

HighCountryNews

2021-22
Annual
Report



From our President

Warm greetings from the board of directors.

This has been my first year as the president, and my 6th year on the board, and I want to share my observation that *HCN* staff has been hard at work, especially in these last few years, to make the organization more successful. The finance committee has approved another ambitious budget for the upcoming year and agreed to sell the Paonia office building – which has been the heart of *High Country News* and its staff for decades. We have built in stronger financial controls and we've just begun our 3-year strategic planning process. As a nonprofit ED myself, I know well the expectations and challenges ahead, to keep *High Country News* on a solid footing. And we're all optimistic about the strengths and vision of the staff.

Thank you readers, for your generous investment in independent journalism.

Estee Rivera Murdock
Board President

Erik Murdock, Rosie and Estee Rivera



From the Publisher

Dear Readers,

Lander, Wyoming, is a humble burg of 7,500 souls, tucked up against the eastern edge of the Wind River Mountains. At the Lander Bar and Grill, a local institution, cowboys and rock climbers give each other the hairy eyeball over beers, while families wolf down burgers on the patio and summer tourists sip cocktails in the lounge upstairs. At Lander Valley High School, kids from the Wind River Reservation, north of town, play basketball alongside others from town.



Painted by Diane Sylvain

Lander is also the birthplace of *High Country News*, and still home to a number of folks who worked for *HCN* in the 1970s and '80s. Geoff O'Gara, former editor, is one of them. During my visit with him this summer, he recalled the day in 1983 that the board of directors met in his leafy backyard and

chose Ed and Betsy Marston as the new publisher and editor. The Marstons moved *HCN* to Paonia, Colorado, a coal mining and fruit-growing community that is, in many ways, Lander in miniature.

Paonia is still *HCN's* hometown, but as we wrote in the November issue, we're looking for a smaller office. Roughly two-thirds of our staff members are now scattered across the West. Our team has put down roots from Durango, Colorado, to Wrightwood, California, and from Missoula, Montana, to Tucson, Arizona. We have people on the payroll in 10 states. This year, for the first time, we have a staff writer in Alaska.

This dispersal adds depth and diversity to the stories you see in the magazine, in our email newsletters, and on the website. And these changes signal deeper shifts within *HCN*.

- *High Country News* is among a growing number of newsrooms addressing a historic lack of representation, inclusion and equity in journalism with effective solutions. We are committed to creating an organization — staff, board and the magazine and website — that reflects the diversity of the region we cover. While this work is ongoing, its results already shine through in our stories and, increasingly, our team roster.



- To put *HCN's* work in the hands of broader audiences, we've shifted our sales tactics. This year, we abandoned "direct mail" as a tool for acquiring new readers. More and more, we're moving away from a traditional, transactional model to one based on community-building. This involves working directly with readers in communities around the West, and partnering with organizations that reach folks that *HCN* doesn't. (Read more on page 12.)
- Our fundraising team is working under a similar model. We've fanned out across the West, strengthening our relationships with readers and donors, and expanding the network of people who support and sustain *HCN's* journalism. A remarkable 9,134 readers made contributions last year, in addition to their subscription dues. Whether you contribute \$10 or \$10,000, we want you to know that we appreciate you, and value your insights on the region. (Peruse the figures on pages 16 & 17.)
- And we've begun a full-scale, soup-to-nuts rebuild of *HCN's* digital infrastructure, from the website to the systems we use to track and serve subscriptions. By the end of this year, you'll be able to easily manage your subscription online, sign up for auto-renewal, or become a member of our Sustainers' Club by making a monthly donation. (Of course, if you prefer to talk to a human, you can always call our customer service team in Paonia.)



At its core, however, *High Country News* is still much the same publication that Geoff O'Gara edited back in Lander. This is a publication by, of, and for the West. We serve communities that have long been overlooked by other media, and surface stories about a landscape that looms large in the public imagination, but rarely gets the kind of attention that it deserves.

High Country News will always be a work in progress. It is a product of restless minds, created for an audience that refuses to settle for simplification and stereotypes. But as always, our reporting is driven by genuine curiosity — a desire to understand people and place, and to give our readers a sense of possibility.

And as always, *HCN* is here, doing this essential work, only because of readers like you, who provide three-quarters of the revenue that keeps our lights on and our laptops humming across the region — and who keep us on our toes with your keen observations and questions.

Sending you gratitude, wherever you are, for your love of the West, and another great year.

Greg Hanscom
Executive Director/Publisher



Stories & Impact

Twelve stories that made a difference



How a salmon farm disaster changed Northwest aquaculture forever



The White Sands discovery only confirms what Indigenous people have said all along



Why 4 hunters in Wyoming were charged with trespassing on land they never touched



What's it like to live in a tourist town with no tourists?



Missing map by William Clark turns up with an unflattering revelation



Winter without snow is coming



What's wrong with the Manitou Cliff Dwellings Museum and Preserve?



Why can't the public access the West's biggest waterfall?



Wild horses, buffalo and the politics of belonging



Botanists find one of 'the world's worst weeds' spreading in the Boise foothills



As Lake Powell levels drop, see inside Glen Canyon Dam



Images from the first-known Native American female photographer

Awards & Recognition

HCN was a finalist for an Ellie (a.k.a. National Magazine Award) from the American Society of Magazine Editors in the category of General Excellence, Special Interest. This is one of the highest honors in the industry.

From the Native American Journalists Association:

- The Richard LaCourse Award for Investigative Journalism for “A Broken System,” a collaboration with the Indigenous Investigative Collective
- Third place in Best Coverage of Native America for “The effort to save Upper Klamath Lake’s endangered fish before they disappear,” by Anna V. Smith
- Third place for Best Feature Story for Nick Estes’ “The battle for Black Hills”
- Second place for Best Environmental Coverage for Brook Thompson’s “The familial bond between the Klamath River and the Yurok people”
- Third place for Best Editorial for “The White Sands discovery only confirms what Indigenous people have said all along,” written by Nick Martin
- Third place for Best Column for Jason Asenap’s film criticism series

The photo essay, “Images from the first-known Native American female photographer,” by Will Chavez, won the Institute for Nonprofit News’s Insight Award for Visual Journalism.



“A mega-dairy is transforming Arizona’s aquifer and farming lifestyles,” by Debbie Weingarten and Tony Davis, won third place for Outstanding Investigative Reporting for small news outlets from the Society of Environmental Journalists.

Kylie Mohr’s “Collecting seeds to restore prairie grasslands” won second place for magazine environmental reporting from the Society of Professional Journalists.



HCN amplifies its voice through partnerships and syndication. We continue to share stories with other news outlets for free, which not only brings our stories to a wider audience, but also helps smaller operations broaden their coverage. *High Country News* is also a go-to publication for other media outlets, which reference our work regularly and often interview our reporters.

A few examples:



- *The New York Times* linked to our story “A community poisoned by oil” in their piece “The Biggest Uncertainty Is Us.”
- *NYT*’s Climate Forward newsletter highlighted our photo essay with LiDAR images of rivers, taken by Washington Geological Survey staffer Daniel Coe.
- “The lion king of Los Angeles” was featured in Longreads and the Sunday Longread.
- Oregon Public Broadcasting has interviewed three of our staff journalists about stories they wrote on cannabis, police and waterfalls.
- Former climate justice fellow Sarah Tory’s feature story “If you don’t want us, tell us to go back” was made into a podcast, as was Associate Editor Paige Blankenbuehler’s 2019 feature story “How a tiny endangered species put a man in prison” and Ruxandra Guidi’s “The lion king of Los Angeles.”
- Three staffers have been guest lecturers in university classes across the country in science writing, journalism, nonfiction writing and photo journalism.
- Fellow Kylie Mohr was interviewed by KHOL, a community radio station in Jackson, Wyoming, about her story “What’s getting more expensive? Everything but grazing fees.”
- B. Toastie’s *Halito* video roundup has inspired a similar production at KGW in Portland.
- Editorial partnerships include The Climate Desk, Solutions Journalism Network and the Colorado News Collaborative.

Thought Leadership

More Than Stories

In addition to supporting award-winning journalism, HCN donors fund powerful programs that enrich our Western communities.

Interns & Fellows

Since the early 80s, *High Country News* has trained more than 230 eager, early-career journalists, mentoring them and giving them opportunities to hone their reporting and editing skills. This incredible program has evolved over the years to what's now a highly competitive incubator for nationally recognized writers and journalists.

Both our interns and fellows serve as full-time staff members, attending regular editorial meetings and writing stories for the magazine and website.



Noah Schlager
Summer Intern

Sarah Tiern
Summer Intern

Caroline Tracy
Climate Action Fellow



Bylie Mohr
Summer Intern/Fellow

Mialed Spotted Elk
Summer Intern

Wufei Yu
Fall Intern

Theo Whitcomb
Fall Intern

Cost of Intern/Fellow program: \$280,000

Congress Campaign

Each year, we bring *High Country News* into the offices of our 535 elected officials in Congress and sometimes to Western state legislators as well, thanks to donors like you. The goal is to give lawmakers the kind of information and analysis that will help them make better-informed decisions for the West and beyond.

Cost of Subscriptions for Congress: \$15,000

Indigenous Affairs Desk

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 focused on bringing readers a rich array of Indigenous stories — by Native writers — and giving us all a more thorough understanding of the West.

Last year, our Indigenous Desk wrote 65 Indigenous stories from across the West.

Cost of Indigenous Affairs desk: \$410,000



Luna Anna Archey

HCNU Classroom Subscription

Donor support has made this classroom subscription program FREE to students and educators, providing a unique and unparalleled resource: HCN's 53 years of archives, with reporting, illustrations and photos, essays, critical analysis and commentary on the American West. Last year, this program served 17,710 students in 25 of our 50 states (yes — outside of the West too!).

“My students get more out of our discussions of changes taking place up and down the Rockies because they have access to up-to-date and in-depth news of the region. HCN drills down into topics that every student and citizen of the West can use.

- Jerry Johnson, Montana State University
Natural Resource policy

“HCNU is an invaluable resource for helping my students engage with the complexities of environmental issues and life in the West today. Student presentations based on issues they first discover in HCN articles deepen and broaden our discussions of environmental ethics. The ideas we wrestle with in class are directly relevant for the human and non-human communities with which we share our home.

- Dr. Jonathan Moo, Whitworth University
Course: Environmental Ethics

Cost of HCNU: \$91,850

Evolving & Doing Better

“Why doesn’t HCN have a larger audience? These stories are so important!” our board has long asked. We do reach millions of readers, actually, each year via our website and email newsletters, the HCNU classroom program, and our media partnerships.

But HCN’s core community of subscribers has remained stubbornly small, topping out at a little over 30,000 last year. Selling this magazine to the multitudes has proven to be more difficult than you might think and we have realized that expanding HCN’s audience is more than a marketing challenge. We needed to change the way we think about our work.



Gretchen King
Executive Editor

“When considering an article for HCN, I want it to be powered by place and give some agency to the subjects that are covered. Alongside deep reporting, we are committed to authentically represent what’s happening in the region we all love. And that can take time and resources, and sometimes be difficult. But, to me, our most inspiring stories dig into the tough questions being worked out in our own backyards. I’m taken some place and left with a deeper understanding.”

Our first task has been to appeal to a wider West. That has meant including a broader range of voices, faces and perspectives in our pages. On that front, we’ve made great progress.

“HCN’s visual storytelling has multiple goals: I believe our photography and illustration should be beautiful, thought-provoking and timeless, and help readers make an emotional connection to our stories and the people and places featured in them. It’s also important that our art challenges the preconceptions and myths of the West that we strive to dismantle in our reporting; that it offers nuanced and honest representations of the complexity of Western communities; and that it also conveys to members of those communities—and new and old audiences alike—that they are welcome here.”



Roberto (Bear) Guerra
Visuals Editor/
Photographer

The second task has been to find new ways of getting the word out.

Our old direct mail marketing strategies were wasteful, expensive and had a low rate of return. We also found that the process created a “churn” of new subscribers, almost none of whom renewed a second year, making the effort seem successful in the short term. This marketing technique also perpetuated a homogenous demographic.

So, we’ve tried new things: We’ve strengthened ties with longtime readers and simplified our renewal process, leading to an 11% increase in retention rates for subscribers. We’ve added ways of engaging with our audience and inviting readers to participate in the HCN community with YouTube video content, livestreams on Twitter, and Zoom events. We’ve been working on a personal level to connect with other nonprofits who are also doing good work around the West.



Michael Leveton
Community
Outreach Manager

“I’ve been focused on developing partnerships with like-minded organizations to reach new readers and build community. So far, such partnerships have included GreenLatinos, The Venture Out Project, and the Wing Luke Museum. As another way to introduce HCN to new audiences, HCN journalists have started sharing fresh, live audio conversations. You’ll find them most Wednesdays on Twitter.”

We’ll be introducing more new strategies this year, and we encourage you to join us as an HCN ambassador.

“When Halito began, the idea was to engage people on social media and give them a sneak peek at the reasons why some of our latest stories were so cool. Sometimes it’s easy to scroll past a headline and miss a great story. I wanted to present my colleagues’ work in a way that’s fun and approachable while still being true to the seriousness and complexity of our journalism. Check out Halito, our weekly video news roundup at hcn.ws/halitos.”



B. Toastic
Staff Writer

HCN's Audience

Subscribers



27,469
Print + digital subscribers



3,664
Digital-only subscribers



153,154
Newsletter subscribers

Website Traffic*



339,221
Sessions



288,168
Unique page views



4:20
Average time on page

*Monthly averages for fiscal year 21-22

Social Engagement



70,593
Facebook followers



15,589
Instagram followers



52,247
Twitter followers

High Country News has always had a special, symbiotic relationship with readers. Our staff create and serve up regular editorial content, and our readers fuel it through subscription dues and tax-deductible contributions. It really feels like a relationship, with two-way communication, mutual affection, trust and earnest commitment.



KHowe
Associate Product Manager



I am interested in capturing customer experiences – how and why they connect with us, and what that looks like for them. I often talk with readers who discover High Country News because they stumbled on an article online, which then opens the doors to our deep archive of stories, unique to this publication.

We pride ourselves on being an independent media source: reliable, timely and accountable to you – our stakeholders. But it's the broad-based, thoughtful support of readers like you that keeps us on the job. Literally.

In addition to paying for a subscription, readers have found ways to support HCN that fit within their budget and giving goals:

Our **Sustainers' Club** monthly giving program has attracted more than 1,000 folks who like the convenience of automated monthly gifts and subscription renewals, which in turn gives us a steady and reliable income stream. Thanks to all our Sustainers' Club members, whether you've just joined or have been with us for the whole 17 years since this program began!

Some readers have planned ahead and intend to leave a legacy gift to HCN in the form of a bequest or by listing HCN as a beneficiary of an investment. These readers are another special group of supporters, the **Tom Bell Legacy Circle**, named for our spitfire founder. Thank you to each of the 43 members of this giving circle – and to those of you who intend to do the same, but just haven't yet let us know!

Thanks to each **foundation** – large and small – that has invested in our work and staff. Your support helps us grow and sustain independent journalism of and for the West.

In case you were wondering – Yes! HCN does accept gifts of stock, bitcoin, IRA distributions, company matching gifts, donor advised funds, annuities and trusts. We'll even take your old jalopy! Please reach out for more info: fundraising@hcn.org

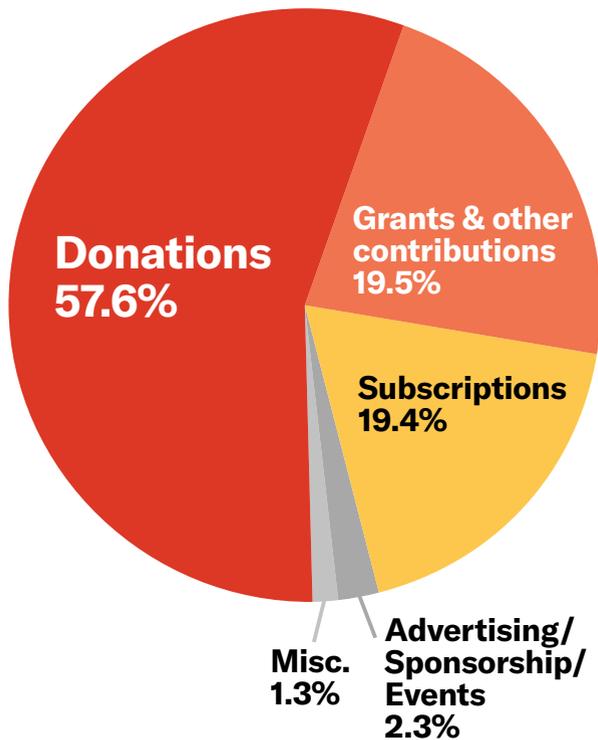


Reader-Supported Journalism

2021-22 Profit & Loss Budget

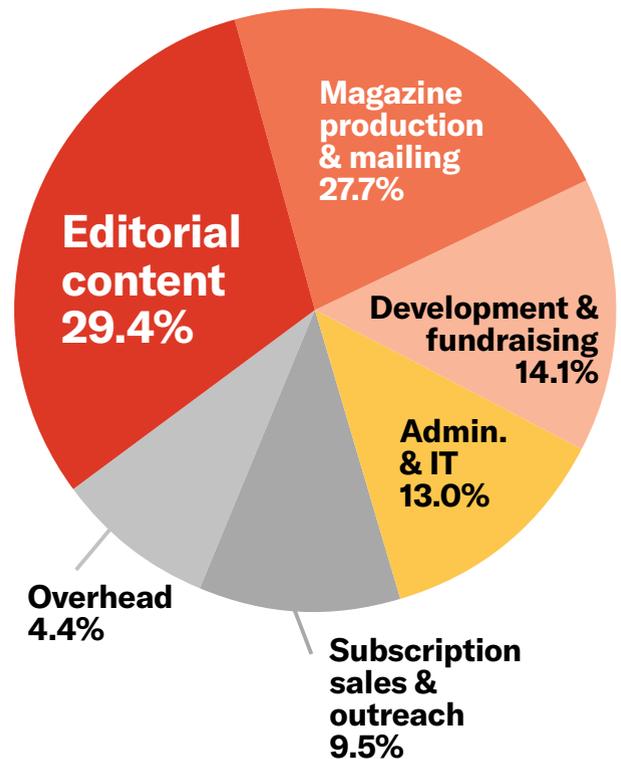
October 1, 2021 - September 30, 2022
October 1, 2020 - September 30, 2021

Annual Support & Revenue



Donations	\$2,101,123	\$2,589,430
Grants and other contributions	\$709,653	\$1,023,730
Subscriptions	\$708,062	\$854,348
Advertising/Sponsorships/Events	\$82,894	\$101,064
Miscellaneous	\$46,112	\$72,368
Total:	\$3,647,844	\$4,640,940

Expenses



Editorial content	\$1,286,413	\$1,188,577
Magazine production & mailing	\$925,413	\$1,119,052
Development & fundraising	\$600,436	\$568,596
Administration & IT	\$529,232	\$527,587
Subscription sales & outreach	\$452,671	\$461,716
Overhead	\$352,095	\$177,979
Total:	\$4,146,260	\$4,043,507

Thank You

Each and every donation is meaningful to HCN. Thank you for investing in independent journalism and for sharing your love of the West. Your support gives our staff the critical resources and editorial freedom we need to uncover the kind of stories that make a difference, inspiring and informing readers across the country.

As seen in the previous two pages, HCN relies on its readers. 19.4% of our revenue comes from your subscription dues and 57.6% comes from your individual contributions. And many of our grants come from small family foundations who are big fans of the journalism and vision of *High Country News*. Excluding foundation support, 77% of our total operating revenue is from you—our stakeholders and reader community.

Last year you gave:

2,478

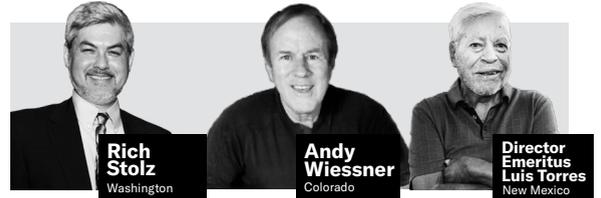
Repeat gifts

\$20
Median gift

\$149
Avg. donation

5,374
Donations
<\$50

2,336
Donations
<\$10



“ As a Western-born person, I deeply appreciate your coverage of Western issues. Your coverage is deep, profound, heavily researched — and yet has implications outside the American West. Thank you for all you do.

– **Karen P. Schaefer, Oberlin, OH**

“ Thank you for your passionate coverage of important stories in our region. Often the loudest voices today are not those of reason. I can compare your work to the style and quality of *The Atlantic* and *New York Times*.

– **Wade Kearns, Colorado Springs, CO**

“ Thank you for all of the incredible journalism you provide – it makes me feel more connected to the West and the myriad of environmental and social issues we’re confronting here. I’ve developed a ritual of reading it in the morning while I drink my coffee, and it’s one of my favorite parts of my day.

– **Jacqueline A. Slocombe, Lakewood, CO**

“ Thanks for shining the light in places others don’t.

– **David Frey, Gaithersburg, MD**

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 — through in-depth journalism — to act on behalf of the West's diverse natural and human communities.

High Country News

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