

High Country News

2022-23

# Annual Report



# From the Publisher

Dear Readers,

Looking back at the past year, I am amazed at how far we've come, and so grateful for all of the members of the *High Country News* community who've helped us get here.

Last year at this time, we had just decided to sell *HCN's* office building in Paonia, Colorado, and look for a smaller space that would reduce costs and better fit the needs of our customer service staff. (The rest of us now work from home offices — about a dozen in and around Paonia, and twenty more scattered across the West.)



Paonia staff at work in our redesigned office space.

We had moved away from direct mail and embarked on a major overhaul of our digital infrastructure, with the goal of making our website the primary tool for finding new readers. And we were midway through a strategic planning process that would guide our crucial next steps as a nonprofit.

One year later, we've sold the building and are renting a corner of it back from the new owner, who has turned our former offices into a warren of art studios. We are preparing to launch the new website and go live with new systems for tracking subscriptions, processing donations, and sending email newsletters. (One of our staffers recently described the IT upgrade as “jumping off the *Titanic* and onto a rocketship.”) And we're off and running with a 3-year strategic plan that is designed to “future-proof” *High Country News*.

Our vision for the next three years is to complete *HCN's* transformation into a nimble, digitally driven news organization that creates journalism by and for the West's diverse communities, engages a broad public in critical conversations about the region and empowers people to drive positive change.

It's an ambitious vision, especially given the state of the news business right now, particularly in the West. But we believe that there's something essential about *HCN's* grounded, public-interest journalism — journalism that is rooted in more than 50 years of lived experience and smart reporting from people with an intimate understanding of this place and its people.

And you know that *High Country News* has always been about more than just the stories. Our nonprofit has been described as the West's town square. It's a place where ranchers and loggers, conservationists and community leaders, academics and activists, and everyone in between, can come to find smart reporting and

civil conversation about the region's most pressing issues. *HCN* is a vital and vibrant gathering place that connects to a far-flung community of thoughtful, engaged people from all walks of life.

The strategic plan is all about nurturing and expanding this community and drawing in more folks like you — people who work tirelessly on behalf of the West and who power our journalism with their ideas and financial support. The plan lays the groundwork for sustainability and expansion by updating and improving every aspect of our operation.

Here's a quick outline of what will come out of this work, thanks to your generous support:

1. **Journalism with impact:** Insightful reporting and incisive analysis by, of and for the West's diverse communities — work that inspires action and empowers people to make positive change.
2. **A fresh business strategy:** The overhaul of *HCN's* IT infrastructure will make the website the primary driver for new readers.
3. **A new generation of readers:** New technology and a fresh approach to community-building will allow us to engage a broader and more diverse public in the critical conversations about the West.
4. **A broader base of support:** New tools will lower barriers for first-time donations, encourage readers to increase their giving over time, and expand our circles of large and major donors.
5. **A stronger, more resilient *HCN*:** Important investments in finance and human resources, organizational leadership and JEDI (justice, equity, diversity and inclusion) will help ensure that, as *HCN* grows, we can support and sustain the work.



Luna Anna Archey

I hope you find time to dive into this annual report and see the powerful results of a challenging year. This work would not be possible if not for *HCN* readers and your steadfast commitment to smart, incisive journalism, civil dialogue, and the project of building a better West.

**With deepest gratitude,**

**Greg Hanscom**  
**Executive Director/Publisher**





Luna Anna Archey

# From the Editor-in-Chief

I recently sat down to look through the issues we published over the last fiscal year, and I found myself feeling really proud and excited about how far we've come. The deep, thoughtful journalism, the vibrant visuals, and the elegant design tying it all together are truly top-notch. When I came on board two and a half years ago, I promised to make a more thoughtful and artful *HCN*, one that centers stories of nature and justice and seeks to represent all geographies and communities in the West. My team and I are making that magazine now, and we hope you enjoy reading it!



**Jennifer Sahn**  
Editor in Chief

We have tackled some challenges in the past year. I spent a portion of the year on medical leave, cheering my team on from the sidelines. *HCN* alum Michelle Nijhuis did an amazing job as Acting Editor-in-Chief, with a lot of help and support from former EIC Jonathan Thompson. Our talented team put extra care and time into making sure each issue exceeded our journalistic standards and contained stories that speak to all sectors of our readership. We were finalists for a National Magazine Award for the second year in a row — the highest honor in the magazine business — and, the cover of our October 2022 issue was a finalist for Best Cover in the News and Politics division.

With our strategic plan as a guide, we've been bringing more clarity to what makes an *HCN* story, and we've mapped out five main coverage areas to guide us: Indigenous Affairs; Lands, Water & Wildlife; Climate Change; Western Life, Culture & Politics; and Justice & Equity. We've retooled our online news operation to better serve our audience, always asking who a story is for and what our readers need to get out of it. We've got a lot coming up that we are excited to share with you: a story package on the 50th anniversary of the Endangered Species Act, a special issue on climate futures, a series about green colonialism in the renewable energy sector — all of it aimed at informing and inspiring readers like you to get involved and make a difference in your communities. As always, we are grateful for your support. It helps us keep doing the work we love to do: covering the contemporary West in all its diversity and complexity.



# Stories

Twelve stories that made a difference



Pacific lamprey's ancient agreement with tribes is the future of conservation



The case of the Colorado River's missing water



'We have fire all around us and we can't get out'



When dams come down, fish come home



A weed is swallowing the Sonoran Desert



Pink snow is a red flag for the West's water

# & Impact



**How Arizona squeezes tribes for water**



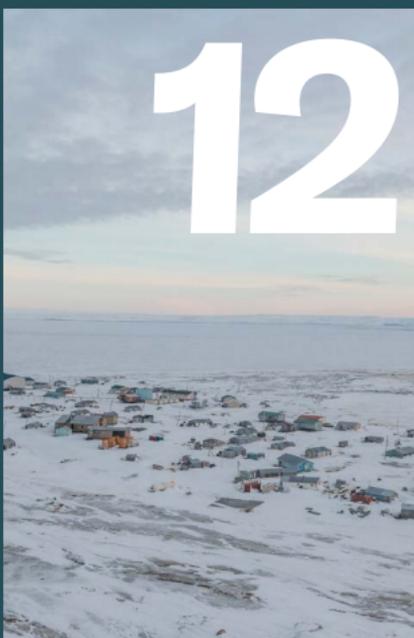
**Hay – yes, hay – is sucking the Colorado River dry**



**Green colonialism is flooding the Pacific Northwest**



**Idaho cobalt mine is a harbinger of what's to come**



**As Newtok, Alaska, crumbles, residents are left in a dangerous limbo**



**Western resort towns risk being 'loved to death'**

# Awards & Recognition



B. “Toastie” Oaster was nominated for a **2023 American Society of Magazine Editors** award, one of the industry’s highest honors, in the Feature Writing category for their story “Underwater Legends,” published in *HCN*’s October 2022 issue.



“Images from the first-known Native American female photographer” won an **Institute for Nonprofit News Award** for visual journalism.



*HCN* received **four National Native Media awards** from the Native American Journalists Association (now the Indigenous Journalists Association).



“On the road, a taste of home” was selected to be included in this year’s anthology of “**Best American Food Writing**,” published by HarperCollins.



Our October 2022 cover “Making Refuge” was a finalist in the American Society of Magazine Editors for the **Best News and Politics Cover** category of the ASME Best Cover Contest.



Sarah Sax won **first place for Investigative Reporting from the Newswomen’s Club of New York** for the feature “Unbearable Heat.” The story also won the **American Society of Journalists and Authors Writing Awards Winner** in the category of Social Change and was a top-five finalist for the **2023 Victor K. McElheny Award** from the MIT Knight Science Journalism Program.



**Jennie Ross Cobb**  
(first-known female Native American photographer)

# More than Stories

*High Country News'* work and impact extends well beyond our award-winning journalism. Your philanthropic dollars help us provide subscriptions to state and federal lawmakers and curious students across the country; we train emerging journalists; and we shine a light on issues important to Indigenous communities with stories for and by Native people.

## Legislator Subscriptions

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As part of our mission to inform readers about complex – and important – issues in the West, we send a copy of *High Country News* to each of our **535 elected officials** in Congress, thanks to your funding. This past year, two donors sponsored subscriptions for legislators in several Western states as well: Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Idaho, Nevada, Oregon, Utah, Washington and Wyoming. Incredible!

These lawmakers and their office staff now have access to stories and data that can better equip them to make wise decisions for their constituents.

**Cost of subscriptions for the U.S. Congress:**

**\$15,000**

**Cost per state:**

**between \$1,700 and \$3,500**

(depends on number of representatives)



# Interns & Fellows

For more than 40 years, HCN has been an incubator and springboard for early-career journalists. Our Intern and Fellow Program has mentored 240 people, many of whom have gone on to successful careers in journalism and publishing. This program continues to evolve to meet the needs of writers in a fragile but crucial industry, and infuses our journalism and staff with fresh perspectives.

## 2023 Fellows



**Caroline Tracey**  
*Climate Justice Fellow*



**Brooke Larsen**  
*Virginia Spencer  
Davis Fellow*



**Susan Shain**  
*Headway Fellow  
(in collaboration with  
the New York Times)*

## 2023 Interns



**Sam Shaw**  
*Spring Intern*



**Taylar Stagner**  
*Spring, Indigenous  
Affairs Intern*



**Sarah Trent**  
*Spring Intern*



**Ollie Hancock**  
*Fall Intern*



**Shana Lombard**  
*Fall, Indigenous  
Affairs Intern*



**Natalia Mesa**  
*Fall Intern*

**Cost of Intern/Fellow Program:**

**\$294,000**

# HCNU Classroom Subscription

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Readers from across the country have told us that they first picked up an issue of *HCN* as a college student, or that an impassioned professor insisted that they read it. So we made the program official in 2013 and have been serving tens of thousands of students from across the country every year. Educators get online access or print copies for each student to use as they choose in their curriculum — and with that, the students get unparalleled access to our 50+ years of reporting on the Western issues. An invaluable resource!

“*My wildlife management and environmental science students come from families of loggers, ranchers and hunting guides, as well as federal and state land-management agency personnel. They are tied to the West and to public lands. Our in-class discussions are phenomenal when the curriculum is based on issues identified by High Country News. HCNU provides my students with real and practical knowledge as they move on as citizens of the West and of America.*

- **Eric C. Atkinson, Biology Department coordinator, Northwest College, Wyoming**

**Cost to serve 17,000 students:**

**\$91,850**

## Indigenous Affairs Desk

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Indigenous voices and issues have long been inaccurately portrayed or simply overlooked by mainstream media. *High Country News* is dedicated to changing that and supports a desk of writers and editors who are focused on bringing readers a rich array of Indigenous stories — many of them reported and illustrated by Native journalists — giving us all a more thorough understanding of the West, from the politics of the Colorado River to the life cycles of the lamprey.

**Last year, our Indigenous Affairs Desk produced 53 stories from across the West.**

**Cost to fund the desk:**

**\$430,500**

# HCN's Audience

We pay attention to who's reading *HCN*, so that we can track change, growth and measure impact.

## How many subscribe to HCN?



**27,370**  
Print + digital subscribers



**3,389**  
Digital-only subscribers



**149,840**  
Newsletter subscribers\*

*\*These folks receive our online newsletters. About 8% of them are paid subscribers, 12% have made a donation in the past and 85% haven't subscribed or donated yet.*

## Where are they from?

There are *HCN* subscribers in every one of the 50 states and about 75 international subscribers as well. Most of our paid readers reside in Colorado, California, Washington, Oregon, Arizona, New Mexico, Montana and Utah.

## How do people use our website each month?\*



**291,326**  
Sessions



**339,731**  
Unique page views



**4:15**  
Average time on page

*\*Monthly averages for website traffic July 2022-July 2023*

## Social Engagement



**70,967**  
Facebook followers



**18,025**  
Instagram followers



**1,958**  
LinkedIn followers



**1.33 K**  
YouTube subscribers



**358**  
TikTok followers

# Outreach

*HCN* reaches more than **2 million readers** every year. That audience includes our subscribers (and the folks who read pass-along copies), as well as visitors to our website and the beneficiaries of our free student and legislative subscription programs. A significant percentage of readers come to *HCN* through syndication and web traffic from other news outlets that share our stories with their audiences at no charge.

*HCN* is involved in several partnerships that allow members to republish one another's work, broadening *HCN's* reach far beyond our immediate audience. Because of this, it's possible to find *HCN* stories in *Mother Jones*, *Wired Magazine*, *Inside Climate News*, *The Atlantic*, *Slate* and many other publications.

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**Collaborative journalism** also provides *HCN* opportunities to work with other newsrooms, sharing both editorial and funding resources as well as extending our reach. Last year, we worked on a number of "collabs" with partners that include:



The **Global Indigenous Affairs Desk** is a partnership in an Indigenous-led collaboration focusing on the intersection of climate and justice and includes *HCN*, *ICT News* (formerly *Indian Country Today*), *Mongabay* and *Native News Online*.

**Capital B** is a new independent, nonprofit online news organization that centers Black voices, audience needs and experiences, and partners with the communities it serves.



**Grist** is a nonprofit, independent online media organization (founded in 1999 by an *HCN* intern!) dedicated to telling stories of climate solutions and a just future. *Grist* reports nearly 2 million monthly readers.

**ProPublica**, launched in 2008, is an online independent, nonprofit newsroom that focuses on investigative journalism. In 2022, they reported 2.3 million average monthly visitors to their website.



# Cutting Edge Technology

One of the principal aims of *HCN* 's strategic plan is to make the foundation of our operation solid. We've been calling this focus "future-proofing," and it involves looking deeply at our funding models and working to make them more balanced and effective, improving our marketing and outreach capacity and revisiting our program structure so that we can continue to deliver impactful journalism to a growing audience.

One of the big focal areas of our strategic planning this year has been a major overhaul of our IT infrastructure. This winter, we'll be launching a fully revamped digital user experience, made possible by the generous support of our donors and the sale of our Paonia office building.

## What will that look like?

- ✓ **A user-friendly dashboard** that lets customers take control of their *HCN* account
- ✓ **Automatic subscription renewals** that streamline your ongoing support for *HCN* (and use less paper!)
- ✓ **Enhanced website design tools** that enable dynamic storytelling and help us engage new website visitors



## Tools we're using:

- **NewsPack on WordPress:** Provides greater control and flexibility for both our features and digital-only stories.
- **Pelcro:** This management tool simplifies the subscription and donation process, making it easier to donate and renew!
- **ActiveCampaign:** Our new email service provider allows for more personalized and engaging emails.
- **Further Integration** of our customer support tools, which will give us a more unified view of our community and enable us to serve you better.

We've completed the architecture, selected top-notch vendors, and are in the final stages of quality control and team training. This transformation opens up new opportunities for *HCN* to deepen our coverage, serve our subscribers and improve our relationships with new and longtime readers.

# Reader-Supported Journalism

Journalism informs society, holds the powerful to account and is an essential pillar of our increasingly fragile democracy. But when newsrooms are owned or controlled by a powerful few, it's easy to doubt the information they share.

**That's why we are proud that *High Country News* is reader-supported** and independent of corporate influence. The revenue figures on the following pages show that 75% of our operation is funded by you, through your subscription dues (15%) and your donation dollars (60%).

***HCN's funding model relies on readers. YOU are our stakeholders.***

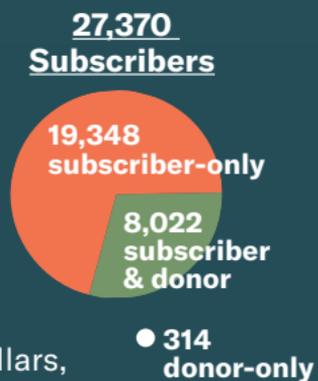
**Tucked into the pie slices of our P&L revenue percentages are some pretty great stories:**

Within our **Subscription** revenue, 1,728 subscriptions were gifts to family and friends. Which means you find *HCN* so valuable, you want to share it — without giving away your own copy!

The **Donations** line includes monthly gifts, \$3 and \$5 “round up” contributions on top of subscription purchases, annual contributions, IRA distributions and more.

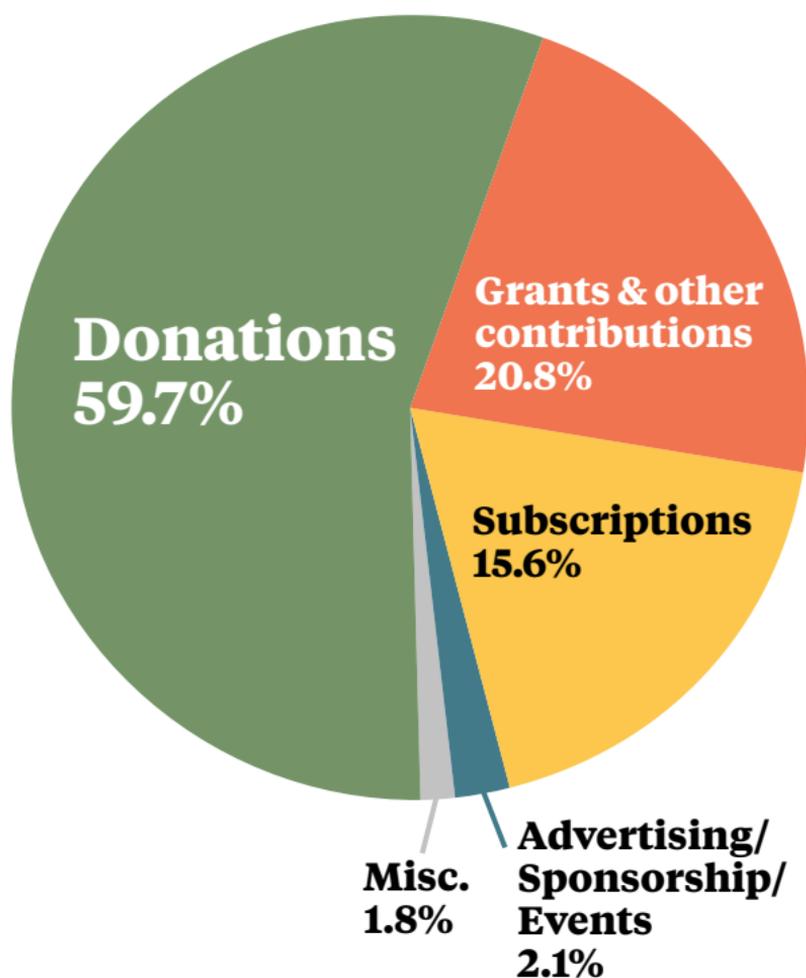
**Fun facts about *HCN* contributions:**

- ✓ \$2,341,000 came from 8,336 donors
- ✓ 950 donations were repeat gifts, meaning you didn't just donate once, but came back and showed your appreciation again!
- ✓ \$151 was the average donation, and \$50 was the median
- ✓ 3,877 donations under \$50 dollars, 1,843 donations under \$10



# 2022-23 Profit & Loss Budget

## Annual Support & Revenue



<b>Donations</b> .....	<b>\$2,341,019</b>	<b>\$2,101,123</b>
<b>Grants and other contributions</b> .....	<b>\$815,127</b>	<b>\$709,653</b>
<b>Subscriptions</b> .....	<b>\$609,743</b>	<b>\$708,062</b>
<b>Advertising/Sponsorships/Events</b> .....	<b>\$83,276</b>	<b>\$82,894</b>
<b>Miscellaneous</b> .....	<b>\$70,724</b>	<b>\$46,112</b>
<b>Total:</b> .....	<b>\$3,919,889</b>	<b>\$3,647,844</b>

### Other Income

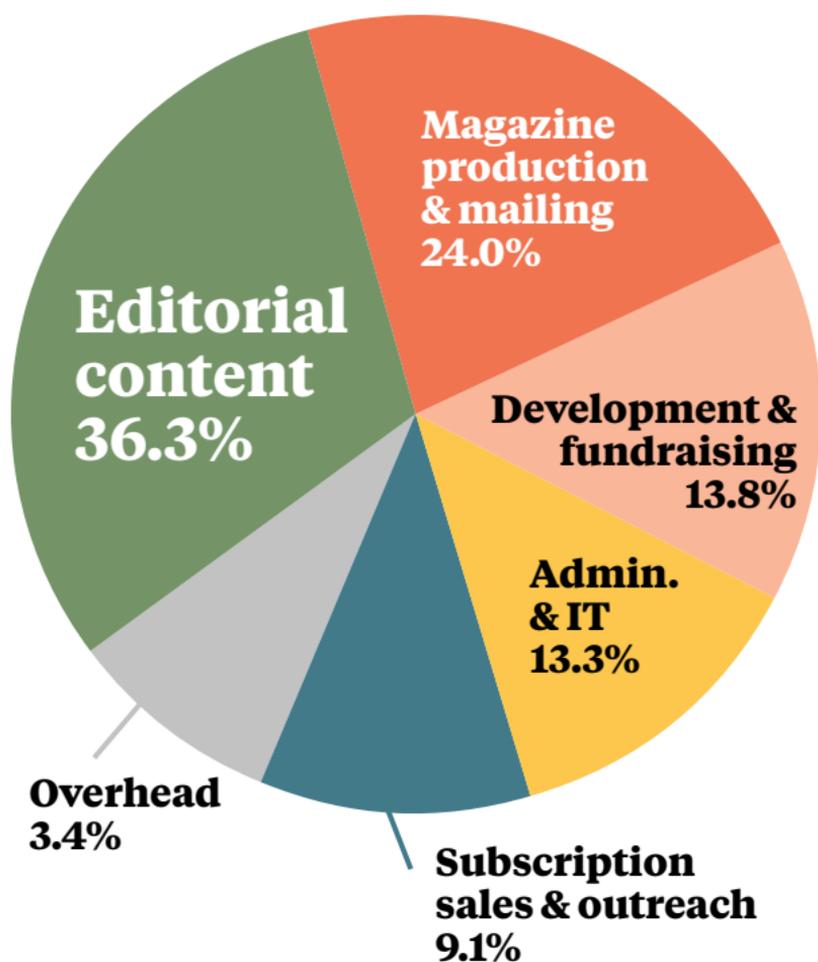
Building sale .....	\$404,300
Change in market value of investments .....	\$32,693

# October 1, 2022 - September 30, 2023

## October 1, 2021 - September 30, 2022

*\*Note: These numbers are unaudited estimates.*

### Expenses



<b>Editorial content</b> .....	<b>\$1,518,251</b>	<b>\$1,286,413</b>
<b>Magazine production &amp; mailing</b> .....	<b>\$1,003,469</b>	<b>\$925,413</b>
<b>Development &amp; fundraising</b> .....	<b>\$576,697</b>	<b>\$600,436</b>
<b>Administration &amp; IT</b> .....	<b>\$556,773</b>	<b>\$529,232</b>
<b>Subscription sales &amp; outreach</b> .....	<b>\$382,494</b>	<b>\$452,671</b>
<b>Overhead</b> .....	<b>\$143,648</b>	<b>\$352,095</b>
<b>Total:</b> .....	<b>\$4,181,332</b>	<b>\$4,146,260</b>

#### Other Expense

Replatforming digital infrastructure \$404,300

**Net Income/(Expense) .....** **(\$22,580)**

# Thank You, Friends!

We literally couldn't do this work without your incredible support, and we're so grateful for this community of curious, passionate readers. You keep us on the job, with your voracious appetite for news and your love of the West.

- Thank you to everyone who has ever **purchased a subscription** for yourself or a friend or loved one.
- Thank you for supporting one of **our powerful programs**: HCNU, our Intern & Fellowship Program, our Indigenous Affairs Desk or the Congress Campaign.
- Thanks for giving a **one-time gift** during one of our campaigns or when you were inspired by a story.
- Thanks to more than 1,200 of you who give monthly as a **Sustainers' Club members**.
- We're grateful to you for remembering *HCN* in your will, and joining the **Tom Bell Legacy Circle**.
- Thank you to all the **foundations** who have invested in *High Country News*' work and mission.

*I look forward to each issue. Even though the West is vast, there is always an article that is related to where I live in the Eastern Sierra. We need more hard-hitting journalism like yours to keep us informed and to open our minds. Thank you for your courage to cover things that most will not.*

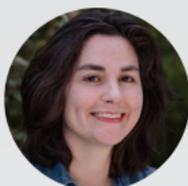
— **Mark Bir, Bishop, California**

*You guys are AWESOME! I am a Native American and HCN offers the BEST JOURNALISM being done ANYWHERE regarding Indigenous news in the Americas, along with excellent news about everything else as well. Thank you for giving voice and in-depth understanding to complex issues!*

— **Dawn Suzanne (Wanatee) Buffalo, Meskwaki Nation in Tama County, Iowa**

*Thank you all for continuing to illuminate the real issues that impact all of us here in the mountains and valleys of the Intermountain West. The clarity and in-depth knowledge you provide helps us all understand one another and navigate towards the greater good for our local economies, communities, water and wild places.*

— **Karen Kurtak, Idledale, Colorado**



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The members of the *High Country News* board of directors give generously of their time and expertise to oversee the health and direction of the organization. We are thankful for their wisdom, patience, humor, guidance and support.

# Board Members

# Know the West

High Country News is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit media organization that covers the important issues and stories that define the American West. Its mission is to inform and inspire people to act on behalf of the West's diverse natural and human communities.



High Country News

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P.O. Box 1090, Paonia, CO 81428  
970-527-4898 • [hcn.org](http://hcn.org)