Colorado legislature rocked by coronavirus

by Jeriel Clark Political & Organizing Director

As with all of our efforts, it’s difficult to write about our work without acknowledging the nanoscopic beast in the room and how it’s infiltrated every facet of our lives.

Colorado’s government has been at the forefront of addressing the statewide response to the Novel Coronavirus pandemic, and the 2020 Legislative Session has been far from immune to the impact.

This year’s session had just reached the halfway mark on March 7 at about the same time that broad concern began to set in and toilet paper was disappearing off the shelves. On March 14, legislators made the unprecedented decision to adjourn the legislative session, and by March 16, the Colorado Capitol was closed with the intention to resume as soon as it was safe.

Legislators took these necessary steps with one big question hanging in the hallways as they shut the doors — would they be allowed to resume the legislative session later this year?

The question wasn’t a matter of waiting out the virus, but rather a legal concern that the 120-day limit for the 2020 session was consecutive from the start date of January 8, which would end the session on May 6 regardless of whether their work was finished. To answer this concern, the legislature went to the Colorado Supreme Court.

On April 1, the Colorado Supreme Court came to a decision that the legislature can indeed hit the pause button and reconvene at a later point during the year. This means the legislature can view the 120-day limit on session as calendar days and not consecutive days, giving them roughly 50 days left in 2020. Lawmakers have decided to reconvene the full legislative body on May 18, and get a jump start on the budget on May 12. Between now and then, they will need to figure contingencies including remote testimony for members and citizens, remote voting, and other mixed conditions. So the road ahead is still a rocky one.

So where did we leave off? By the adjournment date of March 14, six of the 54 bills that the Western Colorado Alliance legislative committee were tracking had passed.

SB20-014 also passed, allowing bipartisan bill sponsored by West Slope lawmakers that serves as a statement of rights to fair battery pricing allowing the PUC to referee any disputes between suppliers and co-ops or municipalities.

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Staying vigilant in a time of pandemic

by Steve Allerton
Alliance President

During these days when we find ourselves separated from our family and friends and uncertainty prevails, we hope that you are well and finding ways to connect with those you care about. Cesar Chavez writes simply that “Together, all things are possible.” We are all experiencing challenges and adapting to different ways of living. At Western Colorado Alliance, we continue to connect with our members and groups through electronic means in order to impact issues we all care about.

Long ago I was introduced to the music of a singer/songwriter named John Prine. He recently passed away due to complications associated with COVID-19. In his 1971 song “Paradise” he wrote:

“Then the coal company came with the world’s largest shovel, and they tortured the timber and they stripped all the land, they dug for their coal ‘til the land was forsaken, and wrote it all down as the progress of man.”

In this moment, as we all cope with the challenges of the day and remain sensitive to the tragedies that have been unfolding daily, we must be vigilant in our work to ensure that the health and welfare of our communities remain a high priority.

As you are able, we welcome your voice and invite you to join the efforts of Western Colorado Alliance as together we redefine “progress” and strive to create healthy, just, and self-reliant communities now and into the future.

We wish you and your family health and wellness, hoping that soon we will be able to gather together knowing that all things are possible.

Trump administration approves massive giveaway to fossil fuel companies in final management plan

On April 10, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) released the final draft of the long-anticipated Uncompahgre Field Office Resource Management Plan. This plan will impact the future of 1.7 million acres across Western Colorado and is a complete giveaway to fossil fuel companies, throwing out years of community input. While Colorado’s governor and the public are focused on a major health crisis in the state, the BLM released a plan that could open up 95% of the public lands in the area to oil and gas development, threatening local farmers and businesses in the region.

Community leaders across the Slope say the plan fails to protect public health, provide ecological well-being, or promote a sustainable rural economy on Colorado’s Western Slope. These leaders say that at a time when small businesses are shutting their doors and communities of the rural Western Slope are telling visitors to stay away, the Trump Administration should not be barreling forward with land use planning that harms our community and environment.

“I grow food in the farm-to-table capital of Colorado, the Lower Gunnison watershed. Over the past nearly ten years, I’ve worked to identify to the BLM what I need them to consider as they make their land-use decisions for the lands around and upstream of me,” said Alliance member Mark Waltermire, owner of Thistle Whistle Farms. “For my farm, and the nearly 100 other Valley Organic Growers Association (VOGA) producers in this valley, this means clean air, clean water, and an understanding that our reputation for clean delicious food is easily destroyed. I am disappointed that the BLM has ignored the agricultural community of the North Fork in its RMP, and has failed to listen to and consider the input we’ve worked hard to give them.”

The final plan, which the BLM began revising in 2010, is meant to guide all activities and development in the Uncompahgre Field Office planning area for the next two decades, impacting the future of 1.7 million acres across Western Colorado. Today, we see the final plan opens the entirety of the North Fork Valley and other critical areas to oil and gas

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2020 People’s Lobby Trip smashed records

On February 24, we took our largest group ever of 31 People’s Lobby Trip attendees to the Capitol in Denver. (See page 1 for more information on this unprecedented legislative session.) Among our attendees were ten students representing the West Slope Youth Vote program who shone in their professionalism and knowledge about the bills on behalf of which they were advocating, and who were passionate about sharing their personal stories.

Our presence was recognized as we held numerous meetings around the Capitol and powerfully elevated our collective Western Slope voices with our elected leaders.

We appreciate the close communication our legislative liaison Sol Mallick has had with us as we navigate these unprecedented times!

This was by far the largest group of Western Colorado residents. Western Colorado Alliance has ever brought to the Capitol. All told, 31 people made the trip this year to be a part of the legislative process!
40 years of memories

Our Alliance is celebrating its 40th anniversary this year. We’re using the opportunity all year to look back and reflect on past victories and some of the many friends we have made along the way.

What are your favorite Alliance memories?

Our Alliance has worked to bring a Western Slope voice to the Capitol ever since our early days. Even if only a handful of us could make, we made sure lawmakers heard from us.

When Rep. Scott Tipton announced a town hall meeting on April 7, 2017, our Alliance organized a massive turnout in the Montrose High School gym. Grand Junction’s Scott Belfuss was one of the Alliance members who demanded answers from Rep. Tipton.

On March 30, President Obama signed into law the Dominguez-Escalante National Conservation Area and the Dominguez Wilderness! This victory was the culmination of more than a decade of citizen action by our Alliance members and allies!
While our society grapples with this historic crisis and its aftermath, there are many decisions about our future that still need making. Colorado is poised to begin two enormous state rulemakings this summer that will shape the energy landscape for a decade to come. Western Colorado Alliance will be in the room and at the dais, mobilizing hundreds of citizens like you to help craft our energy future.

Tri-State Generation and Transmission supplies power to 43 rural electric cooperatives representing over a million consumers, with most of them in rural Colorado places like Craig, Gunnison, Ridgway-Telluride, Durango, and Cortez. Tri-State is one of 63 such generation and transmission associations across the US. It is also one of the nation’s dirtiest and most costly. Tri-State’s historic reliance on an aging fleet of coal-fired plants has cost rural Colorado communities tens of millions in artificially high rates as cleaner, cheaper energy sources have become available.

Our members have been on the frontlines of Tri-State reform for the past two years and our hard work is delivering results. Within the past year, the state legislature has passed major bills to put Tri-State on a better path. Tri-State has announced its own unilateral vision for reforming its energy mix, including retirements for its Colorado coal plants and a shift towards cheaper wind and solar. Just this month, it announced a major new concession that will allow member cooperatives to develop more local renewables. More state legislation for Tri-State reform will emerge this year or next.

Now, Tri-State heads into two state rulemakings that will shine light on its opaque inner workings, require analysis of the climate and social cost of its decisions, and create a new set of rules for its future investments.

The first rulemaking will be conducted at the state Public Utilities Commission (PUC), currently set to begin in June. The PUC will create an Electric Response Plan (ERP) with deeply technical reporting of Tri-State’s financial and energy position, input from experts and stakeholders like Western Colorado Alliance, and sophisticated analysis and modeling for Tri-State’s future possibilities. In a historical development, mandated analysis around the social and climate cost of fossil fuels will shape these discussions. Phase One of the ERP begins in June and focuses on understanding Tri-State’s existing energy position. Phase Two, regarding Tri-State’s future planning and investment, is set to begin in December, stretching well in 2021. There will be numerous opportunities for public comment and testimony throughout.

The second rulemaking will be conducted at the Colorado Air Quality Control Commission, responsible for implementing Colorado’s boldly ambitious new statewide goal of reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 90% by 2050. This sprawling rulemaking, which will extend well beyond electricity supply topics to craft action on automobiles, agriculture, building energy use, and more, kicks off in June and will last well in 2021. It’s presently unclear how the rulemaking process will address electricity suppliers and we’ll have updates forthcoming.

Both these rulemakings will be arcane—technical, slow, and, quite frankly, boring. They will also be one of the largest opportunities for Coloradans to make a difference for climate, consumers, and local energy independence in this generation. Western Colorado Alliance staff and members will be working with allies to make sense of the details so that you, and your communities, can have access to the insight and information needed to make a difference.

As we work to imagine a return to a better new normal that reflects our values, we can’t wait to get that process started.

**Announcing WCA Energy Influencers**

The present quarantine is changing the way citizens learn, connect, and act, accelerating long-moving trends towards a more digital democracy. One of our favorite parts of energy democracy work is our ability to stay in touch with passionate citizens across a broad geography from Steamboat to Gunnison and Ridgway. As we head into another historic year for energy action, we’re proud to announce a new permanent social media campaign: WCA Energy Influencers!

In the coming weeks and months, we’ll be working to bring insightful livestream townhalls and interviews with clean energy experts, policy thinkers, local leaders, entrepreneurs, and more to this campaign, alongside lots of other content to inform, excite, and connect people to both digital and real-world action. If you have stories to tell or ideas to share, get in touch today!

Stop by facebook.com/WCAEnergyInfluencers today and start to get plugged into the conversation!
Colorado legislature rocked by coronavirus

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students in public school to take excused absences for mental health days in addition to sick days.

Our top priority bills revolving around single use plastic bans still hang in limbo, along with hundreds of other bills waiting to be determined.

The #1 priority when the legislature reconvenes will obviously be the state budget. In a normal year, the Joint Budget Committee spends the better part of six months building the annual state budget in the fall and winter. Passing this legislation is a lengthy process, and typically the House and the Senate devote a full week during session each year. The budget has been growing steadily in Colorado over the past decade, topping $30 Billion dollars in the 2019-2020 budget year.

The most recent budget forecast now estimates the $800 million increase previously projected for the 2020-2021 budget year has been reduced to $25 million due to the pandemic response. This was attributed to projected shortfalls due to the stoppage of business and tourism travel to and from the state, 20+ year low oil prices, and various other economically detrimental effects of the coronavirus shutdown.

Essentially, the state could be pushed to its financial brink, and no one can reasonably predict the outcome.

While we wait for our state legislature to return to work, and ultimately for the virus to subside, many of our members have turned their attentions closer to home. Our affiliate groups in Western Colorado Alliance are following our local governments’ responses to COVID-19 working to help inform actions that will benefit at risk populations in our communities.

And West Slope Youth Vote students are connecting students and adults alike to the work of our local municipalities by hosting interviews with local elected officials and asking questions generated by their peers.

Despite the upheaval created by COVID-19, Western Colorado Alliance does have something to celebrate. Just two months ago at the end of February, we took our largest group ever of 31 lobby trip attendees to the Capitol. Among our attendees were ten students representing the West Slope Youth Vote program who shone in their professionalism and knowledge about the bills they were advocating on behalf of, and who were passionate about sharing their personal stories.

Our presence was recognized as we held numerous meetings around the Capitol and powerfully elevated our collective Western Slope voices with our elected leaders.

We appreciate the close communication our legislative liaison Sol Malick has had with us as we navigate these unprecedented times, and hope that our next legislative article will ring informative with a slew of new updates. For more information you can contact me by email at jeriel@westerncoloradoalliance.org.

Trump approves massive giveaway

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leasing and development while removing or limiting critical protections to safeguard the local community’s air, water, wilderness, and wildlife.

Despite making minor changes at the request of Governor Polis, the plan is dramatically out-of-step with the protections local residents have requested for a decade.

The most disappointing aspect of the final plan is that it undermines years of collabo-ration and local engagement.

It completely disregards a community-crafted plan for the North Fork Valley.

In 2014, a diverse group of North Fork stakeholders, including agricultural, tourism, realty, business, and conservation organizations, came together and developed a “community alternative” — essentially a locally grown vision and set of guidelines — for oil and gas management in the area. Called the North Fork Alternative Plan, the balanced proposal would allow for the consideration of regulated energy development on up to 25 percent of the area’s federal lands with additional protections for lands important to hunting, fishing, and other outdoor recreation activities.

Our Alliance endorsed this plan, helping generate hundreds of comments in support. The agency’s final plan ignores this community proposal, and in turn, dismisses the community’s own vision for a sustainable future and diverse economy.

One small piece of good news is that the final plan did find 16 stream segments suitable for wild and scenic management, allowing for strong interim protective management. This is good news for eight streams in the San Miguel River watershed, five in the Dolores River watershed, and three in the Gunnison River watershed.

Western Colorado Alliance and our allies will continue our analysis of the final document and explore options to protect the farms, wildlands, air and water of the North Fork Valley and beyond.

This article was originally published as a press release from the Western Slope Conservation Center and has been reprinted here with minor edits and permission from WSCC.
Celebrating our West Slope Youth Vote seniors!

This is one of the toughest times of year when we say goodbye to some of the most passionate youth in WEST SLOPE YOUTH VOTE as they move on to greater things. Although we’ll miss them, we couldn’t be more excited for all the potential good they will be putting out into the world. This year our seniors may not get their celebratory walk they have been working toward for years. So from our homes, let’s give them a resounding round of applause that can be heard across the Western Slope!

Cassandra Ramirez
a graduate of Olathe High, will be attending Colorado Mesa University with a major in Nursing.

Katie Fry
is graduating from Cap Rock Academy.

Johneith Price
a graduate of Central High, will be attending Harvard University in the fall with a concentration in Government.

Tatum Menon
a graduate of Palisade High, will be studying International Politics and Economics with a concentration in Middle Eastern Studies at Middlebury College in Vermont.

Liliana Flanigan
a graduate from Palisade High, will be attending the University of Denver to major in Political Science with a minor in Spanish.

Natalia Nava
is graduating from Olathe High School.

Taygen Smith
a graduate of Palisade High, will be attending CSU and majoring in engineering this fall.

Mia Bartschi
a graduate of Montrose High, will be attending the University of California, Merced to study political science and expects to continue her education at law school following her undergraduate studies.

NOT PICTURED:
Cesar Ramirez
who is graduating from Olathe High School.
Renee Bruell
who is graduating from Roaring Fork High School.
Mia Brygger
who is graduating from Grand Junction High School.
Western Colorado Alliance hires 3 full-time organizers

by Arn McConnell
Communications Coordinator

In late January, Western Colorado Alliance began its search for three new organizers to join our team. It goes without saying that, although only a few months ago, it was a very different world in which our Alliance’s hiring process began than the one in which it ended!

It took time, because so many excellent and qualified candidates applied to join our Alliance, and because we know the job of “organizer” is a complicated and multi-faceted one. But we are very happy and proud to announce the hiring of our three new full-time organizers: Nick Allan, Abby Landmeier, and Brian Williams!

Nick Allan
It took time, because so many excellent and qualified candidates applied to join our Alliance, and because we know the job of “organizer” is a complicated and multi-faceted one. But we are very happy and proud to announce the hiring of our three new full-time organizers: Nick Allan, Abby Landmeier, and Brian Williams!

Nick Allan is excited to join Western Colorado Alliance’s staff after having previously worked with our Alliance as a volunteer and contractor.

Before Nick moved to Grand Junction, he was a teacher on the Front Range. He and his wife moved to Grand Junction two years ago and have “loved living here ever since.” Nick fell into political campaign work here in the Grand Valley, and while working on a congressional campaign, was able to travel around the Western Slope and learn more about what he calls “the best side of Colorado.”

Nick worked with Western Colorado Alliance both in the Grand Junction community center campaign and helped during our most recent People’s Lobby Trip to the state capitol.

Nick will be working on local foods and agriculture and on public lands issues.

Abby Landmeier’s career has been focused in the nonprofit sector, both in direct client work and in nonprofit administration.

Her last position was as Manager of Community Funding at United Way of Mesa County where she worked hard to connect support and connect health and human services organizations.

Abby has a master’s degree in public administration and a bachelor’s in social work. She is a member of Fruita Rotary, and serves on the Board of Trustees for Mesa County Public Libraries.

Abby says she’s on a mission to visit every hot springs in Colorado. She’s a lover and supporter of independent bookstores, and local newspapers.

Abby will be working on homegrown prosperity and will organize with our affiliate group in Montrose, the Uncompahgre Valley Alliance.

Brian Williams has a professional background in elections and the court system. Having grown up on the Western Slope, he is committed to working toward a strong, sustainable future for our community. Brian also volunteers with Mesa County Library’s literacy and pathway to citizenship programs. As an avid board game enthusiast, he enjoys opportunities to strategize and build winning coalitions.

Brian received his bachelor’s degree in political science from Colorado Mesa University, and his master’s degree in public administration from the University of Colorado Denver’s School of Public Affairs.

Brian Williams
Brian will be organizing in Garfield County and with our members across the Slope to shape future oil and gas policy.

We are genuinely thrilled to invigorate our mission to build healthy, just and self-reliant communities in Western Colorado with the brains, soul and heart that Nick, Abby and Brian bring!

While the IRS has extended the deadline to July 15, you can still help our Alliance with your refund! Our registration number is 20023003581, or just search for "Western Colorado Alliance" in the search gadget at the top of the page.

refundwhatmatters.org