

Wyoming Outdoor Council

Winter 2022

FRONTLINE



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

INSIDE: STEERING THE RENEWABLE ENERGY BOOM

The unsung work of
watchdogging water quality
AND MORE!

Image: Sue Jones

A MESSAGE FROM THE DIRECTOR

LISA McGEE
Executive Director

ADVOCATING FOR CONSERVATION in Wyoming is demanding work, both for the Wyoming Outdoor Council's staff and for passionate members like you. Not only are there more issues than we can possibly address as a small organization in a geographically large state, but for people with big hearts and a love for the wild, open spaces of Wyoming, the outcomes are personal.

We don't always win. When we do find success, as frequent as it may be, it's often in the form of a quiet victory or incremental change. The forces working against us — whether it's government inertia or downright hostile opposition from other stakeholders — can often feel overwhelming.

But we aren't in this alone. After all, we have each other.

Poll after poll shows that the vast majority of our fellow Wyomingites — even if they don't consider themselves "conservationists" — value public lands, wide open spaces, wildlife, clean air, and clean water. Our challenge is to meet people where they are and attempt to find common ground. The more we make these connections, value multiple perspectives, and seek input from a diversity of people outside of our organization in Wyoming and beyond, the more likely we are to succeed in our

I love that the state is working to take steps toward creating a conservation leasing program.



Wyoming Outdoor Council

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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Wild bison herds making their way back to Native American tribes all across the country.

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What's a positive change in the past year that the Wyoming conservation community should celebrate?

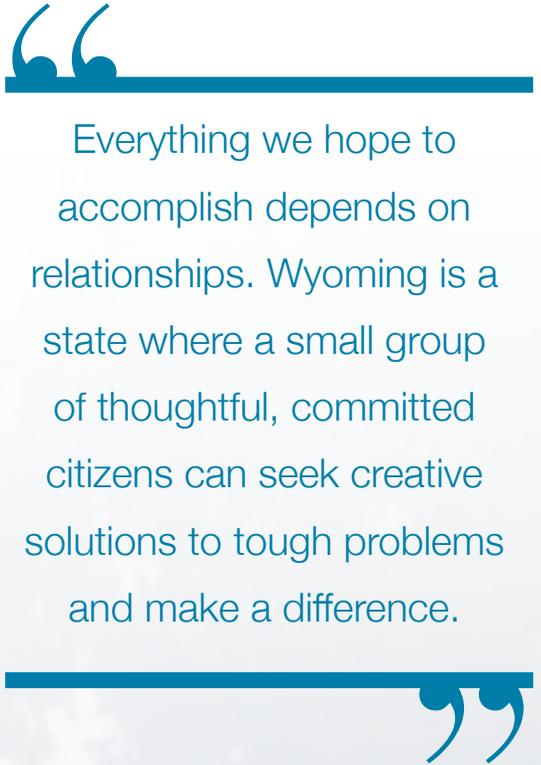
mission.

However difficult it may be, an honest and respectful conversation with a person who disagrees with our position does more good than assuming we have all the answers.

Everything we hope to accomplish depends on relationships. Wyoming is a state where a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can seek creative solutions to tough problems and make a difference. And, as you'll read in the coming pages, positive things can happen when a group of people with diverse perspectives put their heads together around an issue of mutual concern instead of staying in their own camps.

Thank you for being part of the Outdoor Council community in 2022. I take comfort in knowing, despite the obstacles and the slow pace of change, we're all in this together. I hope you'll remember that as well.

With gratitude,



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Everything in its place

How do we make sure the coming boom in renewable energy isn't a bust for our wildlife and public lands?

JOHN BURROWS
Conservation Advocate

THIS STORY, like much of the good work that happens in Lander, began as a meeting over coffee at the Lander Bake Shop. Staff from several conservation groups, including the Wyoming Outdoor Council, had gathered to look at GPS tracking collar data from pronghorn around Sweetwater Solar, Wyoming's first large-scale solar project on public land.

The map of the pronghorn's movement was infuriating — the 700-acre solar development had been placed right in the middle of crucial winter habitat. Fences surrounding the project had funneled many of the animals onto Highway 372 north of the city of Green River, creating hazards for both wildlife and drivers. The impacts of the Sweetwater Solar project on pronghorn were completely predictable and avoidable. But aside from a brief Environmental Assessment required by the Bureau of Land Management, there was little in the existing permitting process to direct the developers to a better location where wildlife conflicts could have been avoided.

What became clear in that meeting and in subsequent discussions was that the Sweetwater Solar project was likely a harbinger of what's to come in the next decade as the cost of developing solar and wind energy continues to fall dramatically.

The expected boom in renewable energy puts advocates for conservation in Wyoming in a challenging spot. We understand the dire

importance of transitioning to cleaner energy sources, and at the same time recognize the significant development footprint that utility-scale renewables can have on Wyoming's wildlife and open spaces. The question and dilemma on many of our minds is this: How does Wyoming decarbonize its electricity production while not sacrificing the crucial wildlife habitat and open space that make it so unique?

As with many of the challenges our state faces, there is no silver bullet to solve this problem, but common sense and science both tell us that focusing our efforts on responsible siting and permitting processes for renewables is the logical place to start. That's exactly what WOC tried to do with its effort to jumpstart the Wyoming Renewable Energy Siting Collaborative.

After the 2020 legislative session, WOC started reaching out to stakeholders around the state to understand the perception of renewable energy and ways we might be able to improve our siting and permitting policies. We worked closely with faculty at the University of Wyoming to convene a group of policy thinkers representing conservation, industry, local government, landowners, and independent consultants to explore opportunities for the state to improve how renewable energy is sited.

During 2021 this group met nine times

over Zoom to discuss issues related to renewable energy in Wyoming, including tax policy, federal and state revenue sharing, transmission development, supply chain manufacturing, and other topics. The group also learned from and consulted with experts from the Wyoming Industrial Siting Division, the Wyoming Game and Fish Department, and the Wyoming Wildlife and Natural Resource Trust. The group's final recommendations were published in November 2021 and can be found on UW's Ruckelshaus Institute website.

These recommendations are a start. They form an important foundation for future policy and advocacy work, especially as our country moves to decarbonize electricity production and accelerate the growth of renewables. They also show that industry and conservation can work together to agree on important concepts moving forward.

Some of the most important points of agreement in these recommendations address the need for more proactive planning for renewable development on public lands, the need for early and frequent consultation with the Wyoming Game and Fish Department to avoid wildlife conflicts, and the need to evaluate previously disturbed locations as places to site renewable energy. There is also strong agreement on the importance of public transparency and engagement as projects move forward so impacted citizens and communities have opportunities for meaningful input on project proposals.

We know that more wind and solar energy is on the horizon, and the development of these resources will present historic challenges and opportunities for Wyoming. But as with all

development, we must insist that this growth be done on our terms — in a responsible and measured way — that does not degrade and diminish the very things clean energy is supposed to protect. Holding that line will require leadership at the state level. It will also take collaborative efforts like the one that played out last year at the University of Wyoming — with the full spectrum of experts and advocates coming together with a shared goal of making sure future development is sited appropriately. We've already seen the impacts on wildlife when things go wrong. But done right, renewable energy development could be an asset, not a liability, to Wyoming's environment and quality of life. ■

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10 recommendations for RENEWABLES SITING

The Wyoming Renewable Energy Siting Collaborative agreed on a slate of 10 policy recommendations for the state. In summary, they include:

1 The governor's office should make it clear Wyoming is open to renewables as part of its "all of the above" energy strategy.

State wind and solar regulations should be regularly reviewed and updated.

4

5 The state should explore options for focusing renewable energy development on brownfields and previously disturbed areas.

8 The state should clearly describe its mitigation objectives and requirements to better inform developers and the public.

2

Private landowners should have the right to develop their property for renewable energy in a manner that is consistent with government regulations.

6

The process for siting and permitting should be streamlined, and improved to provide more public transparency.

State and federal fish and wildlife agencies should always be consulted to identify wildlife conflicts and help determine if a site is appropriate for development.

9

3 Project developers should include visual simulations as part of the county and state permitting process.

State agencies should engage closely with federal decision makers for siting solar and wind energy projects on federal public lands in Wyoming.

7

10

The Wyoming County Commissioners Association should make existing Wyoming county ordinances related to renewable energy infrastructure and facilities available to other county governments.

BENEATH THE *surface*

*The quiet work
of watchdogging
Wyoming's water*

BRANDON REYNOLDS
Conservation Advocate

LIKE THE REST OF THE LANDSCAPE, water in Wyoming is dramatic. Rivers carve through canyons, geysers erupt from below ground, reservoirs emerge from arid shrublands, and idyllic trout streams meander down from the mountains. And with water for agriculture and industry in limited supply, any conversation about water management is likely to turn heated.

Clean water is vital to our health, economy, and quality of life in Wyoming — and to the fish, wildlife, and plant life that surrounds us. Protecting clean water is a core part of the Wyoming Outdoor Council's mission. But with a few notable exceptions, it's a quiet undertaking: Much of this work happens behind a desk or on the phone, pouring over technical documents to identify threats to water from industrial development or shifting regulations.

The nitty gritty work of an advocacy group like the Outdoor Council is watchdogging government actions at the state level. This can involve reviewing proposed rule changes within the Department of Environmental Quality or actions by the legislature. Or we may focus on more discrete topics, like permits to allow companies to inject polluted water underground or to dispose of pollutants into bodies of water on the surface. Oftentimes, opportunities to review

and comment on proposed actions escape the attention of citizens and other advocacy groups who can't dedicate a full-time staff member to water quality. Fortunately, the Outdoor Council can serve this role. And we often work with partner groups around the state to divide and conquer, ensuring these issues have the attention they deserve.

Reading public notices for draft wastewater discharge permits, proposed state agency rule changes, or legislative bill drafts is not what most folks consider exciting. Still, it's essential: Sifting through these dense and technical documents is the front line of protection for clean water. Eventually we may show up at public meetings to ask tough questions. But if and when we decide to provide comments to regulators and decision makers on an issue and encourage citizens to do the same, we've done the legwork to identify and understand the problem and any possible solutions.

The ability to engage with agency staff and lawmakers, and to access the draft permits and regulations as well as the underlying data, is critical. Transparency keeps government accountable to the public and gives everyday citizens the ability to take action.

The Outdoor Council is working on some important water issues right now — like

**Sifting through
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oilfield wastewater that's flowing to Boysen Reservoir and could potentially be injected into the Madison Aquifer, and septic system rules and water quality planning in Teton County — but they weren't dropped in our lap. We have to dig deep to uncover problems, bring them to the public's attention, get agencies or decision makers to take a harder look or change their approach. It's this work that often — but not always — yields positive outcomes.

We're a small staff with a broad mission, and we can't read every permit — much less conduct an in-depth review. But we've found success in focusing on geographic areas that are particularly sensitive or vulnerable to pollution, and on specific issues we've worked with communities on in the past. The quiet work of watchdogging water helps Wyoming citizens make their voices heard, loud and clear. ■

PERMIT TYPES:

Underground Injection Control (UIC)

Authorizes the use of an injection well to pump fluid underground for disposal

Wyoming Pollution Discharge Elimination System (WYPDES)

Authorizes the discharge of pollutants into surface waters like rivers, lakes, and streams



CURRENTLY IN PROGRESS: Aethon Major Permit Modification Application

Aethon Energy applied for a major modification to its WYPDES permit, which authorizes the company to discharge polluted water from oil and gas wells into creeks that flow to Boysen Reservoir and the Wind River. Aethon requested changes to the substances it is required to monitor, the allowed levels of some substances, and the monitoring locations.

The Outdoor Council, along with our partners Powder River Basin Resource Council and Natural Resources Defense Council, requested an extension of public comment which DEQ denied. We often request public records to fully understand the permit in question. The State of Wyoming has 30 days to fulfill these requests, and often the comment period is only 30 days. Without an extension we might not receive critical information until the day the comments are due, which is exactly what happened with this major permit modification.

ON THE HORIZON: Colter Bay wastewater treatment

At the height of summer in Grand Teton National Park, Colter Bay becomes the second largest town in Teton County. The Colter Bay wastewater treatment facility also accepts waste from Jackson Lake Lodge and individual septic systems. Currently, Colter Bay's facility does not operate under either a WYPDES or UIC permit. The Outdoor Council has been reviewing public records on wastewater management in Grand Teton to ensure proper permitting and compliance. While we are following up on outstanding permitting questions at Colter Bay, the Outdoor Council recognizes the recent work the park and DEQ have done to update many park facilities.

WHAT THEY HAVE

TO GIVE

CLAIRE CELLA

Communications Design Associate

THE WYOMING OUTDOOR COUNCIL'S

mission is to protect Wyoming's environment and quality of life now and for future generations. I'll admit that sometimes those two words, "future generations," feel far off to me. They refer to my newly-born niece, yes, but also grandchildren and great grandchildren who I may never meet. Although none of us has a crystal ball to predict the future, we each have the present moment to make decisions that will have ripple effects into the future. That's how we can all make an impact.

I recently talked to two Outdoor Council members who might be characterized as "the next generation." One, Ted Rittle, is 18 years old and just enrolled at the University of Wyoming. The other, Nicole Gautier, is in her early thirties and works for UW as a research scientist. They both have chosen to donate to the Outdoor Council, and we wanted to find out why.

Their reasons are layered, but there was a similar thread of seeing their parents and others committed to a cause, be it conservation, or botany, or the outdoors, and supporting the things they loved. It was these real-life experiences that played a role in their own decisions to become Outdoor Council members. The actions they're taking as young adults ensure a better future for Wyoming and for those who come after them.

THE FIRST YEAR COLLEGE STUDENT

Ted Rittle was born and raised in Laramie, Wyoming, where he currently lives and studies math education at UW. Talking to him, he has a prolific sense of place that I wish I had had when I was his age. He's a self-taught fly fisherman who has developed his own favorite spots in the nearby mountains and rivers in just a few years. Although the rest of his family doesn't fish as often, Rittle said his parents took him outdoors frequently growing up, where they would hike, camp, and Nordic ski. It was there that he learned to appreciate nature, especially wildlife.

"I came to really love the wildlife and want to support it," he said. "There are certainly some special places in Wyoming that helped instill this in me — the Platte River Wilderness, for example. We've gone there since I was young. It's so neat how much wildlife there was there. That really emphasized the importance of preserving the wilderness. I guess that helped me see the value of protected open spaces, too."

When it came to acting on this value, Rittle also had his parents to look up to. His father, Keith, served on the Outdoor Council board for many years and both his parents talked about the importance of donating 10 percent of one's income to causes you support.



Rittle exploring Wyoming's public lands. Image: courtesy Ted Rittle

Wanting to go along with this idea and only just having started working, Rittle joined the Outdoor Council in 2021 and became one of our youngest members. (You may remember a story we did last year about our youngest, Jules Goldwarg, who was just six.)

To me, it's so neat to see other species out there, just going about their lives. I want to make sure they're able to keep being here.

— TED RITTLE

“Protecting wildlife in Wyoming’s open spaces is one of the reasons I chose to donate to the Outdoor Council,” he said of the decision. He said he’s seen WOC’s work on migration corridors and wildlife habitat, and donating felt in line with his values of promoting wildlife habitat.

“To me, it’s so neat to see other species out there, just going about their lives. I want to make sure they’re able to keep being here.”

He plans to donate every year, he says,

as well as stay involved in other conservation efforts such as citizen science efforts led by the local branch of the Audubon Society and Rocky Mountain Amphibian Project.

THE YOUNG PROFESSIONAL

Nicole Gautier, too, had a childhood steeped in the outdoors. She grew up in Oregon, with parents who had botany backgrounds. She remembers many hikes where her parents would eagerly identify the plants along their route. She remembers, too, that they were active in their state’s Native

Plant Society. What she remembers most was always being outside — a value that’s remained a throughline in her life.

Gautier moved to Wyoming six years ago as a student in the Teton Science Schools’ graduate program, which has a focus on place-based, natural science education. Prior to that, she had led outdoor education programs at a variety of small organizations in the West but had found that the science component was lacking.

When she found the Science Schools’ program, and its partnership with the Haub School of Environment and Natural Resources at UW, she applied enthusiastically. After finishing the program, she was offered a position at the Haub School and, again, eagerly accepted.

“I wanted to stay in Wyoming and I was excited to stay in Laramie because of its access to public lands. Being an avid recreationist, climbing and running is how I like to spend my time. The variety of landscapes in Wyoming,

from mountains to desert, still leaves me feeling that there's so much to explore here," she said.

Her first introduction to the Outdoor Council was through Run the Red in 2017, where she ran and the Outdoor Council was a sponsor. She had never been to the Red Desert before and was impressed — both by the rugged beauty of the area as well as the work of the conservation groups advocating its protection.

It was 2020 when she decided she wanted to give back and chose the Outdoor Council based on the good, recognizable work she saw, through our communications and events, as well as her own network of friends and colleagues.

"The projects [WOC is] working on are very tangible. I've been to the Red Desert and seen how special that place is," she said. "That personal connection was part of it, too."

She encourages other people to engage with their values in the same way.

"Consider the landscapes you've spent

Consider the **landscapes** you've spent time in in Wyoming and then ask yourself, **how might I give back?**

— NICOLE GAUTIER

time in in Wyoming," she said, "and then ask yourself, how might I give back?" Giving \$20 can be an easy way to feel a small part of this organization that has similar values," she said.

THE RIPPLE EFFECT

I write this at that time of year when many of us get reflective — looking back and making plans, seeing where we can improve, and setting goals to do so. There are many ways to engage in this practice, and many involve asking thoughtful questions of yourself. It can be framed as simply as Gautier's: "What do I have to give?" Perhaps your answer is 15 minutes to write an email to your local legislator, or \$20 to become a member supporting a cause you value, or a weekend to do volunteer trail work.

Or the question could be as big as, "What's the legacy I want to leave behind for future generations, and that I could start now?" The answer could be the same. You don't know who is watching even your smallest action.

We commend and thank Rittle and Gautier for their support. Along with them, and countless others, we look forward to creating a strong, more connected community of members, this and every year. ■



Gautier near Split Rock. Image: courtesy Nicole Gautier

You can
inspire the next
generation of
conservation.



Thank you for being a member of the Wyoming Outdoor Council.
Your support makes a difference for conservation in Wyoming.

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the next generation of passionate outdoor advocates
— by giving a gift membership. **Give a gift today!**



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