

## BIG SKY. BIG CHALLENGES. BIG CHANGES.

BY BETH GRIFFIN

Montana is known as Big Sky country, but some of its most marketable resources are those that lie deep within the earth. Extracting valuable coal and methane gas and getting it to buyers have taken a terrible toll on Montanans and their environment.

The Northern Plains Resource Council (“Northern Plains”), a group that receives funding from the Catholic Campaign for Human Development, began 35 years ago when Montana residents became determined to protect their homes and livelihoods from the ravages of strip mining. Strip mining opens aquifers and can introduce toxic metals into scarce surface and ground water.

“Twenty-eight percent of all the coal in the United States is under Montana,” says Teresa Erikson, staff director of Northern Plains. “There is a long history of others taking natural resources of all types out of state. A proposal to build 26 power plants here in the late 1960s to sate the insatiable appetite for electricity in other places galvanized landowners to form Northern Plains.

“It was very organic,” she says. “Farmers and ranchers from the area, including Native Americans of the Northern Cheyenne, got together and said, ‘We have to do something to protect the land and our way of life and the rural economy.’” Ultimately, the plan was scaled back to one large power plant, and the number of strip mines was reduced from 26 to five.

Next, Northern Plains turned its attention to public policy. The group began to promote federal legislation to regulate strip mining and to encourage the reclamation of lands disturbed by the process. The Surface



Photos courtesy of Northern Plains Resource Council

FOR 35 YEARS, THE NORTHERN PLAINS MEMBERS HAVE BEEN COMMITTED TO PROTECTING WATER QUALITY, FAMILY FARMING AND RANCHING, AND THE QUALITY OF LIFE IN MONTANA.

Mining Control and Reclamation Act was vetoed by two presidents before President Jimmy Carter signed it into law in 1977.

Reclamation requires planning, Teresa says, because in strip mining, “monster drag lines scrape off layers of the earth to get to the coal. You have to separate the topsoil from the other dirt so you can put it back later. As soon as you mine out a seam, you’re supposed to start to reclaim.”

Reclamation is good policy, and it’s good for the economy, says Teresa. “Miners’ jobs are doubled, because it takes as much energy to put soil back as it does to rip it out. Also, reclamation drives up the market for native grass seed.”

Northern Plains has 3,000 members, 1,200 of whom are active. Teresa estimates that 35,000 people in Montana benefit from their efforts. “There are 21,000 family farms in Montana,” she says. “The turnover

*(continued on page 3)*

## FROM THE DIRECTOR

*Dear Friend of CCHD:*

Thanksgiving is just behind us. Advent surrounds us. Christmas is fast approaching. The Catholic Campaign for Human Development is blessed by the generous support provided through our annual parish Collection, taken up in most Catholic parishes on the weekend before Thanksgiving.

We at CCHD are so grateful to all of you who contributed and to those who provide indispensable support in other valuable ways. Your generous help is essential to the low-income families and communities whom CCHD empowers to improve their lives and protect their dignity. This newsletter features just one of the groups CCHD helps—**Northern Plains Resource Council**. These farmers and ranchers are working together to protect the land, their rural economy, their families, and their way of life.

This is my last newsletter as interim director of CCHD. I am pleased that Msgr. David Malloy, the USCCB General Secretary, is appointing Ralph McCloud to serve as the new director of CCHD. Ralph is a respected and experienced leader with strong ties to CCHD. He currently serves as department head for Community and Pastoral Services for the Diocese of Fort Worth, directing justice and peace ministry, CCHD, and African American ministry. Ralph served on the City Council and as Mayor Pro Tem of Fort Worth. Ralph's tremendous experience, skills, relationships, and leadership will be great assets.

I will still be an integral part of CCHD's terrific work. As the director of the bishops' Department of Justice, Peace, and Human Development, I will continue to help CCHD empower poor families and communities to pursue social and economic justice. I see CCHD's work at the center of this new department and at the heart of the Church's mission. In his first encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est*, Pope Benedict XVI declared:

Love for widows and orphans, prisoners, and the sick and needy of every kind is as essential to her [the Church] as the ministry of the sacraments and preaching of the Gospel.  
(no. 22)

Our Holy Father insists that three things make the Church: proclaiming the Gospel, celebrating the sacraments, and caring for the poor. CCHD's remarkable efforts to serve and stand with the poor help our community of faith to be fully Catholic, truly the Church of Jesus Christ.

We at CCHD wish all our friends, supporters, allies, and partners an Advent of great anticipation, a Christmas filled with joy and peace, and a New Year filled with greater charity, justice, and solidarity. We remember that the baby whose birth we celebrate came "to bring glad tidings to the poor / . . . to proclaim liberty to captives / and recovery of sight to the blind, / to let the oppressed go free . . ." (Luke 4:18).

Sincerely,

John Carr  
Interim Director, CCHD

### WHAT IS CCHD?

Through the Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CCHD), of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), Catholics and friends of CCHD across the country help poor and low-income Americans to help themselves and their communities out of poverty.

Since 1970, the Catholic Campaign has contributed over \$280 million to more than 7,800 low-income led, community-based projects that strengthen families, create jobs, build affordable housing, fight crime, and improve schools and neighborhoods. CCHD requires that projects develop community leadership and participation so that their solutions to poverty will be long-lasting and effective, and so that CCHD's investment in people will help break the cycle of poverty. CCHD also educates Catholics about the causes of poverty and seeks to build solidarity between poor and non-poor persons.

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Brian Stevens  
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(continued from page 1)

value of a farm dollar is often overlooked. When agriculture is profitable, the ripple effect is tremendous, but when agriculture is suffering, stores, churches, hospitals and the health care system suffer.”

Agriculture and tourism are the bread and butter of Montana, and Northern Plains’ membership reflects that, says Teresa. “Our members are farmers, ranchers, fishing guides, rafting company owners. They are all people who are very tied to the land and have something at stake. It’s their land, their livelihood, their community that is being threatened.” While individual chapters of Northern Plains choose their own issues to address, says Teresa, “all of the issues are land-based and depend on the need for clean water.”

Northern Plains became a multi-issue organization shortly after its founding, says Teresa. “In the 1980s, people were losing their land because of credit issues and the increasing monopolization of the meatpacking and grain industries. We helped to reform Montana foreclosure laws that were antiquated and were leading to overnight impoverishment and huge increases in the rural poor. It’s satisfying to know that Northern Plains’ work helped people stay on their land.”

CCHD has funded many Northern Plains projects. “In the early days of the rural crisis, CCHD was one of the only organizations willing to fund us,” says Teresa. “They had the compassion and vision to understand that grassroots change was needed in the systems here. Virtually all of the funds we have received from CCHD have been used to support our work to prevent rural poverty.”

Northern Plains will use a new grant from CCHD on a campaign in support of Montana’s nascent biofuels industry. Biofuels are alternatives to traditional coal and petroleum products. They are produced from renewable resources, such as soybean and rapeseed oils.




AS PART OF ITS ENVIRONMENTAL MISSION, NORTHERN PLAINS PROMOTES SMALL BIODIESEL PLANTS ACROSS RURAL MONTANA.

“Beyond [biofuel’s] being a renewable resource, we see a decentralized industry owned by local farmers, so the wealth stays here,” says Teresa. “We have a clear vision of how we want to see the market structured so that there is enough competition to ensure a fair price for the producers.”

The size of the state and the breadth of the organization may help with that goal. “Montana has 150 legislators, so it’s easy to get to know a legislator,” says Teresa. “Our challenge is to help people to understand that change happens when people are civically engaged.”

One of Northern Plains’ recent successes is the renovation of an abandoned grocery store on the south side of Billings into an energy-efficient headquarters for itself and another resource group. “We took a sow’s ear and turned it into a silk purse,” says Teresa. “Hundreds of volunteers helped and proved that ordinary people can do this. You don’t have to be rich.”

The building, dubbed Home on the Range, was named the “greenest” building in five states: Montana, Wyoming, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Minnesota. It was awarded LEED Platinum certification by the United States Green Building Council (USGBC). LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) is the USGBC’s system for rating and certifying the design and construction of the world’s most energy-efficient and high-performing buildings. Home on the Range is one of only 41 buildings in the United States to win the distinction, and it cost less to develop than any of the other winners. 

#### THE POVERTY LINE

### January is Poverty in America Awareness Month.

Each January, CCHD marks national Poverty in America Awareness Month. We remind Americans of the national scandal that so many live in poverty in the richest nation on earth, and we encourage everyone to do more to address this fundamental challenge for our nation and our community of faith. You can get involved. For concrete ways to raise awareness or to act on poverty at home or in your school, parish, or community, visit the much-praised CCHD Web site—[www.povertyusa.org](http://www.povertyusa.org).



# FOCUS ON GRASSROOTS LEADERSHIP: NORTHERN PLAINS' MARK FIX

After 13 years as an engineer with the Boeing Corporation in Seattle, Mark Fix moved home to Montana and bought a 9,700-acre ranch on the Tongue River, not far from the ranch where he grew up. Mark, his wife, and their three sons raise cattle and grow alfalfa, barley, and oats. They count on the river and aquifers to provide clean water for the cattle and their crops.

But the aquifers are adjacent to underground coal beds that produce methane gas, a valuable fuel. Gas developers have determined that the easiest way to get the methane out of the land they control is to pump water out of the aquifers until the gas is released. Pumping from the aquifers lowers the water table that ranchers and farmers tap for their wells.

The developers have no use for the water they pump, so they have a state permit to dump it into the river—at a rate of 1,600 gallons a minute. The water is too salty to irrigate crops, but not too salty to water cows, whose kidneys can filter it. “We’d like to see the water used for the cattle,” says Mark. “We’re not opposed to development, as long as it’s done right.

“Northern Plains Resource Council is the only group out here helping us. They’re here for people to call, and they’ve explained our rights. They’re interested in protecting resources and the livelihoods of the family farmers.”

## WHERE'S MY MONEY GOING?

All CCHD funds received are used solely for the support of CCHD's anti-poverty mission. CCHD abides by the charitable standards set by a leading donor advisory service. Our funds are divided as follows: 89% is assigned to CCHD's core program mission of community empowerment, economic development, education programs, and supporting services; 3% is allocated to coordinate the annual appeal; and 8% is assigned to administrative costs.

**We thank you for helping to break the cycle of poverty through your ongoing support for CCHD.**



FOR MARK FIX, HIS NORTHERN PLAINS ADVOCACY IS A NATURAL EXPRESSION OF HIS CATHOLIC FAITH.

Mark met Northern Plains in 1991 when he heard of a plan to build a railroad across his land as part of a shortcut for moving coal from Wyoming to Minneapolis. A three-mile-long strip of Mark's property was—and still is—in danger of being taken by the state's power of eminent domain.

Northern Plains supported updated eminent domain laws that give landowners more protection. Still, the railroad proposal resurfaces every few years, and new neighbors need to be updated about the potential consequences.

“[The railroad] would have been like building a wall,” says Mark, “because it would have cut off access to the river for the cattle, and it would have made the Montana coal mines lose their shipping advantage.

“We were lucky to have a group like Northern Plains to help people understand what's going on,” says Mark. “Without Northern Plains, we would have been single voices in the wind and we would have been bowled over.”

Northern Plains is not affiliated with a religious group, but Mark says that a lot of the people he has encountered as a member of the Northern Plains Coal Bed Methane Task Force are Catholics, like himself. “We share the Catholic mentality about protecting the water and taking care of the land,” he says. “Northern Plains goes along with the same ideas.” 