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Winter Weatherization Of Denali's Animals

Article and Photographs by Diane Bergstrom

During the winter months in Denali National Park, where a temperature of -20° is common and -50° is possible, wildlife have three choices: migrate, hibernate or adapt. The adaptations are as fascinating as the land itself. Four months of feeding frenzy are followed by an eight month challenge of survival of the fittest. At -20° , a cup of water thrown into the dry air will evaporate before it hits the ground. The north side of the Alaska Range receives little precipitation, averaging 13"-15" per year, and snow provides critical thermaling for the animals and birds during the long winter months. The area receives only four hours of daylight around winter solstice; low lying light which is often blocked by the mountain range.

Nature's adaptations provide for these extreme conditions. Caribou's feet change with the seasons. Their pads on the bottom of their hooves swell in summer to assist them in walking across spongy tundra. In winter, the pads dry and shrink, causing the foot to contract and morphing the hooves into "caribou crampons." These hoof-claws provide them with



traction on ice, help them avoid predators, and serve as shovels for digging through snow to forage for buried lichens. Their nasal cavities spiral with increased surface area so that every inhale of frigid air is warmed before entering the lungs.

"Like predator, like prey" adaptations can be observed in several species, including caribou, moose and wolves who all have longer guard hairs covering a woolly fur coat. The coarse, scaly moose guard hairs can be 10" long and are hollow to trap and warm air.

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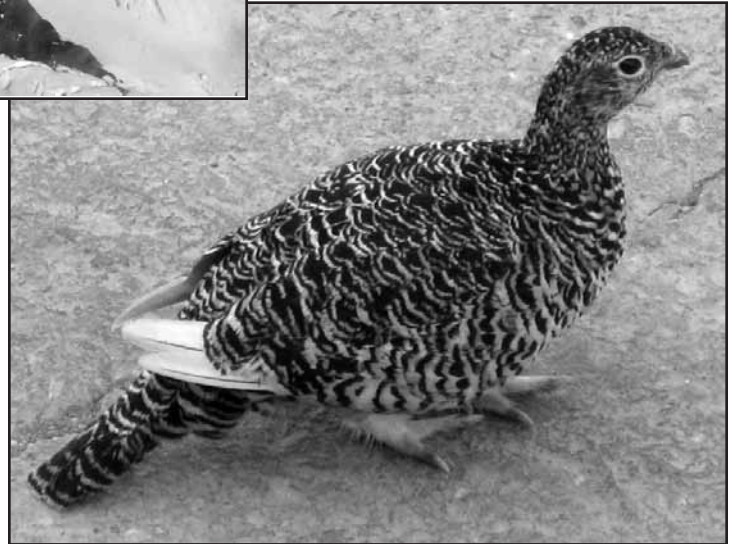
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feet, which keep them warm, and widen and thicken their footprint, enabling them to stay on top of the snow. They burrow into the snow for an insulated rest. Beavers, whose hair count can range from 11,000 to 22,000 hairs per square centimeter, remain active during the winter, swimming to food they've cached in underwater dens. In Alaska, the beavers are moving north as their habitat changes and the access to woody plants increases due to climate change. To survive, their habitat must have two to three feet of water year round. Dave Foreman, in (Continued on next page.)

The guard hairs of the wolf shed water and snow. Similarities can be found in the feet of the lynx and their prey, the snowshoe hare. Lynx have huge paws that distribute their weight and allow them to stay on top of snow, while chasing the hares, which also have big feet. Their populations are closely tied so that a crash in the hare population affects the lynx populations. The cycle seems to occur every 9 to 10 years. Rabbits cannot survive in Denali, only hares. The difference between the two is first observed at birth; rabbits are born blind and hairless while hares are born with hair and can hop within a few hours. The ptarmigan, a native ground bird, have feathers on their



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temperature drops below freezing, the frog burrows into decaying leaves, or “leaf litter,” on the forest floor. Its liver produces glucose (sugar), which circulates through the body into the cells, protecting them from damage. Its eyeballs and limbs freeze first, the heart and liver last. Breathing and heartbeat cease and eventually the whole frog freezes solid for eight months. When spring temperatures rise, the frog defrosts from the inside out and hops off to the nearest pond.

Winter presents a necessary break for the animals of Denali. The wood frog needs to freeze or it wouldn’t survive. If grizzly and black bears didn’t hibernate, they would be greatly stressed to find food. Caribou get a break from some predators and gain weight during the winter. Wolverines, the park’s most elusive animals, build dens with complex snow

Rebuilding America, 2004, wrote, “Beavers are the keystone species that is, their presence and activities are so important to an ecosystem that their removal leads to a loss of habitat for other species and a breakdown of ecological integrity.”

The only amphibian found in the park is the wood frog, a tiny frog with a big voice. In order for it to survive the subarctic winter, it employs a unique strategy. When the



tunnels to protect the mother and her young. While they are able to live in the harshest subarctic terrain, a decreased snow pack would harm their denning abilities and population. They are currently being considered for threatened or endangered status in the lower 48 states.

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pine beetle in Colorado, is now breeding twice in a season. It is decimating forests on the Kenai Peninsula. If the beetle makes it north to Denali, where most of the trees are spruce, the lives of animals dependent on the spruce would be dramatically threatened. Everything we do can affect climate change. We can slow the process from where we live right now. By being aware of our own actions, we can help our immediate environments in Colorado, and save the animals of Denali. Because they are being affected by what we do. Everyday.

According to the nps.gov <<http://nps.gov>> Denali website, "...female wolverines rarely raise more than one young in their lifetime that survives to raise its own young."

The evidence of climate change is most radically witnessed at the earth's northern most latitude. The plant and animal kingdoms are feeling the stress. The change from brown to white in hares' coats is not initiated by temperature but by daylight changes. When the pineal gland in the hare's brain senses shortened daylight, the coats change. In the absence of snow, a white hare against brown earth makes them much more susceptible to predators. While snow levels vary from year to year, snow on the ground is decreasing. The spruce beetle, like the



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West Magnolia Trails Meeting ~ 9Health Fair

Dear Editor,

Nederland Area Trails Organization (NATO) and the Boulder Mountain Bike Alliance (BMA) are hosting a West Magnolia Trail System Open House, **Thursday, April 5, 2012 - 7:00-9:00pm**, at the Nederland Community Center.

The purpose of this event is share with the public the scope of the project and to solicit feedback on the plan. Both the US Forest Service and the contract Trail Planner will be available to answer questions and listen to input. The event is open to the public and we encourage everyone who frequently uses the West Magnolia trails to attend.

Tim Brass timothy.brass@gmail.com

Editor's Note: This area used to be called **Haul Road** and has hiking, biking, equestrian and four wheel usage trails. There are some campsites in this area if they are referring to the area on down the road rather than just up near the Sundance Café & Lodge. If you use these trails at all or plan to - be sure to attend as we horseback riders don't wish to lose usage to folks who might want to restrict it to a mountain bike only area.

Dear Readers,

2012 9Health Fair-List of Dates & Locations

Tips to be prepared: Do not eat 12 hours before having blood drawn, but DO drink plenty of water. Diabetics should not fast. Continue taking prescribed medications. Must be 18 years old. Hotline number is 303.698.3799 and some offer online registration at www.9HealthFair.org/

Saturday, April 21st

Boulder: St. Mary Magdalene Episcopal Church-4775 Cambridge St.

YMCA of Boulder Valley-Mapleton Ctr-2850 Mapleton Ave. Both 7 am to Noon.

Golden: Rockland Community Church-17 S Mt. Vernon Cntry Club Rd. - 7 am to Noon.

Sunday April 22nd

Arvada: Susan M Duncan YMCA-6350 Eldridge St.: Westminster: St. Anthony NORTH Hospital-2551 W 84th Ave. Both 7 am to Noon.

Monday April 23rd

Arvada: Arvada Covenant Church-5555 Ward Rd 7 am to Noon.

Tuesday April 24th

Boulder: Covidien-5920 Longbow Dr 7am to Noon
Arvada: Spirit of Christ Catholic Church-7400 W 80th Ave. Both 7 am to Noon

Wednesday April 25th

Boulder: Boulder Jewish Community Ctr-3800 Kalmia Ave.

Arvada: Spirit of Christ Catholic Church-7400 W 80th Ave. Both 7 am to Noon

Thursday April 26th

Westminster: Covenant Village of Colorado-9153 Yarrow St. 7 am to Noon

Saturday April 28th

Westminster: DeVry University-1870 W 122nd Ave.
Nederland: Nederland Community Ctr-750 Hwy 72 N
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Update - Buffalo Field Campaign

Spring is definitely in the air here in Yellowstone Country. The sun waxes, temperatures rise, the snow melts, and wild buffalo are on the move with the awakening of the earth. The gentle giants carry the season in their quickening steps and the next generation in their wombs.

BFC continues to run full patrols in both the Gardiner and Hebgen Basins, as buffalo begin to cover a lot of ground. It seems that the agencies are, for now, sticking to their word on allowing buffalo to roam for a while in the Gardiner Basin. Last week in Gardiner, for the first time in recent history, a few family groups of buffalo were able to simply enjoy walking the landscape without threat of hazing, even on Church Universal and Triumphant land. It was strange for us to feel that the buffalo were safe on lands where they have always been harassed or killed for even gazing towards. To be sure, the Montana Department of Livestock was watching the buffalo closely, but under the new Gardiner Basin tolerance decision, the agency was unable to touch them. While this was a big win for those particular buffalo that week, it is a small step in the larger effort to protect the buffalo's access to their historic habitat.

One mature bull was not so lucky. After daring to step foot near buffalo-unfriendly private land, he was chased into the hunt zone. One morning we saw him grazing peacefully along the Yellowstone River. That afternoon we found his enormous tracks in our yard. The next day we discovered his remains along with those of a younger bull. The younger bull had lost his entire family to hunters the weekend before and, until the mature bull arrived, had spent his mourning alone. These two bulls and two other buffalo were shot by Nez Perce hunters this past weekend. With these kills, more than 4,000 wild buffalo have

tragically been eliminated from America's last wild population since the year 2000, when the Interagency Bison Management Plan was signed.

Montana's Hebgen Basin brings its own challenges for the buffalo and BFC volunteers, as the shaggy mammoths



migrate through the Madison River corridor to their traditional calving grounds around Horse Butte. In order to get there, buffalo have to cross the high-speed Highway 191, used heavily by eighteen-wheelers. BFC volunteers are out watching the roads closely, armed with our gigantic hot pink warning signs, and our night patrols are going out every evening right now. While BFC's efforts to warn traffic of buffalo on or near the roads have saved numerous lives over the years, without safe passage infrastructure it is

unfortunately impossible to prevent all accidents. Warnings only work when they are heeded. Very early Tuesday morning, just after midnight, a buffalo was hit and killed by a motorist.

After a lot of pressure from Buffalo Field Campaign, the Montana Department of Transportation (MDOT) is taking this issue much more seriously. Over the years we have enlisted their help with the placement of large marquee signs that flash the warning, "Animals on Road," which are placed at critical points on Highways 191 and 287, and turned on when migration begins in earnest. These signs have been very helpful in the Hebgen Basin, and after last spring's bull buffalo bonanza in the Gardiner Basin, we asked the MDOT to place these signs on Highway 89 as well. To our pleasant surprise, they have! The MDOT even went a step further and are now in the process of putting up permanent warning signs that read "Bison on Road - 55 MPH." BFC sends out big thanks to the MDOT for helping to make the dangerous highways a little bit safer for everyone. BFC will continue to do everything we can to keep buffalo safe along the highways that cut through their migration corridors, and we will continue to advocate for safe passage infrastructure that will allow wild buffalo and all area wildlife to make it across the highways alive and unscathed. Roam Free!

Buffalo Field Campaign

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Following The Oregon Trail

By Laura Herrington Watson/High Country News

As a kid, I loved playing Oregon Trail, a popular and notoriously difficult computer game in which avatars inevitably drown, run out of water or die of dysentery en route from Missouri to the Promised Land at the Pacific's edge. An imaginative child, I took my virtual pioneer adventures off screen, loading up my small red wagon and careening around my rutted desert backyard in suburban Phoenix.

In the game, players are faced with terrible choices, forced to ford treacherous rivers and bury their loved ones. I littered my backyard with teacups and paper gravestones, relics of my own doomed expeditions. Later on, in college, I studied archaeology and was awestruck to learn that not only do the Oregon Trail's wagon ruts still exist on the ground, in the real world - they are also visible from space. The land those pioneers crossed still attests to their trials. This past summer, when I joined a team of archaeologists surveying the trail in Wyoming, I saw the evidence for myself. Before our surveys, we combed through diary entries and old photographs in our historical field guide manuals to "get into the pioneer spirit." And at night, after drinking beer and looking at trail sections on BLM maps and Google Earth, we played an Internet version of Oregon Trail.

Of course, the game couldn't recreate the parts of the trail I loved best: The constant smell of freshly crushed sagebrush, released like puffs of perfume whenever our four-wheel-drive trucks steamrolled over it. Wyoming's treeless landscape, populated by wild palomino horses, grazing pronghorn - whose meat, I was told, also reeks of sage - and anxiously roaming cows. The snow-capped Wind River Mountains to the north, our reference point in this sea of rolling hills. Yet the game turned out to be more than an evening distraction. Every day, we fanned out along the real trail's 200-foot-wide corridor, our eyes fixed on the ground as we slowly walked it. Occasionally, we discovered rusted wagon fittings, broken mule shoes,

fragments of glass. My childhood immersion in the game had awakened my imagination, animating these lifeless artifacts and bringing the pioneers to life.

My nightly forays on the virtual trail only deepened my encounters with its real-life remnants. The game also opened my eyes to the brutal landscape around me. I began to imagine the Oregon Trail - its ruts often indistinguishable from modern two-tracks - as my sole path through treacherous mountains and endless plains. Each time we reached the crest of one sage-covered rise in our monotonous survey, only to be greeted with the next one, and the one after that, I felt a genuine blow to my morale. This trail, I thought, could break any traveler - certainly my feeble avatar, and perhaps even me, today.

As my parallel treks continued, I bounced between past and present, between the real and the virtual worlds. By day, I combed the trail for important artifacts and possible gravesites, learning first-hand details about the pioneers' strength. The smell of sage, which at first so delighted me, became sickening at times, and I was exhausted by the incessant whipping of the Wyoming wind in my ears. By night, my Old West avatar dug graves, hunted, and re-enacted the lives that so

(Continued on next page.)

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Highlander History

intrigued me.

In June, our crew reached the Sublette Cutoff, the trail's most famous landmark. Pioneers usually spent several hot July days camped at this fork in the trail while they debated their next step: taking the longer, well-watered road to Fort Bridger or the tempting cutoff, which shortened the dangerous journey by almost a week. Caveat viator: The cutoff had no water source until the Green River, 50 miles and five days distant. It was a fateful calculation. With winter's snow fast approaching, should the travelers risk the cutoff, knowing they had scarcely enough water for their families and animals?

Though the game helped me understand the pioneer experience, it could only take me so far, for the cutoff does not even appear in Oregon Trail. To really know the hardship of the trail and appreciate the pioneers' persistence, I had to walk the Sublette Cutoff myself, feeling the weight of the pioneers' gamble on my own shoulders. Even though I had plenty of water and was unencumbered by a wagon, the hot winds and relentlessly

beating sun of the Cutoff often seemed unendurable. Along the trail lie rusted metal bands from busted water barrels - reminders that one minor slip could doom an entire party - and a smattering of graves, marked only by small piles of shale. But weary as they were, many travelers were tough enough, and lucky enough, to make it.



Today, their pioneer descendants thrive in towns along the Oregon coast. It's possible to reach Oregon on the Oregon Trail - or in Oregon Trail, for that matter - with just the right amounts of planning, daring, luck and cunning. I didn't complete the journey in the real world, or in the virtual one. But toward the end of my summer on the trail, I developed a strange attitude. Part doggedness and part resignation, it

was a kind of surrender to both the beauty of the landscape and the brutality of the trail. It was, I imagine, how the real pioneers must have felt.

Laura Herrington Watson is a freelance writer in Denver. This essay originally appeared in an issue of High Country News (hcn.org). Trail Map Courtesy National Park Service.



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Billboards Vs. Democracy

By Ray Ring/High Country News

Driving around Salt Lake City on a pleasant day last June in a plain white city government car, Doug Dansie pauses at the corner of two streets, 1300 South and 300 East. This is a residential neighborhood where old trees tower over the houses. But there's no house on this particular corner lot. Instead, a billboard occupies it.

The billboard isn't a 10-story freeway giant or one of those garish cutting-edge electronic signs that constantly flash digital ads like imitation Las Vegas casinos. It's only about 25 feet tall, with four angled faces that advertise a "Gem Faire" for dealers and jewelers as well as a nonprofit group that helps Iraq War veterans.

Still, "it's inappropriate to have a billboard in a residential area," says Dansie, a senior land-use planner for the city with decades of experience, who's wearing a striped shirt with his sunglasses secured by a cord around his neck. Beyond the question of whether a billboard should stand next to houses in the first place, some people resent this billboard for a different reason. For more than five years, neighborhood residents have been trying to create a park on this small lot to honor a police sergeant, Ronald L. Heaps, who was shot to death here in 1982. They've raised some cash, and the city has offered grant money, but they haven't been able to strike a deal with the billboard company, which owns the lot as well as the sign. Dansie puts it bluntly: "The billboard is holding up the park plan."

He drives on past other controversial billboards; there are many. Much larger signs emblazoned with hard-to-ignore ads for everything under the sun - office-furniture blowouts, lingerie, colonoscopy doctors, Rio Tinto mining, and a fast-food chain with a playfully illiterate slogan - Eat Mor Chikin - dominate long stretches of I-15, the main corridor through the string of cities along the scenic Wasatch Mountain Front. Other billboards punctuate the metro area, even in the midst of an active downtown renewal effort.

Gigantic construction cranes are adding to the cluster of tasteful skyscrapers downtown, while pedestrians stroll amid trendy shops and bistros, light-rail stations, the impressive State Capitol complex and the Mormon Church's Temple Square. Dansie points out billboards on downtown lots where city planners would rather see new skyscrapers and hotels. Developers are interested, but first the billboards have to go, Dansie says. Railroad tracks, viaducts and other urban eyesores have already been swept away for the downtown renewal. But the billboards remain, because in Utah, billboard-friendly state laws make removing any billboard for any reason considerably more difficult than pulling teeth. Billboards, Dansie says, "are

more protected than any other industry."

It's a pattern in many Western communities. For people who think government has a role in protecting view sheds and aesthetics, billboards are like unsightly weeds popping up in the cracks of land-use regulations. Many cities, including Salt Lake, are trying to impose tougher regulations, either banning billboards altogether or instituting "cap-and-reduce" programs that limit the total number of signs and then reduce it over time.

Understandably, the billboard companies generally oppose regulations, arguing that their property rights are being violated. The issue has sparked many court battles, and state legislatures have become another kind of battlefield. Billboard companies work hard to persuade legislatures to pass laws that override local regulations; in return, the companies donate to political campaigns and run ads for politicians on billboards.

Many industries and businesses struggle with regulations, of course. But the underlying issue seems especially clear for billboards. The battle isn't really about aesthetics, or whether billboards constitute an acceptable instrument of commerce. At its core, the issue concerns corporate power and its influence over all the forms of local democracy - city and county governments and (Continued on next page.)





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ballot measures passed by voters. Salt Lake City Mayor Ralph Becker, a former Grand Canyon National Park seasonal ranger with degrees in law and planning, says simply: "I've never liked billboards. It's an incredibly aggressive industry."

The first major attempt to rein in billboards occurred back in 1965, when their number was soaring nationwide because of a profitable technological advancement: ads printed on vinyl strips that could be quickly installed and switched out, instead of the old cumbersome paper and hand-painted ads. That year, Congress passed the Highway Beautification Act, which was championed by Lady Bird Johnson, the wife of President Lyndon Johnson. It sought to limit the spread of billboards along federally funded highways by pressuring the states to impose regulations on their sizes, lighting and spacing.

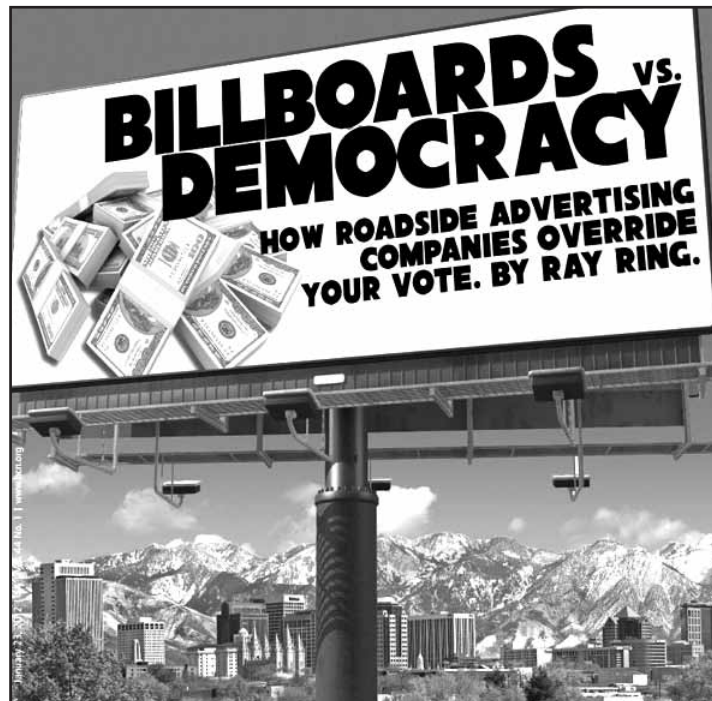
The landmark 1965 federal law has helped keep many of the West's rural highways from being overrun. Still, it was only "a partial victory," observed a leading business magazine, *Fortune*, 21 years later. "Environmentalists at first wanted to outlaw new signs along federal highways and phase out existing ones without compensating owners. So potent was the billboard lobby, however, that the Highway Beautification Act ... required the federal and state governments to pay" for any billboards they want to remove from the federally funded highways, as long as the billboards were legal when they were built. Since then, governments have had to pay billboard corporations many millions of dollars to retire some signs, using controversial estimations of the profit each would generate if left in

place. And as *Fortune* found, "Faster than the old signs have come down, the industry has put up new and bigger ones. Reason: The act allows billboards in commercial and industrial areas, a loophole that has been interpreted so loosely that signs can go up almost anywhere (along federally-funded highways)."

Four states - Vermont, Maine, Alaska and Hawaii - have banned billboards altogether, but most state governments are not so tough. That means it's mostly up to local governments to regulate billboards along many kinds of roads, whether or not the roads get federal funding.

Today, there are roughly a half-million billboards in the U.S., and billboard companies rake in \$4 billion to \$6 billion a year. Many businesses want to advertise on billboards. In the march of technology, traditional billboards have become much more substantial - 60 feet to 125 feet tall and mounted on seemingly permanent steel poles - and the development of electronic billboards that use digital light-emitting diodes is a spectacular breakthrough. A digital billboard typically flashes a series of ads for eight seconds each, and the

companies reportedly make 12 to 17 times as much money on them as on traditional billboards. President George W. Bush's Federal Highway Administration, under pressure from the industry, decided in 2007 that digital billboards could be installed along federally funded highways as long as they comply with state and local regulations. About 2,000 digital billboards have been installed nationwide, and every day more are proposed - that's the industry's main goal now.



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Earth Day Events

2012 Earth Day Fair

When: **Wednesday, April 18**, 2012 from 10:00am - 2:00pm Where: Denver City & County Building Plaza @ 1437 Bannock St.

What: The theme of Denver's 2012 Earth Day Fair is "SAVINGS for your wallet and our planet." This year's Earth Day Fair will highlight the actions and investments that residents and businesses can make to save money and reduce their impact on the environment. These WIN-WIN SAVINGS activities include reducing consumption of energy, fuel, and water.

Awards will also be given to businesses that have made exceptional strides to make their operations environmentally sustainable or contribute to the environmental sustainability of the Denver community.

We are proud to announce that Denver's 2012 Earth Day Fair will be a Zero Waste event with recycling and composting services provided by Denver Solid Waste Management and Denver Recycles.

Who: Denver's 2012 Earth Day Fair is FREE and open to the general public. We especially encourage residents, employees, teachers, and students in or near downtown Denver to stop by the event. We will feature businesses and nonprofit organizations who provide conservation services, equipment, and other resources OR who have made these investments themselves. In addition, several City agencies will be represented.

For questions about becoming a food vendor or exhibitor at Denver's 2012 Earth Day Fair, please contact Andy Rees at Andy.Rees@denvergov.org.

For general event questions, please contact Mim Mirsky at Mim.Mirsky@denvergov.org.

APR 21: EARTH DAY BIKE

RIDE - From: Steve Stevens; I will lead 2 Fun weekend rides ... basically on the rolling plains, not up the mountains; Routes will be slightly different each day.

Saturday April 21 -9:30 AM - Earth Day Saturday ride. Fun - 19 to 20 miles - slight hills. We will do some short stops to see significant Earth and Sustainability items. Meet at Golden Oldy Cyclery - 17224 West 17th Place, Golden, Co at 9:15 for 9:30 start. Bring your helmet and if you have one, a rear view mirror for safety. 720-497-1100

APR 22: EARTH DAY BIKE RIDE - Sunday April 22 - 9:30 AM Earth Day Sunday ride. Fun - 20 to 22 miles,

small grades. We will do some short stops to see Sustainability themes. Meet at Golden Oldy Cyclery - 17224 West 17th Place, Golden, Co at 9:15 for 9:30 start. Bring your helmet and if you have one, a rear view mirror for safety. 720-497-1100

On April 22, more than one billion people around the globe will participate in Earth Day 2012 and help **Mobilize the Earth(tm)**. People of all nationalities and backgrounds will voice their appreciation for the planet and demand its protection. Together we will stand united for a sustainable future and call upon individuals, organizations, and governments to do their part.

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Monkey Woman & Alligator Man

By Melissa E. Johnson

*We're all a little weird. And life is a little weird.
And when we find someone whose weirdness is
compatible with ours,*

*we join up with them and fall into mutually satisfying
weirdness - and call it love - true love.*

~Robert Fulghum, *True Love*

I was visiting my friend Jenna in late September that year. A brown-haired, brown-eyed beauty from Chattanooga, Tennessee, Jenna had this thick, long, flowing mane of hair that followed the curve of her back, swaying behind her as she walked, and a long, slow southern-drawl as thick and sweet as molasses. We had met in law school four years prior and became fast friends. And though the passing of time had forced us to trade our school books for an endless parade of clients, contracts and billable hours, our friendship had thrived.

She was a kindred spirit. Smart and funny and interested in life, Jenna was the kind of friend you could trust and tell your secrets to; the kind of friend who would cheer you on in moments of triumph, and listen patiently as you cried your eyes out over some disappointment, always responding with compassion and candor. She had that way about her.



And, oh, the things she'd say. After a day in the sun, with a twinkle in her eye, she would tease, "Why, Melissa; you're as brown as gingerbread; you better watch out or someone's gonna' eat you up!" Always laughing and patting your arm or leg for emphasis. She made you feel good about you. Naturally, that September, when I found myself in a funk, overworked, stressed out, lonely and recovering from a recent break-up, visiting Jenna was just what the doctor ordered.

We spent the afternoon hanging out by the pool, trading war stories from the trenches of our legal practice; she, speaking with warm affection of her husband and his

imminent return from a business trip, and I, lamenting on my pathetic-all-but-non-existent-love-life. We analyzed every word spoken, every tear shed and gut-wrenching moment of the break-up; caught and entangled in an exhausting game of second-guessing my decision. Should I have settled? Would there be someone else better suited for me? What if there wasn't

anyone else? We carried on this way for hours until the sun set and we headed inside to take showers.

"Come on, Melissa, it's about to start!" She called, grabbing two Cokes and a bag of microwave popcorn from

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the kitchen. "This is the movie I was tellin' you about. You're not gonna believe it!" I ran into the living room and joined her on the sofa.

For the next hour, we watched in absolute amazement a film called **Freak Show**, a documentary about so called "circus sideshow freaks." There was the human torso - the man born without legs who walked on his hands; the Siamese twins joined at the chest who married sisters, all sharing the same bed; a cute little man that called himself **The Pillow Man** because his neck was about 3 feet long, with no arms or a body - he was the size of a bed pillow.

Then we were introduced to Priscilla, the Monkey Girl. Born with hair all over her face and body, she had been dropped off at the circus one day by her father because he couldn't handle the public's reaction to her condition. She was taken in and raised by the other circus people, making a good living for herself by performing and displaying her oddities. My heart broke for the Monkey Girl.

Then one day, the Alligator Man joined the circus, getting his name from the texture and appearance of his skin. As fate would have it, he fell in love with the Monkey Girl, and she with him. They were soon married and lived a long and happy life together, appearing everywhere in public and showcasing their wedding photos. They seemed so



happy together. It was amazing to see.

As the credits rolled, we sat in silence contemplating the insanity of it all; marveling at the ability of these people to be happy in spite of their deformities. Then Jenna turned to me, gently placing her hand on my arm, and in the most soothing voice I'd ever heard, said, "You see, Melissa, even the Monkey Woman found the Alligator Man . . . there's somebody out there for you."

I didn't know whether to laugh or cry, so I laughed; and I laughed, and I laughed. I left Jenna's house the next day full of gratitude for my own life and excitement for the discoveries yet to come.

Now he's here! My very own Alligator Man who loves and genuinely appreciates my crazy monkey business. It feels like magic! Yet, as I move from one phase of life to another, I see so clearly that these experiences, disappointments and difficult decisions led me to this exact place and time; to this wonderful connection; to this beautiful life we've built together. We've only just begun to discover what we're made of together, but I'm sure glad he joined my crazy little circus! *Photos: Previous page-them together now - this page, each at the age of three.*

Melissa is a writer, photographer, artist and lawyer. Read more on her blog at www.HeartLaw.blogspot.com, or visit her website at www.MelissaEJohnson.com.

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Activists Derail Land - Use Planning

By Jonathan Thompson/High Country News

In November, La Plata County Commissioner Kellie Hotter called local land-use planning “a blood sport.” She wasn’t kidding. Since last spring, as this southwestern Colorado county considered a new comprehensive land-use plan, carnage has piled up. By mid-December, casualties included a fired planning commissioner, a resigned county planning director and the plan itself — a 400-page document that took two years, \$750,000 and 137 public meetings to produce. Even planning veterans in the rural West - where it’s not uncommon for mind-numbing meetings to erupt into verbal fisticuffs - were shocked by the bloodshed in La Plata County.

But perhaps most surprising was who emerged the untarnished victors: Activists who believe that smart growth, clustered development, smart meters and even bike paths are all part of a nefarious United Nations plot to rob citizens of their liberties. They may sound like folks on the fringe. But they are increasingly influential - and they’ve sabotaged planning efforts nationwide. The movement’s ideology isn’t new: resentment of government interference and vigilant defense of private-property rights, especially when environmental initiatives are involved.

What is new is the alleged villain: Agenda 21, a two-decades-old U.N. document that encourages sustainable

development worldwide. The Agenda is being foisted, opponents claim, on often-unsuspecting local governments by ICLEI, a nonprofit that offers planning tools, greenhouse gas inventory software and technical support to some 550 government members in the U.S. The result?

“Government will control how hot your shower may be, how much air conditioning or heat you may use,” writes Tom DeWeese of the American Policy Center, an intellectual parent of the end-Agenda 21, or Agender, movement. “The policy of Agenda 21 comes in many names, such as Sustainable Development, Smart Growth, historic preservation ... and comprehensive planning.”

La Plata County might not seem like a yeasty environment for fermenting right-wing movements. It’s voted mostly Democratic in major elections for at least 10 years. The population center is Durango, a college town with a disproportionate number of professional cyclists, lawyers and raft guides, not to mention a fabulous bike path. But remnants of the older West remain, most notably some 3,000 oil and gas wells.

A far-right faction also still festers. When Colorado’s GOP was fractured by extremist and moderate infighting in 2006, the struggle was centered here. Planning has always been contentious, and the county commission expected some controversy when, in 2009, it charged its staff and a team of consultants with developing a community-driven vision for the county’s growth over the next 20 years. The plan would contain no actual regulations, but it would provide a critical road map for rewriting the county’s land-use code.

A diverse, 17-member working group was formed to represent the community, and the public was encouraged to attend meetings. From the beginning, a vocal minority suspicious of government interference was present. At one early meeting, after a consultant spoke about preserving agriculture, possibly through zoning, sheep-rancher J. Paul Brown said: “If you’re looking for a fight, keep that crap up!” Such sentiments were incorporated into the draft plan. Last spring, an ambitious vision emerged to rein in sprawl, encourage bicycling and public transportation, protect agriculture and promote sustainability. Respect for private-property rights and conventional energy development were

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also emphasized, and the draft was sent to the planning commission, an appointed body that in Colorado has the final say on county comprehensive plans.

"There wasn't a word in that plan that wasn't vetted by the working group," says Charlie Deans, the lead consultant. But around the same time, the Agender movement was slithering out of the political primordial soup. Since as early as 2003, a few far-right commentators such as DeWeese had banged the Agenda 21 drum, but few listened. Then, in 2009, DeWeese took his ideas to the Tea Party, and its branches began adopting the Agender platform. "It was a slow acceleration," says Don Knapp, an ICLEI spokesman who has tracked the movement. During the 2010 mid-term campaign, Dan Maes, a doomed Republican and Tea Party Colorado gubernatorial candidate, announced that Denver's bike-sharing program was part of a U.N. plot - probably the first high-profile mention of Agenda 21.

In a debate for Colorado House District 59, La Plata County's J. Paul Brown declared that Obama had a secret army and that the U.N. is "going to control our land and our guns." Gleeful Democrats assumed the rhetoric would kill Brown's chances for a seat long held by moderates. They were wrong: Brown won. Also in 2010, Rosa Koire started the Post-Sustainability Institute, which campaigns against Agenda 21 and "communitarianism." Despite the fact that she's a registered Democrat who looks fresh from auditions for a Gloria Steinem bio-pic, Koire, a Bay Area real-estate appraiser, has become a Tea Party YouTube hero and Agender leader. Then, last June, Glenn Beck did a 14-minute anti-Agenda 21 monologue on Fox News. "It really picked up steam after that," says Knapp.

Last month, Koire and dozens of fellow Agenders packed a planning meeting in Marin County, Calif., shouting anti-planning slogans. Agenders in Benton County, Ore., went after a plan to protect river corridors. One told the Corvallis Gazette-Times: "Riparian, sustainability - it's the words that give 'em away. Their goal is to take over the world by taking over the water, the land and the food." Last fall, Newt Gingrich vowed to cut funding for "any kind of activity for United Nations Agenda 21" if elected president. And at least 16 communities have ended their ICLEI membership in protest.

In La Plata County, by late July the anti-planning crowd started referencing Agenda 21 in their public comments. County planner Erick Aune had never even heard of it. So he attended an "evening of Agenda 21 education" hosted by the Four Corners Liberty Restoration group, where the featured speaker masterfully laid out a 200-year conspiracy culminating in the comprehensive plan. By the end of that

month, more than 100 people had signed a petition against it, saying it was "based on emotional feel-good ideas that are designed for social engineering and social equity that trample our rights as free people."

In December, after whittling the plan down to about 40 pages and snuffing out an entire chapter on sustainable development, the La Plata County planning commission unanimously voted to scrap it altogether. Aune resigned a day later. The reasons the planning commissioners gave were somewhat vague. The plan was too values-based; it didn't reflect the will of the community. But there's little doubt that the Agenders influenced the process. "I'm for planning, but I'm not for the ideological, political, social engineering that went into this document," commissioner Steven Kallaher said in December. Earlier, of community concerns, he said, "Someone who owns hundreds of acres in the county doesn't want someone living in the city who rides a solar-powered bicycle to tell them what to do."

"The (Agenders) group was very organized and very focused and very intent on delivering a consistent message," says Aune. "They wanted (the comprehensive plan) to go away because it represents government and control to them." The movement's meteoric rise is probably due to the fact that it's just the most recent incarnation of an age-old ideology. "Local debates about property rights have been around for decades," says Knapp. "What's new is this idea that it has to do with the United Nations or the imposition of some outside force ... that there's this tyranny at play. "(It's) motivated a lot of people to get involved in local politics," he says. "It's a really good scare story. It's big on fear, it's big on fiction, and it's short on fact."

This story originally appeared in an issue of High Country News (hcn.org)

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Moral Issue Confronts Industrial Farmers

By Pete Letheby

Did you know that Nebraska is being invaded by “terrorists” and “conspiracists?” Perhaps the kindest descriptive noun some unnerved Nebraskans are using these days is “extremists.” Brace yourself: The terrorists and extremists in question are various organizations and people who care about the welfare of farm animals, led by the Humane Society of the United States. And the “conspiracy” they’re engaged in is an attempt to improve conditions for those animals, especially on factory farms.

Nebraska Gov. Dave Heineman inaugurated hostilities about a year ago, and he hasn’t let up. “I’m an Army Ranger,” Heineman told a receptive audience recently. “This guy (Humane Society President Wayne Pacelle) wants to engage in guerrilla warfare. I’ll teach him a thing or two.” Production and industrial agriculture leaders in the state, led, not surprisingly, by the Nebraska Farm Bureau, echo similar sentiments. Said one dairy producer: “The most frightening issue is consumers’ growing concern over animal welfare.”

An official of the Nebraska Corn Growers agreed: “(the Humane Society) and PETA (People for the Ethical

Treatment of Animals) ... are destroying agriculture and rural America. We can’t let this happen. Stand up and fight for America.” Since when was concern for farm animals frightening or un-American? Perhaps the current fuss is due to all the attention that’s suddenly being paid to what happens down on the farm. In just the last three months: The United Egg Producers and the Humane Society recently announced a compromise that would improve farm conditions for egg-laying hens, doubling the size of their cages and offering them perches and nest boxes.

McDonald’s, the biggest restaurant chain on the planet, will no longer purchase pork that’s produced by tightly confining pregnant sows in “gestation crates” on factory farms. Smithfield Foods, the larger pork producer in the world, has pledged to phase out the use of those gestation crates by 2017. Perhaps the biggest blow for change was struck by Nebraska’s Farmers Union, which entered into a partnership with the Humane Society to explore options for “constructive compromise” on farm animal-welfare issues.

The Nebraska Farm Bureau and its allies have responded to these developments by hunkering down in the trenches. They have attacked their critics and done their best to create fear among Nebraskans by rehashing tired and nonsensical statements, saying that the Humane Society “wants to take away your freedom of food choices.” They



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are trying hard to rally their troops, whose numbers continue to dwindle as gigantic industrial farms become increasingly difficult to defend. Production agriculture's old mantra of "feeding the world" is starting to lose out to people's sense of morality. Countless surveys and polls show this, including one right here in Nebraska just last year. It found that "most rural Nebraskans (69 percent) agree that animal welfare means more than providing adequate water and shelter; that it also includes adequate exercise, space and social activities for the animals."


That percentage would probably have been much higher - likely near 90 percent - if urbanites in Lincoln and Omaha had been polled, too. Ultimately, this is an issue that the public will decide with its principles and pocketbooks. If consumers in New York and California want ethically raised meats and poultry, that's what they'll buy. A Kansas State University study last year found that 62 percent of grocery shoppers favored mandatory labeling of pork produced on farms using gestation crates or stalls. The Farm Bureau and other self-proclaimed "mainstream" farm groups and their political backers say they're fighting outsiders in order to save American agriculture. A more accurate description of what they're doing is fighting the conscience of America.

As John Hansen, president of the Nebraska Farmers Union, puts it, "This is a fight Nebraska agriculture would lose, and do permanent damage to our public perception and our relationship with food consumers in the process." It always takes us a while, but the history of this country reveals that sooner or later, we do our best to walk our righteous talk. It took centuries until we finally acknowledged that slavery was morally repulsive, that women are on par with (and sometimes exceed) men in smarts and resolve, and that every human being, regardless of color, deserves equal civil rights.

And even though there is still some resistance to the idea, most Americans now believe that gay and lesbian people pose no threat to family life in America and, in some instances, may enhance it. "We manage to stumble along and get things done the right way," says Bernard Rollin, the renowned Colorado State University animal ethicist. Animal welfare is the country's next big moral movement. The majority of Americans, urban and rural, have come to feel that animals, including the animals we eat, merit freedom from the abominable conditions found in America's 16,000 concentrated animal feeding operations. This raises an important question, not just for Nebraska but for other farming states as well: Who's really in the mainstream on this issue?

Pete Letheby is a contributor to Writers on the Range a service of High Country News (hcn.org). He is a writer in Grand Island, Nebraska.

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Left: Nelson gives Lakota attitude. Right: Chanel smiles.



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Younger Farmers~DEET Free~Solar~LA Smog

Dear EarthTalk: American farmers are an aging population. Is anyone doing anything to make sure younger people are taking up this profession in large enough numbers to keep at least some of our food production domestic? — Beverly Smith, Milwaukee, WI

Indeed American farmers as a whole are an aging group today as young people gravitate more towards virtual realities than tilling in the soil. The National Young Farmers' Coalition (NYFC) reports that the total number of American farmers has declined from over six million in 1910 to just over two million today, and that for each farmer under the age of 35 there are now six over 65. With the average age of U.S. farmers now at 57, one quarter (500,000) of all American farmers will retire over the next two decades. U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack is calling for hundreds of thousands of new farmers nationwide, but convincing young people to take up farming remains a hard sell.

NYFC would like to see action at the local, state and federal levels to help beginning farmers. "At the local level, communities can create market opportunities for farmers by starting Community Supported Agriculture groups and shopping at farmers markets, as well as

protecting existing farmland through zoning and the purchase of development rights." States can be helpful, the group adds, by offering incentives to preserve farmland and giving tax credits for farmers who sell their land to new practitioners.

But real change has to come from the top down. NYFC and others are pinning their hopes on the inclusion of the "Beginning Farmers and Ranchers Opportunity Act" in Congress' next Farm Bill. The purpose of the proposed legislation is to invest in the next generation of American agricultural and livestock producers by enabling access to land, credit and crop insurance to help new farmers and ranchers launch or strengthen their businesses and become better stewards of their land.

"The future of family farming and ranching in America-and the viability of our nation's food supply-depends upon removing existing obstacles to entry into farming so that more people can start to farm," says the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition, another backer of the proposed legislation. "This bill encompasses a national strategy for addressing those barriers, focusing on the issues that consistently rank as the greatest challenges for beginning producers." Backers of the bill warn that, at a

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cost of just a fraction of one percent of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA's) budget, the nation can't afford not to pass the bill given its potential long term benefits to both our food supply and trade deficit.

The good news is that interest in healthier, greener food is driving a resurgence in organic agriculture. As such, many of the new farmers cropping up to replace their retired forebears are eschewing genetically modified crops and harsh chemicals, thus improving the quality of our agricultural land base overall.

Tierney Creech of the Washington Young Farmers' Coalition (WYFC) calls this influx of green enthusiasm an agrarian revival. "We're not just a few people spread across the country, we're a well organized, politically active group that can be documented," she says. "We know who our senators and representatives are, we vote, and our friends and families vote. We need USDA and government support to succeed and we're going to let the nation know that." *NYFC, www.youngfarmers.org; National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition, www.sustainableagriculture.net; WYFC, www.washingtonyoungfarmers.org; Beginning Farmers and Ranchers Opportunity Act, thomas.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/z?c112:H.R.3236.*

Dear EarthTalk: I can't seem to find any natural bug repellents that really work so I end up using the harsh, chemical varieties. Are there any really effective bug repellants that aren't chemically based, or other strategies we can use to keep bugs at bay? — Melissa Armantine, New Paltz, NY

While the industry standard insect repellents rely on the insecticide DEET (N,N-Diethyl-meta-toluamide) to keep bugs at bay, many environmental and public health advocates worry that regular long-term exposure to even small amounts of the chemical can negatively affect the



human nervous system.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) reports that, in studies, DEET has been shown to be "of low acute toxicity," although it can irritate the eyes, mouth and skin. The EPA concluded after a comprehensive 1998 assessment that DEET does not present a health risk as long as consumers follow label directions and take proper precautions. And since nothing works quite as well as DEET in deterring disease-carrying ticks and mosquitoes, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) is relatively bullish on its use in order to reduce incidences of Lyme disease, encephalitis and other insect-borne diseases.

Regardless, many consumers would prefer natural alternatives, and there are several companies already selling DEET-free insect repellents, many of which use essential oils as their active ingredients.

WebMD reports that soy-based repellent formulas (such as Bite Blocker for Kids) are the most effective substitutes for DEET, usually lasting for 90 minutes, which is longer than some low-concentration DEET (Continued on next page.)

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formulas. Some other leading alternative repellents include All Terrain's Herbal Armor, Quantum Health's Buzz Away Extreme, Lakon Herbals Bygone Bugz, and California Baby's Natural Bug Blend Repellent.

WebMD adds that, despite popular opinion, products containing citronella are not the best non-chemical choice, as their effectiveness typically wanes within an hour. Likewise, peppermint oil and some other plant-based oils are also effective as insect repellents. Even venerable Avon Skin-So-Soft bath oil, long thought to deter pests as well as DEET, only keeps mosquitoes away for up to a half hour.

Beyond repellents, there are many other ways to keep pests away. For one, avoid floral fragrances from perfume, deodorant or other sources that can attract mosquitoes and other bugs. The EarthEasy website recommends eliminating standing water around your home to keep mosquito breeding at bay. Bird baths, wading pools and pet water bowls should be changed at least twice a week; also make sure your gutters are draining properly. Also, since mosquitoes are attracted by carbon dioxide released from campfires and barbeque grills, EarthEasy recommends throwing sage or rosemary on the coals to repel the mosquitoes.

If all else fails and DEET is your only option, use it sparingly. The American Academy of Pediatrics

recommends using repellents with no more than a 30 percent concentration of DEET for kids over two-months old (and no repellent for younger babies). Keep in mind that formulas with lower concentrations of DEET may work just as well as others but not for as long. A 10 percent DEET concentration, for instance, should work for up to two hours outside. Applying DEET-based bug spray to your clothing instead of skin can help minimize any negative effects of exposure. Also, kids and grown-ups alike should wash off any DEET-based repellents when they are "out of the woods" so to speak. *EPA DEET Fact Sheet*, www.epa.gov/opp00001/factsheets/chemicals/deet.htm; *CDC Insect Repellent Use & Safety*, www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dvbid/westnile/qa/insect_repellent.htm; *EarthEasy*, www.eartheasy.com; *American Academy of Pediatrics*, www.aap.org; *WebMD*, www.webmd.com. earthtalk@emagazine.com.

Dear EarthTalk: What caused Solyndra, a leading American solar panel maker, to fail last fall and what are the implications for U.S. alternative energy industries? —

Walt Bottone, Englewood, NJ

Solyndra was a California-based maker of thin-film solar cells affixed to cylindrical panels that could deliver more energy than conventional flat photovoltaic panels. The company's novel system mounted these flexible cells, made of copper, indium, gallium and diselenide (so-called CIGS), onto cylindrical tubes where they could absorb energy from any direction, including from indirect and reflected light.

Solyndra's technology was so promising that the U.S. government provided \$535 million in loan guarantees—whereby taxpayers foot the payback bill to lenders if a borrower fails. And fail Solyndra did: In September 2011 the company ceased operations, laid off all employees, and filed for bankruptcy.

What caused this shooting star of alternative energy to burn out so spectacularly after just six years in business and such a large investment? Part of what made Solyndra's technology so promising was its low cost compared to traditional photovoltaic panels that relied on once costlier silicon. "When Solyndra launched, processed silicon was selling at historic highs, which made CIGS a cheaper

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option,” reports Rachel Swaby in Wired Magazine. “But silicon producers overreacted to the price run-up and flooded the market.” The result was that silicon prices dropped 90 percent, eliminating CIGS’ initial price advantage.

Another problem for Solyndra was the falling price of natural gas—the cleanest of the readily available fossil fuels—as extractors implemented new technologies including horizontal drilling and hydraulic fracturing to get at formerly inaccessible domestic reserves in shale rock. In 2001 shale gas accounted for two percent of U.S. natural gas output, while today that number is closer to 30 percent. The result of this increased supply is that the price of natural gas has fallen by some 77 percent since 2008, meaning utilities can produce electricity from it much cheaper as well. “Renewables simply can’t compete,” adds Swaby.

The final blow to Solyndra was China’s creation of a \$30 billion credit line for its nascent solar industry. “The result: Chinese firms went from making just six percent of the world’s solar cells in 2005 to manufacturing more than half of them today,” says Swaby. U.S. market share is now just seven percent.

Low natural gas prices have also hurt other renewables, especially given the slow economy and its stifling effect on

innovation. To wit, the rate of new wind-turbine installations in the U.S. has declined by more than half since 2008. “The fossil fuel industry and its allies in Congress clearly see the solar and wind industries as a threat and will try to kill [them],” says Representative Edward Markey, a top Democrat on the House Energy and Commerce Committee.

Regardless of the challenges in furthering renewables, the White House remains committed to the greener path. In his recent State of the Union, President Obama renewed the call for a federal Renewable Energy Standard that would force utilities to derive significant percentages of their power from cleaner, greener sources. This would provide much-needed regulatory uniformity and a more robust and consistent market for renewable power, wherever solar panels, wind turbines or other equipment happen to be manufactured. *Solyndra*, www.solyndra.com; *Wired*, www.wired.com.

Dear EarthTalk: I was in Los Angeles recently and the smog was not nearly as bad as when I visited 15 years ago. Is it really better now, and if so, how did it get that way? Or did I just happen to visit on a good day? — Marjorie

Hicke, Atlanta, GA

Los Angeles is almost as famous for its choking smog—a haze of ground-level ozone and (Continued on next page.)

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particulate pollution that can aggravate asthma and other respiratory problems-as for its Hollywood stars. The reason so much smog forms there is because the city is in a low basin surrounded by mountains, with millions of cars and industrial sites spewing emissions into the air.

But thanks to tougher state and federal air quality standards, L.A. residents can breathe easier than they've been able to for decades. According to the non-profit

Environment California, air pollution from cars and trucks across the state has decreased since the 1970s by more than 85 percent, with peak smog levels in the city of Los Angeles itself dropping some 70 percent. Meanwhile, California's South Coast Air Quality Management District (AQMD) has been tracking smog levels in the area since 1976, and reports the number of ozone advisories-where residents are advised to stay indoors due to unhealthy local accumulations of smog-fell from a high of 184 days in

1977 to between zero and a few days a year now.

"California's efforts to reduce air pollution from cars and trucks have made the state's air cleaner than it has been in decades and Californians are healthier as a result," says Bernadette Del Chiaro, Environment California's clean energy advocate. This is especially notable because the number of miles driven in California doubled since the 1970s even though emissions



significantly dropped-meaning that vehicles have gotten considerably more fuel efficient over the years. "The technologies found on new car lots today were practically unimaginable even 20 years ago, much less 40 years ago," adds Del Chiaro. "Yet thanks to strong policies, California has pushed the auto industry to innovate and engineer a greener, cleaner car."

According to Environment California's research, a typical new car today is more than 99 percent cleaner burning than its 1960s counterpart. An older car produces about a ton of smog-forming pollution every 100,000 miles; a new car generates only 10 pounds over the same distance. This improvement saves consumers money at the pump as well as health care expenses and lives due to reduced pollution loads. And a new generation of hybrid and electric cars is driving automotive efficiency to even newer heights.

Updated federal air quality standards implemented in 2008 have also helped reduce ozone alert days in California and elsewhere. But despite this progress, environmental and public health advocates are urging federal lawmakers to raise air quality standards even higher. The goal is to get ground level ozone, a chief contributor to smog, no more

prevalent than the range of 60-70 parts per billion averaged over eight hours, as unanimously recommended by an independent board of air experts and scientists created under the Clean Air Act to provide periodic review and recommendations on air quality standards.

The Obama administration reportedly considered updating the 2008 standard last summer but decided to table the decision until 2013 given economic priorities. Let's hope that the economy turns around enough in the meantime so that industry won't push back too hard against raising the federal standards. *Environment California*, www.environmentcalifornia.org; *AQMD*, www.aqmd.gov; earthtalk@emagazine.com.

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Seasoned Employee Skill Set

In his just-released book, *The Great Employee Handbook: Making Work and Life Better*, Quint Studer shares the wisdom he's learned from working with thousands of employees at every level. His work with CEOs, in particular, made it clear that high-level leaders value certain skills in the people who work for them-and those skills may not be what you'd expect.

"The issues most people struggle with have little to do with our ability to do the work," notes Studer. "It's all the things that happen around the work. It's how good we are at keeping projects moving. It's whether we make life easier for our coworkers or more difficult. It's how well we can read and respond to customers' unspoken needs."

In *The Great Employee Handbook*, Studer provides a wealth of how-to advice aimed at helping readers become more productive and successful on the job. He divides the book into three sections aimed at the three "worlds" employees inhabit: the worlds of the boss, coworkers, and customers. When we're able to master these skills, everything in our life goes more smoothly-not just from 8 to 5 but after hours, too.

"When we're more effective at work, everything changes," explains Studer. "Leaders value us and set us up for success. Coworkers like us and want to help us. Customers like us and keep doing business with us. All of these conditions work together to make us happy on the job-and when we're happy on the job, we're happy at home."

He reveals twelve secrets seasoned employees know-secrets that anyone of any experience level can use to their advantage: In the boss's mind, the ball is always in your court. Once the boss gives you an assignment, she may mentally mark it off her to-do list. She may even forget about it. It's up to you to do what you need to do to move it forward quickly. Never let yourself be the hold-up. Check in with the boss regularly on the project so that she doesn't have to bring it up. If you hit a roadblock and can't proceed until you get more information, let her know-just be sure you're not procrastinating. "Sometimes people let a few missing details hold an entire project hostage," notes Studer. "I find it's always better to complete chunks of work and fill in the missing details later. This is good for your workflow but it also reassures the boss that you're doing the best you can to keep the project moving. It relieves a lot of anxiety for her."

Park Ranger Leadership is exhausting and ineffective. When you bring the boss a problem, always bring a solution. Leaders are like the rest of us: overloaded and overwhelmed. Yet, despite the boss's already massive to-do list, employees habitually add their problems to his pile. Studer calls this the-boss-will-figure-it-all-out mentality Park Ranger Leadership-and he insists it's the least

effective way to get things done. "Think about it this way: If every time you got lost in the woods, a park ranger showed up to lead you out, you'd never learn to find the way out yourself," he explains. "That's what many leaders do, and it creates a situation where employees stop trying to solve problems. They think: Someone up there has always figured it out before, so they will this time, too. But that's hard on the leaders and it's limiting for the company."

"When you bring a problem to the boss, also bring a solution," Studer adds. "The boss will appreciate your initiative and creativity. Also, you're closer to the problem than he is so you can probably come up with a better solution. If all employees did this, the whole company would be stronger, more innovative, and more resilient." There is one thing the boss cares about more than anything else. Figure it out and act on it. When you know what matters most to the boss-what her what is, as Studer expresses it-then you can laser-focus on meeting her needs in this area.

Let's say you've noticed negativity drives her crazy. She just can't stand griping and complaining. It puts her in a bad mood and makes her want to hide out in her office. Once you realize this, you can make an effort to frame your communications with her in a

(Continued on next page.)

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positive way. "This is not sucking up and it's not a self-serving exercise," explains Studer. "It's just being aware of your own behavior and tweaking it to create a productive working relationship with the boss. It's good for her, it's good for you, it's good for everybody."

Knowing the why makes all the difference. If you're not sure what it is, ask. Let's say your company implements a major change in the way you capture and process customer feedback. No one likes the new system. It's harder and more time consuming than the old way, and you've noticed your coworkers seem resentful. The problem, says Studer, is that no one told them why the system changed. "When companies implement change, there's almost always a reason why," he notes. "But leaders may not always explain that reason, and people almost always assume the worst."

Instead of getting behind what seems like an arbitrary new rule, they resist it. "If this happens at your company, ask about the why," Studer urges. "You can tell others what you find out. Not every company understands the value of transparency, but sometimes one employee taking the initiative to ask why can change that."

There's no substitute for being liked. Do you greet people with a smile each morning? Do you bring breakfast for everyone once in a while? Do you say happy birthday? Do you offer to take their trash when you're taking yours out? Do you congratulate coworkers when they have a big win? There are a million little ways to contribute to what Studer

calls the "emotional bank account" at work. These deposits have a big, big impact-and they reduce the pain of the inevitable withdrawals. "Go out of your way to make people happy when you can and they'll forgive you when you make a mistake," he says. "These things are not that

hard to do; it's just that we don't always think to do them. When you start looking for ways to be a positive force in your coworkers' lives, you'll be amazed by how many there are-and what a difference they make."

Last-minute requests can derail your day. Retrain chronic offenders. Being a great employee means executing well, meeting deadlines, and, in general, protecting your own "brand." Yet, it also means stepping in and helping others when they need your expertise. It's not always easy to walk the tightrope between these two realities-especially when coworkers are constantly asking you for "five minutes of your time" (which really means 30 minutes or even longer). "When you're good at what you do, everyone wants a piece of you,"

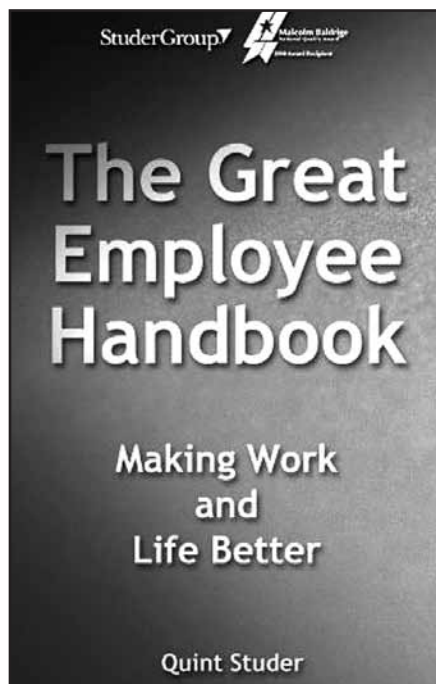
notes Studer. "That's good, but it can also lead others to take advantage of you, even if they don't mean to. If you don't stop last-minute requesters, your own work will eventually suffer. "Hold up the mirror and recognize your role in the problem," he advises. "What we permit we promote."

It's best to resolve coworker issues one-on-one. (Just like in kindergarten, no one respects a tattletale!) This is a tough one for many employees, because we tend to avoid confrontation.

"I'm not saying there aren't times when it's best to go through official channels and involve HR," notes Studer. "Certainly, there are. "People fear they'll be rejected if they show weakness or admit that they failed. The opposite is true. It actually makes people like us. It shows we're human, just like them."

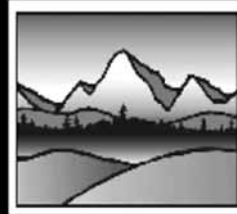
Blaming, finger-pointing, and badmouthing are deeply destructive to your company's image. It's harder than ever to win customers and keep them happy.

The Great Employee Handbook - Making Work and Life Better is available at bookstores nationwide, from all major online booksellers, and at Amazon for \$28.



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Fire!

By Joanna Sampson

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by weather or coal mine theatrics.

*The valley grew quiet and beautiful,
home to a few families that liked it.
Fires fed on coal and waxed and waned.*

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Know When You're Done

How Spending Too Much Time on Things Wastes Your Day -

Your Best Just Got Better, a new book. If you often feel like you've barely skimmed the surface of what you should have accomplished on a given work day, Jason Womack has a secret for you. He says that when you learn to "know when you're done" with projects, tasks, and everything the work day throws at you, you'll free up a lot more time to focus on those things that truly matter.

The curse for many of us modern-day movers and shakers is that we never seem to have enough time to do everything that needs doing. There simply aren't enough hours in the workday (or even the work week!) to accomplish everything on our to-do lists. Worse yet, when we finally do get on a productivity roll, there always seems to be a distraction (or two, or three) waiting in the wings to throw us off course. But the reality says Jason Womack, is

that we could actually accomplish a lot more each day if we would just learn to recognize and acknowledge when we're done with what we're doing.

"One of the biggest time wasters we all face is spending too much time on those things that don't require it," says Womack, a workplace performance expert, executive coach, and author of the new book


Your Best Just Got Better

Work Smarter, Think Bigger, Make More. "When we do so, we lose the time we actually should be spending on more difficult or time-intensive tasks. But when you learn to recognize when you're done with a task, you'll have valuable minutes and maybe even hours added back into your day."

Womack's book is packed with strategies, tactics, tools, and processes to help readers consistently and incrementally improve their performance at work. It teaches the fundamentals of workflow and human performance and spells out how to get more done, on time, with fewer resources, and with less stress. But more than that, it provides brilliant insights into why we tend to do what we've always done-and how we can break out of the patterns that hold us back.

"It often seems that we put off the most important things on our to-do lists until we feel like we have the 'time' to work on them," notes Womack. "When you learn to recognize when you're done with projects, big and small, you'll immediately find that you have a lot more time than you thought you did. Time you can use to focus on those things that truly matter."

Many of us spend a lot of time on those projects and tasks that are easy for us. Then, we convince ourselves that we "just didn't have enough time" to get to the harder stuff. But when it comes to knowing when you're done and freeing up time during your day, completing these easy tasks quickly and efficiently is essential. "Before you start your work day, think about what your high leverage activities are and what your low leverage activities are," says Womack. "For the low leverage activities, force yourself to move through them as quickly as possible. With these tasks-for example, writing an email to a colleague-perfection isn't necessary, and there's no need to waste time wringing your hands over every word. When you can accomplish these minor tasks more efficiently, you'll have the time you need to do those major tasks justice." Don't overwrite



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emails. Much of your time-probably too much-each day gets eaten up by email. Make a conscious effort to keep your emails as short and sweet as possible. "Get to the point quickly and use action verbs in subject lines so that both you and the recipient know what needs to happen before the email is even opened," advises Womack.

"And while long emails waste the time it takes you to write them, keep in mind that the person receiving the email doesn't want to have to spend so much time reading it either. Chances are your boss doesn't want or need a three-paragraph rundown of how your client meeting went. He just wants to know if the client is happy and continuing business with you."

Quit over-staying at meetings and on conference calls. Often meetings and conference calls will take as long as you've allotted for them. Set an hour for a meeting and you're sure to go the full hour. "Pay close attention to how much of your meeting is actually spent focused on the important stuff," notes Womack. "If you spend 15 to 20 minutes at the beginning or end of the meeting discussing your coworker's golf game, then next time reduce the amount of time allotted for the meeting. And always know the meeting or call's objectives before you begin. That way you can get to them right away."

Set your own deadlines and stick to them. It's very easy

to get distracted or sidetracked by things you think you should do or things others think you should do. "Having a self-imposed deadline will help you ignore those distractions," says Womack. "If a colleague calls you about a non-urgent task, you can let him know you've got a 3:00 p.m. deadline that you have to meet. There's no need for him to know that it's self-imposed! And then as 3:00 p.m. draws near, start wrapping up that particular task."

Know when it's time to ask for help. Have you ever been stumped by a certain project or task? Did you walk away from it for a while and then come back to it hoping you'd suddenly know what to do? Sometimes knowing when you're done is knowing when you, specifically, can't take a project any further. "You simply might not have the right expertise to completely finish a certain project," says Womack. "And that's okay. Wasting time on something you're never going to be able to figure out is much worse than asking for help!"

"When you put in place steps to help you know when you're done, you'll be surprised and pleased with how much, and how well you can get things done," says Womack. "It will truly free up time in your day that you can use to focus on areas where it's really needed. As a result, you'll have a more gratifying work day and you'll be happier overall."

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Residents Are Angry, But Not At The Real Threats

By Joe Wilkins/High Country News

I was born in eastern Montana, on a dusty stretch of nearly riverless high plains north of the Bull Mountains. I came of age there, in a country that has never not been true frontier, in the late '80s - during the farm crisis, that notoriously bad old time in rural America. In much of the Great Plains, the economic and social crisis was coupled with a drought of biblical proportions: The seasonal creeks just never ran and the dry rain evaporated before it hit the ground. I remember the fields baking in the sun and grasshoppers making off with whatever sickly, sun-stunned alfalfa was left. But mostly I remember men with feed store ball caps high on their heads and women in sack-like house dresses hanging from their bony shoulders staring shock-eyed at the walls, taking one slow sip of coffee, and then another, trying to reckon with the whispered news of another bankruptcy or farm sale or suicide.

These, you see, are my people. They are the kind that make it a practice to clamber up some nameless knob of hill each morning just to take a look around, to sight again

that great band of antelope grazing away the hours. They measure their days not by news cycles or traffic reports or clocks of any kind, but by sunrise and rainfall, the particular way the quaking leaves of a cottonwood, even in September, whisper winter, winter. They are a people intimate with dust - sickle moons of it beneath their fingernails, a grit of it always on their tongues - and suspicious of sharp corners. I have a friend who even as a young man couldn't stand to spend a day in Billings, Mont., which in many ways is really just a big cow town. He'd get nervous, claustrophobic - claimed he couldn't see where he was going, hated the way everything was built against the land. He couldn't wait to turn his nose north and follow the sinuous brown roll of the Musselshell River home.

Home. Never mind that I long ago followed the river the other way out, that I went off to college and never came back, that now I teach and write my days away instead of bucking bales or walking ditch with a shovel slung over my shoulder. The distance has allowed me to speak in a way that, I hope, you might hear. Because I want you to understand something here about my people and my place: They are one and the same. The land is us. In grad school at the University of Idaho I once heard someone laugh and say that the interior Mountain West would be good country, if only you could eat scenery. And I thought, Yes, that's it. We eat it. And it fills us. Or it did. Like I said, the '80s changed things. And now things look to change again.

In the last 30 years, temperatures across the Great Plains have already increased an average of 1.5 degrees Fahrenheit. In parts of Montana, the change is starker: some 5.5 degrees Fahrenheit. The U.S. Global Change Research Program predicts continued rising temperatures, more frequent droughts, depleted water supplies and an influx of invasive plant species across the High Plains. Couple this with the stress my people will no doubt put on



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the land trying to wring some kind of living out of it, and you've got trouble. As the land suffers, the people suffer. They will hunger, sicken, and grow furious. Tea Partiers, end-times Christians, secessionists, militiamen, the frenzied supporters of whichever Republican candidate happens to be the flavor of the week: Something real is already happening. Rightly or wrongly, people are already worried and scared, angry. Imagine for a moment all of them, and so many, many more, pushed right to the edge, where the one thing they have, their land, is worthless, or gone: the good dust of the fields lifting in a bad wind.

I don't mean to scare you, I do mean to scare you, I mean to say: There are still people in the world, people right here in these United States, who live their lives timed to the transit of the sun. And climate change is going to ruin them. Notice the pronoun shift in that last paragraph: That sun-timed life is no longer mine. Like most Americans, I will most likely find ways to insulate myself, at least to some extent, from the coming ravages - but don't think for a moment that this excuses me, that this excuses us. No, it makes us all the more culpable. In fact, it is up to us, every one of us, to save the Holocene, to save so many breathing, hoping human beings - to save them from hunger and sickness and a pure, sure anger we haven't even seen the likes of yet.

*Joe Wilkins is the author of a memoir, **The Mountain and the Fathers**, and two collections of poems, **Notes from the Journey Westward** and **Killing the Murnion Dogs**. This essay originally appeared in an issue of *High Country News* (hcn.org).*

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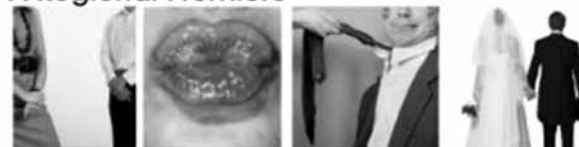
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Natural Gas 101

CSU to Give an Overview of Important Industry

Increased demand for natural gas and greater public interest in gas drilling and production in Colorado has led CSU to offer students a course on the "Fundamentals of Natural Gas" for the first time. The interdisciplinary course this spring features an introduction to the natural gas industry including geology, exploration, production, transportation and environmental issues.

The class exposes students to all aspects of the natural gas industry with a particular focus on unconventional gas extraction as it is being practiced in Colorado. "Part of the significance of this course is that it's multidisciplinary - we have students from economics and construction management in addition to geology and engineering students," said Sally Sutton, associate professor and geosciences department chair.

"It's exciting to have so many different professors with different backgrounds," said Jessica Olsen, a senior in mechanical engineering who has already accepted a job with Pioneer Natural Resources upon her graduation in May. About 30 students in a variety of disciplines are enrolled, but 50 routinely show up. Some of the folks sitting in the front row are other faculty members teaching the course. Tom Sale, associate professor of civil and environmental engineering, and Bryan Willson, mechanical engineering professor, for example, has attended Sutton's lectures on the geology of shale.

"I'm having a load of fun in there," said Willson, whose Engines and Energy Conversion Laboratory has done more than any group in the world to address impacts of natural gas pipelines and help industry partners reduce environmental effects of natural gas compression as well as improve efficiency. "I've always been focused on the end use and haven't studied the rock formations, and I find that pretty interesting."

In addition, the class will draw on guest instructors such as former Gov. Bill Ritter who is now director of CSU's Center for the New Energy Economy. Officials from industry and the EPA also have been invited to speak. The course addresses increased interest in natural gas production in Colorado and around the nation, particularly with the anticipated future development of oil and gas in the nearby Niobrara formation in northeast Colorado.

"I'm taking the class because it really looks like the natural gas industry is going to explode and also to get a better understanding of the energy future," said Shannon McKibben, a senior in chemical and biological engineering. In a recent class, Sutton discussed with students how geologists identify and uncover natural gas from rock formations. Sutton researches shale, the rock type that serves as both source and host for many of the natural gas deposits being actively developed. Her work focuses on relating chemical, mineralogical and textural characteristics of shales to the ease with which they transmit or accumulate fluids, including natural gas. "Changes in how natural gas is being produced suggest that we may be able to use much more natural gas as a potential bridge between petroleum and renewables," Sutton said.

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Our Nuclear Legacy Should Have Taught Us

By Jen Jackson

Here in Moab, Utah, where we can watch railcars carry off the radioactive uranium waste that was stored right next to the Colorado River, many locals are steeling themselves for the return of yet more uranium to their lives.

During the Cold War, Moab was called the uranium capital of the world, as the element was both mined and milled in the area; the 16 million-ton tailings pile is the legacy of that boom. Now, eastern Utah is in the running to host one of the first nuclear power plants to be built in this country in almost four decades.

Area nonprofit groups have opposed the proposed project for years, and scores of residents spoke out against it at a standing-room-only meeting held by the county meeting last fall. Over a dozen incredulous citizens echoed the phrase, "This is crazy," while many talked about the still-unsolved problems involved in safely storing mining or power-production waste. Ten women were moved to

speak in defense of their "viable eggs" - their unborn children. Many others wondered about the plant's impacts on the desert, the river and a tourist industry that depends on wild and uncontaminated public lands. One resident added, "There is no compensation for a loss of community. There are no guarantees that these plants will run smoothly."

Though Moab's elected officials have not taken an official stance, Emery County, home of the nuclear potential power plant, has gone on record in support of the project for the sake of the jobs it promises to bring. Blue Castle Holdings, the Utah-based company behind the power plants, says it selected the Green River site because major highways, rail lines, utility corridors and water all converge there. Though the company says that 15 utilities have expressed interest in purchasing some of the 3,000 megawatts of electricity it would eventually produce, the only known customer is Page Electric Utility, in northern Arizona. Yet that utility would apparently buy only one percent of what Blue Castle generates. Other possible buyers are bound to be based outside of Utah, since Utah's electric power is primarily fueled by coal.

In a major coup for Blue Castle, the state of Utah recently awarded it water rights for the power plant. Permission to withdraw 53,600 acre feet of water a year from the already overtaxed Green River, however, was granted with this caveat: "Approval of the application does not guarantee sufficient water will always be available from the river to operate the plant."

To have a fickle desert waterway as a buffer against potential disaster seems a shaky start. Also disquieting is the thought of radioactive waste sitting in casks under the harsh desert sun, waiting for a nuclear waste repository like Yucca Mountain to finally open its doors. Nuclear industry representatives like to boast about the safety of nuclear power generation, but such assurances were of no help to the people of Fukushima, Japan, last year after a tsunami breached containment structures at a power plant.

It's been only three years since the long-awaited ceremony at Moab's old Atlas Corp. mill site, where local, state and federal dignitaries cut the ribbon on a project that would finally remove all the still-radioactive waste from the banks of the Colorado River, an effort expected to take 16 years. While visiting officials celebrated by trading

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company also needs investors to cover licensing and construction costs of an estimated \$18 billion. Potential backer LeadDOG Capital, however, which pledged \$30 million to the project, is currently in trouble with the Securities and Exchange Commission for allegedly defrauding investors.

All electric-power producing plants face long lead times and financial and regulatory uncertainties. A lot of Moab residents hope that in this case, the time stretches out for a long, long while.

Jan Jackson is a contributor to Writers on the Range, a service of High Country News (hcn.org). She lives and writes in Moab, Utah.

commemorative coins and eating frosted “yellow cake” - a play on the term for the concentrated uranium powder that uranium mills generate - local residents reminisced about their 20-year struggle to force elected officials to pay attention to the issue and to finally act.

Now, of course, the uranium specter threatens to return, and industry representatives tell us this time it will all be different. As one Blue Castle official put it last fall, “We have spent a lot of time researching this... We feel that gives us justification to move forward.”

Blue Castle’s fate now rests in the hands of the fission-friendly Nuclear Regulatory Commission. But the



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Kill Zombie Subdivisions~Say Goodbye To Ranch

By Paul Larmer

For the past several years, I have marveled at a basketball court planted in the middle of a field on the outskirts of Delta, a town of 9,000 people in rural western Colorado. It's a good-looking court with a smooth cement surface and nets on the rims. But I never see anyone playing on it, or even driving on the curvy road that leads to it. The lack of players and drivers can be traced to the great housing bust of 2008, which halted the development of this subdivision. Though the streets, park and fire hydrants had all been installed, the people never came to buy the lots and build homes. Just one new house - probably the model home - sits several hundred yards away from the court.

This is a common sight in many Western communities these days, not only in large metropolises such as Phoenix and Las Vegas, but also in rural areas. Take the extreme case of Teton County, Idaho. In the early 2000s, Teton Valley, a gorgeous agricultural area just over the pass from Jackson, Wyo., was one of the hottest second-home markets in the West, and developers flooded its small towns and county offices with proposals for rural subdivisions. For awhile, everyone from the welcoming farmers and real estate agents to the construction workers and developers made a lot of money, even as a political rift opened up between green-leaning newcomers and the conservative Mormon farming community that had long run the show.

That ended abruptly with the housing bust. As Allen Best reported in High Country News recently, about 7,200 lots that were approved and mapped out, or platted, stand vacant today. Many of the vacant lots have become marooned without good roads and utilities; others are weaved in with lots where houses were built, but those

houses either also stand vacant or, if they're occupied, hold their occupants in a kind of limbo.

The county government is also on the hook financially. It approved many of the subdivisions without requiring developers to pay upfront for infrastructure. So far, Best reports, the county has negotiated "replat" agreements on a handful of developments, but it is reluctant to pressure developers and banks to do more deals for fear of being sued. If I could script an ending for this story, it would be about how a profound economic bust brought the community together to create a new vision for Teton Valley, one that balances environmental protection and smart growth. But that would be fiction, at least at this point.

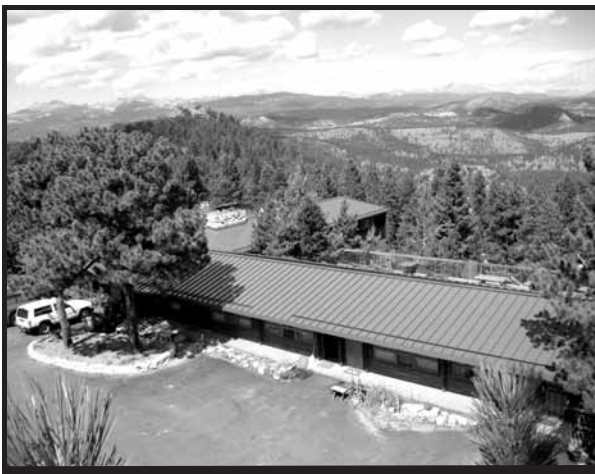
Though backed by a vocal, pro-planning group, Teton County's effort to craft a new comprehensive plan that would prevent future housing disasters is meeting stiff resistance. At a meeting with farmers, held in January, ideas such as down-zoning - reducing the allowable densities for subdivisions in rural areas - and conservation "overlays" - the various maps showing wildlife habitat, wetlands and other sensitive areas that should be protected - were met with vehement opposition, Best reports. "It was a pitch forks and torches meeting. The answer to everything was 'no,'" said one person who attended.

Jaydell Buxton, whose grandfather homesteaded in Teton County in 1888, has already sold a thousand acres of his farmland to a developer, and he's among those who are leery of any tougher regulations. "I get really angry," he said. "We've been overtaken by the Easterners" - his term for the conservationists and others who want regulations. "I see bicycle riders here, young people riding in the middle of the day!" And so, the rural West remains mired

in a planning battle that is only exacerbated by a bust. Part of the battle is cultural and political - an old guard fearful of losing its power to a new guard with different values. Another part is purely economic; where one group sees the downturn as an opportunity to regulate against the wild swings of the real-estate economy, another sees it as the time to loosen up and sweeten deals for developers — anything to get the good times rolling again.

I may yet see people dribbling and shooting on the zombie basketball court near Delta, kids' voices mingling with the sounds of nail guns, hammers and saws. Or, more likely, since it may take another decade for Delta's real estate market to reignite, I'll watch the court slowly melt back into the field from which it sprang.

Paul Larmer is the executive director of High Country News (hcn.org) He is a contributor to Writers on the Range.



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By Kerry Brophy-Lloyd

All my childhood memories take me back to my family's guest ranch in a remote area of northwest Colorado. Without this place, what would I have to remember? There are the good memories of riding through uncut hay meadows and racing toy boats down our backyard stream, all set beneath the looming peaks of the Mount Zirkel Wilderness near Steamboat Springs. Then there are the hard-knock memories that every ranch kid shares, like catching the school bus at 6 a.m. for the long ride into town, the mud seasons that left our truck stuck for days, the fact that we could never take a family vacation because relentless work weighed us down.

But memories are all I have left; my family sold our ranch when I was in high school. And this is not just my experience. Every day, other kids in the West have to say good-bye to the family ranch. It's a separation much like losing a loved one or having the roots that once grounded you yanked up. These days, keeping a ranch going is a lot more difficult than working one, and that's saying a lot, because to my mind, nothing's harder than ranch work. Eventually, many cash-strapped landowners struggling to make ends meet have little choice but to sell. Faced with daunting property taxes, escalating debt and the prospect of never getting out with your boots still on, the decision almost becomes easy.

A ranch sale means retirement money, send-your-kids-to college money. What's left behind when the ranch sells? In the West, it's often residential subdivisions split into 10-, 20- or 40-acre parcels. Gone forever is the family ranch, along with a lot of the wildlife habitat and open space that benefit all of us. In my case, I think I'm lucky. The buyers of our ranch not only kept it as a working guest and agricultural operation, they also safeguarded it from future development by securing a conservation easement, one of the most powerful tools in the West for ranchers who want to stay put without selling off their land in parcels. That said, I've learned that conservation easements aren't for everyone. Delicate negotiations go into making these deals. After countless cups of coffee in kitchen meetings, sometimes it just doesn't work out. But I've seen a lot of conservation agreements that do happen - sometimes against enormous odds - and it gives me hope.

One project in eastern Colorado's grasslands reveals that ranching families don't have to give up what they love, and that strength in numbers counts when it comes to conservation. Here's the example: A rancher named Harold Yoder got to thinking that one way to lure back his older son, who had moved to Oklahoma, was to acquire the nearby Winship Ranch, a 37,000-acre spread that had been for sale since 2008. The place, he thought, was solid country for someone like his son to ranch. A few of Harold's neighbors were interested in the Winship, too, but nobody on his own could swing the asking price. That's when they all sat down with The Nature Conservancy and

asked, "Can we do this together?"

That first discussion led to a new model for private-lands conservation in Colorado, one in which four families placed easements on their home ranches and then used the associated out-of-pocket savings to purchase portions of the Winship Ranch, enabling each family to expand their operations. The Nature Conservancy negotiated the easements and facilitated the transaction. The resulting deal safeguards 48,500 acres of shortgrass prairie; land essential for providing habitat for pronghorn, swift fox and the lesser prairie chicken. It also catches and purifies water, while simultaneously protecting several historic ranching operations. Sure enough, Harold's son, Sid Yoder, returned with his young family after the complex project took shape. "It's been a pleasure and a joy to come home," says Sid. "It's where I grew up, it's a place that I love, and I was glad to have an opportunity to bring my kids back here."

While I will never get the chance to return to my own family's ranch, there is comfort in knowing that, given new tools, people who want to do so can keep their ranches alive. And though the ranch of my childhood is no longer mine, the last time I visited, I saw my little blue tricycle was still stashed in a corner of the old barn. It looked just the way I remembered it.

Kerry Brophy-Lloyd is a contributor to Writers on the Range, a service of High Country News (hcn.org).

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