

Wyoming Outdoor Council

Winter 2026

FRONTLINE



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

INSIDE:

Activism Despite the Odds

PLUS:

- *Nuclear renaissance meets reality*
- *A love letter to the Red Desert*
- *2026 Legislative Preview*

Standing strong on shifting ground

CARL FISHER
Executive Director

AS WE WELCOME 2026, I find myself reflecting on the grit and resilience our community showed throughout the tumult of the past year. Standing together, we proved that Wyomingites know how to confront big challenges, particularly when we work together as a community.

Despite the odds, 2025 ended on a positive note. Thanks to your voices, we defeated legislation that would have made Wyoming the nation's repository for nuclear waste. We stopped the sell-off of public lands. And we overwhelmingly opposed attacks to the Roadless Rule, the Public Lands rule, and the National Environmental Policy Act.

You convinced the Wyoming Game and Fish Commission to recommend designation of the Sublette Pronghorn Migration Corridor. You showed up to our inaugural WYlder Festival in May and our Tribal Conservation Summit in October, sharing stories and knowledge, and strengthening our community. And in a demonstration of resilience, you turned out — yet again — to defend the Red Desert, amid efforts to amend the newly adopted Rock Springs Resource Management Plan and dismantle environmental protections for this cherished landscape.

Of course, we have challenges ahead, and the ground we stand on is shifting. Public lands transfer proponents are looking at new ways to strip us of our beloved landscapes, attempting to privatize vast swaths of our land, while leaving us all out of the process. The Red Desert is poised to have its modest protections stripped so energy companies can drill in

some of the most critical wildlife habitat in the western US. And attacks on water protection rules and regulations are just beginning to unfold, jeopardizing public health and our fisheries.

Despite all this, we find resolve in our collective action. The Wyoming Legislature convenes Feb. 9 for the 2026 Budget Session. They'll be discussing a range of issues that WOC — and communities around the state —

I've met a lot of people of different walks of life all across the state. **We are united** by a deep affection for our land, water, wildlife, and communities.

care deeply about, from rangeland health to watershed projects, recreation to conservation, rising energy costs to subsidies for industry. We'll be there every step of the way, sharing important information and letting you know when to act and what issues to engage on. As we saw this past year, our successes depend upon your engagement. And we are here to support you: We'll provide analysis and information, and we'll organize community events to enrich your understanding and give

you the confidence to take action on issues that matter to you.

I've met a lot of people of different walks of life all across the state. We are united by a deep affection for our land, water, wildlife, and communities. It's who we are. Together, let's make 2026 a year of endurance and action.

What's one hope you have for Wyoming in 2026?

I hope we can continue protecting our public lands — and keeping them in public hands!

Keep advocating for responsible water use, especially when it comes to data centers



Founded in 1967, we are a statewide advocacy group, working to protect public lands, wildlife, and clean air and water in Wyoming. We believe conservation is not a partisan issue and that informed and engaged citizens matter.

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ACTIVISM *despite* THE ODDS

Why your voice matters, even on losing battles

WILLOW BELDEN
Communications Director

ONE DAY LAST SUMMER, I ran into an acquaintance in Laramie. It was June, and the battle around selling off public lands was at its peak. I encouraged my friend to call her senators and tell them to vote no.

She sighed.

“What good will it do?” she asked. “They’re not going to listen to me.”

I was stunned. This was a woman who had always struck me as politically engaged. If she wasn’t speaking up, who would?

My friend’s skepticism is not uncommon. Many Wyomingites are reluctant to contact their lawmakers, because they assume it won’t make a difference. But how true is that? Is there value in engaging politically, when it seems like a losing battle? How much difference can a small group of citizens make?

...

“People have a tremendous opportunity to influence legislation,” says Ryan Williamson, a political scientist at the University of Wyoming who specializes in American government and politics. “Legislators want to keep their job. They want to win reelection.” So they pay attention to what their constituents are saying.

Even if you are in the minority, you can make a difference, Williamson says. That’s because most people don’t speak up at all.

“Your average American, their idea of

political engagement is maybe voting every four years,” Williamson says. “The high-performing American also votes in midterm elections. ... But as far as direct contact with legislators, that is a very small subset.”

As a result, those who do reach out can have an outsized influence.

This is especially true in Wyoming, where each state lawmaker only represents a few thousand people. If they receive 50 calls about a certain issue, that’s a meaningful percentage of their constituency and could make or break legislation — especially on lesser-known issues, where a lawmaker’s mind isn’t entirely made up.

...

This scenario is not just theoretical; we’ve seen it play out in Wyoming multiple times.

One of the most recent examples was during last year’s legislative session. John Burrows, WOC’s Energy and Climate Policy Director, remembers the day vividly.

It was Jan. 29, 2025, and John had gone to Cheyenne to testify before the House Minerals, Business, and Economic Development Committee. The committee was discussing a bill that would allow Wyoming to become the dumping ground for the nation’s nuclear waste.

John felt an anxious weight in his stomach as he walked up the snowy steps to the Capitol.

He knew the best chance to stop this bill would be now. If the bill made it over to the senate and passed into law, Wyoming would be liable to feel the consequences for thousands of years.

The committee room filled with people who came to testify. Others joined online. Everyone had questions.

The meeting went on for an hour, then two.

And then, one lawmaker made a comment that John knew would be pivotal.

It was Rep. Mike Schmid of La Barge who spoke. “I’ve got hundreds of emails,” he said. “And not one is in support of ... this idea.”

John’s pulse quickened. *Hundreds of emails*, he thought. *And not one in support*. Surely, lawmakers couldn’t ignore that level of public opposition.

Sure enough, the bill died that day in committee. Lawmakers couldn’t justify supporting a measure that their constituents so vehemently opposed.

...

To John, this is a classic example of Wyoming’s small government at work.

“It doesn’t take as many citizens reaching out to have an impact as you might imagine,” he says. “A hundred or 150 people sending an email ... can absolutely stop bad legislation from moving forward.”

This has happened on multiple issues over the years. In 2016, public outcry killed a bill that would have called for federal lands to be transferred to the state. In 2024, public pressure prompted the Wyoming legislature to agree to sell the Kelly Parcel to Grand Teton National Park. And year after year, legislation aimed at dismantling net metering — which allows rooftop solar customers to be compensated for the excess energy they feed back into the grid — fails because of steadfast opposition from citizens.

“Everybody’s coming out with a pitchfork



Era Aranow, a former WOC intern and staffer, speaks to Sen. Cale Case at the Capitol (Photo: WOC staff).

A tiny win now could pave the way for a bigger victory down the road.

saying, ‘No, don’t do this,’” John says. “And so that’s what keeps winning the argument around net metering.”



You won’t win everything. There are certain issues where lawmakers’ opinions are so entrenched that no amount of public input is going to make a difference. But even if you don’t win outright, there can be hidden benefits.

For one thing, speaking up publicly can raise awareness around an issue. It can help with fundraising efforts for the cause. It can even pave the way for recruiting new



candidates for the next election cycle.

Secondly, politics is not a zero-sum game. Sometimes it’s not about passing a good bill, or killing a bad one, but rather about modifying legislation to make it more palatable. Baby steps count.

“Your average American kind of expects change to happen suddenly and substantially,” says Ryan Williamson, the political scientist we heard from earlier. “But especially if you’re in the minority, change is going to come, at best, incrementally.” A tiny win now could pave the way for a bigger victory down the road.

Finally, even if you don’t change a politician’s mind, you are still holding them accountable when you speak up.

“Even if one person reaches out ... then that legislator can no longer say, ‘No one is opposed to this,’” Williamson says. You might plant a seed of doubt in their mind, and that seed could grow over the years as more people start championing the issue.



At the end of the day, Williamson says, you have to ask yourself if you are content with the status quo.

“If you care enough, you just have to trust that your contribution, at some point, in some way, will be meaningful,” he says. “Not to do anything would be a kind of implicit endorsement of the status quo.”

That is the mindset that Pinedale resident JJ Huntley lives by. JJ calls her lawmakers at least once a month, and sometimes more often. She focuses mostly on Wyoming’s congressional delegation — the people representing her in Washington — and she reaches out about a range of issues, from public land sales to federal layoffs to immigration.

This outreach has never — not once — made a tangible difference. Her lawmakers have never voted the way she wanted on these



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— Ryan Williamson

issues.

But JJ is unwavering in her commitment to keep trying.

Part of it is personal: The process of articulating her position reaffirms her values. It reminds her of everything she loves about Wyoming. Partly, she wants to set an example for the next generation. And partly, it comes down to the belief that if she says nothing, she

From bottom left to top right: A citizen writes a letter to a legislator in defense of public lands (Photo: Claire Cella); Constituents write to their lawmakers at a rally in Jackson (Photo: Claire Cella).

will be complicit in bad policymaking.

“If we aren’t talking, then we’re basically saying we don’t care,” JJ says. “There will not be a change. ... I want my voice to matter, so I have to keep talking until it does.”



I recently attended a film screening in Laramie hosted by a Wyoming nonprofit. After the movie, the attendees sat around in a circle and talked about our hopes for the future. The executive director urged us to be vocal during the legislative session.

There was silence for a moment, and then one woman raised her hand.

“How much good will it actually do to contact my lawmakers about this?” she asked.

I nearly leapt out of my seat. “I can answer that!” I said eagerly.

I proceeded to tell her everything I had learned researching this story: how a small but vocal minority can influence legislation, especially in a state like Wyoming; how political engagement often has hidden benefits, even if you don’t win outright; how tiny victories add up.



We can’t know how — or if — our input will make a difference. But one thing is sure: If we don’t engage, we won’t be making a difference.

As Ryan Williamson put it, “Politics is hard. Change is slow. And it’s easy to get disenchanted. But the health of a democracy is dependent on engagement from the citizenry.”

If you’re on the fence about speaking up, he says, ask yourself this: “How would you feel knowing that you could have done something?” ■

RENAISSANCE MEETS REALITY

Will advanced nuclear technology usher in a clean energy utopia — or deepen existing problems?

MAX OWENS
Communications Manager

LATE ON A WEDNESDAY AFTERNOON in a nondescript conference room in Casper, the people filling rows of plastic chairs lean forward in their seats. Reporters lining the back wall raise cameras and audio recorders, straining to catch every word. The air hums with tension as one after another, members of the public speak into a microphone and address the lawmakers seated before them.

The people have traveled here, to the July 2025 meeting of the Wyoming Joint Minerals, Business, and Economic Development Committee, to voice their opinions on a draft bill that would help clear the way for a first-of-its-kind nuclear manufacturing facility near Bar Nunn. The proposed facility would build “microreactors,” which are portable nuclear reactors — sort of like a shipping container-sized diesel generator, except with nuclear fuel — that would aim to provide reliable power for military installations, hospitals, and remote towns.

Murmurs of approval and frustration rise from the crowd as nearly 40 people share everything from heartfelt pleas for caution to

hopeful portraits of economic prosperity. At times the tension boils over. “You’re shoving it through!” one commenter shouts, amplifying what several others have declared: that a speedy approval of the measure would disregard the concerns of community members. The chairman’s gavel cracks over the woman’s shouts. The proceedings continue.

Finally, long after afternoon has turned to evening, the last comment has been heard. What happens next is something of an anticlimax: The legislators agree to

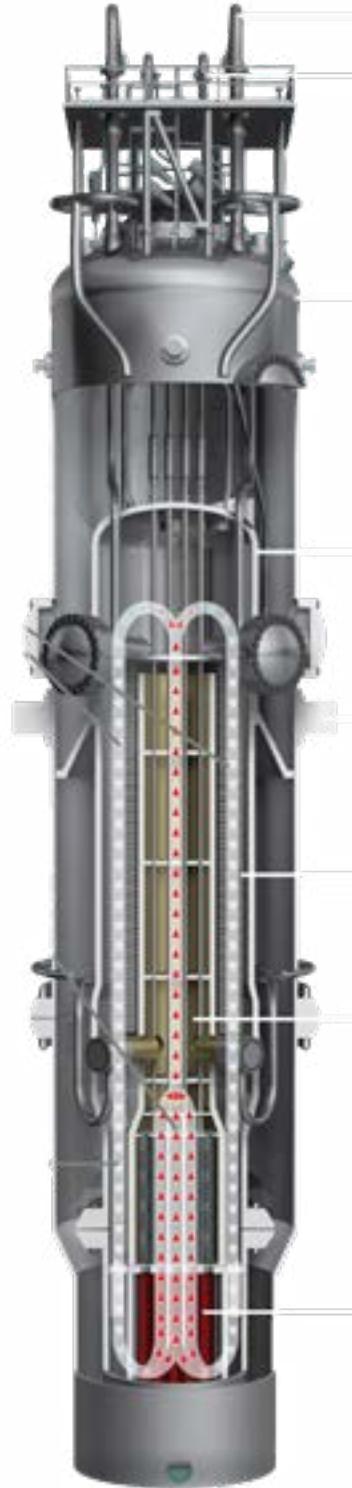


Image: A diagram depicting a NuScale reactor. NuScale Power Corporation, based out of Oregon, designs and markets small modular reactors (Photo: courtesy of NuScale).

table the bill — effectively suspending it from consideration, while leaving the door open to discuss the topic at a future meeting.

But they never get the chance. In October, amid the regulatory uncertainty and public outcry, Radiant Nuclear, the company behind the project, pulled the plug on its plans in Wyoming, announcing that it would build its facility in Tennessee instead.

Some people breathed a sigh of relief. Others lamented what they saw as a missed opportunity. But for everyone, this is just the beginning of a much bigger conversation.

The proposed Bar Nunn facility may be off the table, but interest in advanced nuclear technologies is only growing, and industry has its eyes on Wyoming. In 2025 the Trump administration issued four executive orders to expedite licensing and build nuclear power generation capacity. And Wyoming’s favorable tax environment, plentiful open land, and skilled energy workforce make it attractive for nuclear development. Which is why, advocates say, it’s time for Wyoming to make a comprehensive plan governing nuclear energy.

The problem is, there are still a lot of unknowns when it comes to advanced nuclear energy. The technologies on the horizon are largely untested, and important questions remain about their safety and affordability. These unknowns could have serious consequences for Wyoming, for generations to come. And policymakers need to carefully consider the consequences as they weigh how much — and what kind of — nuclear development to allow in the state.

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Interest in nuclear energy is surging in part because it’s seen as a way to meet rising energy demands, driven largely by the growth of AI and data centers, without contributing to climate change.

Traditional nuclear energy, with its high price tags, burdensome waste, and painful history of catastrophic meltdowns, has had a rocky past. But the advanced designs coming to the fore these days, proponents say, could power America’s

future in an affordable and safe way, while also curbing fossil fuel emissions.

“Advanced nuclear technology” can mean a lot of things. But what’s garnering the most attention from both industry and the public are “small modular reactors,” or SMRs.

Proposed SMR designs vary wildly in their fuel, cooling systems, and power output. The

most basic SMRs are scaled-down versions of traditional reactors, of which there are currently 94 in operation across the country, supplying 19 percent of America’s electricity. But their designers say SMRs have important advantages over traditional reactors: They will produce less waste, for one. And because components would be manufactured in a central facility before being assembled at a power plant site — sort of like Lego building blocks for nuclear energy — they could theoretically be deployed much faster. (Microreactors, like the ones Radiant hoped to build, are even smaller than SMRs; while microreactors are designed to be portable, SMRs are not.)

SMRs are also being touted as eminently affordable. Once SMR designs have made it over research and development humps, their size and modularity will lead to great cost efficiencies, Erik Funkhouser, executive director of the nuclear advocacy organization Good Energy Collective, says. That means they are more likely to be built: A large reactor costing \$12 billion may be very difficult to fund, for example, but \$1–2 billion is comparatively easy. SMRs would be more similar to the energy output and cost of a natural gas plant, Funkhouser says, “and we fund those day in and day out.”

Nuclear proponents hope such advanced designs will usher in a “nuclear renaissance” that will reshape the way we supply electricity to the grid while solving climate change. But other experts caution that nuclear’s economic problems aren’t going away and that commercial deployment of advanced technologies is still a distant dream. Moreover, they worry a “renaissance” could deepen problems around safety and disposal of radioactive waste.

Dr. Allison Macfarlane speaks with the measured, patient air of someone who has explained nuclear energy policy thousands of times. And she has: From 2012 to 2014, Macfarlane, a geologist by trade, headed the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, the federal agency that licenses the country’s nuclear energy projects.

Macfarlane sees many problems with a potential nuclear renaissance — starting with economics. The financial promises being made about SMRs simply aren’t realistic, she says. In her tenure as NRC chair, she oversaw licensing for three different SMR projects. Two of these projects failed in early stages because of concerns that they wouldn’t be economically viable. The third, developed by a company called NuScale, made it further along. But in 2023, this project also collapsed for economic reasons.

Traditional reactor projects have long suffered from construction costs that balloon far beyond initial projections, and SMRs are susceptible to these cost overruns, too. But they also have another issue to contend with: what experts call economies of scale. While an individual SMR might be cheaper to build than a large nuclear power plant, Macfarlane explains, you’d need several of them to generate the same amount of power. In the end, it would be cheaper to build one big plant than five small ones.

The bottom line for Macfarlane? Traditional nuclear power plants haven’t been cost-effective, and smaller reactors won’t be either. Other advocates fear that if they are built despite this, electric utility customers — homeowners, renters, and businesses — will be the ones to suffer as utilities look to recover their inevitable losses.

In 2024, TerraPower, a Bill Gates-funded venture, broke ground on its experimental nuclear power plant near Kemmerer — Wyoming’s first. The theoretical power output of TerraPower’s reactor is just above the threshold for what many consider to be an SMR. But its design, which uses molten sodium as a coolant instead of the water that traditional “light water reactors” use, is a perfect example of the advanced technology that proponents think will power a zero-emissions future.

The problem, Macfarlane says, is that these kinds of advanced nuclear facilities take a very long time to become operational. And we don’t have much time to curb the worst impacts of climate change.

“When you engineer anything — a fighter plane, or bridge, or nuclear reactor — you design it on your computer and then you have to build a scale model,” Macfarlane explains.

As a design is scaled up and into three dimensions, aspects will shift and adjustments must be made, and then more adjustments must be made when moving from scale model to commercial scale. “With small modular reactors, we are at the computer model stage.”

There are only two SMRs being demonstrated in the Western world, according to Macfarlane: the Kairos reactor in Tennessee and the GE Hitachi BWRX in Ontario. Neither

“We don’t have endless time. We have to address this problem now.”

—Dr. Allison Macfarlane

An artist’s rendering of TerraPower’s planned Sodium nuclear power plant near Kemmerer, Wyoming (Photo: courtesy TerraPower).





In 1951, Experimental Breeder Reactor 1 near Arco, Idaho successfully powered four light bulbs, becoming the world's first nuclear reactor to produce electricity. It suffered a partial meltdown in 1955. Later, EBR-1's reactor design gave way to more reliable alternatives.

A uranium mill operated by Susquehanna-Western, Inc. in Karnes County, Texas. When another Susquehanna mill near Riverton, Wyoming closed in 1963, it left behind nearly 1.8 million cubic yards of radioactive waste.



have completed construction. And the rest, she says, are so far from commercial deployment that they are basically figments of imagination.

Even TerraPower's project in Kemmerer fits into this category, she says. While the project has cleared important hurdles, it has not yet received its construction permit from the NRC. And the gap between the design phase and large-scale commercial deployment for it and other advanced nuclear technologies could be on the order of three decades.

That's why Macfarlane loses her patience when proponents laud advanced nuclear technologies as the silver bullet to combat climate change. "I'll try not to be too colorful in my language.... If we had 20 years to fart

around and perfect this technology, great," she says. "But we don't have endless time. We have to address this problem now."

At the July Minerals Committee meeting in Casper, much of the opposition to Radiant's facility had to do with waste. High-level radioactive waste, an unavoidable byproduct of nuclear power generation, produces fatal doses of radiation and could lead to far-reaching impacts on people and the environment if leaked into ground or surface water. Radiant's plan involved storing waste from its microreactors

The story of the Susquehanna mill tailings offers a troubling lesson: When radioactive waste isn't given the diligence it deserves, the impacts ... often fall on the most vulnerable communities.

onsite in Bar Nunn.

Wyoming law prohibits spent nuclear fuel from being stored within the state. But the company was asking for an exception. (A similar exception was given to TerraPower years earlier.)

In the short term, we actually have pretty foolproof ways to store nuclear waste, Macfarlane says. The current storage standard is within "dry casks," or large steel canisters surrounded by thick concrete. And these work well: Even dry casks tipped over and inundated during the Fukushima disaster, for example, were undamaged.

But people are correct to worry about the long term. High-level waste remains radioactive for tens of thousands of years. While dry casks will hold waste safely for decades, perhaps even for a century, there's no way to avoid their eventual degradation, Macfarlane explains. That means someone must always be monitoring them, and someone must foot the bill when it's time to change them out. "The question of who's going to pay for this 100 years from now is not answered at all,"

Macfarlane says.

Another source of uncertainty is the lack of a federal site for permanent disposal of high-level waste. In TerraPower's case, the company is allowed to temporarily store waste from their operations onsite, until a national repository is established. But such a site doesn't yet exist. And the prospect of establishing one in the foreseeable future is bleak, meaning that waste would likely be stored within the state for far longer than "temporary" might suggest.

Wyomingites have good reason to be cautious about radioactive waste. From 1958 to 1963, the Susquehanna-Western uranium mill near Riverton processed uranium ore on land seized from Wind River Tribal members through eminent domain. When it shut down, a 70-acre pile of radioactive tailings was left behind.

Without a lining to keep it contained, waste soon seeped into the groundwater. Local families began experiencing cancer at alarming rates — an apparent impact of the radioactive plume that continues to this day.

When remediation efforts began, tribal

members were often excluded from the decision-making process. “We were stymied at every turn,” says Gary Collins, a Northern Arapaho member involved in the discussions. He describes an atmosphere of broken promises and disregard for the people bearing the waste’s cancerous brunt.

Today, decades later, the waste has been removed. But the danger of contamination lingers, unseen by the people who live nearby. Collins rattles off a handful of local families impacted by cancer. “When you drive by here, you don’t see anything different,” he says. “You see a vast open field. You see somebody’s cows out there grazing away.” Collins pauses. “Are you eating those cows?”

U r a n i u m processing is not the same as a nuclear power plant or nuclear manufacturing facility. But the story of the Susquehanna mill tailings offers a troubling lesson: When radioactive waste isn’t given the diligence it deserves, the impacts, which can last for generations, often fall on the most vulnerable communities.

How to store radioactive waste safely, in both the short and long term, is an important question. But what about other safety concerns? After all, nuclear energy still carries the stigma from catastrophic meltdowns at Chernobyl

and Fukushima. Would advanced nuclear technologies be, as some of their proponents claim, less prone to dangerous accidents?

In the years since those notorious meltdowns, the industry has made important safety advancements. But Dr. Edwin Lyman, a nuclear physicist and director of nuclear power safety at the Union of Concerned Scientists, thinks that many of the advanced nuclear technologies in the spotlight today are not likely to be much safer than nuclear power plants from earlier eras.

Part of the problem, according to Lyman, is that many of these technologies aren’t as “advanced” as industry would have you believe. “Most of the so-called advanced reactors are really repackaged designs from decades ago that were attempted but didn’t succeed,” he says. Today’s “innovative” technologies have

designs similar to flawed projects from the 1950s and 60s: There was the Experimental Breeder Reactor 1 in Idaho, which in 1951 was the world’s first reactor to produce electricity — before an accidental meltdown damaged half its fuel in 1955. And there was Fermi 1 in Michigan, which suffered a partial meltdown of its reactor core in 1966.

Unlike the well-known meltdowns of history, these accidents didn’t result in any major release of radioactive material. But the technologies were discarded in favor of safer, more reliable reactors — which are what’s operational today.

Now industry is returning to those older,

Asking important questions — about how industry and government plan to build projects responsibly, deal with waste, keep communities safe, and pay for it all — takes time.

experimental designs, as the basis for some of the “advanced” technologies of today. To Lyman, that’s risky. He’s concerned that when it comes to some advanced designs, there are still questions without answers backed by rigorous data — such as the risk of fire posed by sodium coolants, and how well physical containment structures would work in the event of an accident. Security is another concern, with some designs increasing the risks associated with nuclear proliferation and nuclear terrorism.

More clean energy is needed to power America’s future, and even many critics of advanced nuclear technology, like Macfarlane, aren’t advocating shutting down existing nuclear plants. “We definitely need that carbon-free electricity,” she says.

But nuclear isn’t the only zero-emission energy source on the table. Renewables such as wind and solar are quickly becoming cheaper. And while nuclear industry proponents have long scoffed at the reliability of these sources, this is far from the problem it’s made out to be, Dr. Amory Lovins, a Stanford University energy efficiency researcher, says. Wind and solar may be variable, but “variable does not mean unreliable,” he says — especially as modern wind and solar forecasting, significant improvements in battery technology, and other advancements are shoring up the reliability of renewable-heavy grids.

Unlike advanced nuclear projects that won’t come online commercially for years, renewables are adding valuable capacity to the grid right now. “There’s no way nuclear can address climate change in any timely fashion,” Macfarlane says. But renewables, by

being cheaper and quicker to deploy, give us a chance.

In the long term, nuclear may well be part of the puzzle that helps the U.S. meet growing energy demands. It may even make sense for Wyoming to host new nuclear projects. But bringing nuclear energy to Wyoming isn’t something we should rush. Even if we speed ahead with advanced nuclear technologies, it’s not likely to add enough clean energy capacity fast enough to solve the climate crisis — and it *is* likely to expose Wyoming communities to unnecessary risks.

As Lyman, the nuclear physicist, says, speed isn’t the friend of safe nuclear energy. And asking important questions — about how industry and government plan to build projects responsibly, deal with waste, keep communities safe, *and* pay for it all — takes time.

It will take even more time, and surely many more public meetings stretching late into the night, to build a comprehensive state policy around nuclear energy.

But slowing down and making well-informed decisions could yield clarity. In a world of unknowns, that clarity may offer the strongest foundation for moving forward, on Wyoming’s terms. ■

THE MAGIC OF THE RED DESERT

To see takes time, like to have a friend takes time.

—Georgia O’Keeffe

JOE QUIROZ
Guest Writer

THERE’S A PLACE on the continental divide near Lander that looks so desolate and forbidding that for years I never considered going there. It’s big. It’s empty. It’s a desert.

Then one day, a friend invited my wife and me to go camping with them.

We drove down a bumpy dirt road on a sunny Friday afternoon, passing through miles upon miles of dusty sagebrush. Eventually, the road dead-ended at an overlook. A few scrubby limber pines grew optimistically out of the rocky dirt.

As we set up our camp, I wondered why our friend had brought us here. The spot wasn’t especially scenic: just a dry plot of land, overlooking a vast sea of sagebrush. There were no hiking trails, no rivers, no craggy

peaks. What would we do here all weekend?

I decided to take the dog for a walk. It had been a long week, and I was feeling antsy.

As Lila and I meandered up a little hill behind our campsite, my mind churned with all the things I had to do at home: rake the leaves, go to the grocery store, pay the water bill. Maybe I should have stayed behind and taken care of things, rather than wasting time doing nothing in a barren stretch of desert.

It wasn’t until later that evening that the magic happened.

We were sitting around eating our dinner. The sun was setting, and its rays exploded over a vista that went on forever. Red and white banded buttes in the basin below, rocky outcrops with hawks circling overhead, groups of pronghorn grazing peacefully 100 yards from us.



It was the same view I’d been looking at all afternoon, but suddenly it felt different.

A quiet settled over the desert — the kind of quiet that you feel more than you hear. The kind of quiet that reminds you that you’re part of something big. Really, really, big.

In that moment, I realized that the only thing I had to do just then was release all of the things on my to-do list and just ... be. Be right here, right now.

Since that first camping trip 15 years ago, I’ve made it a point to visit the Red Desert often. Every time, it has the same effect on me.

It doesn’t happen instantly. Making that transition from the full schedule of daily activity to the serene state of awareness is not something that happens with the flip of a switch. At first, I find myself thinking about everything I need to do when I get back. But the longer I’m there, the more I settle into the stillness. Eventually, I wake up to the idea that what I’m doing is not “nothing” — it’s allowing

my brain and body to readjust to a fundamental state of awareness. I’m tuning into the symphony of sound, light, and movement that told my ancestors where there was safety, food, danger, and opportunity.

Wyoming’s wide-open landscapes are a gift. They are the kind of places that other folks can only see in photos, and they should not be taken for granted.

The federal government is trying to roll back protections on important natural heritage sites like these in southwest Wyoming, including that rocky overlook where I first fell in love with the Red Desert. We have a responsibility to ensure that the people who will call us ancestors some years from now will have the opportunity to find the same peace and awakening that I found. That they will have wide-open places in which to experience renewal. That they will have space to just be.

For this, we must not be silent. ■

WELCOME TO THE TEAM

Say hi to WOC's newest staff members



ALDEN FORBES | Digital Communications Coordinator

A lover of storytelling through film and narratives of environmental justice, Alden's experience spans from NBC Universal to Tower 3 Productions in Jackson. When she's not connecting with WOC's digital audiences, you can find Alden teaching yoga or exploring the mountains in her Teton County backyard.



CLINT WAGON | Tribal Engagement Coordinator

Clint learned the importance of conservation early on, while growing up on a family ranch on the Wind River Reservation. An enrolled member of the Eastern Shoshone Tribe, he is an advocate for tribal sovereignty and self-governance. Outside of work, Clint likes to camp, fish, hunt, and adventure.



BLUE GRONEMAN | Tech & Systems Coordinator

After working with the National Outdoor Leadership School and later, a Wyoming-based tech startup, Benjamin (or Blue, as most know him) now ensures that WOC's tech operations run smoothly. Born and raised in Wyoming, Blue lives in Lander and enjoys backpacking and skiing the Wind River Range.



DATA CENTER DEEP DIVE

Meet WOC's first-ever Wyoming Outdoors Legacy Fellow

WHEN JOCELYN WULF BEGAN researching the meteoric rise of data centers across the West, she knew water was a key concern. But as she spoke to expert after expert, she began to realize that energy demand — even more so than water — was the limiting factor for such enormous development.

The realization prompted Jocelyn, a University of Wyoming graduate student, to ask more questions: What can Wyoming learn from states that are further along in the expansion of data centers? What are the implications for local communities? How should Wyoming handle its own energy buildout?

As WOC's first-ever William W. McIntyre Wyoming Outdoors Legacy Fellow, Jocelyn is working to find answers. The McIntyre fellowship, which will be offered every year, helps UW graduate students find their voice on

Wyoming conservation and natural resource policy issues through real-world experience.

Jocelyn's passion for environmental solutions began at Dartmouth College and grew during her tenure at The Nature Conservancy and the Natural Resources Defense Council. Now she's studying conservation finance while pursuing her Master's in environment, natural resources, and society at UW's Haub School.

While data centers have been the focus of Jocelyn's WOC fellowship so far, she'll shift to conservation policy during the upcoming legislative session. After that? "My dream job would combine problem solving and having real conversations with on-the-ground experts," she says — skills she's honing as a McIntyre Fellow. ■

See Jocelyn's findings on the implications of data centers by scanning the QR code.



2026 LEGISLATIVE PREVIEW

Top issues we're watching this session

AUNA KAUFMANN

Government Relations Manager

THIS YEAR'S LEGISLATIVE SESSION starts Feb. 9, and WOC is gearing up to fight for conservation priorities in Cheyenne. This is a budget session, meaning that lawmakers will be primarily focused on passing a state budget.

With cuts to federal agencies, assaults on public lands, and conservative lawmakers promising to “DOGE the budget,” it’s more important than ever to speak up for the people of Wyoming and the wild landscapes we cherish. For the past year, we have been attending interim committee meetings and tracking committee bills. Here are the top three items we’ll be watching this legislative session.

1 WILDFIRE FUNDING

Lawmakers have been talking about wildfires a lot this year, and they are worried. The state has been experiencing more drought, bigger fires, and extensive beetle kill. And with timber projects behind schedule and unprecedented federal layoffs, there is concern that we won’t have enough personnel to properly respond.

To address this concern, lawmakers are proposing legislation that would make it possible for more state workers to undertake forestry projects on federal land. So-called Good Neighbor Authority agreements allow the U.S. Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management to rely on state employees when they need extra help with wildfire mitigation and forest health. Currently, there’s a cap on how many Good Neighbor positions are allowed in

Wyoming, and there are restrictions on how those positions are funded. This legislation would open the door for more Good Neighbor positions and would make it possible for outside entities, such as nonprofits, to help foot the bill.

The governor’s proposed budget also includes an ask to expand firefighting capacity in the state and to battle annual invasive grasses in fire scars. WOC will be supporting these asks.



2 CORNER CROSSING

In places where public and private land are laid out in a checkerboard pattern, you often have to step across private land in order to access public land. This is called “corner crossing” — and it remains legal after the U.S. Supreme Court declined to hear an appeal on a corner crossing lawsuit. But Wyoming lawmakers want to shore up the court ruling with a clear state statute.

A bill drafted by the Travel, Recreation, and Wildlife Committee would do just that, by specifying that corner crossing is not criminal trespass. The legislation would offer more clarity for people who wish to access public lands, and more security for wardens and sheriffs in enforcement. WOC supports this step toward providing protection for those accessing public lands.

3 DOGE-ING THE BUDGET

The governor’s proposed budget promises deep cuts but offers little indication where they’ll be coming from. We will work hard to ensure that the Department of Environmental Quality has the funding it needs to protect Wyoming’s air and water quality. We will also push for adequate funding for the Department of State Parks and Cultural Resources, so that it can continue supporting Wyoming communities with educational and recreational opportunities in our state parks.

REFLECTIONS FROM WOC'S FIRST-EVER TRIBAL CONSERVATION SUMMIT

BIG WIND CARPENTER
Tribal Engagement Coordinator

FOR THE SHOSHONE AND ARAPAHO, we do not separate ourselves from nature; we live in relationship with it. This connection came to life during the inaugural Tribal Conservation Summit, held on a crisp Indigenous Peoples' Day at the Wind River Tribal Buffalo Initiative headquarters.

During the summit, more than 200 participants, mostly Wind River Tribal members, practiced Traditional Ecological Knowledge as a vital place-based science. Attendees learned plant medicines, braided buffalo hair cordage, and prepared chokecherry patties. They also learned about the Wind River Reservation's tribal conservation victories.

The Shoshone and Arapaho Nations have always led on conservation, pioneering the nation's first roadless area in 1938 and successfully leading the reintroduction of

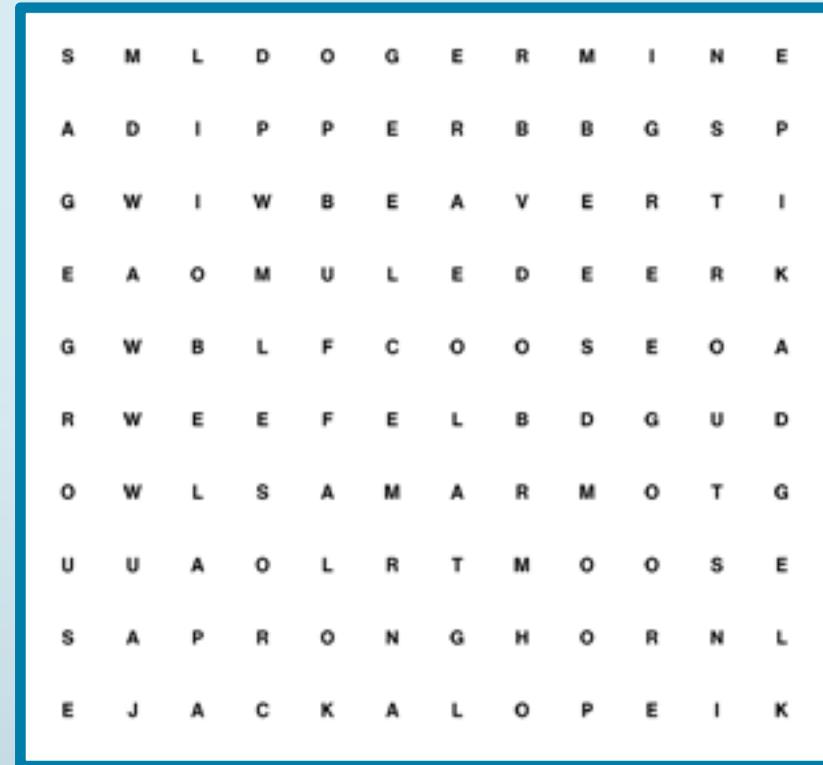
species like bighorn sheep, pronghorn, and buffalo. The summit built upon this legacy by uniting Indigenous ways of knowing with a shared, future-focused commitment to protect our homelands and waterways. Its success warms my heart and fills me with pride, knowing our people's connection to the Wind River and Wyoming will continue to grow and lead the way for years ahead.

The Wyoming Outdoor Council recognizes that protecting Wyoming's quality of life means amplifying tribal voices in every decision affecting ancestral lands. Moving forward, WOC is dedicated to deepening its role as an ally and leveraging support, resources, and advocacy to ensure the Indigenous conservation lens is part of decisions across the state. ■

Big Wind Carpenter, WOC's tribal engagement coordinator, leads a discussion for attendees at the inaugural Tribal Conservation Summit (Photo: Sandy Whitehair).



Wyoming WILDLIFE Word Search



- PRONGHORN
- ELK
- MOOSE
- BUFFALO
- MULE DEER
- WOLF
- BEAVER
- BEAR
- TROUT
- BEE
- SAGE GROUSE
- DIPPER
- MARMOT
- JACKALOPE
- ERMINE
- OWL



WYlder FESTIVAL 2026

Our Lands, Our Responsibility

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