in from the community, Lander Climate Action Network quickly earned a cooperative partnership with the city council, Colovich said.

The city was already scrounging to find energy and budget savings, taking advantage of Rocky Mountain Power’s [Wattsmart Business \(https://www.rockymountainpower.net/savings-energy-choices/business/wattsmart-efficiency-incentives-utah/ut-incentive-lists.html\)](https://www.rockymountainpower.net/savings-energy-choices/business/wattsmart-efficiency-incentives-utah/ut-incentive-lists.html) program and finding savings by switching to LED lighting. It received a \$25,000 grant via the Wyoming Business Council to upgrade to more energy-efficient air conditioning and heating at Lander’s senior center, saving an estimated \$200 to \$300 per month, according to Lander Assistant Mayor RaJean Strube Fossen.

Joining forces with LCAN seemed a natural next step, and essential to building a long-term climate and energy roadmap for the future, Strube Fossen said.

“With the budget shortfalls that every municipality is going to face, these efforts focus on energy efficiency to save the city money,” Colovich said. “Our organization is volunteer-based, so if the city can rely on staff that they don’t have to pay to come up with an outline for how they can save money through energy efficiency measures, I think that is a big plus to the city.”

The city has asked LCAN to provide recommendations; high on the list is a complete assessment [NEWSLETTER] of the city’s energy use and greenhouse gas footprint. Lander’s municipal waste treatment plant is a prime target for energy savings, Strube Fossen said. So far, the city hasn’t tapped new sources of renewable energy, but that’s a topic that the public-private partnership will explore.

“For a city government, renewable energy is beneficial because it saves public tax dollars,” Strube Fossen said. “Anywhere we can reduce our consumption of power, we’re also reducing dollars spent. And those savings are long term.”

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