

Wyoming Outdoor Council

Winter 2017

FRONTLINE

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



Celebrating 50 Years!

Chris Merrill



Wyoming Outdoor Council

The Wyoming Outdoor Council at 50

Born in a Storm



BY STEFANI FARRIS
DEVELOPMENT
COORDINATOR

When Tom Bell first brought together the people who would make up the Wyoming Outdoor Coordinating Council, our country was in tremendous upheaval. Millions of citizens were fighting to see their basic civil rights recognized and upheld, and we were involved in a deeply polarizing war. Just four years earlier, President John F. Kennedy had been assassinated. Two years earlier, Malcolm X had been killed. A year after our founding both Martin Luther King, Jr., and Robert F. Kennedy would be assassinated. And in four years, another president would resign.

National news about the environment in 1967 was hardly good. Despite the recent passage of the Clean Air Act, many urban residents were suffering the consequences of terrible smog. Waterways were badly polluted: Ohio's Cuyahoga River—which would famously “catch fire” after the ignition of an oil slick in 1969 and help usher in passage of the Clean Water Act—had actually burned multiple times, as had many other industrial rivers. DDT was newly banned, but its widespread use had nearly killed off American eagles and had decimated osprey and other bird populations.

Here in Wyoming in the late 1960s things didn't look much better. Projects were underway that promised to wreak all kinds of environmental havoc. The Atomic Energy Commission had devised a harebrained plan to get at natural gas near Pinedale with a series of subterranean nuclear explosions. Vast swaths of timberland on the Shoshone and Bridger-Teton National Forests were being clearcut—causing erosion and sedimentation in nearby rivers. Wildlife was getting hung up on illegal barbed wire fencing in the Red Desert. And, with no

laws to discourage them, many people were quite literally taking aim at eagles, which were on the precipice of extinction.

Considering all this, it would have been easy 50 years ago to look around and simply be overwhelmed—not only by the staggering amount of work to be done, but also by the seemingly long odds of that work ever amounting to anything.

We know what happened instead.

Tom Bell and so many leaders of his time pooled their hope, focused their energies, and got to work. We also know that their hard work paid off in spades—they stopped the clearcuts, killed the misguided nuclear fracking plans, and created Wyoming's foundational environmental laws and agencies. In fact, all of us living in Wyoming today are the beneficiaries of their will to fearlessly take action on the toughest issues of their time.

In 2017, the Wyoming Outdoor Council's expertise and statewide reach have made us Wyoming's cornerstone conservation group. For many years now, citizens and other organizations have looked to the Outdoor Council for leadership on key policy issues. Recognizing this responsibility, we are taking a hard look at how—as we head into our 50th year and position ourselves for the next 50—we can be more successful and have a greater impact on protecting the values that are so fundamental to Wyoming's quality of life.

Looking Ahead: Reclaiming Common Ground

While it's often said that our state is a small town with long streets, it might also be described as a small neighborhood with a big backyard. Perhaps more than anywhere else in the country, this vast, shared backyard is what unites us, regardless of political differences. It's where we hunt and fish. It's where we camp. It's where we hike and climb and bike and ski and wander. And it's where we teach

our kids—and where they'll teach their kids—what Wyoming is all about.

It wasn't so long ago that a shared love of this rugged backyard could be seen in the broad bipartisan support for legislation such as the Endangered Species Act, the Wyoming Wilderness Act, and all of our state's foundational environmental laws. Even as recently as 2009 lawmakers on both sides of the aisle came together in support of the landmark Wyoming Range Legacy Act.

Something has changed in recent years, though, as the majority of Wyoming's elected officials have plainly fallen out of step with the mainstream western



values of protecting our shared natural resources. These decision makers—heavily influenced by the energy industry, which funds our state government—have too often been able to marginalize the conservation values that most Wyomingites, regardless of party affiliation, hold dear.

Just consider the ongoing attempts at a state land grab. Nearly half of all Wyoming's land is public—and 97 percent of us visit this land regularly. Take away access to these lands and Wyoming becomes an utterly different and less inviting place to live, visit, or do business. Knowing this, most Wyomingites do not support a state takeover of our public lands. Yet lawmakers keep pushing for exactly that—even as they face intense public opposition and come up with new and disingenuous ways to frame the issue in order to make it seem like something else entirely.

One of our most important tasks as we head into our second half-century is to bring this and

other conservation issues back from the brink of partisanship in Wyoming. A tall order? Absolutely. But no party has a monopoly on the best fishing hole or on making sure our children are breathing clean air. And if it's going to happen anywhere in this country, it's going to happen right here where our decision makers are also our neighbors, our kids' soccer coaches, and in many cases our friends.

Increasing Our Influence

The path forward is clear: we must bolster our influence in the state.

In 2017 we will hire a new Cheyenne-based policy advocate. Back in our earliest days, Outdoor Council staff spent a lot of time in offices and hallways in Cheyenne. We weren't always welcome, and folks didn't always agree with us, but decision makers knew who we were. And we got things done. Over the years the organization grew and we worked hard to cover the whole map, fielding staff that could show up in every corner of the state, including Cheyenne. Now we're excited to once again take our game up a notch in Cheyenne—seeking common ground on conservation issues, building trust, and deepening relationships in the state capital. While many of our staff often travel to the capital for meetings throughout the year, having an advocate there year-round will give us all a better seat at the table and let us drive policy discussions from the outset.

Another way we aim to grow our influence is by increasing our visibility and our membership. We know there are far more people who believe deeply in our values than who take the step to join. But the fact is, anyone who loves and wants to protect Wyoming's outdoor way of life should know the Wyoming Outdoor Council's name and should be a member. Legislators need to hear loud and clear that there's a big, diverse constituency in this state that supports public lands and environmental quality. In recent years we've held some great events to introduce the Wyoming Outdoor Council to new members across the state, and we've got more of these slated for 2017. But you can help, too, not only by making sure your membership is up to date, but also by spreading the word—to family members, *(continued on page 4)*

(continued from page 3) friends, neighbors, coworkers, and anyone else you know who shares your feelings about the need to staunchly defend Wyoming's outdoor way of life. (Don't forget that memberships make great gifts, too!) Now more than ever, we're going to need all hands on deck.

The Recreation Economy Is Part of the Solution

Wyoming and its economy are changing and the Wyoming Outdoor Council remains committed to helping find workable paths forward for our state. Governor Matt Mead has just tapped our executive director, Gary Wilmot, to serve as co-chair of the new Outdoor Recreation Task Force. This is a great opportunity not only to tout Wyoming's many assets beyond the old standbys of coal, gas, and oil, but also to forge new and stronger connections that will benefit Wyoming and its people for the long term.

Equipped for Tough Times

We're starting our 50th anniversary year under some tough political circumstances. Once again, our nation is undergoing what feels like a seismic shift. Anyone who cares about the fate of our environment could be forgiven for feeling overwhelmed.

But make no mistake: we have never been as prepared for tough times as we are right now. For one thing, we have you, our passionate members, committed to Wyoming and to keeping us afloat, encouraging us always to keep up the hard work. That support counts for more than you might imagine. We are also drawing inspiration from our tenacious predecessors. These visionaries took the long view, even against long odds, not the least bit certain of the change their tireless advocacy would eventually bring about. They, and the future generations for whom they were working, encourage us to do the same today.

Let's get to work. 

Wyoming Outdoor Council

Established in 1967, the Wyoming Outdoor Council is the state's oldest independent statewide conservation organization. Our mission is to protect Wyoming's environment and quality of life for future generations.

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Message From the Director

Constant Vigilance, Caring, and Standing for What's Right

“As an old mountain man might say—WAGH! This seems several lifetimes coming. Fantastic indeed. You guys at WOC (and at The Wilderness Society, Citizens for the Wyoming Range and Trust for Public Land) carried the torch. Never forget this huge band of die-hards who just wouldn't let go of the dream, after Sen. Craig Thomas paved the way with much work also from this group to support him. If the lessons of constant vigilance and caring and standing for what's right by so many diverse people with unswerving determination could be known by our children and grandchildren. A huge blessing as the New Year turns over—and may it stick! Thinking of Tom Bell.” —**Pete Doenges**

“Thank you so much for all you've done for the past decade that got us to this place. It has been a long and relentless struggle, but you and the coalition, composed of a great variety of people with differing points of view, worked tirelessly on this problem where there was overwhelming agreement: there should be no new oil or gas drilling in the Wyoming Range. Although the technicalities of leases seemed to doom such dreams, you had the legal background and the knowhow to defend the Range against development. Your good work is a classic case study in environmental activism. Although many citizens participated in the struggle, we owe a debt of gratitude to the leaders of this coalition and their tireless efforts that brought about this great decision. This is the best Christmas present we could ever get.” —**Florence Shepard**



BY GARY WILMOT
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Above are just a couple of the heartfelt messages that we received in late December when the U.S. Forest Service made a fantastic decision: after a decade of deliberation, analysis, false starts, and unprecedented citizen engagement, the agency finally announced there would be no new oil and gas leasing in the Wyoming Range. It was a great way to end 2016 and to kick off our 50th year at the Wyoming Outdoor Council.

You—our members, partner organizations, and tens of thousands of regular citizens—stood up and spoke out, year after year. And you never gave up, even when our chances of success seemed slim, even when the agency backtracked on good, hard-won decisions.

Sometimes it seems the greatest power conservationists have is the strength of our values and the endurance to constantly stand up for them. We also, more often than not, have public opinion on our side. Wyoming Outdoor Council founder Tom Bell knew both of these things intuitively when he started the organization in the midst of great political and environmental turmoil in 1967.

Like member Pete Doenges, I often find myself thinking of Tom, especially when hard work and dogged determination pays off. Especially when the constant grind yields something historic and lasting—a gift to the future. We lost Tom Bell in 2016, at the very end of August, at the age of 92. But his personal grit and resolve are woven into the fabric of this organization, and I know he continues to inspire us all, whether we're conscious of it or not.

Like member Florence Shepard, I find myself reflecting on the power of activism done right, especially as we look toward the next 50 years of protecting Wyoming's environment and quality of life. There's nothing so formidable as a diverse coalition of citizens with shared values, employing great communicators and the best legal and technical expertise.

It is this kind of experience and know-how that the Wyoming Outdoor Council brings to the table. It's why we're still here, still coming together, 50 years after Tom first assembled us. Thank you all for being a part of it and for carrying on his work.

Best,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Gary P. Wilmot".

Gary P. Wilmot

Stopping the Land Grab: We'll Need You During the Legislative Session



BY LISA
MCGEE
PROGRAM
DIRECTOR

Nearly half of the land in Wyoming—some 30 million acres—is public land owned by all Americans. These are our national forests, our high deserts, the open space and wildlife habitat that characterize Wyoming. These are the lands people from all over the country and the world come to experience, and the reason most residents choose to live here. Each year for the last four legislative sessions, a group of Wyoming lawmakers have proposed bills that would lay the groundwork for the state takeover of public lands in Wyoming.

A year ago, in response to these (so-far unsuccessful) takeover bills, a broad coalition of hunters and anglers, outdoor enthusiasts, and conservation and recreation groups including the Wyoming Outdoor Council convened in Lander to create a collective plan for stopping this growing threat to our public lands. All agreed it would be essential to take swift action against any future attempts at a state takeover of public lands. Recently the changing politics at

the national level has made land grab efforts an even more pressing concern. This fall, this strong and active alliance of more than 40 groups and businesses formed the “Keep it Public, Wyoming” coalition.

This coalition will need everyone’s engagement during and beyond the current legislative session if we are to thwart efforts at a state takeover.

Your Signature Matters

Keep it Public, Wyoming has emerged not only as the coalition’s moniker, but also as the formal rallying cry to engage Wyoming’s diverse citizenry who value our public lands. The coalition’s mission is to raise awareness of this persistent, pernicious threat to Wyoming’s public lands. If you haven’t yet signed the Keep It Public, Wyoming petition, please go to keepitpublicwyo.com and add your name. It’s a way for all of us to demonstrate to legislators that we want public lands to stay in public hands.

At the time of this newsletter’s publication, the Wyoming legislature is considering at least one bill meant to pave the way for state takeover of public lands, a proposed amendment to the Wyoming constitution, which would eliminate the state’s longstanding prohibition on

claiming ownership of federal lands within our borders—a prohibition that was a condition of Wyoming’s statehood.

Passage of the proposed constitutional amendment would open the doors for further state takeover schemes because its passage would send the exact wrong message to Congress—the one body that could divest ownership of public lands—that Wyoming people support state takeover of public lands. In fact, poll after poll shows that Wyoming people do not support this at all.

The Problem with the Proposed Amendment

The proposed constitutional amendment flies in the face of the results of a recent \$75,000 study—commissioned and funded by the Wyoming Legislature back in 2014. The study found, among other things, that assuming management of federal public lands was neither a financially nor a legally sound decision for Wyoming. The annual fire budget alone for these lands would be too much in most years for the state to absorb. And, even if Congress were to divest the public lands to state ownership, there’s no reason why it would also give away subsurface mineral rights—the one aspect takeover proponents claim would be profitable. Therefore, pressure would consistently

mount on the state, pushing it in one direction: sell the lands off. (It's worth noting that Wyoming has almost 20 percent less state land today than it had at statehood in 1890 as the result of selling or swapping acreage.)

The National Outdoor Leadership School is the largest public lands outfitter in the state. Aaron Bannon, the Environmental Stewardship and Sustainability Director at NOLS, has been particularly concerned about the potential consequences of the amendment's passage.

Bannon explained that passage of this amendment would "create the possibility that the public lands NOLS relies on for its classrooms could lose their natural character to more logging, to more mineral extraction, to more oil and gas interests. Our classrooms would degrade."

Majority of Wyoming Citizens Oppose State Takeover

During a meeting of the State Legislature's Federal Natural Resource Management Committee in Riverton last November, legislators heard from a packed room of citizens who opposed the proposed amendment. Seventy more citizens who couldn't attend in person expressed opposition through emails. In Cheyenne a month later, more than 150 citizens filled the meeting room and not a single attendee spoke in favor of the measure. Despite clear public resistance, the

subcommittee nevertheless moved the amendment forward.

"The process has been frustrating," said Bannon. "And for a business like ours, where public land is our greatest asset—to have never been approached by our local legislators to confer with us on the consequences of a state takeover is discouraging."



Despite frustration that such broad opposition has fallen on deaf ears so far, Earl DeGroot with the Wyoming Sportsmen for Federal Lands sees tremendous potential to rally support in Wyoming for keeping public lands in public hands.

"The good news is, the general voting public will ultimately help decide this takeover issue," DeGroot said. "And the vast majority of Wyoming citizens don't want it to happen."

Keep It Public, Wyoming helped demonstrate this at the Rally for Public Lands on November 5 in Casper, when more than 400 people from across Wyoming and neighboring states attended.

Citizen Engagement Will Make All the Difference

Stephanie Kessler, the Wyoming Outdoor Council's director of external relations, has been instrumental in continuing to rally support and bring various groups and people together for the cause.

"The task at hand now is to defeat this proposed amendment and any land grab bills that pop up in the 2017 session of Wyoming's Legislature (which convened on January 10)," said Kessler. "We need to have a substantial show of support from the public. We need people to show up and speak out for keeping public lands the way they are."

The Keep it Public coalition will continue to engage Wyoming organizations, businesses, and citizens who want public lands to stay in public hands. The Wyoming Outdoor Council will also help citizens engage via our new website and updated civic engagement tools at wyomingoutdoorcouncil.org.

"There is a phenomenal power and organizing strength within this coalition: a lot of good ideas, good brainstorming, and common action," Kessler said. "I have confidence we will win on this issue during the 2017 session if regular citizens and our broad coalition keep coordinating and sharing our best ideas and strategies together." 🏞️



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