

Wyoming Outdoor Council

Summer 2021

# FRONTLINE



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

## **INSIDE:** NAVIGATING A TIME OF TRANSITION

Summer in the  
Northern Red Desert  
**AND MORE!**

Image: Dave Showalter

# A MESSAGE FROM THE DIRECTOR

**LISA McGEE**  
Executive Director

ACROSS THE UNITED STATES, 26 gigawatts of new wind and solar energy generation quietly came online in 2020 — enough to power about eight million homes.

All told, wind and solar now make up slightly more than 10 percent of the nation's power generation, and this number will likely continue to climb steadily as utility companies opt for increasingly affordable renewables to add new capacity or replace aging coal plants.

For people in many parts of the country, this may mean little else than the vague knowledge that, when they turn on a light switch, the power is flowing from a different source. But in Wyoming, this energy transition — already well underway — is a fundamental shift.

With a state economy and identity based around fossil fuels, and a growing national focus on renewable energy as a means for combating climate change, what does the future hold?

If we want to invest in Wyoming's future, we can't look backward for solutions. We also cannot afford to take a wait-and-see approach.

There are solutions out there for powering the state, literally and figuratively. At the Wyoming Outdoor Council, we have been focused on proactive efforts to make sure the transitions

*Be diligent and take into consideration how important it is that we can maintain resources for the future.*

*Honor, preserve, and learn from the past. Accept the inevitability of change. Use science to prepare for the future.*



Founded in 1967, we are a statewide citizen 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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**HOW CAN WE PREPARE TODAY  
FOR WYOMING'S FUTURE?**

# If we want to invest in Wyoming's future, we can't look backward for solutions. We also cannot afford to take a wait-and-see approach.

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that have already begun lead us to the future we want for Wyoming.

As you'll read in this issue, we're at the center of conversations about how to incentivize low-conflict siting of industrial-scale renewables. We've proposed a conservation leasing program on Wyoming's state trust lands. And we're supporting long-overdue reforms to our federal oil and gas leasing system.

You'll also meet our conservation staff who work every day to protect your public lands, wildlife, and clean air and water now and for future generations.

With your continued support, we will navigate these challenges head on.

With gratitude,



# FRAMEWORK FOR THE FUTURE

*Responsible policies can help guide Wyoming  
through a time of transition*

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**ALAN ROGERS**

Communications Director

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**WE ALL KNOW TOO WELL** about the outsized impacts of the national shift away from fossil fuels that are already being felt in Wyoming: The state is the largest U.S. coal producer, and dependent on this as well as oil and gas production to fund schools, roads, and local governments. There are no simple solutions for replacing revenue and jobs. And while there is a great deal of opportunity for Wyoming to continue to thrive, it's marked by uncertainty.

Important questions still remain around how we will guide future development of renewable energy, how state and federal lands that were once prioritized for drilling or mining should be managed, and how we can support our hardest-hit communities and workers at a time when census numbers show the population of rural Wyoming counties declining. Allowing these questions to remain unanswered will only lead to poorly-sited industrial development, threats to wildlife habitat and air and water quality, and more economic heartache.

If we collectively commit to this difficult task, however, we can have a healthy economy, the good schools and public services we rely on, and opportunities for the next generation. All while protecting our public lands, wildlife, and clean air and water.

## **RENEWABLE ENERGY SITING**

Wyoming has excellent wind and solar resources: In lay person's terms, it tends to be sunny and windy here. There's also open space for green- and brownfield development, a skilled workforce, and an underlying desire among the state's leaders to keep energy as our economic focus. It would appear that Wyoming has an open door to take advantage of the rising demand for low-carbon energy, but the reality is more complicated. First, the Wyoming Legislature has consistently sought to prop up fossil fuel industries, and in particular has advanced efforts to prevent utilities from retiring coal-fired power plants and replacing them with cheaper renewables. And importantly, there are not adequate policies in place to ensure that future wind and solar development on public lands is done right and sited appropriately. A rush to bring more utility-scale renewables online, whatever the stimulus, could pose many of the same potential conflicts with wildlife habitat and other values of our public lands that oil and gas development currently presents.

Over the last year, the Wyoming Outdoor Council worked with the University of Wyoming's Haub School of Environment and Natural Resources to convene a renewable

energy siting collaborative, bringing together stakeholders representing conservation, agriculture, energy, and development interests, as well as local governments and utility companies. In addition to producing collaborative recommendations for state policy makers to consider, this process also created space for important conversations and brainstorming between stakeholders that will help Wyoming develop renewable energy more responsibly in the future. We anticipate that these recommendations will be finalized in a report and available for the governor's office and other decision makers this fall.

## STATE LANDS

The Wyoming Constitution requires that state trust lands be managed to generate revenue and, as a result, these lands have historically been leased almost exclusively for industrial development. But many of these lands are also in critical wildlife habitat, such as mule deer migration corridors or core Greater sage-grouse range. Others contain cultural or historic sites. Hunters know to look for the nondescript white signs along the roadside which indicate these important public access areas, and some parcels are destinations for all types of outdoor endeavors, from hiking and birdwatching to OHV riding and recreational shooting.

It's clear that development is not the only value state trust lands have to offer. The problem is that, under the current system, there are few mechanisms for Wyoming to earn a financial return. There are solutions, however, such as selling or trading specific parcels with high conservation values to state or federal agencies that are better equipped to manage them for that purpose. The Outdoor Council has advocated this approach for a contentious

IN 2020:

**1.1**  
**GIGAWATTS**  
of renewable energy was  
added in Wyoming.



Wyoming saw the  
**SIXTH**  
highest increase in  
renewable capacity of  
all states.



Renewables generated

**14%**  
of Wyoming's power,  
enough to power

**914,000**

homes.



parcel near Kelly, within the boundaries of Grand Teton National Park, that as of 2015 had an assessed value of \$40 million and is a good candidate for sale to the National Park Service. We've also suggested the state consider novel approaches to monetizing recreational use of state lands, such as leases for Nordic skiing or mountain biking trails or guided tours, as well as public access leases and seasonal leases for protecting critical winter habitat.

One readily achievable approach to diversifying revenue from state trust lands would be the creation of a conservation leasing program. Conservation leases are leases of lands with the intent of conserving natural resources, wildlife, or historic and

to help lay the groundwork for such a system, including conducting and sharing research on other states' conservation leasing programs. We've also convened other conservation and hunting and angling organizations to discuss lease terms and have begun outreach to other stakeholders.

## WHAT'S AT STAKE

As the fossil fuel taxes and royalty payments that pay the bills begin to sputter, Wyoming finds itself backed into a corner.

Instead of charging after new opportunities and considering thoughtful proposals to diversify our tax revenue streams, the state has become increasingly defensive of its legacy industries — proposing legislation that would punish utility companies for adding renewable generation, or push the costs of propping up fossil fuel industries onto ratepayers; giving severance tax breaks to oil and gas operators; and putting up unnecessary roadblocks to rooftop solar, the fastest

growing industry in the U.S. The Outdoor Council has recently battled all of these ideas at the Wyoming Legislature.

There is also top-down opposition among state leaders to reforming the federal oil and gas leasing program, which would bring more revenue to the state while protecting wildlife habitat and reducing government waste. This badly-outdated system should be modernized to end noncompetitive leasing, a practice that encourages speculators to nominate large swaths of public land for leasing and snatch up unsold parcels at discounted rates.

**If we collectively commit to this difficult task, we can have a healthy economy, the good schools and public services we rely on, and opportunities for the next generation. All while protecting our public lands, wildlife, and clean air and water.**

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cultural significance. They are most often sold to local governments, state agencies, nonprofit groups, or charitable trusts through a competitive bidding process. Conservation leasing would allow these entities to have a seat at the table as potential investors in state lands and directly finance the stewardship of specific lands. And importantly, it would mean that development would no longer be the sole option for bringing in significant revenue from most of these parcels. The Outdoor Council has been communicating regularly with staff from the Office of State Lands and Investments

These leases are almost never developed, and are frequently cancelled altogether for nonpayment of rental fees. The Bureau of Land Management should also increase the \$2/acre minimum bid, bring the onshore royalty rate into line with the royalty rates for state, private, and offshore minerals, stop leasing of low-potential lands that could be better managed for wildlife habitat, recreation, or other uses, and strengthen bonding requirements to keep operators accountable for their own cleanup costs.

Outdoor Council staff have been working hard to stave off the consequences of the state's reliance on an outdated business model and advocate policy that moves Wyoming toward economic stability, not away from it. In some cases, that includes finding new sources of tax revenue to replace dwindling mineral taxes and royalties. For example, over the course of 2020, roughly \$2.5 billion of real estate changed hands in Teton County alone. This was equal to roughly 55 percent of the

value of all natural gas produced in Wyoming the year prior (subject to a 6 percent severance tax), yet the state sees no tax income from real estate transfers. This is the type of opportunity Wyoming will need to seize upon as the makeup of the state's economy continues to change.

We've been inspired by Outdoor Council members and Wyoming citizens who have chosen to speak up when their values aren't being represented, and take action when they see opportunities to protect our wildlife and public lands or strengthen their communities. The University of Wyoming renewables collaborative and efforts to create a state lands conservation leasing program are testaments to how we as Wyomingites can create the future we want for ourselves and future generations. When we share our resources and expertise, we move closer to that shared vision for the future — a future where public lands are preserved for all to enjoy, big game herds roam free, air and water is protected, and communities thrive. ■



# SUMMER IN THE RED DESERT

**EVEN IN WYOMING** — a state celebrated for its wealth of public lands, wildlife, open spaces, and outdoor recreation opportunities — the Northern Red Desert is a world apart.

For over a century, Wyoming residents have fought for permanent protections to safeguard the future of this special place. Now, the Wyoming Outdoor Council is working with the Citizens for the Red Desert coalition to finally make that happen.

We've spent much of this summer in the field with state officials, Tribal representatives,

and other key groups — or just camping under the stars. And we're looking forward to upcoming opportunities for our members and the public to get out and experience the desert for themselves, like the Run the Red trail race and Wyoming Public Lands Day celebration on September 25 in South Pass City.

The Red Desert needs to be protected for future generations. To learn more and join up with Citizens for the Red Desert, visit [www.reddesert.org](http://www.reddesert.org).



A group of Citizens for the Red Desert explore the Honeycomb Buttes Wilderness Study Area on a hike in late May.

A herd of pronghorn seen alongside one of the many dusty desert roads.







Yufna Soldier Wolf teaches a group of journalists about the importance of the many dwelling sites found throughout the Red Desert to Indigenous history and culture.

Below: Blooming wildflowers and shrubs bring a pop of color to the desert. Kyle Elmquist and Shaleas Harrison lead a tour through the Killpecker Sand Dunes Wilderness Study Area.



On a Citizens tour, John Mionczynski (an ethnobotanist, biologist, and historian) discusses the uses of the flora found within the desert.



# MEET YOUR CONSERVATION ADVOCATES

**THE WYOMING OUTDOOR COUNCIL'S CONSERVATION ADVOCACY TEAM** works on the ground and behind the scenes to protect public lands, wildlife, and clean air and water in Wyoming with support from the development, administrative, and communications teams and from our volunteer board of directors and our engaged members. Several new faces joined the advocacy team in 2021, and these staff have taken on a number of new issues. Here's an introduction to the team and what they're digging into right now. Don't hesitate to reach out to them directly if you have questions!



## KRISTEN GUNTHER PROGRAM DIRECTOR

Kristen leads the advocacy team as well the Outdoor Council's civic engagement and educational programs. In her direct advocacy work, she focuses on wildlife — particularly big game migration corridors — and the legislature. **HER FAVORITE PART OF HER JOB?** "I love meeting people from all walks of life who share a common passion for Wyoming. Whether I'm talking to someone who loves mule deer or who's worried about local water quality, I'm always inspired by the creativity, dedication, and diverse ways of thinking among people who care about our mission."

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## JOHN BURROWS CONSERVATION ADVOCATE

John heads up the Outdoor Council's work on air quality and methane emissions reductions, climate change, and renewable energy. He represents WOC on the statewide renewables siting collaborative and, closer to home, has provided leadership and support for the Lander Climate Action Network. Recently, he's responded to concerns over a proposed "via ferrata", a permanent cable-assisted climbing route, in Sinks Canyon State Park and pushed for more public input on the project. **HIS FAVORITE PART OF HIS JOB?** "Working with a passionate and talented team, spending time talking with and learning from people in different environments and communities around the state, and most fundamentally, I suppose it's working for an organization whose mission and aspirations feel worthy of the work needed to get the job done."

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## KYLE ELMQUIST

### CITIZENS FOR THE RED DESERT FIELD COORDINATOR

Kyle can normally be found with his boots on the ground in the Northern Red Desert, providing organizational and logistical support for tours and gatherings. The Red Desert team has been extremely busy this summer leading trips for groups including state officials, tribal representatives, and journalists. **HIS FAVORITE PART OF HIS JOB?** “Watching people fall in love with the Red Desert. It’s a rugged and beautiful place that inspires people to connect with the environment. To help facilitate this bond with the landscape is incredible.”

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## SHALEAS HARRISON

### CITIZENS FOR THE RED DESERT COORDINATOR



Shaleas is an organizer for Citizens for the Red Desert and works on behalf of the citizens and organizations that make up this diverse coalition. She is facilitating conversations among the many groups with connections to the desert to create a shared vision for permanent protection. **HER FAVORITE PART OF HER JOB?** “Building life-long relationships with people who also care for the places we work to protect. This work takes me to epic places where I meet true characters.”

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## STEFF KESSLER

### SENIOR CONSERVATION ADVOCATE

Steff leads the Outdoor Council’s ongoing campaign to permanently protect the Northern Red Desert and is at the forefront of our work at the Wyoming Legislature. **HER FAVORITE PART OF HER JOB?** “When I get away from the desk and computer screen and see, interact with, and learn from a variety of folks in Wyoming. Working with citizen activists always inspires me.”

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## JOHN RADER CONSERVATION ADVOCATE



John is an attorney and deeply involved in public lands policy, including oil and gas issues, federal land management planning, and sage-grouse conservation. Much of his recent work has revolved around reforms to public lands leasing and the creation of a state lands conservation leasing program. He is also watchdogging the proposal to build a Natrium nuclear power plant in Wyoming. **HIS FAVORITE PART OF HIS JOB?** “Working with diverse groups of citizens and stakeholders, with many different perspectives and interests, to safeguard the values we all share — wide open spaces, abundant wildlife, and a healthy environment.”

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## BRANDON REYNOLDS CONSERVATION ADVOCATE

Brandon is the newest addition to the program team and is focused on water quality. He will be carrying forward our work to reduce nitrate pollution in Teton County groundwater, and took part this summer in the Department of Environmental Quality’s triennial review of surface water standards. **HIS FAVORITE PART OF HIS JOB?** “Getting to work on water issues, meeting folks from around the state from all walks of life, and working for an organization that is a proven leader in Wyoming-focused conservation.”

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## YUFNA SOLDIER WOLF WIND RIVER ORGANIZER

Yufna supports Indigenous leadership in conservation and land management, both on and off the Wind River Reservation. To date much of her work has focused on the Northern Red Desert, including outreach to Tribes with ancestral connections to these lands and providing educational opportunities for citizens. **HER FAVORITE PART OF HER JOB?** “Bringing Indigenous narratives and voices to the work and amplifying the Indigenous presence on important issues.”

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# Leaving a legacy TO BE PROUD OF

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**CLAIRE CELLA**

Communications Design Associate

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**LIZ AND JOHN HUTCHINSON** both grew up with a love of the outdoors, and spent time with their families hiking, fishing, and camping in northern California and the Sierras. This love was something that came to solidify their love for each other as well. When they moved to the interior West — Denver, specifically — in 2010 for Liz’s law school pursuits, it was a natural fit for them. Although they love Colorado, it was Wyoming that eventually stole their hearts.

After Liz graduated from the University of Denver Sturm College of Law in 2013, she

was fortunate to have the opportunity to serve as a judicial law clerk in Cheyenne with Judge Gregory Phillips, a federal judge on the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Tenth Circuit. That was when Liz and John moved to Cheyenne, and fell in love with Wyoming’s land, people, and culture. Following her clerkship, Liz started working for Equal Justice Wyoming as a staff attorney and pro bono coordinator — a role she says has helped deepen her commitment to service work — while John turned his passion for youth development and



mountain biking into a full-time career with the Colorado High School Cycling League.

During those years, the couple spent a lot of their time exploring the mountains in the area — Curt Gowdy State Park, Happy Jack Recreation Area, the Snowy Range, Saratoga. They've also grown fond of the landscapes

back in that way. I not only get to contribute to efforts I believe in, but I also learn so much from our dedicated staff and learned members. I sometimes think I get more than I give."

Because Liz worked for a state access to justice program, she wasn't able to join the board until she took an associate attorney

“We hope to ensure that [Caleb] has the opportunity to fall in love with these places as much as we have.”

surrounding Sheridan, including the Big Horn Mountains, and the Wind River Range.

The places they frequented were close to home and yet, felt so far away, Liz said. “The trails are often wide open and you feel at peace. After work, I would often find myself on the trail, reflecting on my day and my gratitude for Wyoming’s natural spaces.”

She also said that she and John developed dear friendships because of Cheyenne’s small community and the shared lived experience that most people don’t have anywhere else. “This is really where our heart and soul are,” she said.

In 2018, Liz was introduced to the Wyoming Outdoor Council by Wyoming Supreme Court Justice Kate Fox, a former Outdoor Council board member. Given Liz’s passion for the outdoors and love for Wyoming’s public lands, Justice Fox suggested she look into the Outdoor Council’s work.

After attending an Outdoor Council member event in Cheyenne, Liz knew she wanted to pursue becoming a member of the board. “It’s soul work for me — when I decided not to pursue a career in environmental law and instead focus on business litigation, I knew I wanted to still be a part of the conservation movement,” she said. “WOC is my outlet to give

position at the national litigation firm, Shook, Hardy & Bacon LLP, in Denver. This meant Liz and John had to move back to Colorado in late 2019. But despite the relocation, they’ve remained steadfast in their commitment to Wyoming, both in Liz’s work for the board and most recently, in their decision to leave a legacy gift to the Outdoor Council. While there are other organizations they’ve pledged money to, they purposefully chose the Outdoor Council because it was an organization that they felt most reflected their values as a family.

That family is now a family of three, following the birth of their son, Caleb, in July 2020. The Hutchinson’s values have shifted even more toward prioritizing causes that work to make the world a better place for their son to grow up in.

“Becoming a parent changes everything — all of a sudden, you and your priorities are no longer the most important matters on your mind and heart,” Liz said. “I want the legacy I leave for my son to be one that he is proud of and, hopefully, can learn from, with whatever walk of life he chooses to pursue. And we hope to ensure that he has the opportunity to fall in love with these places as much as we have.”

One of those emergent values was the protection of wildlife, particularly the work

the Outdoor Council has done in recent years to safeguard the designation and protection of Wyoming's big game migration corridors. While Liz isn't a hunter herself, she doesn't know if Caleb will be, and wants that to be an option for him. And that relies on thriving wildlife species, she said.

"And I think that's true of every natural space and habitat that the Outdoor Council

helping local efforts to preserve the land they love — for Caleb and for future generations. They felt that leaving a gift to the Outdoor Council in their estate plan would sustain this work in Wyoming.

"WOC is intentional about everything it does — from the projects and legislative efforts it takes on, to the cases it litigates, to the people it hires. Each and every move WOC makes is thoughtful and measured. I know that culture is deeply rooted in the organization as a whole, and that it will remain in place into the future."

Since Caleb's birth, Liz and John have gone on family hikes near their home and continue to get out in nature as much as they can.

As Caleb grows older, they're looking forward to bringing him to their favorite spots in Wyoming to show him the sense of openness, freedom, and connection on public lands that don't



works to protect — not just mule deer migrations, but sage-grouse, the Red Desert ... We support being good stewards of the land, and we want Caleb to grow up respecting the land and understanding his place in it."

She's been encouraged by the Outdoor Council's commitment to working so closely with Northern Arapaho and Eastern Shoshone communities on conservation issues important to them, including protecting the Red Desert.

With all of these thoughts in mind, Liz and John decided to take the next step toward

exist in other parts of the country. He has spent some time in the mountains outside Cheyenne, and his first trip to the Wind River Range will be in the fall of 2021.

"For us, it's really our understanding of spirituality, part of our connection to natural spaces. The sense of awe that you feel in Wyoming, it's hard to match." ■

# WHAT WILL YOUR CONSERVATION LEGACY BE?

**Did you know** you can support your loved ones and protect public lands, wildlife, and clean air and water in Wyoming — all in one document? **The Wyoming Outdoor Council has partnered with FreeWill to help you create your legal will and conservation legacy, at no cost to you.**

By creating a will you can cross an essential legal task off your list, make a plan for your assets, and be a part of protecting Wyoming's environment and quality of life **now and for future generations.**

**VISIT [freewill.com/wyomingoutdoorcouncil](https://freewill.com/wyomingoutdoorcouncil) TO GET STARTED, FOR FREE!**



Image: Alan Rogers