

**MEMO**

**TO:** 2020 Montana Candidates  
**FROM:** Montana Conservation Voters Education Fund  
**DATE:** April 2020  
**RE:** Conservation and the environment: how to message on these winning issues



Conservation and responsible stewardship of our environment are deeply held values in Montana. Years of public opinion research have shown that people choose to live in our state because of the quality of life, which in large part is based on outdoor and natural resources. In fact, 98 percent of Montana voters say that outdoor recreation is important to their quality of life.<sup>1</sup>

With six paid staff across the state, the mission of the Montana Conservation Voters Education Fund is to engage all Montanans and their communities by empowering them to protect our clean air, clean water, public lands and voting rights through education, mobilization and the power of grassroots advocacy.

In this memo, you will find research on how environmental issues matter to voters, guidance for talking about these issues in a way that resonates with voters, and tactics for incorporating these issues into your campaigns.

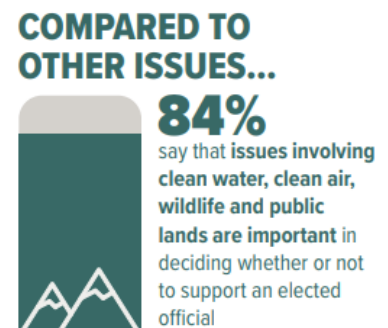
We look forward to developing our relationship with you, partnering to make environmental issues a centerpiece of your campaign and ensuring that Montana’s elected leaders are committed champions for conservation. Our staff have expertise in policy, politics, field organizing, and communications, and we are always available to be a resource to you.

**PART I: Environmental issues matter to Montana voters**

Montanans’ identities are rooted in a deep connection to recreation and the outdoors. Importantly, we are viscerally connected to outdoor spaces, and more than 80 percent of Montanans pursue some form of outdoor recreation. Much of it is dependent on public land and water.<sup>2</sup>

Businesses also see Montana’s outdoors as a competitive advantage. According to one survey of high-tech and manufacturing companies in Montana, “our lifestyle, recreational opportunities and the beauty of the landscape” is the most frequently mentioned advantage to doing business in the state.<sup>3</sup>

And, 84 percent of Montana voters said they are more likely to support candidates who prioritize clean water, clean air, wildlife and public lands.<sup>4</sup>



<sup>1</sup> Montana Office of Outdoor Recreation, “Outdoor Recreation and Montana’s Economy,” September 2018, <https://business.mt.gov/Portals/49/2018%20MTOOR%20Economy%20Report.pdf?ver=2018-10-19-113801-580>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> University of Montana’s Bureau of Business and Economic Research, “A Profile of Montana’s High Tech Industries,” 2018, <https://mthightech.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/2018-MHTBA-Survey-Final-Report.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Colorado College, “Conservation in the West,” 2020, [https://www.coloradocollege.edu/other/stateoftherockies/conservationinthewest/2020/2020-conservation-in-the-west-poll-data/2020%20Western%20States%20-%20Interview%20Schedule\\_COMBINED.pdf](https://www.coloradocollege.edu/other/stateoftherockies/conservationinthewest/2020/2020-conservation-in-the-west-poll-data/2020%20Western%20States%20-%20Interview%20Schedule_COMBINED.pdf)

## **PART II: Talking about environmental issues**

While Montana voters are deeply connected to their environment and outdoor spaces, it's important to talk about these issues with voters in the right way. In this section, we discuss a compilation of environmental messages that have been tested (including guidance as to what to “say/not say”) and direction for discussing specific issues.

### Do's/don'ts

Much research has been done on how to talk about environmental issues with voters and “the public.” Here is a compilation of some of those findings, including concepts, phrases, and words to use or avoid.

#### Do:

- Evoke future generations.
  - This concept “is one that voters volunteer organically as a reason for supporting conservation; moreover, voters who hear it consistently rate it as compelling. The economic downturn has done nothing to diminish the resonance of this time-honored rationale for conserving nature.”<sup>5</sup>
- Focus on public health and safety.
  - Voters' hierarchy of needs starts with health and safety, not ecosystems or “the environment.”<sup>6</sup>
- Use specific examples of things that could harm us.
  - “Case studies remain a powerful part of successful strategies.”<sup>7</sup>
  - e.g., “The Trump administration is trying to undermine or eliminate safeguards like the Clean Air and Water Acts that protect our health and, instead, allow power plants to spew unlimited amounts of toxic pollution like mercury, arsenic, and sulfur dioxide in our air and water.”<sup>8</sup>
- Emphasize the solutions.
  - People are far more likely to support action if they think it can make a difference.
  - “Explaining how voters will benefit from a policy beats describing how they will be threatened by its absence every time.”<sup>9</sup>
- Use phrases that imply ownership, inclusion, and shared responsibility: “our” & “we.”
- Use powerful validators and show local effects.
  - e.g., “Last year, ranchers faced one of the worst droughts in years – putting their livelihoods at risk and impacting Montana’s economy.”

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<sup>5</sup> Andrew Bauman, Global Strategy Group, “Messaging on Climate, Energy and the Environment in the Era of Trump,” April 27, 2017, <http://www.globalstrategygroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/Climate-March-Memo-F04.26.17.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> David Metz, Fairbank, Maslin, Maullin, Metz & Associates and Lori Weigel, Public Opinion Strategies, “The Language of Conservation,” April 15, 2013, <http://www.elkhornsloughctp.org/uploads/files/13824621782013%20Language%20of%20Conservation%20Memo.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Celinda Lake, Lake Research Partners, “Regulatory Enforcement: Winning the Debate,” 2016 <https://stateinnovation.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/LRP-Report-Enforcement-Working-Group-Public-Subset-121616.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> Bauman 2017

<sup>9</sup> Metz et al. 2013

- Invoke a moral imperative; be aspirational and future oriented, not harsh or judgmental.
- Use a villain when needed; “corporate polluters” consistently tests well.

Don't:

- Get trapped in “economy vs. environment” debate.
  - Rather, “voters see no reason why we cannot continue to protect land and water while maintaining the country’s economic strength...73 percent of business owners believe we can protect land and water and have a strong economy at the same time, while fewer than one in five believe that those objectives are even ‘sometimes’ in conflict.”<sup>10</sup>
- Focus on conserving nature for nature’s sake.
  - Rather, “voters are increasingly telling us that the best reasons to engage in conservation are people-centric...a majority now say that benefits to people are the best reason to conserve nature.”<sup>11</sup>
- Use the word “ban.”
  - This is counter to voters’ feelings of having freedom and independence.
- Get into a debate whether environmental issues should be our top priority.
  - Instead the question should be, how do we fix them?
- Use the word “federal,” as the federal government is viewed negatively.
  - Refer to specifics, like national parks or national forests.
  - Specific agencies are also popular, so “referring to ‘lands overseen by the National Park Service or U.S. Forest Service’...is also a positive.”<sup>12</sup>
- Don’t talk about “regulations;” instead use words like “enforcement.”
  - “The call for tougher, fairer and increased enforcement (with penalties) beats their message of [regulations] killing jobs, increasing costs, and hurting small business”<sup>13</sup>
  - Voters across party lines “believe there is a role for government in protecting Americans from harm as a result of unfair and unsafe business practices.”<sup>14</sup>
- Talk about the benefits of nature or “nature’s values.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Public Opinion Strategies, Montana Business Survey, 2013, [https://static1.squarespace.com/static/592f175df7e0abbb80a1a4ce/59925136f14aa1d24631b734/1502761271761/2013.9.MT\\_business-survey.pdf](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/592f175df7e0abbb80a1a4ce/59925136f14aa1d24631b734/1502761271761/2013.9.MT_business-survey.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> Metz et al. 2013

<sup>12</sup> David Metz, Fairbank, Maslin, Maullin, Metz & Associates and Lori Weigel, Public Opinion Strategies, “How to Communicate Effectively to Stop Takeovers of Public Lands,” July 30, 2015, [https://twsorg-public.sharepoint.com/Documents/Messaging%20Recommendations\\_Stopping%20PLT.pdf](https://twsorg-public.sharepoint.com/Documents/Messaging%20Recommendations_Stopping%20PLT.pdf)

<sup>13</sup> Lake 2016

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Metz et al. 2013

- “Few voters spend time visiting “ecosystems” – they visit forests, wetlands, rivers, deserts and mountains.”<sup>16</sup>

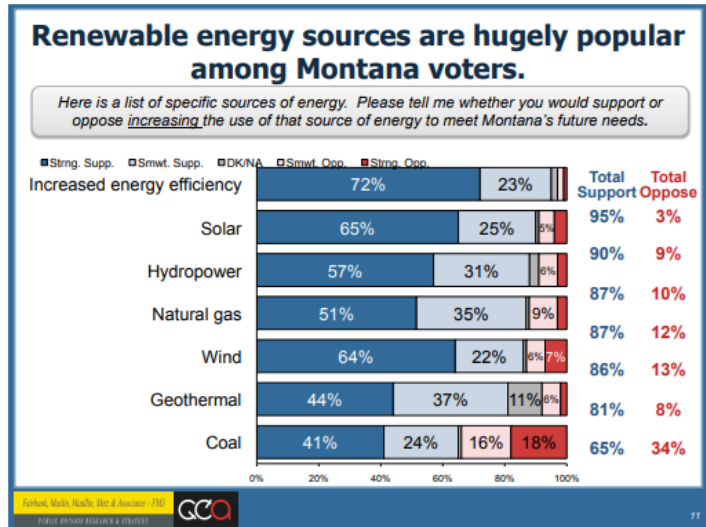
### Specific issues

The following is an overview of and guidance on how to talk about specific environmental and conservation issues in Montana.

#### Clean energy

Support for renewable energy is growing in Montana. In fact, according to a 2020 poll, 55 percent of voters in Montana support gradually increasing the use of renewable energy resources to 100 percent in the state.<sup>17</sup> This is not a new attitude as more than 90 percent of Montana voters in a 2016 survey said solar, wind and other clean energy sources are a sound investment for our state.<sup>18</sup>

Additionally, both Missoula and Helena have adopted resolutions to be powered by 100% clean, renewable electricity by 2030 and there are more towns and cities in Montana already exploring adopting their own similar resolutions.



According to pollster Andrew Baumann:

There is a broad and intense cross-partisan desire for a move toward renewable energy. While the issue of climate change is polarizing, government support for renewable energy is not. According to a post-election survey by Public Opinion Strategies, 86% of voters support action (59% strongly) to “accelerate the development and use of clean energy in the U.S.” including 72% of base Republicans.<sup>19</sup>

Message guidance:

- Never use the term “green jobs,” as voters have no idea what that means.<sup>20</sup>
- “Clean energy” or “renewable energy” are stronger terms to use than “alternative energy” or “green energy.”<sup>21</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Colorado College 2020

<sup>18</sup> Montana Conservation Voters Education Fund, “Montana Voter Attitudes on Energy and Conservation in 2016,” <http://mtvotersedfund.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/MCVEF-web-poll-results.pdf>

<sup>19</sup> Bauman 2017

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

- Focus on jobs, innovation and growing our economy. A 2009, Harvard study ranked Montana number two for wind energy potential in the United States but Montana remains 24th in the nation for actual installed wind energy production capacity.<sup>22</sup> Despite this from 2006-2017, it is estimated that Montana wind farms contributed approximately \$66 million in total property taxes with a current generating capacity of 690 megawatts.<sup>23</sup>

### Climate change

The vast majority of Montanans believe climate change is happening, that it's a problem, and that we must take action, which is up 12 percentage points since 2011.<sup>24</sup> With that said, the issue is incredibly polarizing, both in Montana and across the country. As pollster Andrew Baumann summarizes:



A recent Gallup poll shows that Americans' belief that climate change is already happening (62%) and is caused by human activity (68%) is at an all-time high. The percentage who worry "a great deal" about the issue is also at a record high, up 8 points in the last year. However, the issue remains deeply polarizing. Concern about climate change has increased significantly among Democrats and independents, but Republicans remain less concerned, resulting in the largest partisan gap among any issue tested by Gallup.<sup>25</sup>

### Message guidance:

- Focus on the actual effects. Montanans believe that drought and wildfires are serious problems.<sup>26</sup>
- Use "carbon pollution" instead of "climate pollution," as the latter terminology drops support with voters.<sup>27</sup>
- Highlight the health benefits of reduced pollution – with a focus on specific pollutants and diseases.<sup>28</sup>
- Go beyond just jobs to emphasize the impact on American innovation and the economy broadly.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Xi Lu, Michael B. McElroy, and Juha Kiviluoma, "Global potential for wind-generated electricity," 2009, <https://dash.harvard.edu/handle/1/5029362>

<sup>23</sup> Montana Department of Commerce, 2017, <https://leg.mt.gov/content/Committees/Interim/2017-2018/Energy-and-Telecommunications/Meetings/May-2018/RenewableNorthwestPresentation.pdf>

<sup>24</sup> Colorado College 2020

<sup>25</sup> Bauman 2017

<sup>26</sup> Colorado College 2020

<sup>27</sup> Bauman 2017

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

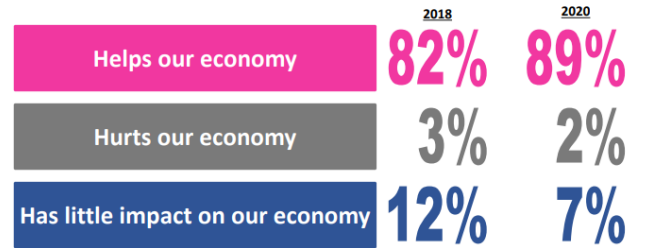
<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

## Public lands and waters

Montanans are highly aware of and deeply connected to our public lands and waters. With 38 million acres of public lands, 170,000 miles of rivers and 3,200 named lakes, our access to the outdoors is unparalleled.

**Public lands are helpful to Montana's economy.**

Our state's public lands and waters support \$7.1 billion in consumer spending and more than 71,000 jobs, making outdoor recreation the second-largest sector in our state's economy. In fact, 89 percent of Montanans say public lands help the state's economy; and people tended to associate that value with outdoor recreation opportunities rather than opportunities for natural resource extraction.<sup>30</sup>



When you think about the presence of national public lands in Montana – do you think that having such lands helps our economy, hurts our economy, or has little impact on our economy?



Despite these facts and attitudes toward our public lands, public land transfer remains a real threat and has continuously been adopted as part of the Montana State Republican Party Platform.<sup>31</sup>

But regardless of party, as seen in the chart to the right, 70 percent of Montanans support a national goal of protecting 30 percent of America's lands and oceans by 2030 and 67 percent support fully funding our public lands, even if it comes at the expense of some future energy development.<sup>32</sup>

### PROTECTING LAND, WATER AND WILDLIFE



**70%** support a national goal of protecting 30 percent of America's lands and oceans by 2030



**67%** support full, dedicated funding for the Land and Water Conservation Fund



**73%** think that portions of existing public lands where wildlife migrate each year should NOT be open to oil and gas drilling

Message guidance:

- By wide margins, Montana voters believe that public lands are important to the economy and way of life, so focus on these values.<sup>33</sup>
- They also strongly oppose privatizing or selling off public lands, so paint the opposition in this frame and stand against these efforts.
- Be specific – talk about hiking, biking, camping, fishing, hunting, viewing wildlife and enjoying nature. “The more vivid the language, the more likely voters are to see themselves using these lands and enjoying their benefits.”<sup>34</sup>
- Stress that we are for “access” to public lands and waters, which resonates with sportsmen and women.

<sup>30</sup> University of Montana, Crown of the Continent and Greater Yellowstone Initiative, “2020 Voter Survey on Public Land,” <https://crown-yellowstone.umt.edu/voter-surveys/2020/default.php>

<sup>31</sup> Montana Republican Party, “Platform of the Montana Republican Party,” 2018, <https://mtgop.org/about/party-platform/>

<sup>32</sup> Colorado College 2020

<sup>33</sup> Headwaters Economics, “Montana's Economy, Public Lands, and Competitive Advantage,” August 2017, <https://headwaterseconomics.org/economic-development/montanas-economy-and-protected-lands/>

<sup>34</sup> Metz 2013

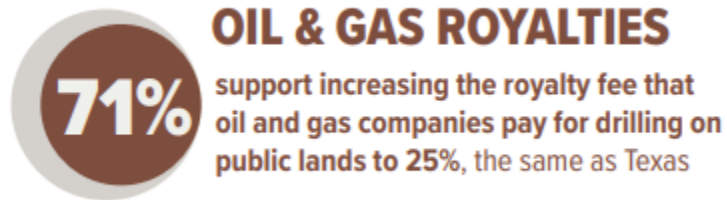
- Stress helping children spend more time outdoors. As two pollsters said, of 18 conservation-related problems tested in a recent national survey, 'kids not spending enough time outdoors and in nature' rated as the most serious problem.<sup>35</sup>

### Oil and gas

Oil and gas issues can be hot in Montana and can bitterly divide communities. These issues are some of the most contentious and challenging to message on.

Message guidance:

- Stress the need for “solutions,” not “bans.” The industry has spent millions of dollars on a PR campaign regarding how safe and beneficial oil and gas is for Montana and has subsequently softened its image. So, focusing on our ability to move towards a clean energy future with safe and healthy communities is key.
- Note that well over a majority (71 percent) of Montana voters support increasing the royalty fee that oil and gas companies pay for drilling on public lands to 25 percent.<sup>36</sup>
- Focus on the fact that we need a level playing field, and the oil and gas industry currently has too many advantages and is working only for itself, not for the people of Montana.
- Focus on “enforcement” against polluters and the lack of resources to adequately do so.
- Cite health and safety issues with oil and gas drilling first. Also focus on homeowners’ and property rights.



### **PART III: How to incorporate environmental issues into your campaign**

There are several ways environmental issues could be incorporated into your campaign:

- Release policy platforms on key issues.
- Tie conservation issues directly to economic issues.
- Add sections on your websites outlining your platforms and plans on clean energy jobs, climate change, water, and public lands.
- Incorporate conservation issues into your stump speeches.
- Travel our state and visit sites that lend themselves to talking about environmental issues.
- Attend events with the conservation community.
- Tell stories around environmental issues. These issues have powerful validators (firefighters on climate change, nurses on public health, blue collar solar installers, etc.) and it would be powerful for your campaign to incorporate these messengers into your messages.

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Colorado College 2020