We are a community of people who love the outdoors and champion wild places.

**MISSION**

We work with communities to protect Montana’s wilderness heritage, quiet beauty, and outdoor traditions now and for future generations.

**VALUES**

We value innovation, integrity, collaboration, stewardship, and tenacity.

**VISION**

We envision a future where, from the rugged mountains to the vast prairies, Montana’s wild places are protected, connected, and restored because Montanans value wilderness as essential to our heritage and way of life.

**PUBLIC LANDS: OUR COMMON GROUND**

Montana Wilderness Association successfully worked with communities across the state and across the political spectrum to protect our public lands and wild places.

**OUR 60TH ANNIVERSARY: POISED FOR OUR BEST YEAR YET**

The victories we’ve achieved over the past year leave me hopeful that we can emerge more dynamic, better organized, and even more powerful by the end of 2018.
The 2016 election gave us cause to worry about the state of political discourse in our country. In 2017 hate speech became widespread. Bitterly partisan politics became the norm. It seemed easier than ever to reject collaboration and choose sides. 2017 was indeed a year of unprecedented division.

In spite of that political environment, Montana Wilderness Association successfully worked with communities across the state and across the political spectrum to protect our public lands and wild places.

- We organized over 1,000 Montanans of all political stripes, from Trout Creek to Twin Bridges, to rally for our public lands at the state capitol.
- We gathered with over 100 Montanans in Seeley Lake to hear Sen. Tester announce introduction of the Blackfoot-Clearwater Stewardship Act, a jobs-and-conservation bill hammered out locally by loggers, ranchers, small business owners, snowmobilers, mountain bikers, and conservationists.
- We linked arms with outfitters, guides, and tribal leaders and inspired 24,000 Montanans to weigh in for protection of the Upper Missouri River Breaks during Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke’s dangerous review of national monuments.
- We advanced an agreement by loggers, county commissioners, outdoor recreation enthusiasts, and conservationists to add 180,000 acres of new Wilderness in the Kootenai National Forest.
- Friend of Organ Mountains-Desert Peaks National Monument was subject to Secretary Ryan Zinke’s national monument review this summer. Also like the Breaks, a diverse group of people came together to fight for its preservation. I was privileged to work with these communities, and I deeply believe that the same commitment to diversity and inclusion will be vital as we work to defend Montana’s unparalleled wilderness heritage.

Since I came on the job, we’ve been hard at work fending off a series of attacks – to our national monuments, our wilderness study areas, and even our wilderness areas. This level of threat to our public lands and wild places is unprecedented. Rarely before has our outdoor way of life come under so severe an assault.

Plain and simple: Public lands are Montana’s common ground.

Looking ahead, we want to expand our common ground, and we have a new executive director to lead that effort. Our state council hired Ben Gabriel last fall, and he hit the ground running on December 1.

A rising star in the conservation field, Ben came highly recommended from partners across the country. He made a name for himself leading the defense of the Organ Mountains-Desert Peaks National Monument last year. As a member of the Next 100 Coalition, he is also committed to building campaigns that reflect the diversity of people who enjoy our public lands heritage. We’re grateful to have Ben on board.

We’re also grateful to our state council, to our donors, and to our members for stepping up to the plate in so many ways last year. Thank you for being a critical part of this team as we continue to protect Montana’s common ground.

I can’t tell you how excited and humbled I am to be at the helm of one of the most effective and well-regarded grassroots conservation organizations in the country.

Before coming to MWA in December 2017, I was the executive director of Friends of Organ Mountains-Desert Peaks, based in Las Cruces, New Mexico. Like the Upper Missouri River Breaks, Organ Mountains-Desert Peaks National Monument was subject to Secretary Ryan Zinke’s national monument review this summer. Also like the Breaks, a diverse group of people came together to fight for its preservation. I was privileged to work with these communities, and I deeply believe that the same commitment to diversity and inclusion will be vital as we work to defend Montana’s unparalleled wilderness heritage.

I look forward to employing the skills and knowledge I acquired in New Mexico on behalf of MWA and to helping our organization boost diversity among our members, supporters, and spokespeople. I also look forward to leading MWA further onto the national stage.

While at my previous job, I often read about MWA in national news stories covering the public lands rally MWA organized last year in Helena. That rally left many of us in the conservation community feeling hopeful and energized. It’s a dream come true to be the executive director of an organization whose successes have been so numerous.

Since I came on the job, we’ve been hard at work fending off a series of attacks – to our national monuments, our wilderness study areas, and even our wilderness areas. This level of threat to our public lands and wild places is unprecedented. Rarely before has our outdoor way of life come under so severe an assault.

Looking back over the year MWA has had, I’m amazed and inspired by all of the successes we’ve had in spite of all these threats. By the time you finish reading this annual report, I’m confident you’ll feel the same.

The victories we’ve achieved over the past year leave me hopeful that we can emerge more dynamic, better organized, and even more powerful by the end of 2018, which happens to be MWA’s 60th anniversary.

Also giving me confidence is your courage and passion, as well as the investment you’ve made in MWA and the outdoor legacy we’re united in protecting. Together, we can make 2018 a special year for our organization and a special year for the public lands and wild places we together hold dear.

Thank you again for your support.

–Ben Gabriel, executive director
A MONUMENTAL AWAKENING

Upper Missouri River Breaks National Monument becomes a catalyst for preserving public lands that are central to our heritage

Long before I came to work for MWA, I was a guide in the Upper Missouri River Breaks National Monument. Over the course of 10 seasons, I spent hundreds of nights sleeping at Eagle Creek, Dark Butte, Hideaway Coulee, and many other campsites along the Missouri. We’d wake early to the sound of songbirds perched high in cottonwoods and drift along the lazy river relating history and spinning half-truths to clients from near and far.

As I get older, I have trouble separating one trip from another. But I will always remember the trip on which I guided four generations of the same family, from an 85-year-old great grandmother to a four-year-old great granddaughter, through the White Cliffs section of the Missouri Breaks. Great-grandma was the daughter of homesteaders along the Hi-Line.

That paddle trip still stands out to me because it felt like the perfect representation of something MWA believes in – that our public lands serve as places where communities, families, and friends can gather to form and practice long-lasting traditions.

For thousands of years, since Native Americans converged here to camp and hunt bison across the plains, the Missouri Breaks have been one of those gathering places.

It’s no wonder, then, that thousands of Montanans rose up in defense of the Upper Missouri River Breaks this summer. This outpouring of support occurred after President Trump signed an executive order mandating Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke to review over two dozen national monuments, including the Upper Missouri River Breaks, to determine which monuments the president would shrink or eliminate entirely.

Soon after the executive order was signed, MWA helped launch Hold Our Ground, a diverse group of Montanans standing up for national monuments and other public lands that embody our shared heritage. Once Hold Our Ground was formed, letters to the editor and guest columns defending the Breaks began filling opinion pages. Billboards showing support for our national monuments greeted Sec. Zinke as he drove into Whitefish for the Western Governors Association annual meeting. Television and radio commercials flooded the airwaves expressing outrage that one of our most beloved places could lose the permanent protection of national monument designation.

Thanks largely to the work MWA and Hold Our Ground did, more than 24,000 Montanans submitted comments to Sec. Zinke urging him to keep the Upper Missouri River as is.

And that’s exactly what he did.

But the fight isn’t over. There are two bills, one in the Senate (S. 33) and another in the House (H.R. 3990), that would cripple the Antiquities Act. Signed by President Theodore Roosevelt in 1906, the Antiquities Act enables presidents to designate national monuments. Both bills would strip that authority away from presidents. The House bill would even allow the current and future presidents to shrink any existing national monument, including the three we have in Montana – Upper Missouri River Breaks, Pompeys Pillar, and the Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument.

MWA will remain vigilant in 2018 and hold our congressional delegation’s feet to the fire should they vote for either of these bills that pose such a grave threat to our public lands legacy.

My river guiding days are behind me, but my wife, our two daughters, and I often return to the Missouri Breaks and carry on our own traditions by walking among the ruins of homesteads, standing silently next to ancient tipi rings, and leaning into headwinds while floating that lazy river. Hundreds of other families from Montana and around the country do the same every year. The Breaks has become more than a place where we gather; in the fight to save it, it’s become a catalyst for defending all the public lands that define who we are as a people, in all of our diversity.

–Based in Bozeman, John Todd is our conservation director.

Families from Montana and around the country float through the Upper Missouri River Breaks every year.
Our public lands serve as places where communities, families, and friends can gather to form and practice long-lasting traditions.
Outdoor recreation is the biggest sector of Montana’s economy.
The Power of Public Lands

Our Rally for Public Lands generated energy that carried us through the year.

As I was driving to Helena from Missoula the morning of the Rally for Public Lands last January, I got an urgent call from a supporter in Helena who was afraid the Capitol Rotunda wouldn’t fit all of the people she thought might attend. I told her that I expected a decent turnout, but not that good. After all, the rally was on a workday, and we hadn’t had much time to promote it. I thought we would, at best, match 2015’s turnout of 500 people.

Boy, was I wrong.

By the time the rally started, there were more than 1,000 people jammed inside the state capitol and spilling out the door. The emcee started the rally by leading the crowd in a chant that plainly expressed what we all had come to the capitol to demand of our elected officials: “Keep public lands in public hands.” Our chorus reverberated throughout the state capitol and apparently reached our nation’s capital, too. Days later, Utah Congressman Jason Chaffetz withdrew his bill to sell off 3 million acres of public lands. And not a single land transfer bill was introduced during the 2017 state legislative session.

The energy generated by the rally carried us through the session and beyond. Midway through the session, more than 70 people had testified and almost 2,000 people had contacted their legislators in opposition to H.J. 9, a resolution calling on Congress to strip protection from Montana’s wilderness study areas. This pressure compelled legislators to amend the resolution so that wilderness designation was included as a potential outcome for resolving the status of these areas. Now that Senator Daines has introduced a bill removing protection of 500,000 acres of these WSAs, that amendment is crucial.

The momentum generated by the public lands rally also helped us convince the legislature to fully fund and authorize Habitat Montana, the state’s main mechanism for land conservation. In September, the Outdoor Industry Association released a report showing that our outdoor recreation accounts for $7.1 billion in annual consumer spending, 71,000 direct jobs, $2.2 billion in wages and salaries, and $286 million in local and state tax revenues. This report confirmed that outdoor recreation is the biggest sector of Montana’s economy.

The report set the stage for achieving another piece of the proactive public lands campaign we established going into 2017. A few days after the report was released, Governor Bullock created the Montana Office of Outdoor Recreation and named Rachel VandeVoort as its first director. The Office of Outdoor Recreation was the final piece of the governor’s public lands agenda that he announced in June 2016 and a major step forward in our work to make the economic case for protecting public lands. We look forward to working with Rachel in 2018 to ensure that communities across the state are harnessing the economic power of outdoor recreation and protected public lands.

–Based in Missoula, Kayje Booker is our state policy director.

Left: Fly-fishing in the Absaroka-Beartooth Wilderness

Right: Beneath the Chinese Wall in the Bob Marshall Wilderness
In July of 2016, when our daughter was just six weeks old, we took her on a pilgrimage.

High in Montana’s wild Swan Range at the headwaters of Morrell Creek lies a hidden world called Grizzly Basin. Perched above Morrell Falls, Grizzly Basin is a crescent-shaped hanging valley guarded by the sheer ramparts of Matt and Crescent Mountains. True to its name, Grizzly Basin is home to a healthy population of the mighty bruins. Remarkably, this area is almost entirely surrounded by the Bob Marshall Wilderness and yet sits outside the Wilderness boundaries.

Sitting by our camp in Grizzly Basin, we watched the last light of the day ignite the walls of the Swan Range. I promised our little one that this special corner of wild America would be a part of the Bob by the time she could hike there under her own pack.

As of February 22, 2017, we are significantly closer to realizing that promise.

That was the day that Senator Jon Tester – surrounded by ranchers, outfitters, conservationists, timber mill operators, and about 50 middle school students – stood atop hay bales at the Rich’s Montana Guest Ranch near Seeley Lake and announced the introduction of the Blackfoot Clearwater Stewardship Act (BCSA).

A ground-up, collaborative proposal more than a decade in the making, the BCSA will add 80,000 acres to the Bob Marshall, Scapegoat, and Mission Mountains Wilderness Areas. It will also support recreation and forest restoration near Seeley Lake and Ovando.

With passage of the BCSA, Grizzly Basin and the entire Swan Range front would become part of the Bob Marshall. Monture Creek, the West Fork of the Clearwater River, the North Fork of the Blackfoot, and other critical bull trout tributaries that feed into the iconic Blackfoot River would also be permanently protected as Wilderness.

This protection would secure the habitat of the largest mountain goat herd in the Crown of the Continent ecosystem and safeguard the migration corridors and summer range of Blackfoot Valley elk.

Senator Steve Daines and Congressman Greg Gianforte have yet to support the BCSA. Undaunted, we’ll continue to hold them both accountable for not backing a bill that 74% of Montanans – Republicans, Democrats, and Independents – already support.

In July and August of 2017, the Rice Ridge Fire burned through much of the BCSA landscape, including parts of Grizzly Basin. It was a classic mosaic burn, leaving some areas scorched while barely touching others. Tourism and recreation-dependent businesses in the Blackfoot and Clearwater Valleys were hit hard by the fire.

Our friends in the outfitting and guiding community will have to deal with the fire’s aftermath for years to come. Trails will take time to clear and repair, and the sun will feel stronger without the canopy overhead.

I look forward to the day when my daughter can carry her own pack into Grizzly Basin. The view may not be quite the same after the fires, but the wilderness remains. MWA will keep on fighting for passage for the Blackfoot Clearwater Stewardship Act so that wilderness still remains when my daughter is taking her own children into Grizzly Basin.

–Based in Missoula, Zack Porter is our western Montana field director.
A ground-up, collaborative proposal, the Blackfoot Clearwater Stewardship Act will add 80,000 acres to the Bob Marshall, Scapegoat, and Mission Mountains Wilderness Areas.
One fall evening in 2017 I stood in front of the Noxon Rod and Gun Club in the far northwest corner of Montana. I was with Shawn Morgan of Thompson River Lumber Co. and Jerry Wandler of the Troy Snowmobile Club to present an agreement that the Kootenai Forest Stakeholders struck in 2016 on how we can boost recreation, create more jobs, and conserve more wild places within the Kootenai National Forest.

I talked about the wilderness component of the agreement — adding 180,000 acres of Wilderness in the Yaak, Scotchman Peaks, and lands adjacent to the Cabinet Mountains Wilderness. Members of the club expressed discomfort with that part of the proposal, as I suspected they might.

It was Jerry’s job to present on the motorized recreation component of the agreement. But he ended up speaking more about the spirit of collaboration and wilderness than he did about motorized recreation, and he did so with a sincerity that moved our audience.

“All of us must support one another — those who represent wilderness, recreation, and the timber industry,” he said. “This is collaboration, and wilderness must be a part of it.” I felt a surge of gratitude, and I knew we were getting closer to protecting more wild country.

A month or so later, I stood with Paul McKenzie from Stoltze Land and Lumber Company at the annual conference of the Montana Forest Collaborative Network. We talked about how a “timberbeast” and “wildernut” were able to work together in two collaboratives, meet in the middle, and support one another’s values. We shared the story of when we met five years ago over lunch. That lunch was the beginning of our friendship.

“I didn’t know where to go in Columbia Falls to eat,” Paul recalled. “I didn’t want to be seen in public with a wilderness person, and I didn’t know what she’d like to eat.”

I was a little stunned by his recollection, because it evoked the deep misperceptions that exist among people with different values and interests. But it also underscored how much we can all learn when we begin to have conversations across difficult divides. Partnerships are about seeing one another as imperfect, bizarre human beings and having a willingness to be proven wrong. They force you to grow, and to remain open to the new and unexpected.

I’ve certainly learned a few things in my time with MWA. In this public land protection work, the important ingredients for me are patience, persistence, courage, comfort with uncertainty, and not assuming the worse in one another. Add a bunch of passion and desire and you’ve got some real potential for protecting more wilderness.

This is the approach we’re taking in northwest Montana, especially within the Kootenai Forest Stakeholders Coalition (KFSC).

Advancing and broadening support for the KFSC agreement was a significant priority this year. Because of the outreach we conducted across the northwest corner of the state, more sportsmen, local businesses, and established groups are aware of and endorsing our recommendations for wilderness, timber harvest, and recreation. Early in 2018, we were thrilled to receive an endorsement from the Sanders County Commission.

The KFSC has also received a lot of media attention over the past year. Heartfelt pieces on wild country in the Kootenai have appeared on the opinion pages of numerous newspapers. Stories on how the KFSC is finding common ground to improve forest health and boost the economies of struggling communities in the northwest corner of the state have appeared on front pages and newscasts.

This year, we will finalize details for turning our agreement into a legislative proposal, which we will then present to our Congressional delegation.

It’s going to be an exciting year. To learn more, visit kootenaifuture.org.

—Based in Whitefish, Amy Robinson is our northwest Montana field director.
This year I traveled to the heart of the Badger-Two Medicine to visit the crew of the Blackfeet Youth Conservation Corps, a group of teenagers spending their summer in service of their ancestral lands. I wanted to hear their stories and offer my gratitude for their work repairing trails and fences. I also wanted to let them know that their voices matter in the long struggle to keep the Badger a sanctuary.

My short foray into the Badger reaffirmed the importance of the work MWA does and underscored the significance of how we go about that work – building connections between people and place in a way that benefits individuals, communities, and our wildlands. Just four years ago, MWA started this program with a single week of trail work on Badger Creek. Gradually more projects were added and now, through a partnership with the Montana Conservation Corps and many other groups, young people participate in a summer-long program with projects in the Badger-Two Medicine, the Blackfeet Reservation, and Glacier National Park.

A few months after my trip to the Badger, we learned that the new presidential administration would stand up for and legally defend the actions of the Obama administration, which last year canceled the remaining oil and gas leases that had loomed over the Badger for decades.

The fight to protect the Badger has now transcended political lines, a testament to the landscape itself and to the persistent, decades-long defense of this special place. The current secretary of the Interior, Ryan Zinke, even went so far as to recommend the Badger be designated a national monument – a proposal MWA had to condemn since he made his recommendation while the administration was dramatically reducing national monument protection for Bears Ears in southern Utah, a place as sacred to five southwestern tribes as the Badger is to the Blackfeet.

For all its difficulty, this year underscored just how far we’ve come in protecting the Badger-Two Medicine from oil and gas development. Just a few years ago, it seemed we were a court decision away from seeing an oil rig in the heart of the Badger. Now, the tribe and a coalition of conservation groups are exploring ways to permanently protect this area. We’ll continue this vital work no matter which way the political winds blow.

The importance of protecting the Badger-Two Medicine was reinforced when I visited the Blackfeet Youth Conservation Corps crew and heard just what this place means to them and their elders. The joy they experienced simply being in the Badger acted like a salve, easing the tension that is an inextricable part of trying to protect wildlands during these difficult times. Even more, it provided a potent reminder of why we do this work.

—Based in Conrad, Casey Perkins is our Rocky Mountain Front field director.
SEIZING OPPORTUNITY

MWA helps forge an agreement to protect the core of the Gallatin Range

Last summer I led a Wilderness Walk along the southern portion of the Gallatin Crest. We stopped for lunch in an open meadow that provided a stunning view up and down the length of the Crest. Many of the participants lived below in the Gallatin Valley, but they had never before seen the Gallatin Range from this perspective. The joy in their faces spoke volumes. I couldn’t help but swell with pride as I told the group about everything MWA is doing to permanently protect this place and the rest of the Gallatin Range.

MWA has been working to protect the Gallatin Range, an essential landscape in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem, for decades. Much of our work has focused on the Hyalite-Porcupine-Buffalo Horn Wilderness Study Area (HPBH).

Currently, and remarkably, none of the Gallatin Range is designated as Wilderness. And none of it was recommended for Wilderness the last time the Forest Service developed a management plan, which was back in the 1980s. MWA has remained vigilant, though and we’re now seizing a new opportunity to protect the Gallatin Range and other areas in the Custer Gallatin National Forest.

In November of 2016, MWA and a number of close partners convened a group of stakeholders who were genuinely interested in finding a long-term solution for the Gallatin Range. We called the group the Gallatin Forest Partnership. It’s composed of conservationists, mountain bikers, hunters and anglers, backcountry horsemen, guest ranch owners, outfitters, and water enthusiasts.

From the beginning, our work has been charged with urgency. That’s because the Forest Service is currently revising the Custer Gallatin forest plan, which will determine how the forest will be managed over the coming decades. The forest plan is the agency’s opportunity to recommend to Congress Wilderness protection for areas within the Custer Gallatin. For the Forest Service to recommend a portion of the Gallatin Range for wilderness designation, it needs wide local support, the precise type of support the Gallatin Forest Partnership can provide.

In the past year, the group has worked hard to find a middle ground that we can all occupy. That work has proved invaluable. In December 2017 we agreed on a proposal that I believe is the best outcome we can achieve for the Gallatin Range and parts of the Madison Range.

In total, the group is recommending 130,000 acres of the Gallatin and Madison Ranges for Wilderness. Of that total, 110,000 acres are in the heart of the Gallatin and along the crest. The additional 20,000 acres include the Cowboy Heaven area in the Madison Range and an area between Quake Lake and the Taylor-Hilgard unit of the Lee Metcalf Wilderness.

Aside from working within the Gallatin Forest Partnership, MWA has been getting our members and supporters involved in the planning process for the entire Custer Gallatin National Forest. The CGNF stretches across the southern portion of the state and includes the Crazy Mountains, the Absarokas, the Beartooths, the Pryors, and other beloved landscapes in need of improved planning and protection.

Over the past year, we’ve turned out over 120 members at numerous Custer Gallatin forest planning meetings, making MWA the best-represented stakeholder by far in the Custer Gallatin planning process. Thanks to our members, we’ve seen significant, positive change in how the Forest Service views wildlands within the Custer Gallatin.

Over the next year, we’ll continue working with the Forest Service to achieve the best outcome possible for the places we hold dear in the Custer Gallatin National Forest.

–Based in Bozeman, Sally Cathey is our southwest Montana field director.
**INTO THE NITTY GRITTY**

This year we went the extra mile, even in gumbo, to protect our **prairie wildlands**

**Standing on a ridge top** along the edge of the Bitter Creek Wilderness Study Area in the northeast corner of Montana, we could see billowy, black clouds moving across this vast landscape. Initially, it looked like they might skirt around us, but then the raindrops started to fall. It didn’t take long for the road to Bitter Creek to turn to gumbo, the kind of mud that can send your car skating into a ditch.

Neither the sky nor the weather reports provided clear guidance, but after a little discussion, we decided to press on in our caravan of four vehicles and take our chances. How could we – five MWA volunteers, a co-worker and myself – not continue? We had plenty of food and camping gear. Besides, we’d come too far to turn back. We were determined to document just how wild this wilderness study area is.

Like many wilderness study areas (WSAs) in eastern Montana managed by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), Bitter Creek does not get the kind of attention it deserves. At almost 60,000 acres, Bitter Creek is one of the last tracts of unbroken, mixed-grass prairie on the Great Plains, providing important habitat for grassland birds and other wildlife. Though no inventory of cultural and historical sites has been conducted here, the tipi ring we saw in the middle of the road reminded us that this is a place with a rich history.

Why were we all here in the gumbo? The impetus for this adventure was the BLM’s recent decision not to prepare a travel management plan for Bitter Creek.

**The primary purpose** of a travel management plan is to determine whether vehicle use will be allowed, and if so, where it will be allowed. BLM staff told MWA volunteers that the agency was not planning to prepare a travel plan for the Bitter Creek WSA, claiming they did not have the authority to do so.

MWA disagreed, and we went to work to change the minds of the BLM staff managing Bitter Creek.

There is already about 50 miles of primitive road dividing the WSA into three different sections. Without a travel plan managing motorized use here, this oasis for nesting birds and one of the last wilderness strongholds in the Great Plains could become even more segmented and degraded.

The primary purpose of our field trip was to document the wilderness quality of this area and thereby make the case for the BLM to create a travel management plan that would respect just how wild this place is.

As we were able to document on our soggy trip to Bitter Creek, the area remains largely natural with outstanding opportunities for solitude.

After reviewing the information we provided from our trip and meeting with MWA staff and volunteers, a BLM field manager acknowledged that the agency needed, and had the authority, to create a travel management plan for Bitter Creek and make some changes to how this area is managed.

As a result, the BLM will prepare a new travel plan for Bitter Creek. It should be released sometime in 2018.

Diving into the nitty-gritty of public land management and getting the lay of our prairie wildlands just might make the difference in permanently protecting Bitter Creek and other WSAs in eastern Montana. We’ll continue to spend time in those places and make sure our public land managers are treating them with the respect they deserve.

--Based in Great Falls, Mark Good is our central Montana field director.
A few years ago, I worked to help pass the Rocky Mountain Front Heritage Act. When President Obama signed it at the end of 2014, it became the first Wilderness bill in Montana to pass in more than 30 years. I’m fairly certain that when I retire from conservation, I’ll look back on this moment as one of the highest of my career.

Around the same time the Heritage Act passed, the Forest Service began the arduous process of revising the Helena-Lewis and Clark National Forest management plan for the first time since 1986. I became MWA’s point person on this plan revision, which will determine how this 2.7 million-acre Forest will be managed for decades to come.

I don’t think I’ll be looking back on most of this work with quite the same fondness as I will on the Heritage Act. After all, wading through thousands of pages of government jargon is about as exciting as watching grass grow.

Despite the glacial speed at which forest planning moves, I am excited by and proud of the grassroots organizing MWA has done on behalf of the wild places within the Helena-Lewis and Clark National Forest. The Forest spans a huge swath of the state, from the Continental Divide near Helena to the Big Snowies near Lewiston and from the boundary of Glacier National Park to the north end of the Crazy Mountains.

Perhaps the most significant improvement in this forest plan draft, as compared to the current forest plan, regards the Big Snowies.

This isolated 100,000-acre island range smack dab in the middle of the state offers nearby communities some of the purest drinking water in the country and is one of the most ecologically intact places in the entire National Forest system. In its draft forest plan, the Forest Service recommends this entire area be designated as Wilderness.

In addition, the agency also preliminarily recommends Wilderness designation for the Nevada Mountain area on the Continental Divide between Lincoln and Helena and for the Deep Creek area in the Smith River corridor. It also recommends a “primitive” recreation designation for the Middle Fork of the Judith Wilderness Study Area. We expect the final forest plan to come out this year.

It’s safe to say the Forest Service would probably have not made these recommendations had it not been for the scores of Montanans we turned out for forest planning meetings and the hundreds of comments we generated on behalf of the wild places within the Forest.

Unfortunately, the Big Snowies and Middle Fork of the Judith are included in a bill that Senator Steve Daines introduced at the end of 2017. His bill (S. 2206) would strip protection from nearly 500,000 acres of the wildest, most pristine public lands in Montana, places managed as wilderness study areas. If this top-down, one-size-fits-all bill passes, the Big Snowies and Middle Fork Judith Wilderness Study Areas would become subject to industrial development and motorized recreation, regardless of the outpouring of grassroots support these places received over the last few years during the forest planning process.

But the same grassroots force that emerged during the forest planning process has now been focused on Sen. Daines’ bill. As of early January 2018, we’ve generated close to 1,000 calls and over 500 emails to Sen. Daines in opposition to the bill and in support of the Big Snowies and Middle Fork Judith, as well as the three other wilderness study areas included in the bill – the West Pioneer, Sapphire, and Blue Joint.

Forest planning may not be the most glamorous work, but it’s one of the best opportunities we have to have a say in how our public lands and wild places are managed. I’ll continue to slog through forest planning documents knowing that, at the end of the day, I’m helping lead a movement in defense of the wild places we hold dear.

–Based in Conrad, Casey Perkins is our Rocky Mountain Front field director.

FOR THE PEOPLE, BY THE PEOPLE

A new management plan for the Helena-Lewis and Clark National Forest helps spark a grassroots movement in defense of our wildest places.

The Big Snowies range offers some of the purest drinking water in the country and is one of the most ecologically intact places in the entire National Forest system.
Late one evening last February, a rancher in the Ruby Valley called, urging me to be at his cattle ranch at first light the next morning. He said that if I wanted to get a feel for what calving was all about, my best opportunity was going to be then.

The following morning, I put on some muck boots, layered up my clothing, and prepared myself for the blizzard-filled day. I arrived just as the sun was rising and spent the rest of the morning bottle-feeding, tagging, and vaccinating calves born the night before. I also got to watch the birth of a few calves. It was a special day, as are all my days on the ranches of those I partner with on the Ruby Valley Strategic Alliance (RVSA).

The time I spend at the ranches in the Ruby Valley, located in the southwest corner of Montana, allows my RVSA partners and I to see each other as people rather than “stakeholders.” I have the opportunity to learn their operations, opinions, and concerns. Time spent with my partners also allows me to share MWA’s goals and see how they might align with those of the ranchers, whose cattle graze on public land allotments in the nearby Snowcrest Range, a priority area for MWA.

When the RVSA formed two years ago, we first had to determine whether we had the common ground necessary to create a strategic alliance. It quickly became apparent that we did.

Over the last year we’ve all spent a good deal of time learning about the challenges our fellow members face. For my part, I’ve toured grazing allotments with the ranchers and observed firsthand the restoration work they do there and on their private land. In turn, the ranchers have spent time learning about MWA’s values and why we advocate for wild places like the Snowcrest Range.

The RVSA is now identifying ways we can build on the relationships we’ve established. Our goals for 2018 include advocating for federal funds to implement conservation and restoration projects that will improve wildlife habitat and water quality on private land. In 2018, we will also work together to fight invasive weeds in areas of the Snowcrest that have been recommended for wilderness designation.

MWA and our partners are investing time in this special place because so many conservation opportunities exist there. We can protect wildlife habitat by keeping open spaces open. We can reduce conflict between wildlife and livestock. Eventually, we can also build a strong partnership and generate an inclusive agreement for permanently protecting the Snowcrest Range.

—Based in Bozeman, Sally Cathey is our southwest Montana field director.
Thank you...  

To each and every champion of our wild places, for your commitment to our public lands and your investment in the quiet beauty that makes Montana, Montana.

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Thank you to you generosity and hard work during the Wild Bunch Monthly Giving Program. We are grateful for the support of all our participants and their contributions to our mission. Thank you to all who support our work with their payroll deductions and pledges through Montana Shares.

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Thank you to our 3,209 committed households who are the foundation of Montana Wilderness Association.

Thank you to all who support our work with their payroll deductions & pledges through Montana Shares.
On September 30, 2017, Montana Wilderness Association had:

- Total assets of $4,387,388, liabilities of $749,577, and net assets of $3,637,811.
- $2,661,018 unrestricted and $342,167 temporarily restricted assets.
- $742,199 in fixed assets.
- $634,626 in permanently restricted endowment funds.

Revenues for the year were $2,349,163 and expenses were $2,250,171.

Notes to Financial Statements:

- Montana Wilderness Association is a nonprofit, tax-exempt organization under 501(c)3 of the Internal Revenue Code.
- This financial information is drawn from audited financial statements by the accounting firm Anderson ZurMuehlen.

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