

MONTANA WILDLIFE

NEWS FROM THE MONTANA WILDLIFE FEDERATION

THE PUBLIC LANDS ISSUE

WHEN PUBLIC LANDS BECOME POLITICAL LEVERAGE | 2025 LEGISLATIVE WRAP-UP
HUNTING ON CRUTCHES | AFFILIATE SPOTLIGHT: FLATHEAD WILDLIFE, INC.
HONORING MONTANA'S CONSERVATION CHAMPIONS | WELCOMING NEW LEADERSHIP



Dear friends and members,

Across the country, the people who care for our public lands and wildlife—those who support farmers and ranchers, manage our National Parks, rivers, forests, and prairies, and protect our communities from wildfires, floods, and drought—are being fired.

Working with you, we defeated Utah Senator Mike Lee's scheme to sell off millions of acres of public lands, but Senator Steve Daines has seen to it that oil and gas drilling permits on 200 million acres of public lands will get fast-tracked without community input or scientific review while slashing royalty rates, providing a special interest subsidy costing American taxpayers \$6 billion over the next 10 years.

The stakes couldn't be higher for Montana. Our congressional delegation cannot allow the Trump Administration to dismantle the Roadless Rule—a bedrock protection for a quarter century that has safeguarded Montana's most iconic tracts and critical wildlife habitats. We are aghast at our delegation's embrace of an anti-science pablum that will only increase costs for Montana taxpayers, communities, ranches, and wildlife as climate change accelerates.

Don't believe the rhetoric from D.C. politicians. These attacks won't improve efficiency, affordable housing, or reduce the federal debt. They are well-funded efforts to privatize and exploit public goods, public trust, and erode a century of bipartisan conservation victories. Yet, there is still reason for hope.

During our 2025 state legislature, MWF helped secure permanent, historic funding for Habitat Montana to protect working lands, wildlife habitats, and public access, and created the nation's first dedicated account for lifesaving wildlife highway crossings. In these times, bipartisan conservation leadership reminds us that when we work together, we can win.

Let's build on the momentum of defeating Senator Lee's land selloff proposal and securing historic Habitat Montana funding by demanding that our federal delegation strengthen conservation outcomes—not dismantle them. Join MWF today and stand with us to protect Montana's wildlife, waters, and wild places for future generations.

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Executive Director

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WELCOME TO OUR PUBLIC LANDS ISSUE



Public lands are the foundation of everything we value in Montana. They are where we learn to fish, to hunt, to roam freely. They are the beating heart of our outdoor heritage, supporting not only clean water, working lands, and public access, but also the iconic wildlife that defines this state: elk bugling through alpine meadows, mule deer ghosting through sagebrush basins, and native trout rising in cold, clear streams.

In this issue, we celebrate the victories you helped us secure during the 2025 Montana legislative session to protect and invest in these lands, notably securing

permanent, historic funding for Habitat Montana—one of the biggest conservation victories in a generation.

We take a deeper look at the growing threats we face, from federal selloff schemes to rollbacks that put corporate profits ahead of public interest.

You'll also hear personal stories of harvesting game on public lands, including a favorite recipe from the field, and meet the new leadership guiding the MWF into its next chapter—one shaped by the same values that have always driven our mission: protecting Montana's public lands, wildlife, and access for all the species that depend on them.

ABOUT THE COVER ARTIST: MONTE DOLACK



Born in Montana, Monte Dolack has been a full-time working artist since 1974. The American West's changing landscape is often evident in his artworks. His carefully crafted magic realist works are infused with a sense of mystery, drama, and irony.

His work resides in many public and private collections and has been exhibited in museums internationally. Recent solo exhibitions include the Palace of Nations at the United Nations, Geneva, Switzerland, and Helena Montana's Holter Museum of Art. He received the distinguished Fine Arts Alumni award from the University of Montana in 2009. In 2018, he was honored with the Montana Governor's Arts award.

In 2020 he was featured in a solo exhibition at the Montana Museum of Art and Culture, and a major new book of his artwork has just been published by the University of Montana Press.

MEET MWF'S NEW STAFF & BOARD MEMBERS

MIKE Mershon SUCCEEDS CHRIS SERVHEEN AS MWF BOARD PRESIDENT

After years of dedicated service, Chris Servheen is passing the torch as Board President of the Montana Wildlife Federation. Chris brought deep expertise, thoughtful leadership, and an unwavering commitment to science-based conservation during his tenure—guiding MWF through legislative challenges, strategic growth, and a renewed focus on protecting Montana's wild places. As we thank Chris for his many contributions, we welcome Mike Mershon into the role. A longtime outdoorsman and conservation advocate, Mike brings a clear vision for the future of MWF. Read more in a Q&A on page 20.



JOHN MCILTROT



John McIlTrot lives on the prairie outside Roundup, Montana, where he has trained pointing dogs on wild birds for more than 25 years. His close connection to the land, and the sharp-tailed and sage grouse that inhabit it has given him a rare, year-round view into the challenges facing Montana's grasslands, from development to drought.

A longtime small business owner, John brings decades of experience in communications, advocacy, and negotiations—skills he has put to use in recent legislative sessions speaking up for bird dog trainers and public land users. As someone who lives just a mile from an active grouse lek in one of the last four intact temperate grasslands on earth, John sees conservation not just as a cause, but as a responsibility.

DIANE BOYD, PH.D.

With more than 40 years studying and managing wild wolf populations, Diane Boyd, Ph.D., brings a lifetime of knowledge to the MWF Board of Directors. She came to Montana in 1979 to study the natural return of gray wolves to the Northern Rockies and went on to help shape their recovery across the West.

Diane's work has explored everything from wolf ecology and dispersal to the complex dynamics of wolf-human conflict. She has collaborated on projects internationally and has published widely in scientific journals. After retiring as the Region 1 Wolf and Carnivore Specialist for Montana FWP, Diane continues to educate, write, and advocate for sound, science-based wildlife management.

She holds advanced degrees from the University of Montana, where she taught courses on predator conservation as an affiliate faculty member.



WELCOMING OUR NEWEST STAFF MEMBERS

KEVIN FARRON REPRESENTS MWF AS CONSERVATION DIRECTOR



After serving as MWF's Phil Tawney Fellow during the 2025 Montana legislative session, where he played a key role in securing some of our biggest conservation wins, Kevin Farron has officially joined the team as MWF's new Conservation Director.

In this role, Kevin draws on his policy experience and knowledge of conservation issues to help shape state and federal policy that advances MWF's mission. Kevin, his wife, and their two young kids live a life rooted in the outdoors—relying on wild fish and hunted game to fill the freezer and fuel their connection to the land.

MJ MARTIN GROWS MEMBERSHIP AS DEVELOPMENT ASSOCIATE

MWF welcomed MJ Martin as the Development Associate, where she leads board fundraising efforts, improves MWF's membership platform, and helps lead the ambassador team. She brings a background in outdoor sales and leadership, along with seven years of experience as a professional mountain bike coach, where she has focused on empowering women and children about mountain biking and trail stewardship.

Her passion for upland hunting led her to MWF. Each fall, she spends time afield with her bird dog, Ruth, chasing sharptails and chukars. Outside of hunting season, she enjoys exploring Montana's public lands by bike, skis, and foot, and enjoys cooking gourmet upland dinners or knitting an ever-growing collection of socks and sweaters.



SUPPORT CONSERVATION WITH MWF'S LICENSE PLATE!



We're thrilled to announce that our new license plate is available at your local county treasurer's office!

The next time you renew your vehicle's registration or register a new vehicle, get MWF's new plate! The proceeds help fund our conservation efforts across the state.

If you have any questions, reach out to us at mwf@mtwf.org!

Honoring Montana's Conservation Champions

Each year, the Montana Wildlife Federation takes a moment to pause and recognize the people and organizations going above and beyond for our state's wildlife, waters, and public lands. For more than 40 years, the MWF Conservation Awards have celebrated those whose efforts often go unrecognized—those who quietly, persistently, and effectively work to protect the wild places and traditions that define Montana. To this year's awardees: thank you for your service, your passion, and your commitment to Montana's wild future.

Conservation Organization of the Year — **Vital Ground and Trust for Public Lands**

Special Conservation Achievement — **Ben Deeble**, Big Sky Upland Game Bird Association

Conservation Educator of the Year — **Stephanie Gillin**, Confederated Salish & Kootenai Tribes

MWF Heritage Award 2025 — **Jon Tester and Dick Dolan**

Special Achievement Landowner-Sportsmen Relations — **Rebecca Mowry**, Region 2 wildlife biologist for FWP

Les Pengelly Conservation Professional of the Year — **Julie Cunningham and Neil Anderson**



Rebecca Mowry, a Region 2 wildlife biologist with FWP, received the Special Achievement Award for Landowner-Sportsmen Relations. She was nominated by the Ravalli County Fish & Wildlife Association for her excellence in wildlife management and her leadership in completing the 500-acre Sweathouse Creek conservation easement with the Hackett family. She is pictured with Mark Oswald of RCFWA (left) and Frank Szollosi, MWF Executive Director (right).

Julie Cunningham, Region 3 wildlife biologist for FWP, received the Les Pengelly Conservation Professional of the Year Award for her commitment to wildlife research, habitat conservation, and public engagement. Julie recently led Madison Valley game damage hunts that opened 50,000 acres of public access, resulting in the harvest of 300 elk. She also teaches at MSU and leads citizen science efforts to support bighorn sheep, mountain goats, and other species. She is pictured with MWF Board Member, Jim Vashro (left).



Neil Anderson, Region 1 wildlife manager for FWP, received the Les Pengelly Conservation Professional of the Year Award for his leadership in wildlife disease research and management. A national expert on Chronic Wasting Disease, Neil has advanced conservation efforts across species from elk to bighorn sheep. He is pictured with MWF Board Members, Chris Servheen (left) and Jim Vashro (right).

MWF 500 CLUB

We're proud to honor the MWF 500 Club—members who contribute \$500 or more annually, above their standard membership, to fund high-priority initiatives in MWF's Strategic Plan. By leading the way, MWF 500 Club members help secure an additional \$250,000+ in annual funding, ensuring vital conservation efforts move forward. We're deeply grateful for their commitment. We're honored to recognize MWF 500 Club members through the following designations:

MWF 500 Club Members – Those who contribute \$500 or more annually to support our conservation mission.

Wildlife Champion Lifetime Members – Those who have made a one-time contribution of \$1,500 or more.

Wildlife Benefactors – Our most dedicated supporters who contribute \$5,000 or more annually.

To each of you who supported us at this level: thank you. Your generosity helps protect what makes Montana wild.

Andrew Chanania	Doug McSpadden	Kathy Knudsen*	Raymond Carlin*
Andrew Knight*	Dustan Nyberg	Kris & Ginger Pooley*	Reg Page*
Brent Roster*	Ed Bangs	Lou and Lila Bahin	Ron Clausen*
Bruce & Ariel Wooley	Elizabeth McFarland	Louise Pfister & Barr Edwards^	Robert Maricich
Bruce Rehwinkel	Greg Case*	Lyn Cameron	Roy O'Connor
Carl Westphal^	Howard & Brenda Sheridan^	Malcolm Kinney	Ted Lyon*
Carol & Tim Aldrich^	I. Edward Sondeno*	Margaret & Skip Kowalski*	Tim Conway
Chad Richards*	Jamie & Phillip Bruns	Marion Cherry*	Tim Crawford (deceased)^
Chase Bjornson*	Jim Johnston*	Michael Pilon*	Tom Deveny*
Chris Merker*	Jim Vashro*	Patrick Sweeney	Tom Puchlerz*
Christopher Servheen	John Dale (deceased)^	Paul Dahlke	Warren Wubker
Clif and Heidi Youmans	John Lahey	Pete Clarkson*	William Geer
David & Monica Paoli*	John Marshall	Randall Gray	Yvon Chouinard^
David Schmid*	John Rich^		
Denice & Glenn Elison*	Kathleen Hadley*		

*Lifetime Member

^Wildlife Benefactor



Photo by Lisa Ballard

2025 MONTANA LEGISLATIVE WRAP-UP

After months of debate that will shape the future of our wildlife, waters, and public lands, Montana's 69th Legislative Session concluded on April 30. MWF engaged on more than 60 bills, stepping in whenever habitat, access, or science-based management were involved. From packed committee rooms to public rallies and meetings with lawmakers, MWF worked alongside partners to protect the places and species that make Montana wild.

CONSERVATION WINS

Conservation funding secured—Our biggest win of the 2025 session came with the passage of HB 932, a historic bill that locks in annual funding for conservation from Montana's recreational marijuana tax. Over the next two years alone, this bill will allocate an estimated \$32 million to support conservation priorities, including Habitat Montana, State Parks, Trails, and Nongame Wildlife. The bill also establishes a new Habitat Legacy Account, ensuring long-term investments in land protection, wildlife habitat, and access to outdoor recreation.

Wildlife crossings finally get funding—Montana ranks near the top in wildlife-vehicle collisions per capita, with no dedicated state funding to address wildlife crossings. HB 932 and HB 855 changed that by creating a special account for wildlife overpasses and accommodations, as well as establishing consistent financing from both a new license plate and cannabis tax revenue.

Block Management improvements—A suite of bills—SB 441, SB 83, and HB 763—strengthened Montana's Block Management Program by expanding enforcement, improving access, and promoting hunter accountability. A small fee increase for nonresident base hunting licenses also passed which will generate more money for the program.



In one of the most powerful moments of the legislative session, MWF and conservation partners organized the Rally for Public Lands that filled the rotunda of the State Capitol. Montanans stood shoulder to shoulder speaking out for the lands that make Montana home. The echoes of their voices rose through the marble halls that day, a reminder to every lawmaker inside: public lands belong to the people. Photo by Cameron Evans.

BILLS WE STOPPED

Perpetual easements protected—SB 209 would have eliminated perpetual conservation easements—an attack on private land stewardship and private property rights. It died in its first hearing.

Public land transfer resolutions defeated—MWF stood firm against HJ 24, a resolution supporting Utah’s attempt to seize federal lands. The resolution was overwhelmingly rejected on the House floor—thanks to strong public opposition. We also helped defeat SJ 14 which sought to remove protections from wilderness study areas, and sounded the alarm on HB 676 which would have forced the sale of some state lands before it was amended.

Stream access safeguarded—Montana’s heralded Stream Access Law stood strong this session, despite an attempt to weaken it via HB 240. MWF worked with partners to ensure the bill was withdrawn before its first hearing.

BAD BILLS THAT GOT THROUGH

Anti-science water bills passed—MWF opposed HB 664 and HB 736, which roll back nutrient pollution standards and create regulatory loopholes. Both bills were signed into law, but we expect legal challenges ahead, likely at taxpayers’ expense.

Climate protections gutted—Several bills sought to dismantle the Montana Environmental Policy Act (MEPA) in the wake of the victorious *Held v. Montana* climate lawsuit. MWF opposed HB 270, HB 285, SB 221, and HB 291—all of which were ultimately signed into law. These bills significantly reduce the state’s ability to consider climate impacts and environmental concerns in permitting and planning.

OTHER NOTABLE ENGAGEMENTS

Upland game bird habitat and access funding secured—HB 372, led by Rep. Tom France, D-Missoula, backed by MWF, increases funding for the Upland Game Bird Enhancement Program by \$1 million over two years.

Fair chase bills advanced—MWF backed HB 202, SB 106, and HB 264—bills that crack down on drone use, protect wildlife location data, and uphold hunter ethics. All three made it to the Governor’s desk, but unfortunately, HB 202 was vetoed.

Wildlife conflict bills debated—Several bills attempted to address the challenges of communities coexisting with wildlife, including HB 356 (black bear depredation compensation), HB 560 (community fund for rural areas), and HB 847 (grizzly management funding). The latter two didn’t make it through, but MWF will continue advocating for balanced coexistence measures.

Science-based management support—MWF supported HB 564, HB 175, and SJ 17, all of which focused on improving data collection and understanding of hunter behavior. Though only HB 175 became law, all represent a welcome shift toward informed policy.

LOOKING AHEAD

While we didn’t win every fight, 2025 delivered some of the strongest conservation gains in recent legislative memory. Montana’s wildlife and public lands are better off because people cared enough to act.

As the interim begins, MWF will stay engaged, tracking agency rulemaking, advocating for fish and wildlife habitat and improved public access, and preparing for what lies ahead. We’ll show up. We hope you will, too.



AFFILIATE SPOTLIGHT

FLATHEAD WILDLIFE, INC.

BY JIM VASHRO, FLATHEAD WILDLIFE, INC. PRESIDENT, MWF BOARD DIRECTOR

Nearly 70 years ago, a group of hunters and anglers in Kalispell came together with a shared conviction: that the wildlife and landscapes of northwest Montana deserved more than admiration—they deserved protection. In 1956, we put that truth to paper and incorporated as Flathead Wildlife, Inc. (FWI), adopting a motto that continues to guide the organization today: Protecting and Enhancing Our Hunting and Fishing Heritage.

Over the decades, our group has followed four program pillars: protecting hunting and fishing, protecting and enhancing wildlife and wildlife habitat, protecting public access, and engaging youth in the outdoors.

Some of our work is visible. Every year, we build and sell about 500 bluebird nesting boxes to raise funds and support native songbirds. We helped introduce knapweed-eating weevils—released on private lands in the lower Clark Fork in partnership with the Montana Wildlife Federation—to improve forage conditions for bighorn sheep, elk, and deer.

But much of our work takes place quietly, behind the scenes among landowners, lawmakers, and the land.



Flathead Wildlife, Inc. provides orange vests to youth Hunter Education graduates in northwest Montana. Photo courtesy of Jim Vashro.

FWI has been instrumental in enrolling hundreds of thousands of acres of former Plum Creek timberlands in conservation easements, preserving working timberlands, habitat, and public access. We've taken legal action against Flathead County to protect public access at McGregor Lake, the Flathead River, and Church Slough.

In collaboration with Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP), FWI has helped fund additional access projects, such as building a picnic shelter at Pine Grove Pond Fishing Access Site, docks at Smith Lake and Shady Lane, and ongoing trail work across other fishing access sites. FWI has worked with the Flathead Land Trust to protect key habitats.

We work with private landowners to remove trash and unneeded fencing, and to draft legislation that extends FWP's enforcement authority to public use on private land year-round, helping to control unwanted use.

We recognize individuals and groups who step up for wildlife, habitat, and science-based management, honoring them with Plaques of Appreciation.



Volunteers from Flathead Wildlife, Inc. construct the picnic shelter at Pine Grove Pond Fishing Access Site. Photo courtesy of Jim Vashro.



Flathead Wildlife Inc., in partnership with Montana Wildlife Federation, helped introduce root-boring weevils that target invasive spotted knapweed in the lower Clark Fork. These weevils feed on the plant's roots, killing mature knapweed and restoring vital forage for elk, deer, and bighorn sheep.

We understand that the future of conservation depends on education. We hold monthly meetings that tackle timely issues and provide testimony to the Montana Legislature and the Fish and Wildlife Commission.

But perhaps our most lasting legacy is in the hands of our youth. We organize fishing days where children are awarded “First Fish” certificates and can use donated gear, and we partner with Hooked on Fishing to allow students to stock rainbow trout in local ponds. We donate to the Flathead 4-H Shooting Sports program, which teaches safety and marksmanship to youth, and conduct FWP Becoming an Outdoors-Woman (BOW) ice fishing and fly fishing workshops.

Some efforts are creative, such as the construction of a rolling bear decoy used in “Bear Aware” and bear spray demonstrations, and autumn advertisements featuring young hunters alongside their first

successful harvests, emblazoned with the words “Preserve the Tradition.” Through a collaboration with Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks and Flathead Electric’s Roundup for Safety, FWI also ensures that every Hunter Education graduate in northwest Montana receives a blaze orange vest—an emblem of safety, mentorship, and belonging.

Over the years, FWI has proven that conservation doesn’t always make headlines. Sometimes, it’s quiet work, the sound of a child reeling in their first fish, the absence of a fence where wildlife once tangled, or the open gate at a trailhead.

Flathead Wildlife, Inc. is a longtime affiliate of the Montana Wildlife Federation and has been recognized multiple times as MWF’s Affiliate of the Year—most recently in 2024. To learn more or get involved, visit: www.flatheadwildlife.org.





HARVEST ON CRUTCHES

INJURY, RECOVERY, AND THE LAND THAT SUSTAINS US

Using my crutches as a bipod, I hunted from a ridge on public land after undergoing surgery for a shattered leg.

BY MANDELA LEOLA VAN EEDEN, MWF BOARD DIRECTOR

In October 2024, during my final adventure ride of the season, I found myself navigating the rugged 4x4 roads of the remote and historic Lolo Corridor. A couple of massive windstorms earlier that summer had littered the landscape with downed trees, and as I carefully navigated the debris on my Yamaha Tenere 700, my saddlebag snagged on a fallen branch, bringing my motorcycle, and my season, to an abrupt end.

Drawing from a life split between Montana's public lands and the African bush, I did what I've always been taught to do: refocus and make a plan. Injured and running on adrenaline, I rode my motorcycle over three mountain ranges to reach Highway 12. When I finally

made it to the hospital, the doctor shook their head in disbelief. "You're too tough for your own good," they said, stunned that I'd ridden out of the mountains with a fractured fibula, a shattered tibia, and a torn deltoid ligament. The road ahead wouldn't be dirt or gravel anymore. It would be lined with surgery, patience, and a deep reserve of grit.

As an athlete and an international whitewater expedition guide, healing wasn't just a medical process, it was an emotional journey. And as anyone who's faced a long recovery knows, healing is far from linear. But underneath it all, a single motivation pulled me forward: I still wanted to hunt last season.

Spending time on Montana's public lands did more to heal me than any prescription or pair of crutches ever could. That urge to regain my independence, to return to wildness, was rooted in the incredible privilege of having access to public lands. In Montana, we're blessed with millions of acres where anyone—regardless of ability, income, or background—can connect with the natural world.

That privilege isn't something I take for granted. In my other home, South Africa, access to wild places and wildlife is largely privatized, gated by economics or land ownership. It's a stark contrast to the American model of conservation, which treats wildlife as a public trust and land as a shared heritage. Thanks to organizations like the Montana Wildlife Federation, which has spent over eight decades protecting public access, future generations will have the same opportunities I did—to heal, reconnect, and harvest nourishing, organic protein.

I've been a vegetarian for most of my life, but when my body tells me it needs animal protein, I honor that call by harvesting it myself. This fall, I still intended to do just that—even on crutches. When I think back on early hunter-gatherers, I'm struck by the advantages we now have: orthopedic surgery, antibiotics, lightweight gear. The same injury would have been permanently disabling 200 years ago. With that perspective in mind, I had no excuse not to follow through.

So I adapted. I used my crutches as a bipod. I glassed from accessible ridges. And I relied on a healthy dose of ingenuity: make a plan. The result? A healthy



Montana Wildlife Federation Board Member Jim Vashro gifted me a European mount of the buck I harvested on crutches. Vashro prepared the mount himself. It perfectly symbolized the kind of conservation community we're fighting to protect.

whitetail buck, made possible by access to public lands, a can-do mindset, and the invaluable mentorship of friends and conservationists who helped me along the way.

One of those friends was fellow MWF board member Jim Vashro, who graciously turned the head of my buck into a beautiful European mount. It wasn't just a gesture. It was a symbol of the kind of community the Montana Wildlife Federation fosters. We don't just protect wildlife and habitat; we pass down traditions, support one another, and create space for resilience to flourish.

This experience deepened my respect for both the land and the creatures we share it with. Ethical hunting, rooted in gratitude and responsibility, is one of the most powerful tools we have for wildlife conservation. It funds habitat restoration, supports science-based management, and reminds us of our place in the natural world. That's the heart of the North American Model of Conservation—and the mission of MWF.

Harvesting that buck on crutches wasn't just a personal victory. It was a celebration of everything Montana stands for: wild places, public access, strong mentorship, and the resilience of both people and wildlife. I'm grateful to MWF for fighting to protect those values. And if there's one thing I've learned through all of this, it's to never underestimate what you can accomplish—even with a broken leg.



The Yamaha Tenere 700 I was riding when I broke my leg on Montana's Lolo Corridor.



LAND TRANSFER OR LAND GRAB?

WHEN PUBLIC LANDS BECOME POLITICAL LEVERAGE

BY SAGE MARSHALL

The Paradise Valley north of Yellowstone National Park was once a vast undeveloped landscape. Bison, elk, mule deer, and bighorn sheep used the grassy hillsides for winter range. Grizzly and black bears prowled the riparian areas. And native cutthroat trout finned the river. The land just outside the park was nearly as wild as that inside it.

Of course, that's changed. Luxury ranches and vacation homes now dot much of the land north of Yellowstone.

While some of the development was inevitable on private lands, part of the story stems from a failed land transfer with the federal government that was squandered because of political interference.

Robert Dennee, a former land manager for the Gallatin National Forest and longtime expert in land exchanges, witnessed both the promises and pitfalls of these deals. Over decades of experience negotiating land transfers for the federal government, he got to see what could go well during land transfers—and what could happen when outside actors meddled with the deals.

In the early 1980s, media magnate Malcolm Forbes began looking to sell a massive, undeveloped ranch just north of Yellowstone known as Royal Teton Ranch. The U.S. Forest Service (USFS) developed a proposal using the agency's land transfer powers to acquire the 12,000-acre parcel and conserve critical wildlife habitat while expanding public access. But the deal fell through.

“Congress and the Reagan Administration decided to freeze the funding for land acquisition,” says Dennee. “We lost the chance to purchase that entire ranch.”

Instead, the Church Universal and Triumphant, a controversial religious cult, acquired the land. They developed parts of it and eventually sold off other parcels, some of which were developed. Some acreage was eventually sold to federal land management agencies under a different administration. But the original deal would've been better for wildlife and the public, according to Dennee, who considers it a cautionary tale.

“The bottom line is always: does it meet the test of truly being in the long-term public interest?”

— Robert Dennee

“When you lose that opportunity, sometimes you may never get it again,” says Dennee. “If you do get an opportunity later, the market price is going to go up substantially.”

What Land Transfers Should Look Like

Over the past year, heated political debates have ensued over public land management, including the recent push by Utah Senator Mike Lee to privatize vast swaths of federally managed lands in the West.

What’s often missing from these debates by pro-privatization politicians is the fact that there are tried-and-true systems for public land transfers that are already in place.

Federal land management agencies such as the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) and Bureau of Land Management (BLM) have long had the authority to acquire, dispose of, and sell land.

Different agencies have slightly different protocols and considerations for doing so, but generally, the agencies are supposed to acquire land that would benefit from federal management and dispose of it in exchanges that help consolidate federal land. They can also convey it to local communities to use for infrastructure such as libraries, which was the case for the library in White Sulphur Springs.

The agencies are guided by clear directives to prioritize both public access and resource value.

Such deals are typically developed by the land management agencies together with private landowners, who benefit from such deals by consolidating their holdings or through the market-rate pricing that the agencies pay to acquire their land. What follows is a process that involves environmental analyses of the impacts of such transfers, public comment opportunities, and deliberation, among other steps.

According to Dennee, the framework has largely been successful.

“The federal land management agencies have the authority, staff, and expertise to go about land transfers in a thoughtful and deliberate way,” he says. “The bottom line is always: does it meet the test of truly being in the long-term public interest?”



Montana was excluded from Senator Mike Lee’s recent land sell-off proposal due to pressure from the state’s delegation, but the threat is far from over. As Congress takes actions to weaken land management agencies, it opens the door to privatization efforts that bypass public input and jeopardize the public lands that define Montana’s identity, economy, and way of life. Photo by Lisa Ballard.

One example of such success occurred in the 1990s, when Dennee helped negotiate a 54,000-acre land exchange with Big Sky Lumber Company in Montana’s Gallatin range. Both the lumber company and the USFS consolidated their holdings from pre-existing checkerboard ownership to solid tracts of land. The exchange resulted in the USFS acquiring land in the Gallatin, Madison, Bridger, and Bangtail mountains.

It was a win-win for both the private landowner and the public, and it was even supported with special legislation put forward by Montana’s national delegation. Thanks in part to this land transfer, Dennee says, the Bozeman area has vast swaths of public land in close proximity to populated areas.

The Current Threats to Public Lands

Understanding how land transfers are meant to work helps underscore how today's threats to public lands deviate from that process, including recent efforts spearheaded by legislators in Utah and Nevada.

One such threat came in the form of a lawsuit filed by those states that petitioned the federal government to transfer unappropriated federal lands to state control.

According to John Tubbs, the author of a recent study called "The Montana Land Transfer Report," commissioned by the MWF and partners, such a transfer would almost certainly allow states to then privatize those lands without the same kind of safeguards of acting in the public interest that federal agencies have.

Moreover, according to Tubbs, states just aren't equipped to manage such vast swaths of public land—for instance, 29% of Montana, or 27.4 million acres, are federal public lands—and doing so would incur an economic toll of \$8 billion dollars on the state's taxpayers, not to mention the impact to tourism.

"Tourism is a really big part of our state economy and you would be putting it at risk," Tubbs says. "If you transferred the public lands, we'd all of a sudden be more like Texas, and I don't think tourism would be the same."

Although that lawsuit died when the Supreme Court declined to hear it, another effort to privatize public lands was already underfoot. In the federal budget appropriation bill, House Representatives Mark Amodei

Montana's public lands support wildlife and are the backbone of our outdoor economy. In 2024, a record 13.8 million out-of-state visitors spent \$5 billion here. Places like Paradise Valley and the public lands surrounding Yellowstone remain not only critical to wildlife and our outdoor heritage, but to Montana's communities and economy as well. Photo by Cameron Evans.



“The issue is not going away. Especially with the way the Trump Administration is gutting land management agencies—they’re skeletons of what they were and more vulnerable about these types of schemes.” — Travis Hall, associate news editor for *Field & Stream*



The Forest Service uses land exchanges to consolidate fragmented “checkerboard” landscapes by trading isolated parcels. These exchanges follow a formal review process, including environmental analysis and public comment, to ensure they serve the public interest and do not harm sensitive species.

and Celeste Maloy snuck a proposal to sell off over a million acres of public land in Utah and Nevada, ostensibly to fund affordable housing.

Montana Representative Ryan Zinke played a key role in getting that language out of the house version of the bill. Senator Mike Lee later reintroduced language that could force federal agencies to dispose of 2 to 3 million acres of public land across the West. (Montana was exempted because of political pressure from the state’s delegation.)

Thanks to widespread opposition from both parties, advocates, and western lawmakers, the proposal was ultimately removed from the final version of the bill.

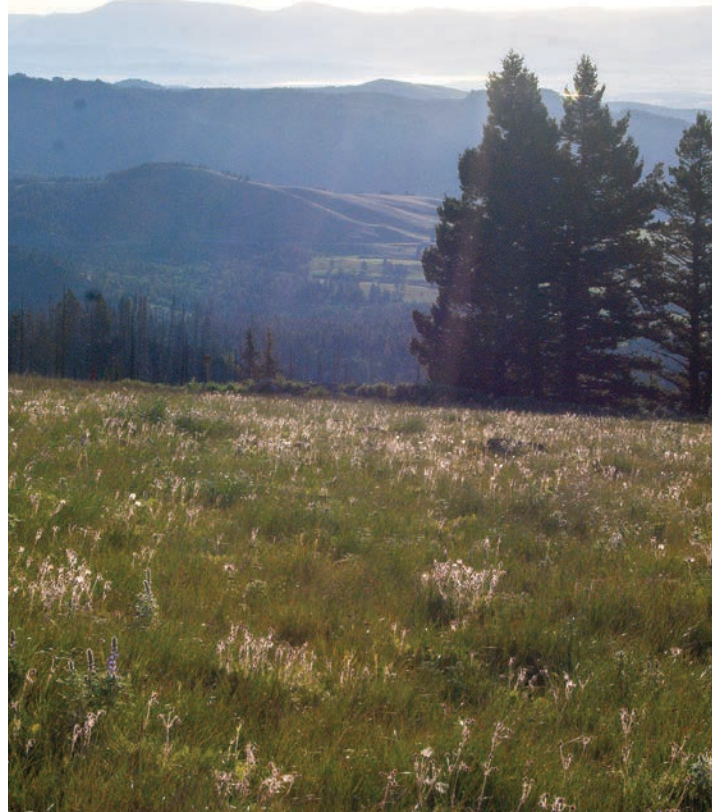
The move underscores that efforts to sell off public lands are persistent—and evolving. The move would have essentially side-stepped federal land management agencies’ authority to facilitate transfers in the public interest. According to Dennee and other experts, the results could be catastrophic.

“This is precedent-setting, and I would consider it to be irreversible,” says Dennee. “If this type of

legislation is enacted, it will have a snowball effect. What we’ll be doing is converting public lands to permanent development.”

Travis Hall, associate news editor for *Field & Stream*, is based in Stevensville, Montana but has covered the issue on a national scale. He says that, while there’s a long history of conservative land privatization proponents, he’s never seen such an “emboldened push” to do so as today.

“The issue is not going away,” says Hall. “Especially with the way the Trump Administration is gutting land management agencies—they’re skeletons of what they were and more vulnerable about these types of schemes. We need to be vigilant.”



Montana Rep. Ryan Zinke helped remove a provision from an early version of the federal budget bill that would have sold 450,000 acres of public land, saying, “Once the land is sold, we will never get it back.” The proposal resurfaced in the Senate, pushed by Utah Sen. Mike Lee, and was expanded to over two million acres across the West. It was ultimately defeated after bipartisan pushback. Photo by Sonya Smith.

MEET MWF'S NEW BOARD PRESIDENT MIKE MERSHON

Most of my earliest memories are rooted in wild places. Backpacking trips with my father taught me the contours of high alpine lakes in Colorado. My grandfather led pack trips deep into the Beartooths, and in that high, unforgiving range, I first understood the difference between being outdoors and being part of the land. And my uncle secured a deep appreciation for open landscapes.

As I've grown older, I've come to realize just how lucky I was to have been shown how to access the vast public landscapes and wildlife that we have in this country. That knowledge, passed from one generation to the next, shaped the path I walk now and the sense of duty I feel to ensure these places endure.

In my younger years, I chased everything. Whether it be rock or ice climbing, mountaineering, backpacking, fly fishing or hunting, I scrambled across as many of the mountain ranges of Montana as possible and in any little piece of public land I could find along the way.

Now, I've focused on big game hunting. I've been fortunate to find success with a variety of species in Montana, but I've developed a particular passion for elk hunting and for pursuing bighorn sheep in the Beartooths' famed unlimited units.



While studying science at Montana State University Billings, I met the woman who would become my wife. After five years of adventuring together, we were married on top of the Beartooth Plateau, on a spring day full of sunshine, snow, and thunder. We've now been happily married for 11 years. My work in painting and property management has given me just enough to live the life I want, and balance work with my outdoor pursuits.

A few years ago, I felt the call to give back to the places that have shaped me.

I kept seeing the Montana Wildlife Federation show up—especially at Fish, Wildlife & Parks commission meetings—and soon discovered their Legislative Action Team. It gave me a clear path to meaningful advocacy, and I joined without hesitation. Through the LAT, I felt like I was making a measurable difference as a strong advocate. I became an MWF ambassador in 2021, and in 2023, I was elected to the Board. I recently served as chair of the legislative committee during the 2024–25 session.

This work, for me, is about giving back to the places that made me who I am—and helping ensure they remain for the next generation.

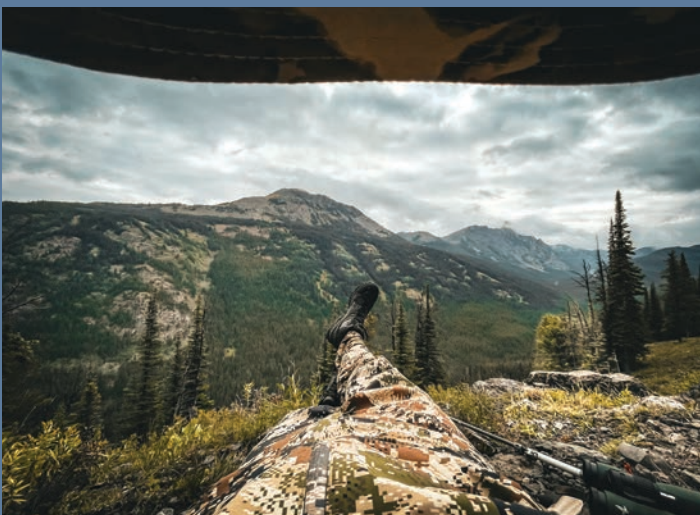


Photo by Mike Mershon.

THANK YOU, CHRIS SERVHEEN

Chris Servheen, Ph.D., has spent a lifetime working to understand and conserve bears. With degrees from the University of Montana and the University of Washington, he returned to Montana to earn his Ph.D. studying grizzlies in the Mission Mountains—a relationship that would shape the next four decades of his life.

As the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) Grizzly Bear Recovery Coordinator for 35 years, Chris wrote the 1993 Grizzly Bear Recovery Plan and led the grizzly bear recovery program in Montana, Wyoming, Idaho, and Washington.

He wrote the original grizzly delisting rule for Yellowstone in 2007 (72 FR14866) and contributed to the delisting rule published in 2016, the same year he retired.

His work involved every aspect of grizzly recovery, from public meetings to working with state and federal agencies and the public to build management plans, to working on interagency cooperation based on science. He testified before Congress in 2023 and 2025 on grizzly recovery and, in 2024, submitted a proposed revision to the 1993 Grizzly Bear Recovery Plan to the FWS.

Chris's work has reached far beyond the Northern Rockies. He investigated the issue of the trade in bears and bear parts for use in traditional medicine across Asia, served as a Fulbright Scholar working on brown bear conservation in Greece, and was the faculty advisor for 21 graduate students at the University of Montana while they researched bears and other species across the globe, from Siberia to Jamaica. For 18 years, he taught International Wildlife Conservation at the University of Montana and today serves as the co-chair of the North American Bears Expert Team for the IUCN Bear Specialist Group.

Chris has chaired eight interagency Boards of Review on grizzly-caused human fatalities, helping produce detailed recommendations to reduce future fatalities. In 2024, he submitted a proposed revision to the Recovery Plan he first authored more than 30 years prior.

As Board President of the Montana Wildlife Federation, Chris led with clarity, conviction, and an unwavering commitment to science-based conservation. His leadership helped ground the organization in facts, thoughtful decision-making, and a long-term vision for wildlife and habitat stewardship. His idea of recovery wasn't just about bringing species back, but about making sure their population numbers are sustainable into the future. That means giving wildlife the habitat to live, and the chance to live with us.

Chris will continue serving on MWF's Board of Directors.



IN THEIR OWN WORDS

As leadership transitions, Past President Chris Servheen and President Mike Mershon share their visions for MWF's future



At MWF's May board meeting, leadership officially transitioned as Mike Mershon (left) stepped into his new role as Board President, succeeding Dr. Chris Servheen (right).

REFLECTING ON LEADERSHIP

What wins are you most proud of during your time as Board President of the MWF?

Chris: I am proud of our strong presence at the legislature during the past two sessions, and of our continued efforts to push FWP and the Commission to base wildlife management and policy decisions on science and facts. While we haven't always seen those values reflected in decision-making—particularly around carnivore management—we have stood unwaveringly on these principles and will continue to do so.

What first brought you to MWF, and what made you want to step into a leadership role?

Mike: When I started attending public meetings held by our management agencies and legislative hearings, I quickly noticed MWF's consistent presence and their commitment to stand up for sound policy. After feeling frustration with my ability to be an effective advocate for my

passions, I began actively searching out organizations that could help me use my time and energy more efficiently and effectively.

This is when I found MWF's newly formed ambassador program, which was my on-ramp to joining the Federation. My ambassador role soon morphed into becoming a board member, and it became abundantly clear that MWF has an incredibly passionate and hardworking slate of volunteers who dedicate themselves to MWF's mission. Their dedication inspired me to help carry the weight, because it truly takes all of us to protect the things we care about.

What have you learned through your leadership at MWF?

Chris: I've learned that conservation is a long game. We will rarely get short-term victories, and if we get discouraged and give up, we will have no chance to succeed in the long run. Steady, consistent pressure is often the best approach. I've also learned that it's best to

give people the benefit of the doubt and encourage good decisions and respect for the process rather than confronting those who may not agree with us directly. This is a long-term effort. Our motto is: "MWF shows up," and we need to remember that.

As Board President, what are your top priorities?

Mike: Continue MWF's long-standing leadership in Montana's conservation community. Our tag line "MWF Shows Up" has never been more relevant. We must stay present in the rooms where decisions are being made that impact Montana's habitat, wildlife, and access to our public lands. It's also critical that we continue to strengthen collaboration within the broader conservation community. MWF is a big tent organization, and we rely on our network of affiliates, ambassadors, members, and partner organizations to bring a united voice to the table. In the face of today's threats, that collective voice is more important than ever.

URGENT CHALLENGES

What do you see as the biggest conservation challenges Montana is facing right now?

Chris: There are so many. Here are some:

- Accelerating private land development in wildlife habitat with ancillary losses of habitat, winter range, and increased human-wildlife conflicts.
- Departing from science and facts when making wildlife management and policy decisions—particularly on predator management.
- A Commission lacking any formal background in biological studies.
- Increased recreation pressure on wildlife habitat combined with fewer professionals in federal land management agencies.
- The threat of public land divestiture and erosion of environmental protections like the Endangered Species Act (ESA), National Forest Management Act (NFMA), and Clean Water Act.

- Organized efforts to ignore and accelerate climate change through fossil fuel expansion.
- The ongoing attacks on science that undermine our ability to manage wildlife responsibly.

Mike: In addition to what Chris mentioned, I would add:

- A resurgence in efforts to divest federal public lands. Montana is about 30% federally managed public land, which is vital for wildlife habitat and public access.
- Unprecedented growth and pressure on open spaces and habitat. How we manage this will define Montana's outdoor heritage.
- The politicization of issues that were once nonpartisan, often at the expense of the resource.
- Ongoing threats to foundational protections like the Montana State Constitution, Stream Access Law, the USFS Roadless Rule, the ESA, and the Public Trust Doctrine.

LOOKING AHEAD

What gives you hope about the future of conservation in Montana?

Mike: Our members give me hope. The ones who leave work early to attend public meetings, who drive across the state to testify, who write comments, who show up to volunteer, and who teach Hunter Education and pass on ethical traditions. You all give me hope. Together, our voices will ensure Montana's wild places endure.

As you pass the gavel to Mike, what are you most looking forward to?

Chris: More time to fly fish and backpack. I also look forward to spending more time in my woodshop being creative and artistic with various projects.





Photo by Skip Kowalski

FIELD TO TABLE: Slow Cooker Antelope Bánh Mì Sandwiches

Ingredients:

PREP TIME

15 minutes

COOK TIME

5 hours

SERVES

6

For the antelope:

- 2 pounds antelope roast
- 1 tablespoon olive oil
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1/2 teaspoon pepper
- 1 jalapeno, diced
- 1 2-inch slice ginger
- 8 garlic cloves, minced
- 1/4 cup soy sauce
- 1/4 cup white vinegar
- 1/2 cup brown sugar

For the sandwiches:

- pickled carrots (see below)
- 2 long baguettes or 6 small rolls
- 1/2 cup mayonnaise (for mayo, add 2 teaspoons of Sriracha, mix, and set aside)
- 1 English cucumber, thinly sliced
- 1 jalapeno, thinly sliced
- 1 cup cilantro leaves
- Sriracha for mayo and drizzle

For the pickled carrots:

- 1/2 cup distilled white vinegar
- 1/2 cup granulated sugar
- 1/2 teaspoon kosher salt
- 1 1/2 cups coarsely shredded carrots

RECIPE AND PHOTO COURTESY
OF JAIME TEIGEN

Instructions:

Slow cooker instructions:

- Remove any silver skin from the antelope roast and pat dry. Season the antelope with salt and pepper on all sides.
- In a separate pan, add the olive oil and brown the antelope on all sides.
- In a slow cooker, stir together the jalapeno, ginger, garlic, soy sauce, vinegar, and brown sugar. Nestle the roast in the liquid. Cover and cook on low for 6 to 8 hours, or on high for 4 to 5 hours, until the antelope is very tender.
- Pull apart the meat in the slow cooker, so it can soak up some of the juice.

Pickled carrots instructions:

- In a medium bowl, combine the vinegar, sugar, and salt. Stir until dissolved. Add the carrots, and let it sit for about 30 minutes. Drain well. Refrigerate until ready to use.
- To assemble the sandwiches, slice the baguettes or rolls in half lengthwise. Spread a layer of Sriracha mayo on the bottom half.
- Top with some of the shredded antelope, drizzle with Sriracha, then top with pickled carrots, cucumber, sliced jalapenos, and cilantro leaves. Enjoy!



About this dish:

In 2020, I harvested my first antelope. Now, it's my favorite animal to hunt and eat. The uniqueness and flavor of this animal surprises me every time I cook it.

I love a flavorful, hearty, and saucy sandwich. If there is sauce all over my face while eating a sandwich or a burger, you've made me a happy lady. This sandwich is spicy and bright when you bite into it. The juice from the slow-cooked antelope and the Sriracha mayo are a perfect touch to the brightness of the pickled carrots, the crunchy cucumbers, jalapenos, and fresh cilantro leaves that top it off. I hope you enjoy this great sandwich as much as I do. Don't be afraid to get a little sauce on your face!

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access to public lands.

With your help, we can continue to advocate for
the important needs and resolve the challenges
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Our members love Montana

*“Wildlands and wildlife, open
public spaces, wild rivers, trout
fishing. The way it should be.”*

— Dave G., member since 2023

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