High Country News

PRECIOUS METALHEADS

Vol. 57 / November 2025
No. 11 • hcn.org

INSIDE THE WAR ON FLUORIDE

SALMON RECOVERY IN MENDOCINO

THE INSPIRATION OF JOCK SOTO

On the Ten Mile River in Mendocino County, California, The Nature Conservancy oversees monitoring for juvenile coho salmon. Biologists Lydia Brown and Evan Broberg implant tags in young fish to track their growth. (*See story on page 7.*) **Christie Hemm Klok / HCN**

Know the West.

High Country News is an independent, reader-supported nonprofit 501(c)(3) media organization that covers the important issues and stories that define the Western U.S. Our mission is to inform and inspire people to act on behalf of the West's diverse natural and human communities. High Country News (ISSN/0191/5657) publishes monthly, 12 issues per year, from 119 Grand Ave., Paonia, CO 81428. Periodicals, postage paid at Paonia, CO, and other post offices. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to High Country News, Box 1090, Paonia, CO 81428. See hcn.org for submission guidelines. Subscriptions to HCN are $45 a year, $47 for institutions: 800-905-1155, hcn.org. For editorial comments or questions, write High Country News, P.O. Box 1090, Paonia, CO 81428 or editor@hcn.org, or call 970-527-4898. For correspondence addressed to High Country News, HCN or to the editors, permission to publish will be considered implicit unless specifically stated otherwise.

Survival tips

IT'S A PRETTY UNSETTLING TIME TO BE ALIVE. And I'm not just speaking figuratively: On a recent beach walk, I passed several new slides — clear evidence of coastal erosion. Some of the detritus took the form of thin geometric plates; other areas appeared to have fallen in big chunks. But no matter the size and form of the eroded matter, relatively new signage informed me that "85% of the California coast currently experiences active erosion that can be attributed to a combination of natural and anthropogenic causes." That's a lot of coastline sloughing off and being washed away by the next high tide, due in part to the burning of fossil fuels. A restroom and the beloved snack bar at this same beach were recently removed due to their imminent exposure to the rising sea.

Add to this the forest-killing insect infestations plaguing the West, the increasingly violent storms and floods and fires, the perennial drought. As if all this isn't enough, innocent people are being killed indiscriminately in wars being fought far from here. Domestically, we have a government terrorizing its own citizens and waging all-out war on the environment, including the clean air and water that sustain life — not just human life, but all life.

I recently attended a workshop on managing through uncertainty. The presenter shared a matrix of self-help techniques, including taking walks, which, as you know, is part of my routine. Whether it's the weaponization of the economy, the future of your health care, or more personal threats to you and your family members, coping techniques are in order. Listening to music also made the list, and this issue of *High Country News* contains a potent and beautiful tribute to the healing power of music. In "Precious Metalheads" (*see page 30*), staff writer B. "Toastie" Oaster takes us to a festival on the Blackfeet Nation built on a mental-health-meets-heavy-metal platform that one fan referred to as "a strange road to joy."

Joy: that feeling when some unknown, unseen force seems to draw your chest upwards — the part of your body known in yoga as your "heart center." A couple of weeks ago, I was in Colorado for an *HCN* retreat and board meeting when early one evening a double rainbow appeared, drawing us all outside and onto the land. I do not use the word *blessing* that freely, but to witness such phenomena feels like a blessing. No president or hostile regime can take this from us. For a moment, we are blinded by awe and can think of nothing other than our gratitude for being present to bear witness.

Jennifer Sahn, editor-in-chief

Jason Persoff / Alamy

The Trump administration's war on wind
How energy companies and states are navigating federal policy that's hostile to wind.
By Shi En Kim

Joseph Rushmore / HCN

The strange loneliness of Charlie Kirk's funeral
Photos and reflections from the memorial in the Phoenix suburbs.
By Joseph Rushmore

Scan to read these stories and all our web-exclusive content.

Follow us **@highcountrynews**

FEATURES

Lights Out 20
In wildfire-torn California, rural residents bear the burden of worsening power outages.
BY EMMA FOEHRINGER MERCHANT & MARIA PARAZO ROSE
PHOTOS BY TRACY BARBUTES
DATA VISUALIZATIONS BY PARKER ZIEGLER

Precious Metalheads 30
A heavy metal festival on Blackfeet Nation supports teen mental health.
BY B. "TOASTIE" OASTER
PHOTOS BY RUSSEL ALBERT DANIELS & TAILYR IRVINE

REPORTAGE

Conservationists make an (intentional) mess in Mendocino 7
And coho salmon love it.
BY TANVI DUTTA GUPTA
PHOTOS BY CHRISTIE HEMM KLOK

The Trump slump 10
Western economies struggle with tariffs, layoffs, federal funding clawbacks.
FACTS & FIGURES BY JONATHAN THOMPSON

A forgotten bridge reborn 12
Idaho's newest wildlife crossing didn't need to be built. It already existed.
BY KYLIE MOHR
PHOTOS BY REBECCA STUMPF

A toothless conspiracy theory 14
Make America Healthy Again wants fluoride out of drinking water, regardless of what you want.
BY LEAH SOTTILE
ILLUSTRATION BY ISRAEL VARGAS

BOOKS, CULTURE & COMMENTARY

The inspiration of Jock Soto 43
An Indigenous male ballet dancer talks about his legacy and his time on ballet's biggest stage.
BY SHAUN GRISWOLD
PHOTO BY EVAN JAMES BENALLY ATWOOD

Who's looking? 46
The gaze of aspen 'eyes' in a time of increased state surveillance.
CONFETTI WESTERNS BY MILES W. GRIFFIS

Jess Walter is not done with Ruby Ridge 48
The best-selling Spokane, Washington, novelist approaches America's political divide with humor and heart.
BOOK REVIEW BY MAGGIE DOHERTY
ILLUSTRATION BY AMY BERENBEIM

#iamthewest 52
Ben Rupert, Carson City, Nevada.
BY ALEJANDRA RUBIO

OTHER MATTER

EDITOR'S NOTE 3
LETTERS 6
HCN COMMUNITY 17
DEAR FRIENDS 19
HEARD AROUND THE WEST 50

ON THE COVER

Buffalo Hide Academy students in Browning, Montana, pose in corpse paint for an art project as part of the school's heavy music symposium.
Tailyr Irvine / HCN

Jock Soto at home in Eagle Nest, New Mexico. (*See story on page 43.*) **Evan Benally Atwood / HCN**

High Country News is dedicated to independent journalism, informed debate and discourse in the public interest. We welcome letters through digital media and the post. Send us a letter, find us on social media, or email us at editor@hcn.org

INFORMED AND INSPIRING!

I've read a lot of issues of *HCN* over the years, and to my mind the October 2025 magazine is, cover to cover, a real high point. The reportage is geographically diverse, incisive, balanced and well-researched, and the essays are intellectually challenging yet accessible, real people dealing with real problems in language that hits home, sentence by sentence.

And the features — wow! What a treat to have Tony Davis' perspective in such a balanced piece ("Dried out in Phoenix"), giving us not only up-to-the minute news but sorely needed context — history, politics, the law — along with a view from the desert floor. He painted a picture (with the help of wonderful photographs) of those isolated suburban areas I won't soon forget.

Finally, Jaclyn Moyer's "Portrait of a Vanishing Tree," printed on glowing green pages and lit up by those mind-blowing illustrations: What a fine blend of reporting, personal experience, science, deep history, poetry, philosophy and humor, all informed by palpable humility and unending curiosity.

What can I say? I set the magazine down feeling not only informed but inspired. Every piece prodded me with the question, "How can I better inhabit this place?" Please keep it up!

Devin Odell
Fort Collins, Colorado

INSATIABLE THIRST FOR MONEY

"Dried Out in Phoenix" is a great article, but Phoenix's water problems are caused by the 142 data centers in the valley sucking up all the water. It's all about the money.

Tom Kinnaman
Marana, Arizona

There is no one to blame for Phoenix's problems but greedy townships seeking big business. Why would Glendale allow a Nestlé coffee-creamer bottling plant to be developed, or Phoenix allow TSMC to develop semiconductor chips, using billions of gallons of water yearly of the citizens' precious water? Phoenix is also slated to be a Top 10 city for data centers, which require massive amounts of water to cool their servers. I am ready to leave Arizona, afraid that we may run out of our most crucial resource!

Stephen Oliva
Peoria, Arizona

I lived in northern Arizona for 10 years in the '70s. It was hard to see, looking ahead, that Maricopa County was growing and developing faster than its water resources. Once money finds a way to tap the aquifers below the Colorado Plateau, it's game over for the environment.

Drew Irby
Via email

Halting out-of-control growth in the Phoenix metro area, the country's fifth largest, is long overdue. Arizona's Department of Water Resources decision to pause development due to inadequate water supply must be applauded despite the political and industrial pressure. As an environmental geologist and longtime Arizona resident, I was troubled that the statewide groundwater resource crisis was downplayed for years. I recently retired and moved "upstream," where the water supply is more reliable — for now.

Dave Palmer
Farmington, New Mexico

SEPTEMBER'S FOOD FOR THOUGHT

I enjoyed reading the "Who Controls Our Food?" September issue, which helped inspire me to start visiting my local farmers' market each Sunday to buy fresh and support local sources. I am always excited when I receive another issue of *High Country News*. Keep up the great work!

Lynda Roberts
Sausalito, California

"There is no one to blame for Phoenix's problems but greedy townships seeking big business."

As a geographer with a long-standing interest in food who taught a course on the geography of food for many years, I found your September food issue to be exceptional, the best single issue of your magazine I've read.

I especially liked Eva Holland's story about the difficulties of transporting food to Alaska; I've always wondered, as a vegetarian, if I could survive in remote Alaska ("The Road Not Taken"). (Probably not.) And Laureli Ivanoff's essay on the joys of cutting fish ("Working Together Is Everything") — yes, even a vegetarian could appreciate it.

Blake Gumprecht
Albuquerque, New Mexico

Thank you for such a great September issue! I usually read all the articles in each issue, but as an artist, I was particularly touched by the artwork of Narsiso Martinez, created utilizing produce boxes ("Dignified") — beautifully painted, wonderful design, color, expression and ideas. The farmworkers are deeply honored by this work.

I was also moved by Paisley Rekdal's "Eating Bitterness," a profound exploration and powerful personal sharing of elements of Western history that are new to most of us. I knew only the topmost layer of history of Chinese railroad laborers and the Chinese Exclusion Act. Rekdal remedied my ignorance and offered so many insights and missing pieces of cultural history that I know I will read and refer to this article often.

Louise Minks
Leverett, Massachusetts

Along the Albion River in Mendocino County, the California Conservation Corps moves logs and branches into the river.

REPORTAGE

Conservationists make an (intentional) mess in Mendocino

And coho salmon love it.

BY TANVI DUTTA GUPTA | PHOTOS BY CHRISTIE HEMM KLOK

CONSERVATIONISTS restoring salmon along California's North Coast have a mantra: A good coho salmon stream looks like a teenager's bedroom — if teenagers discarded logs and branches instead of dirty clothes. Surveying a stretch of the Navarro River one morning last spring, Anna Halligan, a conservation biologist with Trout Unlimited, was delighted. "This is exactly what we want," she said, examining the debris-filled water. The twigs, dirt and branches around a fallen redwood had slowed the river to a crawl and carved out a deep, sun-dappled pool underneath the trunk.

In September 2020, Trout Unlimited's partners spent days selecting a redwood and then carefully maneuvering it into the river to make it more coho-friendly. That tree has now vanished — crushed under this much larger redwood, likely carried downriver by this winter's rains. The collision has created even more of a "mess" than Halligan could have planned.

Halligan climbed down for a closer look. Within minutes, a young, silvery coho flashed into view in the new pool.

Coho salmon, which migrate between freshwater creeks and the open ocean, have nourished people, plants and animals along the Pacific Coast since time immemorial. Fred Simmons, an environmental technician for the Cahto Tribe of Laytonville Rancheria, recalled growing up along coho runs "jammed up so thick that you could go out there any time of evening and just get whatever you needed for your family."

But logging, development and climate change have devastated the coastal streams, and Simmons — now in his 60s — has seen coho pushed to the brink. The population in and around Mendocino County, toward the southern end of the species' range, was declared threatened by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in 1996 and endangered in 2005.

That young coho in the Navarro River was part of a resurgence: For two years now, conservationists have watched the species return to the coast in notably large numbers. For the first time, "recovery seems possible," said Peter Van De Burgt, a restoration manager with The Nature Conservancy. "We're on the right track."

(*Clockwise from top left*): Conservation biologist Anna Halligan is the North Coast Coho Project director for Trout Unlimited.

As the environmental technician for the Cahto Tribe in Laytonville, California, Fred Simmons oversees the tribe's restoration projects.

The North Fork of the Navarro River has been the site of many restoration projects over the last couple of decades.

On the Ten Mile River in Mendocino County, The Nature Conservancy oversees monitoring for juvenile coho salmon. Biologists implant PIT (Passive Integrated Transponder) tags inside young fish to track their growth and movements.

THE FIRST ATTEMPTS to restore Mendocino's streams for coho and other salmon began in the 1960s. Decades of logging in the area's old-growth forests left woody debris in stream channels, creating miles-long barriers. Well-intentioned state conservationists decided to remove it.

"They had this Western concept, like sweeping the floor," said Anira G'Acha, environmental director for the Cahto Tribe of Laytonville Rancheria. They left behind hundreds of miles of tidy streams — simplified channels like bowling-alley lanes filled with fast-flowing water.

And fish kept dying. "It's hard to be a salmon," said Van De Burgt. Everything wants to eat you — birds, otters, even other fish. Without fallen logs to slow their flow, streams lack the overhanging banks, woody debris and deep pools that young salmon need to hide from predators.

Gradually, researchers realized that salmon needed the shelter provided by logjams. By the time coho salmon populations were protected by the Endangered Species Act, the California Department of Fish and Wildlife "basically did an 'Oops' and said, 'Well, let's put them back in again,'" said John Andersen, a California forester and policy director of

the Mendocino and Humboldt Redwood Companies.

Historically, fire helped fell the trees salmon needed. "Stream habitat evolved around fire for thousands of years," said Ron Reed, a Karuk tribal member who is a cultural biologist and dipnet fisherman. But as the logging industry grew, so did wildfire suppression. Conservationists had to cut down some trees to create new logjams.

In the late 1990s, Mendocino Redwood and other logging companies began partnering with Trout Unlimited to restore coho back to the land they owned; soon, The Nature Conservancy and other groups, supported by state and federal grants, began restoring streams elsewhere in the region. Halligan noted that an "ecological system" of collaborators has sustained this work, directing millions of dollars to local contractors and rural economies.

But creating logjams is harder than clearing them. Projects initially went through the same state environmental permitting processes required for conventional logging projects, despite their substantially different goals. Some took more than a decade to see through.

Other challenges were more practical. "We learned very quickly," said forester Chris Blencowe, who consults on Nature Conservancy and Trout Unlimited projects. Blencowe initially relied on second-growth redwoods but noticed that when they toppled into a streambed, they would "often just break like an overweight watermelon." He's since switched to Douglas fir for many of his projects.

Blencowe has also learned to wedge logs between standing trees so that the wood doesn't wash away in the winter rains, as it did in the early years. The Nature Conservancy has come to rely on a machine that uses vibrations to sink logs into the sediment, since the sound of a power hammer could stun or kill nearby fish.

Even after 20 years, not everything goes according to plan. Van De Burgt said this unpredictability is a feature, not a bug: "We want to implement projects that create chaos in the river." The more chaos, the more places young coho will have to live and survive — and the more coho will make their way downstream to the ocean.

The projects can benefit other salmon and steelhead species, too, as well as the streamside forests. Felling nearby second-growth trees for logjams "encourages understory plant relatives to grow," Marisa McGrew, a Karuk and Yurok woman and assistant natural resources director for the Wiyot Tribe, said over email. "Stream restoration and forest restoration go hand in hand."

IN THE WINTER of 2023-2024, 15,000 coho salmon returned to spawn along the Mendocino coast, the highest number recorded by the California Department of Fish and Wildlife in 16 years of monitoring the population. Last winter, according to preliminary estimates, that number nearly doubled. "I think we got the perfect alignment," said Sarah Gallagher, who leads the agency's monitoring program. Good ocean conditions, a reprieve from several years of drought, and hundreds of miles of restored streams have combined to foster a flush of coho.

Still, this recovering population represents a fraction of historic runs. Once, hundreds of thousands of coho returned to California streams each year. But chinook and steelhead continue to dwindle. In mid-April, the interstate Pacific Fishery Management Council extended its ban on ocean salmon fishing for a third year. And hundreds more miles of North Coast streams still need wood. "Sometimes, when you look at it on a map, it looks like we've barely done anything at all," said Halligan of Trout Unlimited.

Even as this year's population is tallied, its habitat's future is uncertain. Earlier this year, the Trump administration proposed deep cuts to the budget of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, whose Pacific Coastal Salmon Recovery Fund has supported much of the restoration work along with Gallagher's coho monitoring.

Meanwhile, Northern California conservationists are exploring alternatives, such as the $10 billion for climate resilience projects in Proposition Four, which California voters approved last November. With recovery underway, they're determined to continue bringing coho back. The coho "are realizing this is their homeland where they were born," Simmons said. "It seems like they're trying to heal."

Tanvi Dutta Gupta's writing and reporting appears on underground murals, in Bay Nature *and* Science*, and on her mother's Facebook page.*

Christie Hemm Klok is a San Francisco- based photojournalist. She is passionate about storytelling that highlights the relationship between nature and humans.

This story was produced with support from Bay Nature, baynature.org*, a nonprofit news organization that connects the people of the San Francisco Bay Area more deeply with the natural world.*

This story is part of High Country News' *Conservation Beyond Boundaries project, which is supported by the BAND Foundation.*

The Trump slump

Western economies struggle with tariffs, layoffs, federal funding clawbacks.

BY JONATHAN THOMPSON

DURING HIS PRESIDENTIAL campaign, Donald Trump talked a lot about the economy. He vowed to bring down the cost of groceries (an "old-fashioned" word with which he was obsessed), revive manufacturing, slash federal spending and inefficiency and distribute the savings to the citizenry, all while achieving energy dominance and the high-paying jobs that come with it.

By early summer, however, it was becoming clear that Trump's economic policies were not having the promised effect.

Trump's tariffs only exacerbated the post-COVID inflation that had haunted Joe Biden's presidency. Prices rose on everything from steel pipe to coffee, while retaliatory trade barriers hurt U.S. manufacturers. The loss of Biden-era grants and loans caused several firms to cancel planned billion-dollar manufacturing facilities, and tourism fell as international travelers began to avoid the U.S. The mass firing of federal employees has further eroded the already-lagging jobs situation, while the mass deportation and harassment of immigrants has sent painful ripples through the West's construction, agriculture, leisure and hospitality industries.

Across the Southwest, the economic cracks are widening.

SOURCES: National Park Service, Bureau of Labor Statistics, Arizona Tourism Office, *Moab Times-Independent*, International Trade Administration, University of Arizona Economic and Business Research Center, Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority, New Mexico Department of Workforce Solutions, *Arizona Mirror*, E2, KUER, AgWest Farm Credit, Hay & Forage Grower, USDA Foreign Agricultural Service, Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas, Nevada Department of Employment Training and Rehabilitation. Icons: Freepik / Flaticon

TOURISM

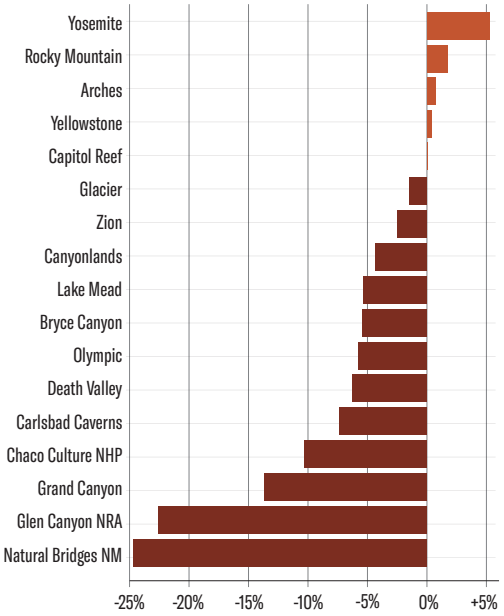
The administration's "America First" creed — which often manifests as hostility toward anyone who is not the "right kind" of American — has begun to hollow out the nation's essential immigrant labor force, hitting the agriculture, construction and service industries especially hard. It's also discouraged travel from abroad, especially in the Southwest, walloping that region's tourism sector.

The World Travel & Tourism Council predicted that the U.S. will lose about $12.5 billion in international spending this year, prompting Council President Julia Simpson to warn:

> **"This is a wake-up call for the U.S. government. While other nations are rolling out the welcome mat, the U.S. government is putting up the 'closed' sign."**

Following a string of record-breaking years for national parks, the number of visitors enjoying America's "best idea" has dried up this summer, impacting gateway communities, especially in the Southwest, despite relatively low gas prices.

National Park Service summer visits, 2025 vs. 2024



▼ **3.8%** Amount that international air travel into the U.S. for January through July declined from the previous year.

▼ **15%** Number of Canadian air passengers arriving in the U.S. this August compared to last year.

930,982 August 2024

783,532 August 2025

TRADE WAR FALLOUT

Trump's tariffs were supposed to help American businesses by raising costs on imported goods. But the haphazard way in which they've been implemented has spawned uncertainty and increased the cost of steel, aluminum, fertilizer and other inputs for American producers, in many cases hurting rather than helping them. Meanwhile, retaliatory tariffs have seriously dampened hay and meat exports from Western states, especially those going to China.

> **"The Liberation Day chaos and tariff antics have harmed the domestic energy industry. Drill, baby, drill will not happen with this level of volatility. Companies will continue to lay down rigs and frack spreads."**
>
> —Petroleum executive in an anonymous response to a Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas survey

In September, there were **8% fewer drilling rigs** operating in Western states than there were a year earlier, an indication of a struggling industry.

▼ **27%** Amount that hay exports from California, Arizona and Utah fell over the first seven months of the year, compared to the same period last year.

$734,169,000 in exports Jan.-July 2024

$526,913,000 in exports Jan.-July 2025

CLEAN ENERGY AND MANUFACTURING

The Trump administration and the GOP-led Congress have been on a rampage against non-fossil fuel energy, clawing back Biden-era funding and incentives for electric vehicles and chargers, clean energy manufacturing, and solar and wind power — both the utility-scale and rooftop kind. In response, companies and states have canceled billions of dollars' worth of investments, and dozens of planned projects are at risk.

▼ **$7 billion** Amount in federal funding the Trump administration reclaimed when it canceled the Solar For All program, which would have helped lower-income households install solar.

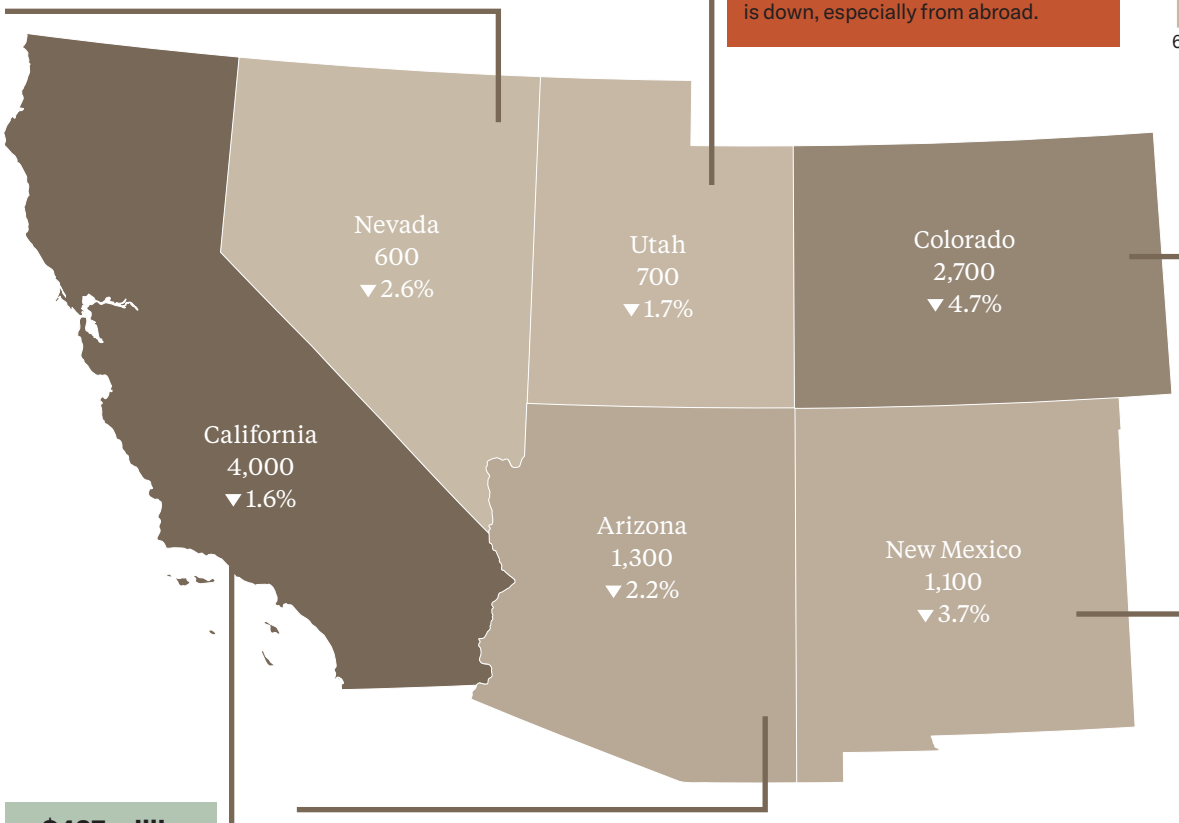
▼ **$156m** Nevada
▼ **$156m** Colorado
▼ **$156m** Arizona
▼ **$156m** New Mexico
▼ **$62.5m** Utah
▼ **$250m** California

▼ **11%; 12%** Decrease in visitors to Las Vegas in June and July respectively, compared to those months in 2024, resulting in the **loss of 4,300 jobs** in the metro area in August alone.

▼ **7,300** Number of construction jobs lost in Nevada between January and August of this year.

▼ **4%** Decrease in tourism over last year this spring in Grand County, Utah, home to Arches and Canyonlands national parks, despite a predicted 6% increase. Business owners told the *Moab Times-Independent* that tourism is down, especially from abroad.

Federal government jobs eliminated during the first six months of the Trump administration



In June, Amprius Technologies **abandoned plans to establish a $190 million electric vehicle battery factory** in an existing warehouse in Brighton, Colorado.

▼ **$38.9 million** Decrease in Colorado's meat-related exports for the first half of 2025 compared to last year.

ConocoPhillips is **laying off 25% of its workforce, while Chevron laid off 200 workers** in the Permian Basin this spring.

▼ **$66 million** Projected decrease in New Mexico oil and gas revenues in the next fiscal year compared to 2024, thanks to low oil prices and a drilling slowdown.

5.2% In New Mexico — the nation's second largest oil producer — the unemployment rate shot up from 3.5% in April 2025 to 5.2% in July, a possible indication of trouble in the oil patch.

▼ **$427 million** Amount the Trump administration rescinded in September from a project aimed at building an offshore wind assembly, launch and maintenance facility at Humboldt Bay in Northern California.

▼ **8%** Decrease in July passenger volume at Page and Flagstaff, Arizona's airports — major Southwestern tourism hubs — compared to the same month last year.

▼ **7.5%** Decrease in Arizona's June lodging tax revenues compared to the previous year.

▼ **3,000** Number of manufacturing jobs Arizona has lost since the beginning of the year.

Not long after Trump's inauguration, the Phoenix area's booming clean energy manufacturing industry took a big hit: Electric vehicle maker Nikola **laid off 855 workers**; solar panel manufacturer Meyer Burger **closed its factory**; battery-storage manufacturer Li-Cycle shuttered its facility; and Kore Power **nixed plans to build a $1.2 billion battery factory** expected to employ about 3,000 people.

The GOP's Big Beautiful Bill's clean energy tax credit phase-out jeopardizes three proposed utility-scale solar projects on public land in Arizona **worth an estimated $1.6 billion**.

REPORTAGE

A forgotten bridge reborn

Idaho's newest wildlife crossing didn't need to be built. It already existed.

BY KYLIE MOHR
PHOTOS BY REBECCA STUMPF

EVERY FALL AND WINTER, elk meander their way down from Idaho's Coeur d'Alene Mountains and congregate in the Silver Valley near Interstate 90. Sometimes they try to cross the four-lane freeway, walking, leaping or sprinting through the stream of cars and trucks. But those interactions rarely end well for the elk or the drivers.

Now, however, there's new hope for the animals and motorists passing through Silver Valley. Passionate locals have rallied to transform a defunct bridge in the small town of Osburn into a wildlife overpass.

Collisions between motorists and wildlife kill more than 350 million animals and 200 humans and injure more than 26,000 people in the U.S. every year. They are also expensive, costing over $8 billion in property damage annually.

But wildlife crossings aren't cheap, either, especially if they're built from scratch. According to the Center for Large Landscape Conservation, overpasses can run between $1 million and $7 million depending on their size and the surrounding terrain. Idaho's first wildlife overpass, built near Boise at Cervidae Peak in 2023, cost $6.5 million.

By comparison, the Osburn bridge project came to about $645,000, with the primary cost

going to fencing to funnel the wildlife toward the bridge.

It's common knowledge that elk, whitetail deer, coyotes and even moose cross the freeway near the bridge. Community members use a Facebook group as a way to alert each other whenever there are animals on or near the section of freeway that runs through Osburn. Laura Wolf, a regional wildlife biologist with the Idaho Department of Fish and Game, noted that the stretch of I-90 where the overpass is located has the second-highest density of roadkill between Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, and the Montana border.

"I-90 is such a barrier for wildlife in the region," said Eric Greenwell, senior connectivity specialist at the Yellowstone to Yukon Conservation Initiative, a conservation group. "It's one of our priority freeways."

The wildlife crossing was the brainchild of Osburn resident Carl Wilson, a long-haul trucker, avid outdoorsman and longtime supporter of the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation. About a decade ago, Wilson began to wonder whether the dead-end bridge at the edge of town could be repurposed to help wildlife cross the freeway.

The bridge over the freeway and the South Fork of the Coeur d'Alene River was built in 1969 in anticipation of the town's growth. But shortly thereafter, a mining company bought a parcel for stashing its mine tailings on the north side of the freeway, blocking residential expansion. Then, the company demolished half of the bridge. The section that was left crossed the freeway and then stopped abruptly in its tracks.

"At that point, it became the bridge to nowhere," said Kirsten Voorhees, a fourth-generation Silver Valley resident and civil engineer.

Wilson spoke to representatives from Idaho Fish and Game, the Idaho Department of Transportation and the Shoshone County commissioners and knocked on doors to build community support. Voorhees described him as dogged: "He had no problem hustling," she said. "He never gave up." But by 2021, he realized he could use help from people with technical expertise. "One person can't do it all himself," he said. So Voorhees got involved.

For Voorhees, the issue was personal: When she was 16, she hit a whitetail deer on the freeway while driving alone late at night. Her sedan spun onto the shoulder, barely missing a light pole; law enforcement officers told her she was lucky to be alive.

One day in 2022, as they were talking over coffee, Wilson told Voorhees he was worried that he might not live to see the project completed. So he made Voorhees promise she'd see it through. "I told him, 'You have my word,'" Voorhees said. "Whatever it takes." Wilson died in December 2022 at the age of 80.

Voorhees was determined to keep her promise. "It became a blood oath," she said. Grants from the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, National Fish and Wildlife Foundation and the Yellowstone to Yukon Conservation Initiative secured after Wilson's death provided funding for the necessary fencing and bridge retrofits, which were completed in August.

Fencing was installed on the bridge so that spooked animals couldn't jump off onto the freeway, and today it extends more than a mile in each direction on both sides of the road. In addition to directing animals toward the overpass, it also encourages them to use an underpass to the east. One-way gates in the fencing allow animals on the freeway to pass through to safety.

The repurposed crossing won't last forever, however. The Idaho Department of Transportation plans to remove the bridge within 10 years; it needs repairs and lacks enough clearance for some semi-trucks. But even if it only lasts a short time, Voorhees said, the reduction in wildlife-human collisions will be worth it. She hopes that animals make good use of the bridge so that a new, higher wildlife overpass can be constructed in the same location.

In early September, I stood on the overpass with Voorhees and Wolf. Cars and semis whizzed beneath our feet, and the dull roar of traffic permeated our conversation as we paced over the crossing, imagining the critters that will follow in our footsteps. The bridge officially "opened" in August, and Idaho Fish and Game is monitoring the crossing with motion-activated video cameras. Several whitetail deer used it even before the fencing was completed, while a coyote appeared to consider it, but ultimately retreated.

Animal traffic is expected to pick up as ungulates migrate downhill to the valley floor. Both Voorhees and Wolf are proud to have helped Wilson achieve his long-cherished dream. And Voorhees hopes the bridge is eventually named after him: "People want to see him get credit for his final act," she said.

Kylie Mohr is a correspondent for High Country News *writing from Montana.*

This story is part of High Country News' *Conservation Beyond Boundaries project, which is supported by the BAND Foundation.*

A previously abandoned bridge in the small town of Osburn, Idaho, is now a wildlife overpass (*opposite*). Kirsten Voorhees, a fourth-generation Silver Valley resident and civil engineer, helped lead the project (*below*).

A toothless conspiracy theory

Make America Healthy Again wants fluoride out of drinking water, regardless of what you want.

BY LEAH SOTTILE | ILLUSTRATION BY ISRAEL VARGAS

ON THE EVENING OF JUNE 2, 2025, the City Council meeting in Pasco, Washington, was winding down when Councilor Leo Perales piped up from his seat on the wood-trimmed dais.

"I know we've talked about fluoride a few times," Perales said. "If we can just bring forward a vote in the next couple weeks to just remove it from our water without getting any staff presentation, or hearing, I think a lot of us feel that we should just take it out." Perales had made local headlines a few months earlier when he released a plan to establish the Department of Pasco Efficiency, or "DOPE," a deliberate echo of DOGE, the federal Department of Government Efficiency.

Mayor Pete Serrano leaned toward his microphone. "I'm certainly in favor of removing it," he said. Beside Serrano's mic sat a blender cup advertising Titan Nutrition, a company that sells "Trigger Warning" supplement powder. The product's label sports a dramatic image of President Donald Trump bleeding from his ear after an assassination attempt.

By the time of that council meeting, Robert F. Kennedy Jr., the United States secretary of Health and Human Services, had announced plans to tell the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to stop recommending fluoridation, the practice of adding the mineral to water supplies to help prevent dental decay. Dentists were alarmed: Fluoride strengthens tooth enamel, and without it, acids can cause holes to form, leading to cavities, difficulty eating and debilitating pain.

While high concentrations of fluoride can give teeth a mottled look and cause abdominal distress, or, in rare cases, even organ failure, Kennedy had long spread disproven conspiracy theories that it is a dangerous neurotoxin that lowers children's IQs. As a Cabinet member, he was making it a cornerstone of his Make America Healthy Again (MAHA) campaign.

Since 1945, when Grand Rapids, Michigan, became the first American city to fluoridate its water, studies have documented marked drops in tooth decay and dental disease in communities that take up the practice. The CDC considers fluoridation one of the 20th century's 10 great public health achievements, alongside things like widespread seatbelt adoption and declining tobacco use. Reversing course "will be hardest felt by Medicaid beneficiaries, including children and the most vulnerable Americans who often cannot afford routine oral care," Brett Kessler, president of the American Dental Association, warned in a press release.

But since fluoridation began, conspiracy theories about it have been "an ongoing, never-ending American obsession," wrote R. Allan Freeze and Jay H. Lehr in their 2008 book, *The Fluoride Wars*.

In the West — from Mesa, Arizona, to Port Angeles, Washington — communities have debated fluoridation for decades. Dentists testify about science. Opponents argue fluoride is poison, and many insist that "clean water" must be unfluoridated. In some states, a municipality's decision to fluoridate is up to voters; in other places, residents must bring the issue to their council, which ultimately makes the decision.

Around the time of Kennedy's pronouncement, however, Western lawmakers began sidestepping public input and unilaterally banning water fluoridation. In late 2024, the Aberdeen, Washington, City Council passed an ordinance to stop fluoridation, ignoring a survey showing that local residents wanted it. This year, the council in Lynden, Washington, did the same after a motion to put the issue in front of residents for an advisory vote failed. And in March, Utah Gov. Spencer Cox signed the first statewide ban on fluoridating water in the nation, despite a poll showing that most Utahns support fluoride or think the issue should be decided by communities.

This summer, the Sweet Home, Oregon, City Council also ended the practice. "Over the last few years, I've heard from a significant number of residents asking that fluoride be removed," Mayor Susan Coleman wrote in an email to a resident.

Yet a public records request revealed that Coleman's emails from 2020 to 2025 showed just a single email from one resident opposing fluoride. "Today, fluoride is widely available through toothpaste and rinses for those who choose to use it," Coleman replied to a request for comment.

Now Pasco, a city of nearly 82,000 with a majority Hispanic population located in the arid shrub-steppe of southeastern Washington, was considering doing the same.

At the June 2 meeting, after Perales and Serrano discussed ending fluoridation, then-interim City Manager Dave Zabell spoke into his microphone. "There are people who are strong believers in fluoride for dental health, and there's strong believers opposed to fluoride," he said. "My fear is that if you just make a decision without inviting input from those groups, it could just come back and bite ya." The council ultimately decided to arrange a staff presentation on the matter and schedule two public feedback sessions.

The first public session took place on a hot, dry evening in early August. One by one, about 20 people took seats in chairs with fading red cushions in the council's chambers. Many wore medical scrubs. They were dentists, a dental hygienist, a school nurse, parents. Most spoke of fluoride's documented benefits, especially to low-income communities, children with developmental disabilities, people who lack dental insurance or any access to fluoride rinses. Just two people expressed a desire to halt fluoridation.

Spencer Jilek, who practiced dentistry in Pasco for 42 years, stepped up to the podium.

"I was going to start off my speech by thanking the council members for being here," he said, waving a hand toward the front of the room. But the chairs on the dais were empty: No council members had come to listen. "I've never seen a council disrespect the citizens of Pasco like this council is doing this evening."

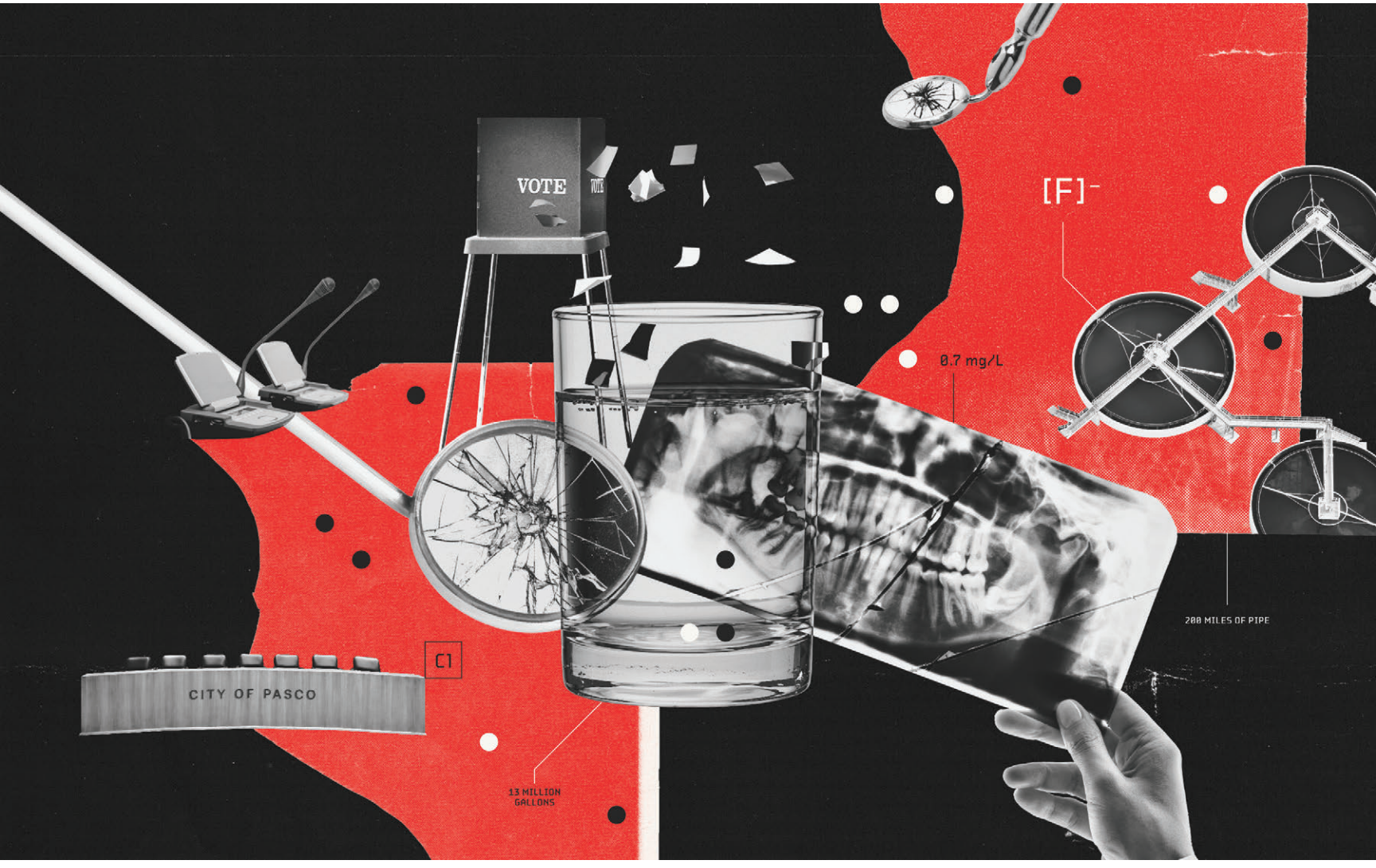
FOR DRINKABLE WATER TO RUN from Pasco's taps, 15 million gallons are sucked up every day from the Columbia River and piped through two treatment plants, where it's filtered and strained. Several chemicals are added to meet federal drinking water standards, including chlorine, which disinfects water to protect people from parasites and diseases, and permanganate, which makes water clear and removes funky tastes and smells. And, of course, there's fluoride: Pasco spends $40,000 per year on fluoride to meet the federal standard of 0.7 parts per million.

Surveys show community support for fluoride; in 2009, an independent survey of 300 residents found that almost 80% supported continued fluoridation. A more recent poll is in progress, but in late June, staff members discussed early results over email: Of 991 residents surveyed, 52.5% opposed removing fluoride.

Pasco's City Council is composed of seven members, the majority conservative. A review of members' fluoride-related emails from January to June 2025, obtained through a public records request, showed little demand for removal, though one woman emailed a quote from the Book of Revelation in the Jehovah's Witnesses New World Translation. "Hopefully the fluoride will go away!" she added.

"This will be a big community decision," Perales replied to one person who wrote in support of fluoride. "Thank you for your input and I will definitely consider it."

But late on the night of the June meeting, Perales emailed two other conservative council members, Charles Grimm and Peter Harpster, suggesting that his mind was made up. In the email — subject line: "FLOURIDE" — he laid out a plan for discontinuation: "This could be fast tracked and could be done by



November if we move on it."

"I say we keep it way more simple than that," Grimm responded: He thought they should have a single presentation on the matter "and vote the next week."

"Sounds good to me. If we have the votes, let's do it," Perales replied.

Not everyone on Pasco's city council opposes fluoridation. "I do not support removal as I represent the many that have seen the benefits of this mineral in Pasco water," Councilor Blanche Barajas emailed *HCN*.

Both Grimm and Perales declined to answer questions for this story. While Pasco has discussed fluoridation in the past, the recent debate came "out of nowhere," said Janae Parent, district administrator of the Benton-Franklin Health District. Did the council come to the health district asking for information on fluoride? "No, they did not."

"Having been born and raised here, I've got those conservative values in me as a leader," she said. "But we've got some responsibility here as a community to also take a look at facts, take a look at studies, and understand where *we* want to be, not just what's being said at a national level, and not have groupthink."

"Why would you choose an issue that would actually hurt people?" Jilek, the dentist who testified to an empty dais in August, said later. "This is not the hill they should want to die on."

Seth Cotlar, a history professor at Willamette University who writes about the history of far-right politics, wondered the same thing. "How does something that isn't an issue become an issue?" he said. "And why would you want to make that thing an issue?"

He pointed out that, in the past, ultraconservative groups like the John Birch Society pushed conspiracy theories warning that fluoridation was part of a Communist plot. In the 1950s, the Los Angeles-based anti-Communist Keep America Committee distributed a leaflet naming what it believed were "The Unholy Three": polio vaccines, mental hygiene and fluoridated water. By adopting fluoride, "every citizen will be at the mercy of the enemy — already within our gates," it read.

Fluoride's sudden revival as a hot-button issue is "connected to this generalized world of conspiracy, which MAHA has amplified," Cotlar said. "(The podcast *Conspirituality* has) a line that I really like, which is that these MAHA people, they get the feelings right, but the facts wrong. Especially around health, there's a real sense of vulnerability and uncertainty and fear and anxiety and mistrust of our health system." That creates an environment, he said, "for people to rush in with simple answers."

But it also plays into real concerns. Amarnath Amarasingam, an associate professor at the School of Religion and the Department of Political Studies at Queens University in Ontario, Canada, said Kennedy exploits real issues — water pollution, lack of access to healthy food — to sow conspiracy theories and mistrust of science. "At the core, he's saying we eat very unhealthy foods. Well, yeah, that's true; all doctors have been saying that forever. And then it becomes 'vaccines are bad for us ... vaccines were produced by evil deep-state actors in order to keep us subservient.' And now you're in the conspiracy space."

Amarasingam said that if people really believe fluoride is toxic but unavoidable, that could contribute to an overall feeling of powerlessness. "Anti-fluoride activism might be a symptom of this overwhelming sense that forest fires, pandemics, whatever else is going on — things are collapsing. All I can really do is protect the four walls around my kids and myself. It might be a symptom of this sense of chaos."

AS FALL CLOSED IN, Pasco's council changed, but the fluoride issue remained.

Serrano was tapped by the Trump administration to be the interim U.S. attorney of eastern Washington, and the council voted to replace him with Joe Cotta, a prominent conservative pastor.

In mid-September, the council held another listening session. This time, six members were present. Dentists, teachers, parents and the heads of the local and state dental associations all testified in favor of fluoride.

Lilo Black, a local dentist, stepped to the microphone first and brought up a recent decision by the council to honor Charlie Kirk, the conservative activist killed in September. "In your proclamation, you recounted how Charlie wanted people to think critically and engage civically. ... So I find it so perplexing that when it comes to the matter at hand, water fluoridation in Pasco, that you have completely diverged from the very tenets you espouse," she said. "In fact, the origin of this issue seems to be a mystery."

Just four locals spoke against fluoridation. "Fluoride is a neurotoxin," Lacey Walter said. "I grew up with well water, my parents opted out of fluoride, I never used fluoridated toothpaste and my teeth are fine."

No matter how strongly held their opinions or how great their expertise, the most that Pasco residents could do was testify. None would be able to vote on the issue directly.

After the meeting, Parent, the health district administrator, was hopeful. "The council was actively listening and asking questions," she said. "So it's possible we may have made some headway in having more thoughtful discussions moving forward."

The council is set to vote on the issue in mid-November.

Leah Sottile is a correspondent and contributing editor for High Country News.

"We've got some responsibility as a community to take a look at facts, take a look at studies, and understand where we *want to be, not just what's being said at a national level."*

Thank you, readers!

Your generous and dedicated support makes these pages possible.

If you would like to make a tax-deductible contribution, please scan the QR code to the right, visit hcn.org/give2hcn, call 800-905-1155 or mail a check to: P.O. Box 1090, Paonia, CO 81428.

Anonymous (109)
In honor of Dean Rickman
In memory of Edgar E. Cooper
In memory of John Hauser
In memory of Chief Joseph
In memory of John Kauffmann
In memory of Russell Martenson
In memory of Elisabeth Ruffner
Elizabeth Bardwell
Blue Moon Fund
Alden Cadwell
Jane Clark
Martha Conklin & Roger Bales
Ella Deutchman
Tom Gerrity
Chris Lovenko
John Lehenbauer
Janet Lever-Wood
Phillip Round

ALASKA

Stephen Livingston & Peggy Cobey | Anchorage
Kathleen Lucich | Anchorage
John & Rika Mouw | Homer

ARIZONA

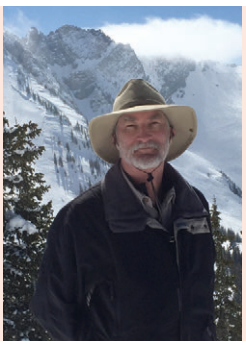
Charles Awalt | Prescott
Sandra Borg & Michael Doubleday | Tucson
Ray Cage | Tucson
Charles & Louise Conrad | Tucson
Wallace Craig | Tucson
Diane Davidson | Portal
Timothy Flood | Phoenix
Richard Haag | Flagstaff
Helen Heisler | Glendale
Michael Huckaby | Tucson
Ian Jackson | Pinetop
John Krizek | Prescott
Sharon Larson | Tucson
Leland Miller | Phoenix
Daniel Robinett & Linda Kennedy | Elgin
Tamera Ross | Camp Verde
Charles Schulz | Tucson
Catherine Yarber | Seligman

CALIFORNIA

Rhonda Anderson | Calimesa
Jenny Basiji | Los Altos Hills
Richard Baumgartner | Palo Alto
Jill Beckett | Santa Cruz
John Bernstein | Berkeley
Dan Booth | Anaheim
Mark Bracewell | Atascadero
Douglas Brown | Aptos
Roland Bryan | Santa Barbara
Eric Carlson | Livermore
Robert Coon | El Cerrito
William Copren | Sattley
Claudia Cudia | Novato
Vila Deiss | Vallejo
Elizabeth Di Regolo | Gold River
Pamela Dougherty | Morro Bay
Sally Falkenhagen | Atherton
Jerry Ferguson | San Diego
Norbert Frane | Cambria
Rosie Garcia | Laguna Niguel
Charles & Mary George | Orange
El Padre Guiney | Ben Lomond
Gerhard Hahne | Sunnyvale
Debby Harrison & Greg Blomstron | Arcata
Steven Hibshman | Foster City
Gretchen Hofmann | Santa Barbara
Bill Hudson | San Francisco
Jennifer Inglet | Yuba City
Lois James | Encinitas
Richard James | Burbank
Jon Klusmire | Bishop
Mark Lance | Chico
David Larson | El Cerrito
David Lennette | Alameda
Margaret & David MacPhail | Santa Rosa
Fran McDermott | Dorris
Theresa McGovern | San Francisco
Kathy Morrissey | Palo Cedro
Marybeth Norgren | Del Mar
Grace Peng | Redondo Beach
Chad Roberts | Davis
Mark J. Roller | San Francisco
Rosenthal Family Foundation | Los Angeles
Nadine Semer | Carmel by the Sea
Donna Shoemaker | Larkspur
Jerry Smith | San Jose
John Taylor | Burlingame
Gene Titus | Manchester
Noreen Trombley | Yosemite National Park

COLORADO

In honor of Andy Wiessner | Snowmass
In memory of Sarajane Anderson | Thornton
In memory of Howard & Mary Alice Evans | Fort Collins
In memory of Philip Rule | Paonia
Hill Abell & Laura Agnew | Salida
David Abell | Denver
Tom Abood | Centennial
Ellen Aiken | Boulder
Elaine Andersen | Fort Collins
Linda Andes-Georges & Jean Pierre Georges | Longmont
Eva Arndt | Littleton
Russell & Carol Atha | Steamboat Springs
Ralph Bender | Wellington
John & Carol Bert | Arvada
Kenneth Bertelson | Broomfield
Peter Bonaker | Crestone
Charles Bordner | Colorado Springs
Thomas Breitkreuz | Centennial
Keith Brown | Colorado Springs
Dennis Brown | Denver
Bill Brown | Estes Park
Chris Brown | Boulder
John Bruno | Crested Butte
Buzz Burrell | Boulder
Deborah Byrd | Boulder
Barbralu Cohen | Boulder
Ernie & Margo Cotton | Durango
Jim & Todd Cowart | Nederland
Carol Daake | Greeley
Ann Davenport | Eagle
Janet Davidson | Colorado Springs
William Davidson | Golden
Tom Delate | Centennial
Carol Dutton | Greeley
Rose & Peter Edwards | Telluride
Evan Ela & Maggie Elligott | Littleton
Fred Ellenbecker | Bayfield
Scott L. Fetchenhier | Silverton
Terry Fitzmorris | Lakewood
Bob Foster | Grand Junction
Charles Fry | Parker
David Futey | Colorado Springs
Mark Giesecke | Carbondale
Ned Grauel | Centennial
Gary & Faith Gregor | Denver
Margaret Griffes | Greenwood Village
Peter & Caroline Guynn | Denver
Joan Hay & Brian Muller | Boulder



"Born and raised in the Intermountain West, education and career have held me in unfortunate diaspora for the last 50 years. Worth its weight in platinum, HCN *has provided throughout a vital and vibrant connection for important issues, developments, and people in my homeland. I'd have been well and truly lost without it. Keep up the great work, and thanks!"*

–L.V. Giddings, Silver Spring, Maryland

"What I like about HCN *is the information about Indigenous food sovereignty and the great articles you all have, and actually, it was through getting the article on the Smokehouse Collective that I came to appreciate all that you cover."*
–Karen, California

Terry Haynes | Fort Collins
Carla Hendrickson | Pueblo
Gary Herrli | Boulder
Joni Huffman | Morrison
Keith Jacober | Centennial
Bill Johnson & Cheri Ferbrache | Denver
Edward Kennedy | Boulder
Jay Kenney | Paonia
Major King | Fort Collins
Peter Kirsch & Pat Reynolds | Denver
Stephen & Yoshie Koester | Boulder
Jane Larsen | Loveland
Jim Laurita | Lakewood
Robert Lee | Pagosa Springs
Torsten Lyon | Golden
Virginia McAfee | Boulder
Kristy McFarland | Crested Butte
Susan Meason | Carbondale
Hans & Marylyn Miesler | Penrose
York Miller | Denver
Bill Mitchem | Rangely
Robert Murphy | Grand Junction
Philip & Joyce Nelson | Golden
Steve Nissen | Denver
Jim Parys | Niwot
Marcia Patton Mallory | Fort Collins
Marie Pierce | Littleton
Jennifer Pitt | Boulder
Kari Pokorny | Denver
Jane Reed | Hotchkiss
Laurie Rugenstein | Boulder
Drusilla Rutledge | Denver
Randall Rutsch | Boulder
Larry Seidl | Grand Junction
Gary Sims | Evergreen
Emily Sinclair | Hotchkiss
Jill Skorpen | Lakewood

IDAHO

Preston Andrews | Sandpoint
Mary Blew | Moscow
Judy & John Casper | Middleton
Nancy DuTeau | Pocatello
Douglas Halford | Idaho Falls
Molly Hutsinpiller | Ketchum
Sarah Jessup | McCall
JoAnne & Paul Michaels | Boise
Adrian Pfisterer | Boise
Duane Priest | Deary
Mary Rogers | Star
Steve Smith | Swan Lake
Lynn Smith | Hayden
Charles Trost | Pocatello
Eric & Brandy Wilson | Boise

MONTANA

Ed Bangs | Helena
Michael Brown | Missoula
William Carpenter | Whitefish
Nancy Curriden | Billings
Cynthia Di Francesco | Livingston
Ennis & Susan Geraghty | Columbus
Craig Groves & LeeAnne French | Bozeman
Mary Guggenheim | Bozeman
Jim & Lillian Hartung | Billings
Ronald & Carol Hildebrand | Billings
Richard & Kaye Hoffmaster | Somers
Mark Juedeman | Helena
Matt Kennedy | Columbia Falls
Maxwell P. Milton | Helena
William Phillips | Livingston
Linda Pilsworth | Missoula
Jack & Rachel Potter | Columbia Falls
Jay Rector | Missoula
Gary Smith | Billings
Elaine Snyder | Kalispell
David Spildie | Missoula
Gary Splittberger | Billings
John Sveen | Bozeman
John Unwin | Bozeman
Margaret Webster | Billings

NEVADA

Dick Benoit | Reno
Carole Childs | Pahrump
Christopher Cochran | Sparks
Phyllis Duncan | Las Vegas
Ellen Fockler | Reno
Justin French | Spring Creek
Joxe Mallea-Olaetxe | Reno
Gary A. Saunders | Pahrump
Lynn Zonge | Carson City

NEW MEXICO

Kathy Anaya | Albuquerque
Susan Bell | Santa Fe
Richard & Lois Carter | Reserve
Michael Crews | Los Ranchos
Laurie Cullinan | Albuquerque
Don Fisher | Albuquerque
David Floyd | Santa Fe
Kenneth Harrington | Carlsbad
Adelaide & Edward Jacobson | Los Alamos
Joyce Johns | Peralta
Yale Jones | Ranchos de Taos
Christopher Jones | Tularosa
Thom Kutt | Placitas
Constance Leary | Arroyo Hondo
Martha Liebert | Bernalillo
Ron Loehman | Albuquerque
Alan Marks & Josephine Lopez | Albuquerque
James McGrath | Santa Fe
Judy Mosher | Santa Fe
Bill & Mary Orr | Ohkay Owingeh
Larry Shore & Clare Castiglia | Albuquerque
Marilyn Thayer | Los Alamos
Anthony Traweek | Albuquerque
Patricia Walter | Albuquerque
Bill Wiese | Albuquerque
Grace Williams | Mimbres

OREGON

Kipp Bajaj | St. Helens
Nancy Bishop | The Dalles
Michael & Sharon Boreing | Portland
Phillip & Karyn Callaway | Crawfordsville
Elnora Cameron | Joseph
Avram Chetron | Ashland
Catherine Ciarlo | Portland
Mike & Sue Daugherty | La Grande
Erik Fisher | Eugene
Loren Gerig | Albany
Judy & Dave Heller | Portland
Charles & Katherine Hunt | Eugene
Terry Jess | Albany
Arthur Martin | Portland
Richard Martin | Jacksonville
Rob Lamb | Portland
Kay Myklebust | Salem
Henry Oberhelman | Forest Grove
Rick Ray & Anne Philipsborn | Troutdale
Karen Riener | Richland
Mark Rogers & Janet Davis | Sandy
Sharon Creek-Siewert | Ashland
Patricia Smith | Ashland
Hugh Studebaker | Salem
Stephen Thomas | Portland
Jean Thompson | Chiloquin
David Walp | Springfield
Bob Wendel & Jeannie Britton | Hillsboro

UTAH

Jane Campbell | Park City
Sid Cowand | Salt Lake City
Paul Dremann | Salt Lake City
Susan Fleming | Salt Lake City
Carol Goodman | Sandy
Billie Larson | Holladay
Hank Louis | Park City
Jennifer MacAdam | Logan
Kathryn MacKay | Ogden
Scott McKay | Nephi
Steve Mimnaugh | Sandy
R. Keith Pitts | Salt Lake City
Ira Rubinfeld | Springdale
David Smith | Sandy
Rhoda Stauffer | Park City
Brian Swanson & Pat Priebe-Swanson | Teasdale
Stephanie & Park Willis | Salt Lake City
Park Willis | Salt Lake City
Sheldon & Elaine Wood | Centerville
Mary Ann Wright | Salt Lake City

WASHINGTON

Jan Baker | Spokane
Becky Beasley | Everett
Andrea Buck | Clinton
Carl Burns | Renton
Dan & Molly Carmody | Yelm
Linda Codlin | Burlington
Tish Eaton | Ellensburg
Roland Emetaz | Vancouver
Candace & Donald France | Yakima
Robert Fuerstenberg | Vashon
Marilee Fuller | Seattle
Betsy Gabel | Roy
Karl Halupka | Leavenworth
Dennis Hibbert | Seattle
Jean Jacobsen | Tacoma
Lloyd & Mildred Kellogg | Richland
Kim Larsen | Winthrop
Chris Marks | Bellevue
Kent D. Morris | McCleary
G. Harvey Morrison | Spokane
David Nelson | Port Angeles
Russell Ralph | Bellingham
Rex & Catherine Reed | Selah
Paul Richardson | Spokane
Clint Rogel | Spokane
Martha Scott | Seattle
Mary Ellen Smith | Seattle
Sonja Sollie | Bremerton
Earl Sutherland & Judy Gilbert | Camas
Eric Swanson | Seattle
Mikki Symonds | Prosser
Natasha Yankoffski | Gig Harbor

WYOMING

Steve Bozich | Casper
Pam Cutler & Robert McDevitt | Jackson
Stephen Foster | Jackson
Tim Libassi | Wilson
Bruce McCormack | Cody
Gary Olson | Rawlins
Mel Orchard | Jackson
Sue Sheppard Ford | Casper
Mary Carol Staiger | Alta
Teresa Stemle | Evanston

Hosts with the most

In September, we held our fall board meeting in Boulder, Colorado. And once we were caught up on business, we got together with friends old and new to celebrate **Andy Wiessner**, who marks 40 years on the *HCN* board this year. (You'll read more about Andy in a future "Dear Friends" column.)

We want to thank our hosts at the Center of the American West at the University of Colorado Boulder: **Thomas Andrews, Tamar McKee, Brooke Neely** and **Ryan Lueck**. Tamar, who manages programs and operations, is an anthropologist who has wandered all over the Western U.S. and Tibet; her degree in museum and field studies was shown in the incredible photos of Mexican cowboys and cowgirls that adorned the center's walls. Brooke is a research fellow who specializes in the intersection of national parks and Indigenous nations. Ryan coordinates the center's academic program and hails from Colorado's Western Slope, not far from *HCN*'s headquarters.

We're not entirely sure that anyone thought to check in with Thomas, the center's director, before we invaded his office to hold a meeting with our management team. He looked a little surprised to find seven of us huddled around his conference table, guzzling coffee and chatting away on an otherwise ordinary Wednesday morning. But we couldn't have found a more gracious host, or a better space than that high-windowed second-floor office in Boulder's grand Macky Auditorium. Thomas, a historian, specializes in environmental, Indigenous and animal history and is currently writing a book about the Great Horse Flu of 1872-'73, which sickened more than 90% of North America's equine population.

We were humbled by the hospitality and all the fascinating conversation, and we vowed to get together again and make good trouble at the earliest opportunity.

HCN's Greg Hanscom and board member Andy Wiessner, above, who was honored at the Boulder event. Left, former board members Michael Ehlers and Robert Wiggington, and John EchoHawk (below left), with readers. Below, current board member Rich Stoltz with reader Terry Oldendahl. **New Legends Media Co.**

A marathon three years at *HCN*

In the fall of 2022, the *High Country News* management team and board of directors met in Seattle and laid the groundwork for a three-year strategic plan to rebuild *HCN* from the ground up. Since then, we've overhauled everything that makes publishing a magazine like this possible — all the sprockets and pulleys and wheels and gears that keep our journalism running.

- We developed new publishing strategies that make it easier for us to serve up timely news and analysis online while still printing blockbuster issues of the magazine 12 times a year. (Only half of what we publish appears in the print edition; log in and sign up for our email newsletter if you want to see what you're missing!)
- We traded in the old building in Paonia, Colorado (where we still have a small office) for fresh digital infrastructure, including a new back end to our website and up-to-date software to track subscriptions, process donations, send out emails — all that behind-the-scenes stuff.
- We quit using junk mail to attract new subscribers and adopted new digital marketing strategies instead. We want to do more than just bring in new readers; we want to keep folks engaged and excited, not just with our stories but with their communities and with the region as a whole.
- And we adopted new fundraising, accounting and management strategies, revising our technology so that our staff can better focus on the work that we came here to do: telling great stories and keeping our wonderful readers informed and involved with the issues that matter.

In the process, we've transformed what was once a scrappy nonprofit into a more nimble and professional institution, one with the chops to navigate the stormy waters that lie ahead. With your help and encouragement, dear friends, *HCN* will survive and thrive — and even manage to have some fun along the way!

A challenging year ahead

High Country News is lucky: Unlike our colleagues in public media, we've never had to rely on government funding. You, our readers, keep us going by providing three-quarters of the revenue we need, so we can pay our staff and freelancers and publish the magazine, keeping our community fully informed about the West.

But rising costs, including double-digit increases in health-care premiums, mean we'll have to tighten our belts for the coming year — and that, as you know, is never easy. Please keep an eye out for our year-end fundraising appeal and contribute what you can.

And don't forget: You can always make a contribution online at **hcn.org/support**, or send a check to P.O. Box 1090, Paonia, CO 81428. (And please give what you can to those public media orgs, too! They're really suffering right now.)

—Greg Hanscom, executive director & publisher

LIGHTS OUT

In wildfire-torn California, rural residents bear the burden of worsening power outages.

By **EMMA FOEHRINGER MERCHANT** and **MARIA PARAZO ROSE**
Photographs by **TRACY BARBUTES** | Data visualizations by **PARKER ZIEGLER**

Power lines and a transmission tower in Tuolumne County near Groveland, California.

When the power cut out around 5 p.m. on a hot July weekend in 2023, Jerry Baker had one thought: "Here we go again."

First, Baker had to inform his nearly two dozen staff: *We're in power outage mode*. Several counselors zipped around the camp, assessing electric loads and determining what could be connected to the generators. Off went the pool pump and swamp coolers — except the one in the infirmary — along with the air conditioning in several cabins.

Baker is the founder of Camp Tuolumne Trails, a summer camp nestled in the Sierra foothills bordering Yosemite National Park. Each summer, it holds several sessions for dozens of adults and kids with disabilities. Usually, the outside world and its challenges seem far removed from the pine-covered campus. Campers board in log cabins equipped with power lifts and accessible bathrooms to swim, stargaze and care for the camp's miniature donkey, Jenny. But in recent years, it's become harder to keep certain challenges at bay.

Pacific Gas & Electric Company, the utility that provides power to the area, uses so-called "fast-trip" settings to prevent wildfire ignitions. These settings encompass a suite of technologies — including software and equipment — that can be programmed to sense physical hazards that might spark a fire. When that happens, equipment on the lines cuts off power within milliseconds. The threat of fire here is real; a camp overlook reveals scorched, rolling hills marking the scar of the Rim Fire, which burned about 400 square miles and nudged the camp's border in 2013.

Baker had already invested in a large generator that could keep essential parts of the camp running — refrigerating medicines and running the elevators and breathing machines — in case of an emergency. But it broke down, and he hadn't yet found a mechanic to fix it.

Baker's neighbors are also learning how to cope. That same weekend, a few miles away in downtown Groveland, Finn Horsley, who owns a local hotel and restaurant, muttered the same refrain: "Here we go again."

Horsley filled fridges with hotel trays of ice to keep precious food from spoiling. He informed the restaurant's diners that their meals might never come. An outage, he told guests, could last a few hours, or more than a day. That night was one of at least eight dinner services the Hotel Charlotte and its restaurant lost that year, Horsley said. But he's equally concerned about keeping his guests — and his own family — cool and safe in the punishing summer heat. "This stuff is dangerous, never mind the inconvenience on the business," he said.

A few doors down, at one of the oldest bars in the state, the lights cut out and two gas-powered generators kicked in. Owner Chris Loh lit the restroom with candles, and the Iron Door Saloon switched its generators between refrigerators, a power-hungry exhaust hood and the bar's carbonation system to serve sodas and beer. "It's basically like I'm running around doing this weird, circular electrical swap-out thing," he said.

Back at Camp Tuolumne Trails, California's dry July heat did not let up as the night grew dark. Baker and his staff engaged in a similar dance: alternating between powering refrigerators, freezers and air conditioning with a group of small backup generators. They had to use a tractor to move one particularly hefty generator.

"All of a sudden, I realized there was a good chance I was going to get somebody seriously hurt," Baker said. "All of us were dead beat. At that point I said, 'Turn off the cooler, let the food go bad, keep the campers safe.'"

For millions of Californians, these electrical gymnastics are now the norm.

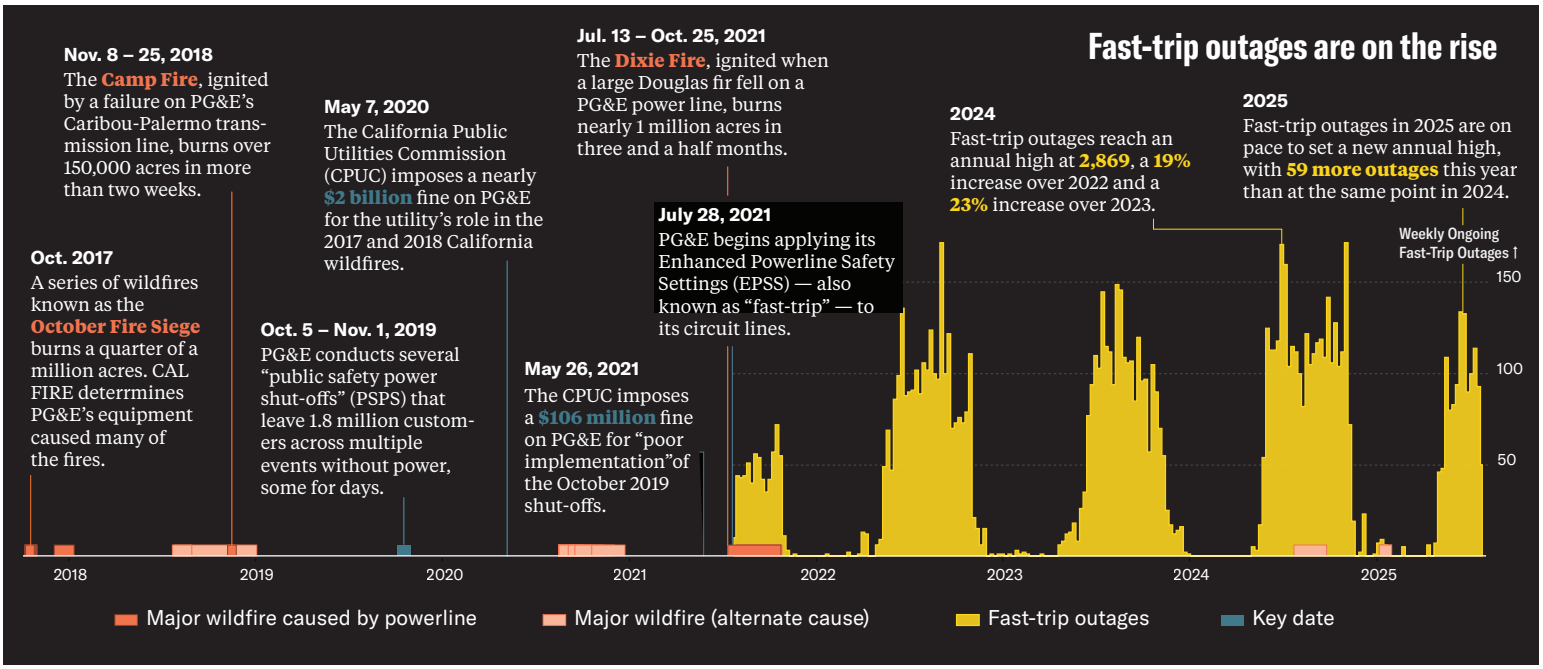
This story was produced in partnership with the nonprofit newsroom Type Investigations.

Rural communities in California, such as Groveland, experience fast-trip outages at higher rates than urban and suburban areas.

IN 2024, NEARLY A MILLION CUSTOMERS EXPERIENCED FAST-TRIP OUTAGES, MANY OF THEM REPEATEDLY. MORE CUSTOMERS EXPERIENCED OUTAGES IN 2024 THAN IN ANY OTHER YEAR OF THE PROGRAM.

IN FALL 2018, A SHOWER OF MOLTEN METAL landed near an unpaved road 150 miles north of Groveland. The resulting Camp Fire burned for more than two weeks, consuming nearly 19,000 structures and practically the entire town of Paradise. Eighty-five Californians died, making it the deadliest fire in state history. An investigation linked the initial spark to a damaged transmission tower owned by PG&E, which provides electricity to 5.6 million customers throughout much of Northern and Central California.

In the wake of the fire, thousands of Californians sued the utility, one of the nation's largest, for damages. Faced with the prospect of massive liabilities from



the Camp Fire and previous wildfires, PG&E filed for bankruptcy, its second in less than two decades.

California policymakers and regulators responded aggressively, establishing advisory committees and councils and passing laws designed to reduce wildfire risk from the state's aging electrical infrastructure. PG&E, too, took serious action: adding hundreds of weather stations to provide real-time data, clearing trees near utility lines, and making plans to bury thousands of miles of power lines in the ground, so they can't spark fires.

But as climate change intensifies wildfire risk, the fire-prevention strategy most familiar to many Californians has become the frequent power outages that cut electricity thousands of times every year.

PG&E has used scheduled preemptive power outages regularly since 2019, but the company began to use extra-sensitive fast-trip settings in the summer of 2021. PG&E launched the settings soon after a tree branch hit one of the utility's lines, igniting the Dixie Fire, which still ranks as the second-largest in California history. Now, with fast-trip settings, tree branches swaying in the wind, squirrels gnawing on lines, even a glitch in PG&E's software could shut down power lines in milliseconds. The utility now uses these settings on about 40% of its distribution lines, which ferry electricity from the grid to homes and businesses. The unplanned blackouts regularly impact hospitals, schools and people who rely on oxygen, CPAP machines and other medical equipment. They can last a few minutes, or stretch on for hours. And because they are designed to be instantaneous, residents never know when they will happen.

The two segments of the grid, called circuit lines, that service Groveland are some of the least reliable in PG&E's territory, based on the number of fast-trip outages they endure each year. And though the area has exceptionally poor performance, its situation is not unique. Over time, PG&E has slightly reduced how long fast-trip outages last on average, but the outages have increased in number — growing about 20% from 2022 to 2024 — and in how many people they impact.

In 2024, nearly a million customers experienced fast-trip outages, many of them repeatedly. More customers experienced outages in 2024 than in any other year of the program.

The outages predominantly occur in rural areas, based on a first-of-its-kind analysis of publicly accessible utility data from *Type* and *High Country News*. Rural communities — which often border forests and face heightened wildfire risk — experience 600% more fast-trip outages than urban and suburban areas. These outages also tend to last longer. That means that the worst impacts from fast-trip outages occur in remote areas — exactly where residents tend to be the most vulnerable due to age, disability or their distance from essential services like hospitals. And these outages are becoming more frequent.

Outages have increased in part due to more dangerous fire conditions, Brienden Realph, the utility's director of enhanced power-line safety settings, said. In an email, PG&E spokesperson Andria Borba noted that 2024 was an exceptionally hot, dry summer, necessitating the use of fast-trip to prevent wildfires from starting.

Borba also said there has been a "significant increase" in the number of devices with fast-trip settings. However, a recent report from PG&E suggests that the increase doesn't fully account for the rise in outages; outages increased overall between 2022 and 2024, even when normalized for the number of days in which fast-trip settings were active.

Even as they recognize the extreme risk of fire, some rural residents have grown frustrated with the frequent interruptions and feel skeptical of PG&E's motives. "They're shutting the power off so that they don't start a fire with their bad equipment and then get sued,"

Willow Polson, who has lived in Groveland for more than 25 years, said. "They're throwing us rural residents under the bus, for their safety more than our safety."

In an email, Borba said the utility "understand(s) the burden and inconvenience not having electricity creates for our customers" and added that PG&E works every day to refine fast-trip settings "to prevent an ignition and minimize reliability concerns for our customers."

California is not alone in facing these challenges; utilities in wildfire-prone Western states like Utah, Colorado and Oregon have implemented similar outage technology. These companies face a dilemma: Utilities increasingly face blowback when they turn the power off proactively, as in Northern California, as well as when they do not, as happened after the devastating fires in Los Angeles and Lahaina, Hawai'i. Utilities also face hugely expensive liabilities if a fire ignites as a result of their equipment.

Utilities and those who govern them must decide how much fire risk can be mitigated, how much to spend on these efforts, and what kind of sacrifices — including reliable electricity — customers will tolerate.

Few Californians would say that all power outages can be avoided; fast-trip outages have prevented fires and likely saved lives. PG&E says the settings reduced ignitions by 65% in 2024. Independent analysis of data from 2022 and 2023 by researchers at University of California, Berkeley puts that figure even higher — at an average of 82% — where fast-trip is used. According to Borba, every time a fast-trip outage occurs, it's "one time when we're keeping the community safe from the threat of wildfire."

But it's unclear whether every fast-trip outage is triggered by an active fire risk. According to data PG&E submits to regulators, the company doesn't understand why many of these outages happen. Between 2022 to 2024, the most common cause of fast-trip outages was listed as "unknown," representing about 40% of outages. Realph said the utility takes unknown outages "very seriously" and investigates each one in an effort to determine what caused it, adding that PG&E is on track to reduce the proportion of unknown outages in 2025 to about 34% of all fast-trip outages.

Notably, the number of "company-initiated" fast-trip outages — which can be triggered by software glitches, accidents during maintenance and construction, or anything else directly caused by PG&E — jumped from 4% in 2022 to 13% in 2024. Borba said that during the initial implementation of fast-trip, some settings were overly sensitive and needed to be adjusted. Realph said the company has recently improved an algorithm that was causing some of these outages and hopes to see a reduction.

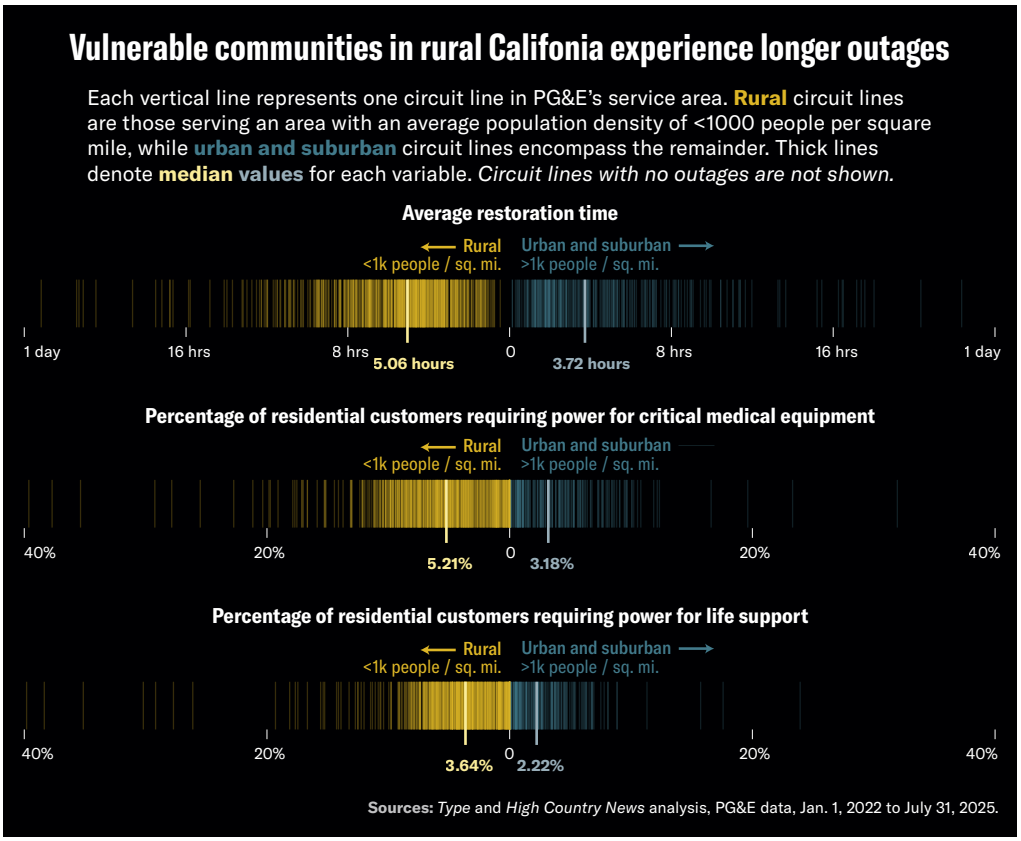
As the utility fine-tunes its system, residents are left with limited options. PG&E has argued that the outages must continue due to climate change and dire wildfire conditions. Legislators have not passed any laws requiring changes to how utilities implement automatic power shut-offs. And regulators have not required PG&E to reduce fast-trip outages, despite public outcry.

In the absence of external support, both residents and local governments say they have had to shoulder the costs, investing tens of thousands of dollars in backup generators, tossing hundreds of dollars' worth of spoiled food, and employing scarce resources to direct traffic or set up community cooling centers. Residents can ask the utility to reimburse them for some of these costs, but losses must be a result of negligence by PG&E.

Some residents believe PG&E has sacrificed its reliability — one of a utility's primary mandates — not just to prevent wildfires, but also to protect its own financial interest.

"They really aren't suffering on any corporate level from these problems," Baker, the camp founder, said. "The suffering is all being done by their customers."

DEBORAH KARR STORES HER TWO UTILITY-DISTRIBUTED BATTERIES, each weighing nearly 70 pounds, in the hallway closet of her modest one-bedroom apartment, where her splatter art covers the walls, and a Christmas tree lights up a corner of the living room in late October. She is one of the roughly 28,000 PG&E customers to receive a free-standing backup battery over the last five years; Karr



uses a CPAP machine at night and needs electricity to run it.

The electricity lines serving Blackberry Oaks, the low-income senior housing building in the Sierra foothills where Karr has lived for the last six years, has lost power 19 times due to fast-trip outages between 2023 and 2024. When that happens, Karr often heads down the hall to her neighbor Barbara North's doily-covered apartment to play gin rummy until light returns.

Everything in the complex's 42 units runs on electricity. In a building where much of the population is elderly or disabled, blackouts can cause fear and chaos. Residents get stuck in the elevator; those in wheelchairs sit stranded on certain floors.

North, who is in her 80s, suffers from lung disease and congestive heart failure. When the electricity cuts out, her oxygen pump's alarm alerts her that it's no longer running; during middle-of-the-night outages, it jolts her awake. She too has a free battery, which she keeps in her bedroom, but it's too small to support her oxygen machine. Without electricity, she is forced to connect to large compressed oxygen tanks that only last eight hours at a time.

"When my electricity goes off, I'm in a mess," she said from a leather easy chair in her living room. Backup batteries help, North said, but they don't last indefinitely. "When that runs out, you're really — excuse my expression — screwed."

The vulnerability of people who might suffer from a sudden blackout is exacerbated in communities like the one where Blackberry Oaks is located. Along circuit lines in rural areas, there are higher rates of people with no internet or phone service in their homes, and 10% more people with disabilities than in urban areas.

Those disparities are even more dramatic in Groveland, where 23% of the people along the circuit lines live with a disability, according to census data. That's more than double the rate in more densely populated parts of California. In 2024, fast-trip power outages cut electricity for more than 2,200 Groveland customers who need electricity for medical devices or life-support equipment, such as respirators or motorized wheelchairs, according to PG&E data.

Across PG&E's entire service area, 233,590 customers rely on electricity for medical devices or life support, Borba said. And while the utility does not share the number of unique customers impacted by each outage, *Type* and *High Country News*' analysis of publicly accessible information estimates that more than 20,000 of these customers live along circuits with 10 or more outages each year. All of these vulnerable customers are in rural areas. In 2024, more than 48,000 people who required electricity for medical needs endured fast-trip outages. Outages also impacted thousands of customers who use well water in 2024. During an outage, those people may lose access to running water.

PG&E does offer some programs to help medically vulnerable people cope with outages, but it's unclear if they are reaching everyone who needs help. PG&E distributes backup batteries and other equipment like insulin coolers and mini fridges. The utility works with organizations to contact eligible customers and certain medically vulnerable customers can also reach out to receive that equipment. The utility has distributed roughly 28,000 free-standing batteries and nearly 1,900 permanently-installed backup batteries. Since 2020, nearly 34,000 PG&E customers have applied for batteries, according to the utility. The utility doesn't "make different accommodations for medical needs customers," Borba said in an email, but encourages customers to develop personalized safety plans, with resources provided on the PG&E website.

The utility also offers rebates of a few hundred dollars for customers to purchase batteries or generators — though the customers must pay to fuel them, and the systems can cost thousands of dollars to purchase outright. The rebates are open to people who live in high fire-threat areas or are served by power lines with fast-trip settings, but it's up to customers to apply for them.

PG&E also has bigger system upgrades in the works, including projects to bury or insulate thousands of miles of power lines around the state to keep them from sparking. Meanwhile, it has not set any public targets to reduce or end the fast-trip outages.

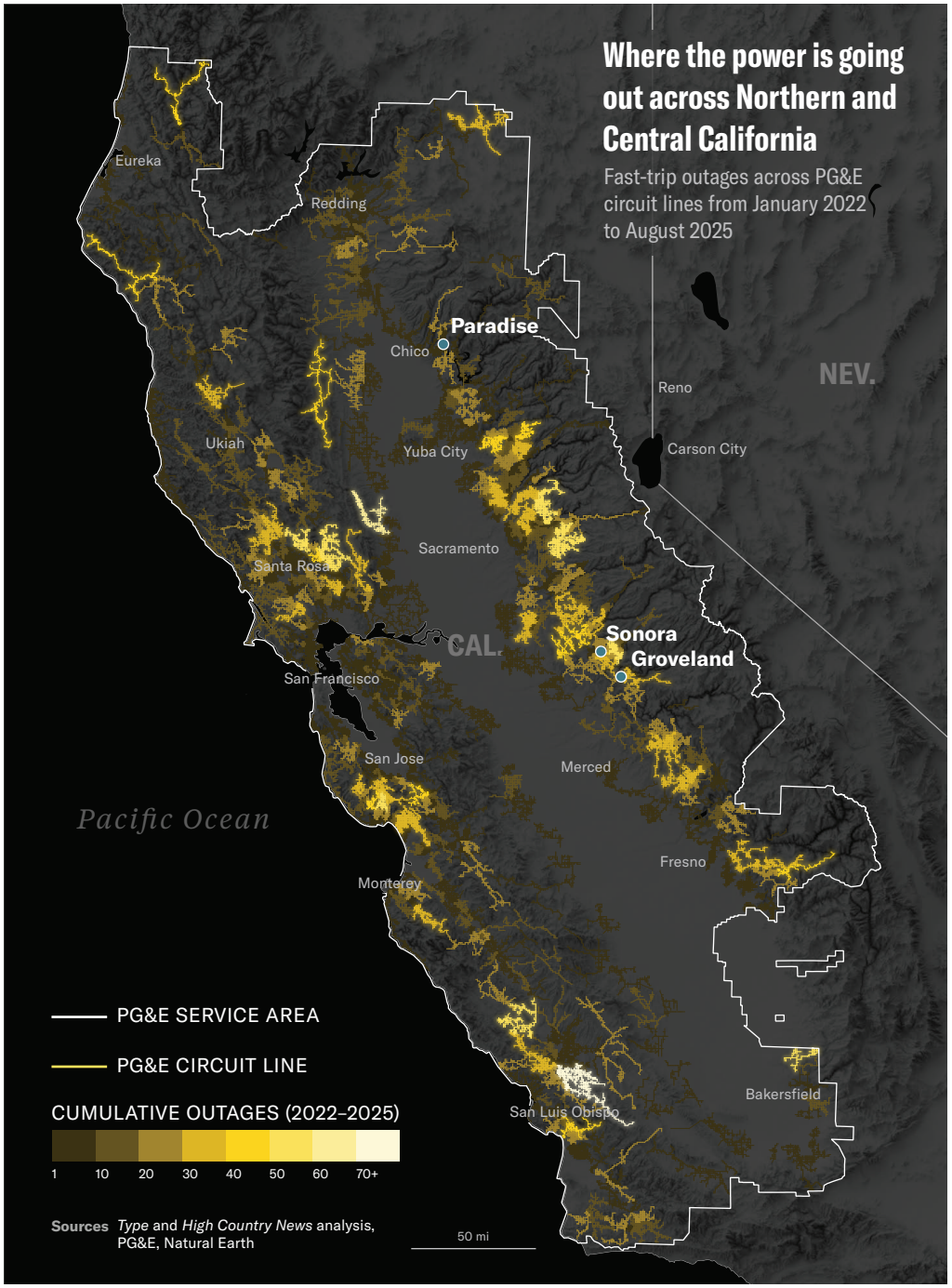
"We want to encourage wildfire risk-reduction measures," said John Kennedy, a senior policy advocate at Rural County Representatives of California, a membership coalition that advocates for the state's rural counties. "But you should be making progress on the back end, and we're not quite sure what that progress is."

CALIFORNIA FIRST AUTHORIZED the use of "Public Safety Power Shut-offs" — preemptive scheduled power outages to avoid wildfires on hot dry days with strong winds — for one utility more than a decade ago, and later extended the authorization to all investor-owned utilities. But those companies aggressively expanded their use after the 2018 Camp Fire. In October 2019, about nine months after PG&E filed for bankruptcy due to wildfire-related costs, the utility shut off electricity for about 1.8 million customers across multiple events. Some people endured blackouts that lasted days. The two largest outages impacted more customers than any other public safety power shut-off in California before or since.

Pushback was swift. "Sadly, the state has learned too well in recent years the level of destruction climate-change-induced weather events can have on our communities when combined with negligent maintenance of electrical infrastructure," Marybel Batjer, then-president of the California Public Utilities Commission (CPUC), said in an emergency meeting in 2019 to discuss the outages. "But resilience will not and should never translate to Californians being willing to put up with inadequate execution of measures that are supposed to keep them safe."

CPUC, which regulates the state's investor-owned electric utilities, fined PG&E $106 million in 2021 for what it called "poor implementation" of power outages, noting the company's failure to provide accurate outage information online and notify customers in advance, among other violations.

The event further soured public sentiment on PG&E, but financially, the fines paled in comparison to the fire-related liabilities the utility was facing as part of its bankruptcy. When the utility announced its reorganization plan in mid-2020, it accounted for $13.5 billion in payments to fire victims, plus billions more for insurers and cities and counties. CPUC slapped PG&E with a $2



"WHEN MY ELECTRICITY GOES OFF, I'M IN A MESS. BACKUP BATTERIES HELP. BUT THEY DON'T LAST INDEFINITELY. WHEN THAT RUNS OUT, YOU'RE REALLY — EXCUSE MY EXPRESSION — SCREWED."

–BARBARA NORTH, A RESIDENT AT BLACKBERRY OAKS,
A LOW-INCOME SENIOR HOUSING BUILDING IN THE SIERRA FOOTHILLS

billion fine for its role in the 2017 and 2018 fires. And shortly before the company filed for bankruptcy, rating agencies downgraded its credit to "junk" status, potentially impacting its ability to access the capital that's essential for utility operations.

Determined to avoid another destructive fire, the company reasoned that power outages were an unfortunate necessity.

"Let me assure you, we do not like to turn off the power. It runs contrary to the reason any of us ever got in this business," then-PG&E president and CEO Bill Johnson said at that emergency meeting in 2019. "The fact is that we did this for one reason, and that is safety."

In 2021, the company introduced automatic fast-trip outages. Fast-trip outages, on average, are much shorter than scheduled shut-offs, but they can also last for long periods without notice. Between 2022 and July 2025, the utility executed just 12 preemptive power outages, while the number of fast-trip outages exceeded 8,600.

Because fast-trip outages happen automatically, the CPUC says they cannot be regulated in the same way as preemptive shut-offs. Though the commission created rules for the implementation of scheduled outages, it has not done the same for fast-trip. Every year, investor-owned utilities must outline a plan for preemptive outages to regulators, including information on how they will provide enhanced support to vulnerable customers and set up community resource centers for residents to access electricity and get updates. Those same plans are not required for fast-trip outages. PG&E has faced millions of dollars in penalties for improperly handling preemptive power shut-offs, but the utility has not suffered any regulatory fines for its implementation of fast-trip.

In recent years, PG&E has also requested regulatory approval to spend billions of dollars rehabilitating its system to make it more resilient and less likely to ignite costly and dangerous wildfires. After its bankruptcy, the utility embarked on a mission to bury thousands of miles of lines and insulate thousands more miles, installing equipment called "covered conductors." From the utility's perspective, burying power lines is "the best tool in the highest-fire risk areas," because it reduces wildfire risk by 98%. But it is also

expensive, at about $3 million per mile, and it will take years to underground a significant portion of the grid.

There is still debate over the best solutions for keeping PG&E's aging grid, which winds through some of California's highest fire-risk areas, from sparking. Some consumer advocates prefer short-term power outages paired with insulated lines, which are cheaper and faster to install than underground lines, and, they argue, provide adequate risk protection. Research from UC Berkeley contends that fast-trip outages can cost-effectively produce the same risk reduction as undergrounding lines, even when controlling for the costs of outages to customers — including those who use electricity for medical devices.

No matter the strategy, it's residents who will pay for the majority of it. When a regulated utility builds and installs new equipment, it earns a guaranteed return on that investment, which is embedded into the rates it collects. A recently passed California law does not allow the state's largest utilities to collect that return on the first $6 billion the companies spend cumulatively on wildfire mitigation after 2025, but customers are slated to pay much more than that. California has also created a fund to help utilities pay for wildfire liabilities, but its available funds are much less than the amount that utilities would likely need to pay if a large fire ignites.

That financial structure leaves California customers — particularly in rural areas — with less reliability along with exceedingly high electricity rates, as well as the personal costs many of them pay to cope with outages. Because PG&E plans to continue using fast-trip for years while it buries lines and replaces other equipment, there is no clear end in sight. The outages cost the utility little in the short term, while its undergrounding plans set it up for years of regulator-approved financial returns.

In response to questions about whether regulators have taken any action to reduce PG&E's use of fast-trip outages, a CPUC spokesperson said the commission has not implemented any fast-trip fines or penalties, but it meets regularly with PG&E to discuss how to reduce the duration and scope of fast-trip outages. The commission has also started a public policy process to address reliability issues, including those caused by fast-trip.

Above all, PG&E said, it aims to prevent ignitions. "We just don't want to have an outage, but really I don't want to have an ignition," Realph said. "We're going to do everything we can to make sure that doesn't happen."

PG&E'S OVERALL RELIABILITY HAS SUFFERED due to these power outages. In an annual report on its reliability, PG&E notes that its performance declined between 2022 and 2024. Fast-trip settings are the largest contributor to interruptions on its system by far, according to the report.

"The grid is completely unreliable," Groveland's Horsley said. "My business is having to take on the burdens of PG&E not being able to provide a safe, reliable power grid that doesn't cause wildfires to burn down towns."

As the company's reliability has faltered, its residential customers' electric rates have climbed, increasing over 100% during the last decade. California has the second-highest residential electricity rates in the country. "That's just salt in the wound," Horsley said.

Continuing to raise rates to fund additional wildfire-prevention programs is becoming increasingly infeasible because California customers already pay so much, said Michael Wara, who directs the Climate and Energy Policy Program at Stanford University. Nearly a quarter of the revenue that PG&E now collects from its customers goes toward wildfire mitigation. Costs are expected to continue rising as climate change makes wildfires more likely and more dangerous, and customers have to pay for more measures to avoid them. And rates fund more than wildfire-related improvements; California is also in the midst of a costly endeavor to decarbonize its grid, and putting more money toward wildfire mitigation could undercut those efforts.

Already, one in five California households struggle to pay their electric bill. As of July, well over 1 million PG&E customers were behind on payments.

"The rates have gone up so high that most of the people who are on Social Security can't afford to pay their electric bill," Karr, of Blackberry Oaks, said. She previously worked at a community service center that provides food, clothing and other support, including helping people navigate their utility bills.

On top of the rising rates, many Groveland residents have sunk thousands of dollars into generators. Polson said she has gone "deeply into debt" to buy two generators for her house.

And those systems remain inaccessible to many. At a weekly crafts circle held at a local community center for older adults, attendees, many of them retired, said the financial divide is clear.

"We keep debating, 'Do we want to spend the 10 grand?'" Donna Johnson said as she knitted a hat to donate to a local cancer unit.

"How're you going to do that if you're on a fixed income?" Kelly Sexton, an attendee working on crowns for the annual Advent event, asked.

"You don't," Johnson said. "Tuolumne County is poor."

Businesses in Groveland, which largely line one of the main arteries that empties into Yosemite National Park, have also suffered. Loh and Horsley earn the great majority of their profits in the summer, when fire risk is high. During the July Fourth weekend of 2023, Loh said his Iron Door Saloon lost at least $60,000 from the fast-trip outages. By Horsley's account, his business has lost tens of thousands of dollars due to canceled reservations and refunds, missed dinner service, spoiled food and other expenses.

"This cannot be the solution," Horsley said. "Don't make me pay for your problems."

Local governments say they've suffered, too. Last year, during an outage that coincided with a heat wave, Sonoma County set up a cooling center where people could sit in air-conditioned spaces and use charging stations, because PG&E did not. "PG&E continues to externalize the responsibility and costs of keeping its customers safe during wildfire-mitigation outages," lawyers for the county wrote in a 2024 regulatory document. "Fast-trip is not a benign outage program, and PG&E has yet to prove that the scope and scale of fast-trip is appropriately calibrated."

Borba, the PG&E spokesperson, said the utility only sets up those Community Resource Centers during planned outages.

The unplanned nature of fast-trip outages, she said, makes it challenging to make such facilities available.

Over time, system hardening projects like undergrounding and insulating lines should reduce the need for fast-trip outages, a CPUC spokesperson said, particularly in rural areas. "The way to restrict these outages is through investment in infrastructure such as covered conductor or undergrounding, or increased vegetation management, which all of the utilities are pursuing at an increased rate," spokesperson Terrie Prosper wrote in an email.

But the data on these projects so far shows mixed — if any — results in reducing outage impacts. *Type* and *High Country News* analyzed publicly accessible data on PG&E system hardening projects, although it is unclear if the public-facing data includes all the company's projects.

A review of the circuit lines where system hardening projects were completed in 2022 or earlier shows that 37% of the lines saw a decrease in fast-trip outages, but 51% saw outage frequency go up. And data on PG&E's vegetation management program, which involves cutting trees and branches near electric lines, is limited: Of the 136 projects they have listed, only five are completed.

For those watching such efforts unfold, progress on improving outage trends can appear opaque.

PG&E is "not providing any real feedback on what they're doing to evaluate high-frequency outage circuits and the measures they're taking to reduce the number of outages on those circuits," Kennedy at Rural County Representatives of California said. "As we're seeing improvements in the system, we should see fewer instances in which things come in contact with the power line" and cause outages.

FOR BAKER, THAT TERRIFYING NIGHT at camp in 2023 left its mark. At one point, he tasked a staffer, equipped with a walkie-talkie and a handheld thermometer, to monitor temperature fluctuations in one cabin in order to determine when the air conditioning could be turned off while ensuring the campers stayed cool. Around then, Baker told his staffers to give up on the refrigerators. "Four o'clock came along, and it was obvious that we were just out of control," he said. "We were not going to be able to make this work."

Around 5 in the morning, Baker drove nearly 70 miles in the camp SUV to a store renting generators, arriving right as the doors opened.

The generator he rented sat at the camp for six weeks. Whenever someone used the elevator, Baker switched that load from the electric grid to the generator in case the power was cut while the elevator was in use. The machine cost about $800 a week to run. "It wasn't cheap, but it was a bargain compared to getting people stuck," he said. "Three-fourths of the time I never turned it on, but I was afraid not to have it."

"You have no way of predicting what the next crisis is going to be," he added.

In the last couple of years, the camp has received a donated generator that can power most of the property. But the camp still needs to pay the "extraordinarily expensive" amount it costs to keep it fueled, on top of its PG&E bill.

Baker said the outages in his area seem to be improving, but he's not sure how much of this is "blind luck" versus changing priorities and policies. Horsely, too, said PG&E was doing a better job in Groveland.

But that is not the case in all rural areas: PG&E logged more fast-trip outages in 2024, and outages impacted more customers than in any other year since the program began. In the areas where those outages occur most often, they last the longest.

"Am I glad that we're worried about the impact of fires? Hell, yes," Baker said. "However, I don't really feel like we are getting to the root cause at all."

"MY BUSINESS IS HAVING TO TAKE ON THE BURDENS OF PG&E NOT BEING ABLE TO PROVIDE A SAFE, RELIABLE POWER GRID THAT DOESN'T CAUSE WILDFIRES TO BURN DOWN TOWNS."

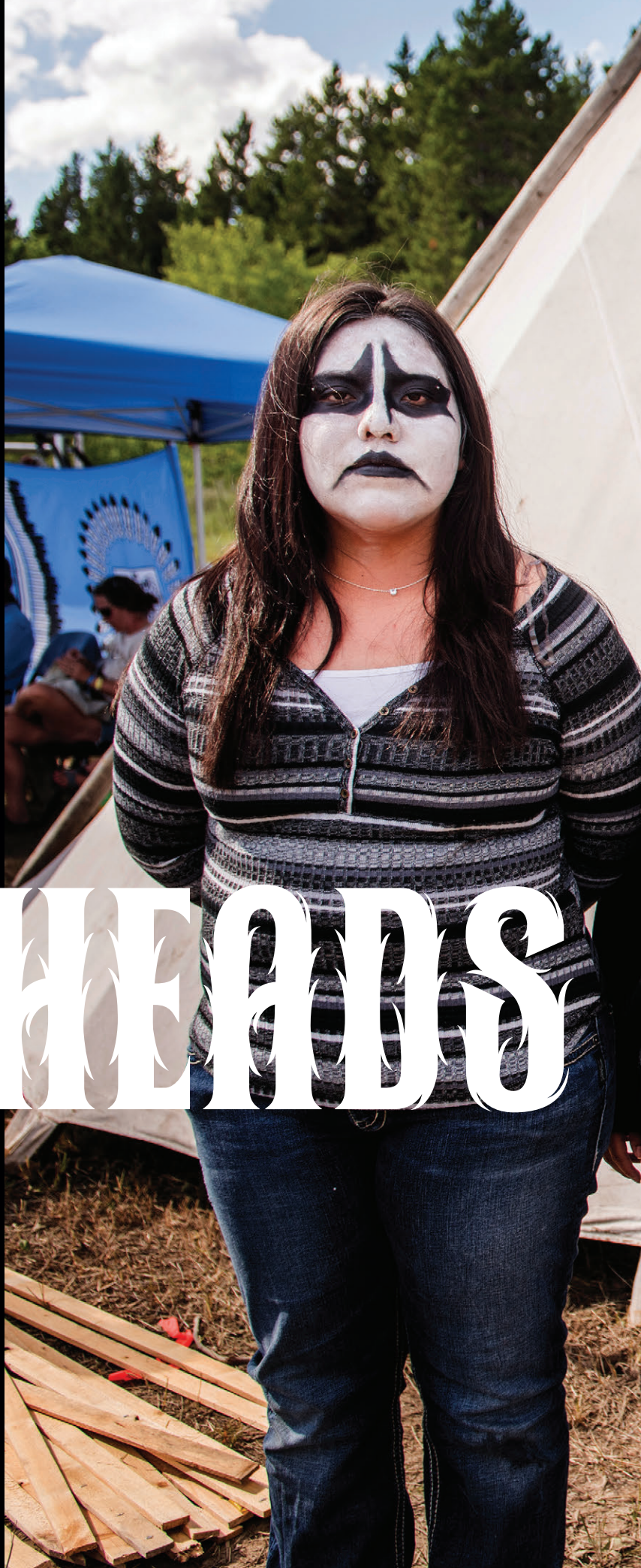
–FINN HORSLEY,
OWNER, HOTEL CHARLOTTE

Emma Foehringer Merchant is a California-based journalist. She writes about climate change and energy. Her work has been recognized by the Society of Environmental Journalists and supported by the Fund for Investigative Journalism and others.

Maria Parazo Rose is an investigative journalist. She covers Indigenous affairs, land use and sovereignty, and climate change, often through data and spatial analysis.

Ethan Corey contributed research.

This story was supported by the Wayne Barrett Project at Type Investigations*, the Fund for Investigative Journalism and the Institute for Journalism and Natural Resources.*



Piikunii high school students Alisa and Alison Skunkcap, Jasmine Bechel and James Trombley at Fire in the Mountains (left to right). *Russel Albert Daniels*

PRECIOUS METALHEADS

A heavy metal festival on Blackfeet Nation supports teen mental health.

BY **B. "TOASTIE" OASTER**

PHOTOGRAPHS BY **RUSSEL ALBERT DANIELS** AND **TAILYR IRVINE**


Autumn Eternal
r Lodge
We grieve them.....
you to take part in a heartfelt art activity
ceased relatives, friends, and special peopl
use the materials provided to create a small
corated square, image, or object — that
ory, spirit, and legacy of your person.
space encourages silence, reflection,
connection, allowing FITM attendees to
brance through creativity. We encourage
communal display within this lodge, as it
lective act of love and honoring — a
are never forgotten, and their spirits
and strengthen us

Blackfeet high school students Alisa and Alison Skunkcap, Jasmine Bechel and James Trombley paint each other's faces. *Russel Albert Daniels*

Buffalo Hide Academy director, Charlie Speicher after his heavy metal symposium. *Tailyr Irvine*

YOU'RE GOOD

"A few, for sure."

"About four times, actually. And my family's rather small."

"Suicide has impacted my old friend group quite a bit."

"I've lost friends. I've lost family."

"My older brother."

"My sister's youngest."

"I never thought I'd have that many people."

"Alcohol and depression, it comes hand-in-hand."

"One day the smiles stopped."

"I don't mind talking about it."

"You guys are actually talking to the right person."

I'm interviewing fellow Indigenous metalheads at a heavy music festival on the Blackfeet Nation, with Russel Daniels (Diné and Ho-Chunk descent), a photographer who's not into metal.

"Plenty of times."

"I had attempted two times."

"Growing up here, you could feel very isolated."

"The truth is I felt like I didn't belong anywhere."

"Everywhere I went I just didn't feel like I had enough of me in me."

"It's a battle, for sure. Sometimes it's a little voice in the back of your ear."

"I've looked at a full prescription of pills I had, and I'm just like, 'just this, and it can all just be …'"

"But I never went through with it, cause I'm still here!"

Some of them are young. High schoolers, even.

"The idea came close here and there, but I had my own outlets to manage my emotions."

"Music. Going to shows. Keeping my hands busy."

"After those two times, it really was music."

"My son, really. There's a lot of love around me."

"I didn't want my mom to lose another kid."

"I don't want my niece or my nephew, or even my mother, walking in and finding me there."

"Seeing how other people push on. Being one of the people that other people see pushing on."

"Skateboarding, when I was younger, which is kind of why I got into heavy metal. Listening to my uncle's Metallica CDs."

"I just get over it by listening to metal."

"Throw on some metal and you're good."

"HEAVY MUSIC TEACHES US THAT WE'RE NOT ALONE; WHEN LIFE IS DARK, WE DO SOMETHING ABOUT IT. WE'RE NOT JUST A PRISONER TO THAT DARKNESS. BUT ALSO THAT OUR RISK FLUCTUATES, THAT OUR MISERY ISN'T GONNA LAST FOREVER. THERE ARE WAYS THROUGH IT."

–CHARLIE SPEICHER, DIRECTOR OF BUFFALO HIDE ACADEMY

BUFFALO HIDE ACADEMY

THE SCHOOL YEAR WAS ALMOST PAST, and a hot May afternoon lorded over Browning, Montana, capital of the Blackfeet Nation. Grinning rez dogs with patchy coats rested in the sidewalk shade outside an alternative public high school called Buffalo Hide Academy, where lunch was ending. Students ambled into a warehouse-sized classroom with a podium and some tables at the far end, and musical instruments in a corner by the teacher's office. Student artwork and a Blackfeet Nation flag bedecked the walls alongside a mural of a buffalo skull and the school's name in dripping red letters. The kids didn't sit in rows or take out homework; nobody checked whether they were on time. They shuffled around in grubby Converse, joking with each other at full volume. Some picked up instruments and started jamming with their teacher, Robert Hall (Piikunii), who was already messing around on the drum kit. It got loud, fast.

"I would describe Browning as metal," Hall told me, seated at the drums in a luau shirt and bushy black ponytail, his ferocious brown eyes the size of jawbreakers. "We don't turn away from the darkness," he said. "We don't hide our own ugliness, the way that people in big cities could hide." The town is rough, even by rez standards. "There's buildings that have been standing just in a void. No humans, no life running through these buildings for years," Hall explained. "But there's immense beauty here, too — extreme beauty. Our murals, our family networks, our ancient history, our language, the things that are binding us together for thousands of generations."

Another teacher, Charlie Speicher, warmed up the mic. "Who likes chaotic mathcore?" he tried, referring to a rhythmically unpredictable subgenre of hardcore punk that he describes as "bonkers" and "all over the place." Two hands went up. One was mine. "That makes three of us," said Speicher as he pulled up a YouTube video.

The students were finishing the inaugural year of Buffalo Hide Academy's semester-long, two-hour heavy music symposium dedicated to the study of metal and hardcore. Speicher, who's non-Native, is a clinical counselor and also Buffalo Hide Academy's director. The symposium was his brainchild. He and other

teachers hand-picked students who looked like they might be isolated, or might be into darker, more aggressive art and music — kids who might be potential metalheads. More than fifty students initially enrolled. By the end of the first semester, kids were sneaking out of other classes to join.

Speicher teaches in his "battle vest," a staple of metal fashion that's usually denim hand-studded with metal pyramids or spikes, and stitched with patches showing band logos in barbed, rootlike scripts impossible for the uninitiated to decipher. In addition to providing a feeling of physical protection, battle vests are threshold guardians that intimidate normies while signalling to dedicated fans who recognize the glyphs. If you know, you know — and you're family. If not, fuck off. But Speicher is here to welcome kids into the fold, where a community of music fans understands their suffering. Or, as he put it later, "to create more safety and protection specifically from suicidal distress," which he said has impacted every family in Browning.

Some in Browning think he's doing the devil's work, but Speicher is as warm and approachable as a cool youth pastor, speaking gently and smiling easily through a handsome swath of stubble. His vest is emblazoned with the gaunt face from Converge's 2001 album *Jane Doe*. He showed the kids the music video to "Farewell, Mona Lisa" by mathcore band The Dillinger Escape Plan. It sometimes sounds like Dick Van Dyke's fancy footwork flawlessly executing a trip and stumble. "Goes hard, huh? What'd you see? What'd you hear?"

It's precise and complicated, students said. The guitars and drums are in conversation, mirroring each other. The drumming starts like black metal blast beats but switches into a groove. Rough vocals alternate with intelligible singing. Guitars are in standard tuning, not drop-tuning like most metal. The fashion is different from metal too – less theatrical. One student noted the singer's contorted body language: "He's feeling his emotions while he's letting the art out of him."

"Mmm, beautiful," Speicher said. Later, students looked at landscape photos and guessed which heavy genre or subgenre they represented: a frozen forest for black metal; a crumbling alley for doom; an urban protest for hardcore; an alligator swamp for death metal. They discussed "geographic determinism," the theory that music is shaped partly by its place of origin.

But Speicher wasn't just there to nerd out. He shifted seamlessly into an overview of heavy music's therapeutic benefits: catharsis, community and coping skills. "Heavy music teaches us things such as we're not alone; when life is dark, we do something about it. We're not just a prisoner to that darkness. But also that our risk fluctuates, that our misery isn't gonna last forever. There are ways through it." Students doodled in notebooks, idly plucked at an unplugged bass guitar, or held hands under the table.

A history lesson from another teacher on the '80s and '90s Scandinavian origins of black metal — including its problematic elements, like murder and Nazism among some bands — served as a caution to consume media critically. While hardcore is overtly political and tends hard left, the morality of metal is murkier, oriented primarily around pushing extremes and attacking social norms. Results can be chaotic. This segued into a high-level, student-led conversation about whether and when to separate art from artist. In another lesson, Speicher said, they'd studied the Vietnam War through the lens of Black Sabbath, whose 1970 staple "War Pigs" critiqued American involvement.

"Your homework tonight, and I'll remind you of this later, go listen to the song '43% Burnt.'" Speicher told students to pay special attention to an influential breakdown at the end. They broke off to paint each other's faces in "corpse paint," and take album cover-style

photos with animal skulls and hides. Emily Edwards (Piikunii), an almost-15-year-old, schooled me on Swedish rock. "You don't know Ghost?" she said. Inspired by the class, Edwards and some friends had started their own band, Crimson Harmony. Edwards was one of many students who signed up for a paid internship at an upcoming metal festival called Fire in the Mountains coming to Blackfeet Nation later that summer. Festival internships were part of why teachers started the symposium.

Nicholas Rink (Piikunii), who teaches Blackfeet studies and language, pulled me aside, brimming with excitement. He was painting the skull of a buffalo the students helped process. Across its brow he'd painted overlapping bear paws, mother and cub, in flame colors. He dotted them with pinprick white stars — Ursa Major and Minor, which he said both Piikunii and European traditions recognize as bears. The skull was a gift for Norwegian festival headliners Wardruna, whose latest album, *Birna*, was named in honor of the bear. Rink had aligned the painted stars to match the position the real stars would take when Wardruna performed beneath them in Blackfeet Nation.

▶ Steve Von Till *(left)* and Wardruna lead singer Einar Selvik *(right)* during the festival. *Russel Albert Daniels*

▼ (*Clockwise from top*) Students apply corpse paint at Buffalo Hide Academy in May. Paul Medicine Horse, 16, plays the drums before class. A buffalo skull teachers painted for Wardruna. *Tailyr Irvine*

THE FIREKEEPERS

AS COVID ARRIVED IN 2020, a string of suicides ripped through the Blackfeet Nation, claiming multiple kids per year, some as young as 11. Speicher said it hit the entire community "like a sledgehammer." He called up a fourth grade teacher in Rathdrum, Idaho, named Steve Von Till, whom metalheads might recognize as a doomy poet-troubadour and the former Neurosis guitarist. Speicher, Hall, Rink, Von Till and a few others banded together to help their students stay alive, as if building a protective fire to shelter them in the darkness. They called themselves the Firekeeper Alliance.

A few years earlier, the crunchy-pagan festival Fire in the Mountains was priced out of gentrifying Jackson, Wyoming. Speicher spoke to its owners about bringing the festival to the rez. He planned to build internships into his class to connect kids with career pathways in an industry of like-minded people. It sounded perfect. But first they needed buy-in from tribal council.

The Blackfeet Tribal Business Council has long supported youth through athletics, especially running and basketball. Dipping into the arts, specifically music — to say nothing of metal — would be new territory. But Councilman Everett Armstrong told me that because it was for the kids, they considered it. "Let's try to go a different route to give our youth something that they can open our minds to, open our hearts to, find themselves," he said.

It could help the nation economically, too, Armstrong said. The reservation lies along the imaginary line splitting Piikunii homelands into the colonial annex called Glacier National Park. The park is an over-half-billion-dollar industry. But many Piikunii people, Armstrong said, live in poverty. It's one of the factors contributing to the widespread suicidal distress that disproportionately harms Native communites. When I told folks I was going to Blackfeet Nation, most didn't know where that was, until I mentioned Glacier. The monied Glacier Park Lodge had a gift shop peddling Glacier mementos — but, despite being on the reservation, offered nothing I could take home that says "Blackfeet Nation." "We need to try to tap into that and try to get some revenue back into the Blackfeet Reservation," Armstrong said.

For the festival to work, they needed bands big enough to draw fans to the rez. So in August 2024, the Firekeepers flew to Boulder, Colorado, to court pagan folk band Wardruna, whose world tour was starting at Red Rocks Amphitheatre. Speicher and the gang wanted to meet in person and convince them to play Blackfeet Nation. It's for the children, they would say. Norwegian and Piikunii cultures share traditions of animism. The Firekeepers brought sweet pine ties, used for smudging, as gifts, and met Wardruna at the C.U. Boulder library. They didn't know the band was already sold on the idea. Singer Einar Selvik had spoken to Speicher on the phone, and they were ready to say yes.

"A chance to stand with (the) Indigenous in a constructive, powerful way, and a chance to visit a beautiful place and to do something that is more than just a festival, more than just a concert," Selvik told me, "all the pieces just fit so well together." It was a major get for the festival. Rink said they stayed up all night talking about it. Their vision and the Nordic stars had aligned.

DANCE INTERTRIBAL

LATE JULY: AMTRAK UNLOADED A GAGGLE OF BLACK DENIM and bandanna-clad metalheads onto the small, sunny platform at East Glacier Park, Montana, a tiny seasonal town 15 minutes outside Browning. Two days earlier, Ozzy Osbourne, the grandfather of metal and lead singer of Black Sabbath, had died.

Because it was the festival's first time on a reservation, nobody knew what to expect. Festivals, after all, can go very badly, and no one wanted to remember this as "Fyre" in the Mountains. But good omens greeted us. Our Lord and Savior Ozzy must have parted the week's rainy spell for a few days of perfect festival weather: high 70s, partly cloudy, cool after sunset.

The Firekeeper Alliance distributed tickets to the local community, and invited Blackfoot attendees from Canada. Others road tripped in, or flew into Kalispell, around 2,400 fans — a third of them Natives, Speicher and Rink estimated — converging from across the continent for three days and 23 bands.

On the festival grounds, the party opened not with a land acknowledgement but a welcome from the land's actual Indigenous people. In proper Native fashion, they held a grand entry, and true to form, it started late. "We're runnin' on Indian time!" shouted Hall through a megaphone, war-whooping and half-dangling from the back of a motorcycle that Speicher peeled across the rugged ground.

As the crew finished setting up a stage in the distance, hundreds of metalheads sat watching in a circle while Piikunii locals in regalia danced fancy, traditional, chicken, jingle and grass. Young Grey Horse hammered the drum and Hall let his rowdy demeanor emcee, throwing out Charlie Hill jokes to keep the mood light. For many, it was a transformative moment. Some fans had never been to a powwow and were encountering Indigenous culture for the first time.

Finally, Hall called for an intertribal — an all-inclusive dance. The metalheads hesitated, but after a few courageous outliers broke onto the grass, others followed, bouncing a circle in their battle vests and black jeans, like a respectful, slow-motion mosh pit, as they awkwardly tried to two-step like the pros. A showboating school-aged fancy dancer twirled past them in her shawl, rapid-fire footwork leaving them in the dust. But the dance was a welcome, not a competition. Hearts were opening. People cheered, Natives and non-Natives together.

For Selvik, the powwow was a powerful way "to set the tone, to open the circle." This festival required some vulnerability of attendees, some deference. We were guests on Piikunii lands. There would be no alcohol — a marked adjustment for metal culture. It would be, as Hall declared, "a cultural exchange between the Piikunii and metalheads."

FRINGE CULTURE

"ON MY RESERVATION, PEOPLE ONLY LISTEN TO TWO THINGS: rap or hip-hop," joked Logan Mason (Colville), who traveled from Spokane and volunteered with the camping crew in exchange for festival admission. Mason lost his brother and nephew to suicide, and metal helped him work through depression in his late teens and early 20s. "Growing up, I did not know anybody else that listened to black metal or death metal."

On other reservations, it's different. The Navajo Nation, for example, has a genre-defining "rez metal" scene. Some folks joke that you're either a hip-hop Native or a metal Native. If anything, Natives seem over-represented in the metal community. "A lot of it is land-based," said Meg Skyum (Oji-Cree), who'd come to the festival from Ontario to see the Native black metal outfit Blackbraid and get a sneak preview of their third album. Atmospheric black metal in particular is "about the fucking trees and shit," which Natives appreciate. Plus, Natives and metalheads, Skyum added, both live in the margins of ordinary society. "We're fringe, they're fringe."

"The metal tribe itself seems to attract a lot of people that go through different types of struggle," said Tomas Falomir (Ojibwe, Hopi and Zuni Pueblo descent) from Parker, Colorado, noting that the music is healing, the community welcoming. "Any type of person could be included."

There's also something about the sound, Falomir added. "It almost goes with the loudness, and even down to the beat of it." Other fans agreed. The thundering drums and powerful vocals resemble a modernized

version of Native music, one said. Pomona-based Indigenous death/doom project Tzompantli would later exemplify this, shaking the festival grounds with stomping downtempos from a battalion of traditional and contemporary drums. And European bands like Wardruna, fans noted, are really, *really* into their cultures, especially pre-Christian traditions, just like Natives.

"A lot of people are into metal because of how much trauma that we go through in our daily lives. And not only in our own daily lives, but our historical trauma," said Damien Jones Jr. (Diné), who traveled with family from Lukachukai in Navajo Nation, and brought one of the festival's most-photographed battle vests, decked out with turquoise geometrics and a "Frybread Power" backpatch. Jones plays saxophone — classical and jazz. "That's what I do as well, throw all my feelings and emotions into music."

DARK HORSE, RIDE

"WELCOME TO THE BACKBONE OF THE WORLD," read the sign at Red Eagle Campground, where the Rockies arched like the knobby vertebrae of a sleeping Elder God half-buried in sediment. Across glassy Two Medicine Lake an amphitheater of pines presided like a chorus between the water line and a low timberline. On the near bank, a footpath wound along the edge of the lake, opening to beach access here and there with pop-up canopies and scatterings of hay-bale seats for workshops and panels on Indigenous sovereignty, ethnobotany, the epidemic of missing and murdered Indigenous people, and the therapeutic effects of heavy music.

A cluster of interconnected meadows transformed into parking lots, a village of glamping yurts, a small bazaar of vendor tents, and the "stage bowl": a shallow glen with two stages set up between tipis serving as green rooms. Curtains of savory smoke stoked saliva as Montana "off-grid catering" team Region Sauvage barbecued ducks and student-processed buffalo. High school interns decorated the stages with skulls, antlers, driftwood, witchy-Indigenous pieces of the forest. Edwards worked the merch tent, hawking Firekeeper Alliance shirts that showed a malevolent spirit of suicide haunting a tipi where Native kids sheltered around a fire. Proceeds supported suicide prevention. Shirts sold out the first day. Parking attendants and security all seemed suspiciously chill. It was intentional, she explained. Natives are used to being followed and scrutinized. Nobody wanted that atmosphere here.

First on stage was Sage Bond (Diné and Nde), an up-and-coming acoustic metal singer-songwriter from Tonalea in Navajo Nation, who'd previously toured in support of suicide prevention efforts on her reservation. Bond matched the mountain sunshine with a low snarl a la Eddie Vedder, before breaking into a roar the size of 10 mountain lions — what she called "the Cookie Monster vocals." Bond expected a sparse crowd drifting in and out, but her performance captivated hundreds. It was a big moment — her first time playing a festival that size, which she jokingly called a "black metal Coachella" (though the only feather headdresses were on tribal council members). "How the heck did they even find me?"

Turns out Bond was recommended by Chicago black metal artists Pan-Amerikan Native Front. During their set, they invited students onstage to headbang alongside the singer, Kurator of War, in black-and-white face paint and crossed bullet sashes. Other students held up a Blackfeet Nation flag and tossed their long hair next to barrel-chested guitarist Necroboar (Purépecha), who looked mean as hell in spiked leather cuffs, but later, backstage, was beaming. "A lot of people are thanking us for being here with the kids," Necroboar said, "but it's like you don't understand what this means to us to be here and to see them." He told me he and his bandmates saw themselves in the teenagers. Misty-eyed fans agreed, knowing they would remember this moment forever. The band had rehearsed their set that morning at Buffalo Hide Academy with the kids. They'd always wanted to play a rez. Being here was a dream come true. "I'm still shaking from it," Necroboar said.

Musicians didn't quarantine themselves. Many hung out with fans — riding horses, paddleboarding, doing yoga by the lake, attending workshops and panel discussions, or headbanging in the crowds. By the food stands selling frybread with huckleberry butter, metalheads set up a little table as an altar to Ozzy. It gathered river rocks, feathers, cigarettes, and trinkets. "Long Live the Prince of Darkness," read a sign at the feet of a grinning Ozzy bobblehead and some candles.

Twenty-four weeks pregnant, Heather Jordan (Diné) delivered a scorching set in the sunshine with her masked drummer pummeling the kit behind her. Jordan is the singer and guitarist for Navajo Nation blackened doomgaze duo Liłith. She'd wanted to play Fire in the Mountains because favorites like Wolves in the Throne Room preceded her. And it helped that this year's festival focused on "the Native side of things." Jordan works a day job at a restaurant serving tourists on her own rez, which is also dry. "It's like the hardest thing for them to understand," she said. When Fire in the Mountains invited Liłith, their answer was "Hell, yes."

The festival's spirituality attracted Jon Krieger of Blackbraid, a solo recording project that blew up overnight when his first single, "Barefoot Ghost Dance on Blood Soaked Soil," got traction on YouTube in 2022. "All the black metal that's the best in the world in my opinion comes from the heart," Krieger said. Blackbraid was one of around five Native bands playing the festival, though Krieger, who was adopted, doesn't know his tribal affiliation. Black metal is a spiritual genre, he said, and while it's dominated by "Scandinavian dudes talking about old Norse religion and culture," the values align. "Anti-Christianity is something that we share with them."

On stage later, beneath an array of a dozen stag skulls, Krieger was slinking around like a ghostly Indigenous Jim Morrison, windmilling his waist-length hair, blasting life force through a cedar flute and leaning over the crowd to shriek upward-arcing shards — whose strength never flagged during his entire blistering set — as his guitarist crowned his howls with constellations of tremolo picking. In the mosh pit, one fan hoisted a buffalo rib the size of a baseball bat, presumably from the barbecue, like some feral invocation. Blackbraid's performance may have converted Daniels, the photographer, to solid metal fandom. But after Converge, he stood by me and said, "Now I get it."

Converge was another get, one of Speicher's favorites. Bassist Nate Newton had Zoomed into Speicher's classroom to chat music with students. So had Ivar Bjørnson from Enslaved — A-listers, donating their time to Browning rez kids.

Before Converge played, Speicher and the other Firekeepers presented them with a buffalo skull painted with the iconic *Jane Doe*

face. And they gifted the buffalo's tongue, the most prized part of the animal, to tribal council.

A mosh pit opened in the center of the crowd as soon as Converge blasted forth, the biggest and most fearsome pit yet. The chaos of bodies in conflict summoned a dust devil from the Earth into the sky. It might not look like it, but there's a shared ethic at work, what Hall called "consensual fucking violence, man." If you get a bloody nose, you can be proud. If you fall, fans pick you back up. We aren't fighting. By bracing and colliding, we're helping each other. The rush is purifying. The release, stabilizing. Jumping in, you might want to die, but when the pit spits you out, you'll be beaming like Necroboar — happy to have survived the maelstrom.

Partway through Converge's set, skinny, sleeve-tatted frontman Jacob Bannon passed the mic to a Piikunii youth, who seamlessly took over the chorus of "Dark Horse."

We'll show the demons
For what they are
Dark!
Horse!
Ride!
Towards the light!

He knew every shout and scream by heart, absolutely commanding the stage. The crowd was living for it.

Musicians understood the assignment and turned it up to 11, new blood and seasoned pros alike. As dusk settled, staff closed the lakeside trails, mindful of everyone's safety, while Finnish folk metal band Hexvessel sang about people disappearing into the forests. After dark, fans gathered around a bonfire to ward off the chill. Wardruna took the stage and spread their haunting ambience to the woods' inky edges. Someone dressed like a wizard slipped through the crowds as a human figure with antlers danced silhouetted before a glowing tipi. High above a membrane of diffuse gray, the bear stars slowly turned.

▲ Sage Bond *(left)* and Lilith singer and guitarist Heather Jordan *(right)* perform during the festival. *Russel Albert Daniels*

"WE'VE ALL HAD PERIODS OF HURT. AND THIS MUSIC WAS THE MEDICINE WE DIDN'T KNOW WE NEEDED UNTIL WE'RE IN IT."

–KURATOR OF WAR, SINGER FOR PAN-AMERIKAN NATIVE FRONT

A STRANGE ROAD TO JOY

A FULL MAP OF METAL'S SPRAWLING GENRES and subgenres is hard to pin down. But for what it's worth, Wikipedia lists 34 subgenres and 16 sub-subgenres of metal, rivalled primarily by much broader genres like pop, rock, and opera, the latter which has 120 subgenres. *Encyclopaedia Metallum* lists 16 main subgenres, but sub-subgenres and combinations seem unlimited.

Like opera, much of metal prioritizes the voice — though as an aesthetic inversion. Similar to Inuit throat singing, vocalizations are guttural and challenging to master. Like wine, metal adheres to a pedigree whose sense experience reflects a place of origin: Cascadian black metal, for instance, is hazy as the misty forests of the Pacific Northwest. And like European classical music, or jazz, metal ranges in style from ambient drone to bombastic spectacle to precise and unpredictable arrangements astonishing to perform.

But something deeper draws metalheads together, perhaps a willingness to inquire on levels the establishment forbids. What most clearly sets it apart from other genres is that it's so rooted in anger and sadness — or their common ancestors: terror, lack, isolation and despair. Metal, one fan told me, is "a strange road to joy."

"We've all had periods of hurt," Kurator of War said, seated on a folding chair next to Von Till with singer and songwriter Chelsea Wolfe, Newton and Bjørnson. No makeup, no bullets. Behind them, morning clouds rippled like flags on the glacier-crisp pebble beds of Two Medicine Lake. "And this music was the medicine we didn't know we needed until we're in it." A crowd of metalheads sat cross-legged on the grass, or perched on hay bales in the partial pine shade, listening to the panel. "I think we're all curious. I think we're all empathetic. I think we want to get to that other side of connection and knowledge."

Speicher lobbed questions that prompted an intimate conversation about the healing power of heavy music, which at times drew tears — from fans and musicians. Von Till said heavy music is a way of "getting rid of the sickness," which helps him become more sensitive and vulnerable. He also noted the importance of catharsis. "How many times

has that moment of release prevented that one moment in a kid that can't be retaken?"

Early in Bjørnson's life, he realized people had to be athletic or good looking for acceptance in some groups. "With the metal gang, the qualification was being into metal," he said.

"It's not like this kind of stuff attracts normal people. Like we all — you're weird. You're all weird," Newton said to ripples of laughter and cheers. "And it's beautiful. We could be completely different but we have this one thing that we both understand: why we're into it."

"It's them that are weird," Von Till parried. "We're the normal ones, right? Fuck that." More cheers.

OH, LORD, YEAH

ON THE THIRD DAY, THE SKY RENT IN TWO. Just as the evening drained of color, the power went out — halfway through a set by Virginia headbangers Inter Arma. They didn't stop. Only the drum kit was audible without amps and mics, but the drummer kept spirits rolling as the minutes wore on, stage hands scrambling to patch the glitch.

Sparse raindrops descended upon the crowd, but nobody seemed to care. Then the familiar tick of a tempo rose from the drummer's high hat cymbals. The crowd started laughing, cheering, singing. It was "War Pigs" — Sabbath. Colorful stage lights fired back up. When the metalheads sang "Oh, Lord, yeah!" the sneer of Ozzy's voice carried like mist across the many, a phantom formed by hundreds of mouths in unison. Re-amped guitars picked up the lick to complete the collective homage. Piikunii highschoolers sieged the stage again, drumming powwow style alongside the band.

Nigh had the crowd caught its breath when lightning flashed like a Catholic schoolteacher flicking the lights. Thunder murmured from the belly of the Rockies beyond a ridgeline that blurred into rolling gray. Another flash. Closer, noted Daniels, the photographer; maybe two second's delay. Sparse droplets swelled to a downpour. The lightless heavens opened, the Prince of Darkness summoned.

"This is metal," a festival staff member in a Day-Glo vest shouted to fans gathered under the merch tent. He wasn't speaking metaphorically. The tent's frame could draw lightning. "Shelter in your cars or tents!" he ordered. "Go, now! *Now!*" Metalheads scrambled for cover, evacuating in slick mud.

Daniels and I found ourselves with some new friends, ducking into the yurt of one of the musicians, Rebecca Vernon, founder of Salt Lake City doom-sludge band SubRosa, who now performs a solo piano project called The Keening. She invited us in, offered us snacks, made sure we were all safe and hydrated. We laughed together, Natives and non-Natives, prisoners of the darkness, speculating about whether Inter Arma had summoned the spirit of Grandfather Ozzy and he was messing with us from — wherever he was. We worried the next set might be canceled. It was one of the headliners, Old Man's Child, a fan favorite that helped define the Norwegian black metal sound in the early days. In over 30 years, Old Man's Child had never played in the United States. But they'd agreed to play Blackfeet Nation.

"Debuting in a setting like this adds depth to the moment," singer Galder told the website *Knotfest* before the festival. "There's something about the rawness and unpredictability of the natural world that mirrors what I try to capture in Old Man's Child. The beauty in the darkness, the stillness before the storm, the feeling of something ancient just beneath the surface." That ancient unpredictability may have just gotten the better of his grand North American debut.

A scream rang through the night. Or a shout? It was hard to understand, like metal vocals. I unzipped the door flap. The rain had stopped. The shouts rang clearer a second time: "Show's back on!" We jammed our feet back into soggy shoes and boots.

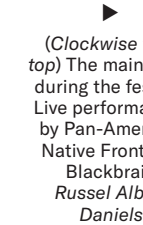
It was fully nighttime when the storm's misery passed. A string of fans with phone flashlights and headlamps meandered back down the muddy path and over a little footbridge, across a babbling brook to the clearing where the bonfire flared bright and warm between the stages, belching embers upward like some inverted underworld rain. From a distance, the returning metalheads looked like a serpent of stars.

By firelight we danced with a Piikunii grandmother in a silk bandanna to Dio's "Rainbow in the Dark," euphoria setting in from the topsy-turvy snafu and the might of nature, which had banished all traces of late-festival fatigue. Then finally, riding in on the heels of the thunderstorm, Old Man's Child took the stage. Galder, in corpse paint, dispatched legions of fog wraiths, strobe spectres galloping across a sea of electrified faces. A beautiful hell broke loose, exorcising our collective and personal demons. The festival — the ceremony — was complete.

'OUR ANCESTORS HELD CEREMONY TOGETHER'

ON SOCIAL MEDIA, FANS WERE STUPID WITH ENTHUSIASM about the weekend: *"Pure magic," "transformational," "profound," "life changing."* They posted reports of unexpected tears and healing. One Instagram comment called it the "the most incredible metal festival I've been to, and it was my 3rd one this summer." Others called it the best music festival they'd been to of any genre. Daniels, newly baptized, joined the chorus: "*I'm officially part of the cvlt.*"

And it wasn't just the music. The consensus seemed to be that the lack of alcohol actually enhanced the experience. Frank Godla, co-founder of digital publication *Metal Injection*, said he learned more about Native people at this festival than he ever had from books or



(*Clockwise from top*) The main stage during the festival. Live performances by Pan-Amerikan Native Front and Blackbraid. *Russel Albert Daniels*

PRECIOUS METALHEADS PLAYLIST

Use the QR code below to listen on Spotify

Answers
Sage Bond

The Dying Breath of a Sacred Stag
Blackbraid

Dark Horse
Converge

Michikiniqua's Triumph
Pan-Amerikan Native Front

Tlaloc Icuic
Tzompantli

The Millennium King
Old Man's Child

Feral Love
Chelsea Wolfe

War Pigs
Black Sabbath

Takeahnase
Neurosis

The Watcher
Enslaved

Farewell, Mona Lisa
The Dillinger Escape Plan

Forest Service Road Blues
Inter Arma

Hell is a Mirror
The Keening

Birna
Warduna

Calling Down the Darkness
Steve Von Till

Rainbow in the Dark
Dio

documentaries. Wardruna echoed the many in posting humble thanks to the Blackfeet Nation: "There are so many people out there in the world who deeply sympathize and stand with you and your ancestors in all your struggles. I am one of those people," Salnik captioned a picture of himself on stage, proudly holding aloft the hand-painted buffalo skull. "It was like our ancestors held ceremony together and their meeting is rippling as we speak."

And the learning was two-way: Tribal Chairman Rodney "Minnow" Gervais took the stage to remark on how kind and diverse the metalheads were, how clean they kept the grounds. "Be proud of yourselves," he said. "What you see here is proof that music transcends religion, color, whatever you want. It brings us all together."

"They look scary," Councilman Armstrong told me about the metalheads, "but they're some of the nicest people. They're so welcoming." People I spoke to in East Glacier agreed. Armstrong said tribal council is now considering branching into music events of other genres, too.

"It's heartwarming to have a full circle moment for me," Mason, the fan from Spokane, said, seeing Native culture come together with the music he loves, in support of a cause close to his heart. "I was like damn, was this festival calling me?" After interning at the merch tent, Edwards said she might pick a different long-term job, but does see herself working in the music industry. And she wants to keep playing in a band when she is older, Crimson Harmony or otherwise.

As stray metalheads sat around the grand foyer of Glacier Park Lodge, leaning on their backpacks or napping on the sofas, waiting for the evening train, a classical guitarist plucked out a polished-up version of the Led Zeppelin classic "Stairway to Heaven." On the train back to the West Coast, the metalheads hung out as new friends. In the observation car, they shared weekend highlights, Natives and non-Natives together.

A week later, I saw Von Till and Vernon again, this time in Portland, the last stop on Von Till's summer tour before the new school year. We were still thinking about the festival. We tried to pin down what it was about Fire in the Mountains that still had us sobbing intermittently a week out. Von Till nailed it: "It made me dare to hope."

CAN YOU IMAGINE

"If there's a world where we don't have to worry about suicide, that's a world where we don't have to worry about bullying, that's a world where we don't have to worry about violence, about war."

"I feel like that world wouldn't work."

"You could try to picture it, but it never really fully comes into view."

"I feel like it needs to be talked about."

"I like to daydream about that a lot."

"These are things I think about too much and I don't have too many spaces to set them out of my mind."

"There'd probably be a lot more people at the reservations, and more family and connection."

"Those little subtle moments that we all share, of sitting next to the fireplace, or sharing a new book, making a new friend, all of that would still keep expanding in mysterious ways of goodness."

"Everyone just being creative."

"It looks probably a little bit like heaven."

If you're considering suicide, please call or text **988**, *or chat online at* **988lifeline.org**, *for a free, confidential conversation with a trained crisis counselor. Any time, day or night.*

B. "Toastie" Oaster (Choctaw) is an award-winning journalist and a staff writer for High Country News *writing from the Pacific Northwest.*

Western Resource Advocates

What are the climate impacts of artificial intelligence **(and the data centers that power it)**?

55%

increase in new energy demands across the Interior West by 2030 from data centers.

46M+

megawatt hours (MWh) of growth projected in the next five years surpasses current energy capacities that took a century to build.

7B

gallons of water that new data centers in the Interior West could use annually by 2035.

Without guardrails, data centers pose an imminent threat to meeting climate and water conservation goals in the West. But with the right policies, our region can rise to the challenges posed by data centers while simultaneously accelerating the transition to clean energy.

Learn how WRA is leading the way.

Notice to our advertisers: You can place classified ads with our online classified system. Visit hcn.org/classifieds. Oct. 27, 2025, is the deadline to place your classified ad in the December 2025 issue. Email advertising@hcn.org for help or information.

Advertising Policy — We accept advertising because it helps pay the costs of publishing a high-quality, full-color magazine, where topics are well-researched and reported in an in-depth manner. The percentage of the magazine's income that is derived from advertising is modest, and the number of advertising pages will not exceed one-third of our printed pages annually.

EMPLOYMENT & EDUCATION

Enchanted Circle physician needed — Family Practice Associates of Taos was founded in 1983. Taos, New Mexico, is nestled in the high-desert mountains of the Land of Enchantment. Our practice is looking for qualified physicians who are interested in joining us. 575-758-3005 familypt@taosnet.

Now hiring: Executive Director — The Center for Science in Public Participation (CSP2) seeks a visionary Executive Director to guide our shift from technical consultancy to a hub that connects technical service providers, strengthens capacity, and funds partnerships with communities impacted by mining. Visit www.csp2.org to learn more.

REAL ESTATE FOR SALE & RENT

Unique property in the Zuni Mountains of New Mexico — 91+ acres of wilderness land, with three tiny off-grid houses, a tower and a vintage Winnebago bean trailer. The property is composed of six adjoining parcels, which can be sold individually. The structures are all on one parcel and can host up to nine people. The rest is unadulterated wilderness. 505-980-6684 lorenkahnnm@gmail.com

STAND TOGETHER FOR GRAND CANYON

When the Canyon Needs Us Most, We Show Up.
This year, Grand Canyon faced extraordinary trials, and every time, Grand Canyon Conservancy supporters stood strong beside the National Park Service to keep this treasured landscape safe, accessible, and thriving.

Your donation to Grand Canyon Conservancy directly supports preservation, education, and recovery efforts across the park.
This is your moment to make a difference.

STAND WITH US HERE

grandcanyon.org

GRAND CANYON CONSERVANCY

THE OFFICIAL NONPROFIT PARTNER OF GRAND CANYON NATIONAL PARK

The inspiration of Jock Soto

An Indigenous male ballet dancer talks about his legacy and his time on ballet's biggest stage.

BY SHAUN GRISWOLD
PHOTO BY EVAN BENALLY ATWOOD

Jock Soto at home in Eagle Nest, New Mexico.

AT THE PREMIERE of the new short film, *Following Enchantment's Line*, Jock Soto, the Diné and Puerto Rican ballet dancer, could be seen gliding underneath vast blue New Mexico skies — the only time the audience saw him dance. Afterward, as the lights went up in Santa Fe's Lensic Performing Arts Center, lightning cracked the summer monsoon clouds. Hard rain echoed inside the theater, as Soto led a live rehearsal with dancers from Ballet Taos accompanied by classical music from his friend Laura Ortman.

The evening exemplified Soto's desire to share the rhythm and grace he cultivated during 24 years with the New York City Ballet.

"I started hoop dancing with my mother," Soto said. "And I continued hoop dancing until I discovered ballet. And ballet was just my life. That's all I wanted to do. My mother and father found the only local ballet school in Phoenix, Arizona, which was hours from my house. So my dad would drive there every day, and I got a full scholarship because I was the only guy in the class."

It's a long way from Arizona to New York City, especially for a Diné-Puerto Rican man, the son of Josephine Towne and José Soto.

"My dad loved salsa. He loved the Beach Boys, all that kind of stuff. That's what I remember listening to. And I always got a warm feeling when I heard salsa or drums from the reservation. My heart jumps when I hear *thump, thump, thump*. And I always felt like, oh, God, I want to do this. I want to do this," Soto said.

It is one of those universally acknowledged truths that anyone born in a small rural town will have to leave it to pursue their dreams — especially if they dream of classical ballet.

And so, at 13, Soto dropped out of school and left for New York. Now 60 and retired from the stage, he is committed to sharing his story across the nation's tribal communities.

At the premiere, the rain slowed and then stopped as the celebration concluded. Soto and his husband, Luis Fuentes, were eager to return to their home in the northern New Mexico mountains. But first, they posed with friends underneath the Lensic's marquee, which proudly announced: INT MUSEUM OF DANCE & CD: AN EVENING WITH JOCK SOTO.

"I'm liking the marquee saying my name," Soto said.

"We can arrange that anytime," Joel Aalberts, executive director at the Lensic, responded.

JUST BEFORE THE premiere, I sat down with Soto in the theater lobby. While preparing for our talk, I'd practiced pronouncing his name correctly. I sometimes work best in binary, so I framed a reference point under the guise of the antagonists in the film *Revenge of the Nerds*. Soto, I thought, was not a nerd; he was a jock — *the* Jock.

And he is clear about who he is.

When Soto's name was misspelled in the *Navajo Times* art section, he corrected it with a black Sharpie, turning the "A" into an "O." But he kept the newspaper on the table in the lobby, relishing the sense of local pride despite the error. The article outlined how the International Museum of Dance was building a digital archive for his career, titled "Jock Soto: The Dancer and His Life."

It was when he finally took the stage that I realized something: Soto had sacrificed his body to dance. When he walked, he reminded me of NBA Hall of Fame greats like Bill Russell and Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, who moved with pain from decades of physical achievements on the basketball court.

"It's not an easy career at all," Soto told the crowd, from a chair on the stage. "You know, it's often painful. Like, I can't even get out of this chair if I want to right now."

The obvious health impacts explain the urgency behind Soto's desire to partner with the International Museum of Dance,

Jock Soto at 15, training for *The Magic Flute*. **Steven Caras**

sharing his lifework with the public and encouraging the next generation of dancers.

The digital archives the museum is creating preserve dance legacies and education programs. A similar project with the Dance Theater of Harlem inspired a history book about the group's influence on Black ballet dancers.

The museum has a larger goal: creating a physical space, slated to open in 2026, to host artist residencies, performances and public events. But since a location has yet to be determined, the archives currently live in a digital cloud hosted by the nonprofit arts organization ChromaDiverse, which sifts through websites for information on the careers of dancers like Soto, unearthing forgotten photos, videos, posters, press and other ephemera.

The archive is the quickest way to immerse yourself in Soto's life as a dancer. It also hosts the Moving Memories Fund, which established the Jock Soto Scholarship, whose first recipient is a Chickasaw dancer, Heloha Tate.

SOTO WAS ONLY 12 when he received a full scholarship to the School of American Ballet in New York City. There, his talent blossomed among the other dancers seeking the limited roles available to men in ballet.

"I felt amazing, because (in Phoenix) I was in the class with all girls. And when I got to New York, I was in a class with all men — 40 men," Soto said. "That was my competition, or the way that I evolved."

At 16, he accepted an invitation from legendary choreographer George Balanchine to join the New York City Ballet. Four years later, Soto was the theater's principal dancer — a pinnacle that any ballet dancer in the world would be delighted to reach.

"I became an adult very quickly," Soto said. "I became very good friends with a couple of the guys. We lived in an apartment together. We had no money, but we would go buy hot dogs on the street or eat pizza and stuff like that. We lived three blocks from the school, so we spent all day till 7 every night, dancing. That's all we did."

Soto's finest performances occurred when he partnered with ballerinas, taking the masculine role to lift or sometimes lead the

female dancer, making sure that she remained the dominant presence onstage. He became what the ballet world calls a "natural partner," dancing as his mother had taught him to dance, as a way to gracefully walk with beauty.

Soto's mother was his first partner in the Southwest powwow circles. She led, he followed, until he was good enough to lead; that was how he learned the significance of each dancer's role. In ballet, he mastered the masculine role. Now, as a teacher, he holds firmly to the traditional gender role necessary for a successful performance.

An openly gay man, he tells his students to follow traditional gender roles onstage.

"I try to teach the dancers that a man is a man onstage. And if I see anything other than that, I correct it right away. And I'm like, 'No, no, you're behind a ballerina, you're a man. Don't act like the ballerina.' So that's what I try to teach," Soto said. "Masculine is masculine. It's not that hard to teach, but it can be a lot."

Soto's Diné clan comes from his mother. He was born for Tó'aheedlíinii, meaning "water flowing together," which is also the title of a 2007 documentary about Soto's life. He was born 90 minutes away from his home in Chinle, Arizona, at the closest Indian Health Services Hospital in Gallup.

Soto said his mother was a vital inspiration.

"My mother was my strength. She was my strength, and my dad was such a macho Puerto Rican, you know," Soto shared. "They said it was OK to be gay. And I didn't tell them until I was 30. My mom laughed so hard on the phone. She said, 'We've known that ever since you were 18.'"

More than 700 dancers are alumni of the New York City Ballet, but only several dozen men have achieved Soto's status as a principal dancer. Elite ballet training and performance skills like his are rare. Soto has deep roots in the Navajo Nation, but his ascent to the rarefied world of ballet left him feeling distant from the Indigenous community. Today, Indigenous communities are still just getting to know Soto — something that should prompt state lawmakers and education reformers to work with local ballet theater groups to expand arts programming in Native communities and schools.

ChromaDiverse wants Soto's digital archive to be available in New Mexico public schools within a year. Since 2018, New Mexico has invested billions in education reform as mandated by a state court order aimed at students that are Indigenous or non-English speakers or have disabilities. Making Soto's career archive accessible excites lawmakers like Shannon Pinto, who attended Soto's premiere, where she met him for the first time.

"We need to make sure that the arts are something we bring forward with some funding, at least, because we know it's been on the back burner," Pinto said.

It will take time to learn how that will affect classrooms in New Mexico and beyond. But in the broader sense, Soto's presence has already had an impact. Jicarilla Apache President Adrian Notsinneh encountered Soto and his work for the first time at the Lensic. Onstage, as he offered a blanket gift to the dancer for his work supporting Jicarilla Apache ballet dancers, Notsinneh told the audience how Soto led him to reflect on skipping flat stones across water as a child.

"As it jumps across, it causes ripples. Each time it hits the surface, it radiates. So what I'm seeing from this type of person that's standing here with me is a type of person that causes that ripple effect," Notsinneh said, standing next to Soto. "Within his lifetime, he's caused so much of this effect. And I want to thank you for being that type of person."

The ripple effect was shown in the crowd's response to the evening.

As Santa Fe calligraphy artist Blythe Mariano (Diné) put it: "To know that somebody from where I'm from made it all the way to New York is like, oh my God, I'm getting overwhelmed," she said. The artist, who is from Church Rock, New Mexico, was born in Gallup at the same hospital as Soto.

At the end of the night, when I asked Soto if he had noticed the large number of young Indigenous people in the audience, he beamed with excitement.

"I loved it, I loved it. It's inspiring!" Soto radiated the enthusiasm he felt. "Like I said onstage: You have to be inspired."

Shaun Griswold is a sovereign citizen from the Pueblos of Laguna, Jemez and Zuni who writes from New Mexico about Indigenous people living with colonialism.

WEB EXTRA View photos, videos and a digital archive of Soto's work at **hcn.org/soto**

Wendy Whelan and Jock Soto in the New York City Ballet production of *Agon*. Choreography by George Balanchine, ©The George Balanchine Trust. **Paul Kolnik**

CONFETTI WESTERNS

Exploring the queer natural and cultural histories of the American Southwest.

Who's looking?

The gaze of aspen 'eyes' in a time of increased state surveillance.

BY MILES W. GRIFFIS

ON A BRISK YET SUNNY afternoon in Colorado, I found myself walking through a towering stand of white-barked voyeurs. They watched me from the canopy like sprites and peered from behind the chokecherries in the undergrowth. I've always felt comforted by their gaze; the quaking aspen that lived outside my childhood home watched me grow up.

I approached the trunk of an aspen that day, meeting the yellow-leaved giant eye-to-eye. Over time, this particular *Populus tremuloides* had shed one of its lower branches, leaving behind a perfect "eye" the size of my hand, complete with punk eyeliner, a gray iris and black pupil. It was uncannily mammalian; I almost expected it to blink. Two sets of initials were carved near it, and I wondered how lovers could gouge letters into the soft bark of these beloved trees while their victim watched, open-eyed. Especially there in one of the world's largest aspen groves, where tens of thousands of aspen clones stood as witnesses.

There are half a dozen species of aspen around the world, and myths about them date back centuries. In the United Kingdom, the trees have been linked to other realms, their quaking leaves serving as a portal to "the land of Faerie." Their heart-shaped leaves, which shimmy like jazz hands, communicate with the Faerie world. Whenever I nap beneath an aspen, I receive bizarre messages from poplar nymphs. They whisper through the leafy threshold an encrypted Yeatsian message that fades upon receipt: *Monkshood! Mandrake! This Golden Look Will Make You Quake!*

Behind the trunk in front of me, I saw more eyes that day. Not aspens, but an actual mammal's, the eyes of a runner up-trail from me who held my gaze as he zigzagged through the flaming understory of yellow and orange leaves. A crisp rush of wind through the stand brought the decaying smell of Rocky Mountain autumn. I returned the mustached hiker's look, then quickly diverted my eyes. *Woof*. He was handsome, a fanny pack wrapped around his shirtless torso.

When I glanced back again, his gaze was unbroken. I nodded "howdy" as he silently passed me, trembling a little inside. But I was curious, too. Moments after he passed, I looked back, and our eyes met again. I swore that he gestured for me to follow him — perhaps for tea in his Tacoma? — but was uncertain. My mind was with the fairies.

That encounter was all about the eyes: the watchful gaze of the aspens, and the hiker's stare as well. In the queer community, a stare has deep significance as essential nonverbal communication. Such cues can help us show desire and affiliation, especially when we ourselves are being watched by outsiders. In hookup culture, encounters and meetups are often sought with the verb our eyes are best known for: *Looking?*

The all-seeing eyes of the aspens observed us but didn't judge, unlike the government eyes that now may be watching.

Looking for what? Arboreal delights? An encounter with a mysterious stranger? Eye contact and other nonverbal signals have been key throughout history, enabling people to find companions and lovers, building community even where queerness isn't accepted. They remain vital today when other forms of signaling may be too risky, especially where queerness is criminalized. But all the while we're looking at each other, state surveillance is watching us.

Cameras, drones and facial recognition technologies watch us wherever we go — the evil, intrusive Eye of Sauron. The all-seeing eyes of the aspens, however, inspire community accountability; these trees were a witness to the shared exchange between me and this trail runner. They observed us but didn't judge, unlike the government eyes that now may be watching. Earlier this year, Americans lost protection from surveillance based on their orientation or gender identity, thanks to the Department of Homeland Security. All eyes are on us now — our medical records, social media posts and other data — and it will only get worse if we do not resist this boiling fascism. An ill-fated portal now connects us to the 1950s Lavender Scare, when suspected "homosexual" government employees were targeted and fired. Or worse — far worse. And it goes beyond queerness: People are spied on and punished for fighting multiple prongs of fascism — protesting U.S.-funded genocide in Palestine and violent ICE raids and deportations.

The living ecosystem and all its inhabitants are part of our community here on earth. Like the aspens, we can watch, too. And we can organize. I see the aspen eyes as a summons from the natural world: Will I speak up, as roads are built through the roadless wildernesses, data centers drain rivers, children's hospitals defund trans care, the pandemic surges, or my community's members disappear into concentration camps?

On a more recent hike this fall in California's Eastern Sierra, I rubbed the powdery trunk of a tree, and my fairy mind flitted off to Greek mythology, where aspens are associated with the underworld and its queen, Persephone. If you wore a crown made from aspen leaves, you could visit the underworld and return unharmed. With rising temperatures and ghouls leading our country, livestreamed horror after livestreamed horror on the news and social media, I've become convinced that we are already in an underworld.

Countless eyes from hundreds of thousands of trees glanced out at the passing storm around me that day in the Sierra. The giant grove in Colorado near Kebler Pass was actually one singular creature, like its relative, Pando, a grove of 40,000 clonal aspens in Utah thought to be one of the largest living organisms in the world. Like the aspens, we, too, are connected, our struggles linked as so many of us face attack. We must connect the roots of our various movements and resist as one. We must not quake or tremble; we must look each other in the eye and weave ourselves crowns of aspen leaves, placing them on our heads as we resist our infernal reality.

Miles W. Griffis is a writer and journalist based in Southern California. He is the executive editor of The Sick Times, *a nonprofit newsroom that covers long COVID.*

Aspis, 2022. **J. Carino**

REVIEW

Jess Walter is not done with Ruby Ridge

The best-selling Spokane, Washington, novelist approaches America's political divide with humor and heart.

BY MAGGIE DOHERTY | ILLUSTRATION BY AMY BERENBEIM

THIRTY YEARS AGO, in the summer of 1992, Jess Walter was a staff writer at *The Spokesman-Review* in Spokane, Washington, when he got word of an armed standoff at an isolated mountaintop cabin in northern Idaho.

Walter rushed to the scene, and his on-the-ground reporting recorded the incident that later became known as the Ruby Ridge standoff. It began when Randy Weaver — an Aryan Nations sympathizer with apocalyptic

religious beliefs — failed to show up in court to face charges related to selling a sawed-off shotgun. In response, federal agents swarmed his cabin. At the end of the bloody 11-day standoff, Weaver's wife, son and a U.S. marshal were all dead. Ruby Ridge galvanized the anti-government militia movement, and it continues to loom large in modern political discourse.

The siege was the subject of *Every Knee Shall Bow* — Walter's only work of nonfiction. But now, three decades into a career as a best-selling and award-winning novelist, his new novel grapples with a nation whose ideas of freedom, values and government were forever changed after Ruby Ridge.

So Far Gone is the story of Rhys Kinnick, a divorced middle-aged man who has become disillusioned with life. His son-in-law, Shane, has fallen into a bottomless well of conspiracy theories, and Kinnick cannot understand why his daughter stays with him. His newspaper laid him off, and his country elected Donald Trump as president. It all proves too much for him, so he exiles himself to an off-the-grid cabin.

One day, his grandkids, whom he hasn't seen in years, show up. Their mom — Kinnick's daughter — is missing, and Shane has gone in search of her.

So Far Gone is not a fictionalized retelling of Ruby Ridge and the Weavers' story. But it features characters who might have cheered them on. Set in and around his hometown of Spokane, Walter's story is an exploration of disillusionment and its consequences.

"I think that disillusionment is one of the most human things that happens to us," he said. "So, for Rhys to suddenly find himself the disillusioned one and feeling pushed out of society struck me as a great starting point for a novel."

Kinnick is not the only character who feels alienated. His daughter struggles to understand Shane, who finds fellowship among Idaho's well-armed religious separatists. Walter said the book was inspired by his own growing anxiety over politics, crystallized by his phone's screen time usage report. "It informed me that I had been spending five and half hours a day on my phone, doomscrolling. I realized I couldn't go on like this, imagining the demise of the country," he told *High Country News*. "I imagined myself going into a metaphoric woods to write the novel, turning my back on all of it."

While *So Far Gone* deals with heavy themes like the popularity of conspiracy theories and militia-slash-churches, Walter's quirky cast of characters infuse the story with humor. In one early scene, Kinnick fumes when Shane insists that there is a far-reaching conspiracy within the NFL, where the most powerful people on the planet are trying to take control of everyone on and off the gridiron. Later, a gunfight erupts over a set of brand-new truck tires.

Walter says the comic bent makes the story "in some ways more real, and that makes it more horrible," he said. "People do get shot over things like tires. I believe so fully in the folly and fallibility of human beings; in many ways, it's the only constant. So I don't write humor as an effect; I write it as a philosophical underpinning of the world as I see it."

In the 30 years since he bore witness to the anti-government protesters that assembled at Ruby Ridge, Walter has watched as those once-fringe conspiracy theories have become mainstream. "Now, we live in such a conspiracy-rich world," he said. "I don't think Ruby Ridge was the cause of this so much as a harbinger of what was to come."

So Far Gone captures this unique moment, when Americans wrestle with a loss of purpose amid a pervasive and deepening political divide.

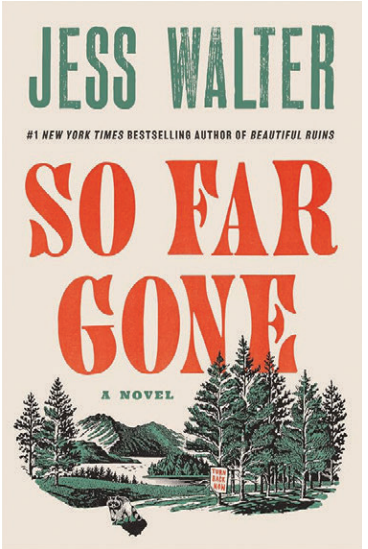
Walter is now returning to his first book, which was retitled *Ruby Ridge*, to provide its first update since 2008. A new afterword will note the deaths of Randy Weaver, in 2022, and Gerry Spence, Weaver's legendary firebrand lawyer, who died this August. Walter is also retracing the path that enabled anti-government sentiment to flourish in the West ever since the incident.

"Part of the update is looking at the way in which conspiracy theories have not only been absorbed into the mainstream, but have really become a winning political formula," he said.

And while these serious topics have occupied his life and writing for many years, he remains hopeful. "My son calls me a toxic optimist because I am so optimistic in general. I'm optimistic about human beings and their capacity for change and decency."

Maggie Doherty is a Kalispell, Montana, freelance journalist whose work has appeared in The Guardian, Washington Post, LA Times *and* SKI.

So Far Gone
By Jess Walter
257 pages, hardcover:$30
Harper, 2025.



Heard Around the West

Tips about Western oddities are appreciated and often shared in this column. Write heard@hcn.org.

BY TIFFANY MIDGE | ILLUSTRATION BY DANIEL GONZÁLEZ

WASHINGTON

If you plan on strolling through West Seattle's Lincoln Park, you might want to carry a large umbrella. We'd recommend wearing a hat, too, but Seattle Parks and Recreation issued an "owl safety alert" after an aggressive hooter started attacking unsuspecting park-goers and flying off with their headgear. In a post on the agency's Facebook page, one hiker reported that an owl swooped down and stole their brother-in-law's hat while they were walking through Lincoln Park on their way to visit a troll. (No, the hikers didn't accidentally wander into Narnia, there really *is* a giant troll named Bruun Idun out there, made by artist Thomas Dambo as part of the "Northwest Trolls: Way of the Bird King" project.) Rachel Schulkin, a spokesperson for Seattle Parks and Recreation, told *The Seattle Times* that "owl dive-bombing" isn't uncommon; in fact, similar "fowl-play" occurred at Discovery Park, on the Burke-Gilman Trail and at Lincoln Park last year. Are the owls auditioning for a remake of Hitchcock's *The Birds,* or is something else at work? According to the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, both barred and great horned owls tend to become more territorial during autumn, when the days get shorter, as well as during the spring mating season. Schulkin said that the hat thief appears to be either a horned or barred owl, adding that "she's personally seen no pattern between whom the owls pick to dive-bomb, and whom they choose to spare." Or should we say "hoo" gets dive-bombed, and "hoo" is spared?

COLORADO

In other avian news, KDVR-TV reported that police and animal control officers were called to recapture AWOL emus twice in five days, in Lakewood, Colorado, and also in Camfield. The first fluffy and fabulous fugitive was spotted Aug. 18, strutting along an intersection near Colfax Avenue and Quail Street (naturally) after fleeing its Lakewood home. Officers from the Lakewood Police Department Animal Control and the Regional Transportation District flocked together to return the bird to its home, with Lakewood police reporting that they'd had a "pretty emu-sing day." And then, just four days later, a second emu, aptly named "Dash," took off running, according to Camfield resident Brian Bunn, who assisted with its capture. Bunn told KDVR-TV — accurately, we might add — that emus are "pretty intimidating because of their claws on their feet. They're just real live dinosaurs. They're the last living dinosaurs." Colorado police are frequently tasked with rounding up exotic animals; witness the baby kangaroo found hopping down the streets of Durango last year, or the Patagonia mara — which resembles a cross between a jackrabbit and a capybara — spotted in Lakewood near Bear Creek Park. Patagonia maras are illegal to keep as pets in Colorado. Emus, however, are legal, and some are local celebrities: We are especially fond of Dennisaurus Rex, an emu that promenades around Colorado Springs on a leash.

CALIFORNIA

An immigration arrest in Los Angeles unfolded like something from a theater of resistance playbook. On Aug. 15, as several federal immigration enforcement officers were detaining a Colombian woman charged with living in LA illegally, a tow truck driver decided to intervene, *The Sacramento Bee* reported. According to the affidavit filed by Homeland Security, the man ignored officers' warnings, "started swearing at them," jumped into his tow truck and proceeded to haul away one of the officer's vehicles, with its emergency lights still activated. A video shared on the social platform X by the U.S. attorney's office shows the government vehicle, its flashing lights a-twinkle, being towed out of the apartment parking lot, with an ICE officer running fruitlessly after it. The driver, who has since been arrested, was reportedly laughing and filming as the ICE officer ran after him.

CALIFORNIA

Three new species of snailfish were discovered thousands of meters deep "along the abyssal seafloor offshore of California," thanks to a joint effort by the Monterey Bay Aquarium Research Institute and teams from the State University of New York at Geneseo, University of Montana and the University of Hawai'i. The aptly named "bumpy snailfish" are unlikely to make it as beauty or skincare influencers, though we think they're rather adorable, being large-headed with "jelly-like" bodies covered in loose pimply skin that reminds some of us of our own high school yearbook pictures. This discovery of a trifecta of hitherto unknown snailfish (*Careproctus colliculi)* is the result of "major advances in underwater technology," *Oceanographic Magazine* reports. And just when you thought there were no new surprises left to uncover.

HCN

Streamline your giving.

Want greater tax benefits with your year-end giving? You have options.

APPRECIATED STOCK
A stock transfer is one of the most tax-efficient ways to support *HCN*. When you give stock held for longer than one year, you avoid paying capital gains taxes and can deduct the full market value of the gifted stock on your tax return. It's a win-win for you and us.

DONOR ADVISED FUNDS
You can help *HCN* continue to tell compelling stories about the West by making a grant recommendation from your donor-advised fund (DAF). Don't have a DAF but want to know more? Contact your financial adviser or local community foundation for information on how to set one up.

IRA DISTRIBUTION
If you are 70½ or older, you may donate up to $105,000 directly from your IRA to *HCN* tax-free. If you're 73 or older, you may use this transfer to satisfy some or all of your required minimum distribution.

RETIREMENT BENEFICIARY
It is simple to name *HCN* as beneficiary of all or a percentage of your IRA or company retirement plan. When you choose or change your beneficiaries, write in: *High Country News*, tax #23-7015336, PO Box 1090, Paonia, CO 81428.

Learn more about ways to support:
hcn.org/support

Howard Litherland / Alamy

HCN
119 Grand Avenue
PO Box 1090
Paonia, CO 81428

U.S. $5 | Canada $6

#IAM THE WEST

BEN RUPERT (DUCK VALLEY SHOSHONE-PAIUTE, WASHOE DESCENT)
Treasurer of the Nevada Indian Territory
Carson City, Nevada

Nevada's Indian Territory represents all 28 tribes across the state, and our mission is to change the world through eco-cultural tourism. We want visitors to travel the Great Basin in a meaningful and respectful way, learning our languages, stories and traditions while understanding that this land holds deep Indigenous roots. I believe tourism should move beyond merely sustaining culture to regenerating it, connecting people to the environment and to one another. Through our "Explore Native Nevada" app, travelers can visit our homelands, attend powwows and experience places through their original names and histories. My art, my dancing and even projects like our upcoming Togugunde Observatory are all about honoring the land and the heavens above us, and ensuring that when people come here, they walk away changed, with a sense of respect and belonging.

Do you know a Westerner with a great story?
Let us know on social.

@highcountrynews | #iamthewest | hcn.org

Alejandra Rubio / HCN