



2026 MCV Education Fund Candidate Education Memo

Montana's Public Lands Are Part of Who We Are

Conservation in Montana is part of our way of life. Our public lands, clean water, wildlife, and open spaces support local economies and working lands. They are the places where we hunt, fish, hike, work, and spend time with the people we love.

Heading into the 2026 election, the Montana Conservation Voters Education Fund wants candidates to have a clear picture of the conservation and democracy issues Montanans care about, where we stand, and how these issues are showing up around the state. We encourage you to make the issues local to your community. Voters want to know what statewide decisions will mean for their community, their family, and the places they care about.

The MCV Education Fund brings experience in policy, public engagement, organizing, and communications, and we are glad to be a resource as you talk with Montana voters.

Public Lands & Access

For generations, Montanans have relied on public lands for hunting, fishing, recreation, livelihoods, and access to the outdoors. Protecting those lands and keeping them open to the public remains a priority for voters across the state.

Montana voters are clear about how much these places matter¹:

90%

say clean water, clean air, open spaces, and public lands are important when deciding whether to support an elected official, including 82% of Republicans, 92% of independents, and 99% of Democrats

84%

support maintaining public access by preventing the sale or transfer of most federal public lands

85%

say public lands help Montana's economy

Support for public lands cuts across party lines. Voters care about keeping them public, maintaining access, and having a say in how they are managed.

Seventy-one percent of Montana voters are concerned about losing access to national forests, lakes, and other public lands. Majorities also believe cuts to public land staffing and funding would hurt wildfire risk reduction, land maintenance, wildlife management, visitor safety, and access for recreation. And 86% say public meetings and opportunities for public input on public land decisions are extremely or very important.²

Candidates should know the lands, access points, trails, hunting areas, fishing access sites, and other public places their communities use and what is affecting them.

Montana's State Lands

Montana has more than 30 million acres of state and federal public lands, in addition to managing 5.2 million surface acres of State Trust Lands that generate revenue for public schools, universities, and other state institutions.³ Montanans use state lands regularly: 92% say they visit at least once a year, and more than one-third visit more than 20 times annually.⁴

Habitat Montana and the newer Habitat Legacy Account help protect wildlife habitat and public access. Habitat Montana is funded primarily through nonresident hunting license revenue, while the Habitat Legacy Account, created in 2025, receives 20% of eligible marijuana tax revenue for habitat and conservation work.⁵



Public lands are also part of a much larger outdoor economy. Outdoor recreation contributed \$3.8 billion to Montana's economy in 2024 and accounted for 4.9% of state GDP, the highest share among the contiguous states.⁶

Water, Wildlife & Land

Montanans are seeing the effects of drought, low snowpack, and development in the places they farm, hunt, fish, and recreate. The polling reflects that.⁷



Between 2024 and 2026, the share of voters who viewed low snowpack as an extremely or very serious problem increased 18 points, while concern about drought increased 17 points. Two-thirds of Montana voters also identify as hunters, anglers, or both.⁸

Those numbers reflect what communities across Montana are already experiencing: water shortages, changing wildlife habitat, pressure on working farms and ranches, and questions about access to the places people hunt and fish. These are increasingly local issues, affecting how communities grow, how people use the land, and whether the places Montanans rely on remain healthy and accessible.

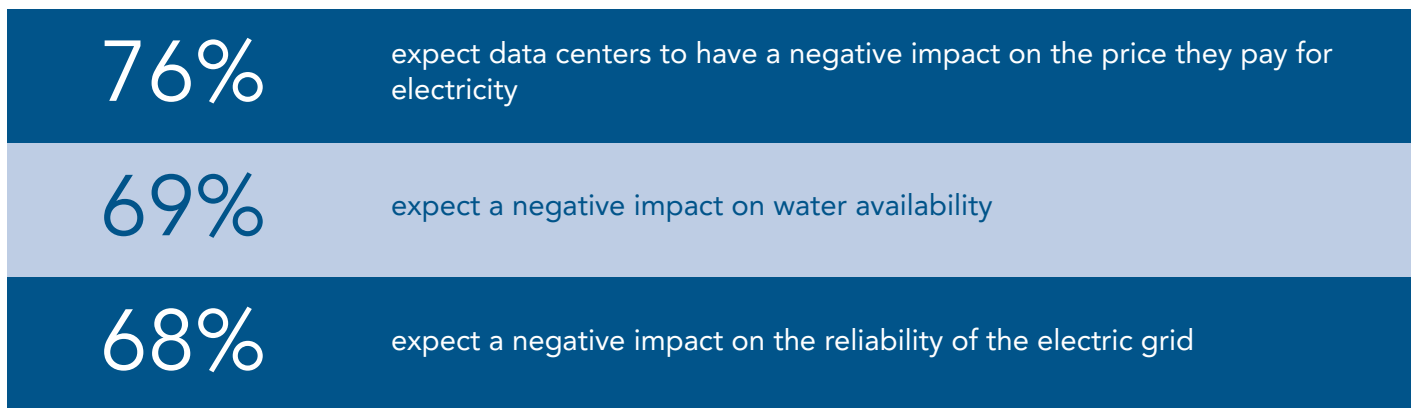
The MCV Education Fund supports sustained conservation funding, healthy rivers and streams, protection of wildlife habitat and migration corridors, public access, and policies that protect Montana's water and lands for the long term.

Energy Costs & Data Centers

Montana Should Set the Rules Before Data Centers Set the Terms

Hyperscale data centers could bring an extraordinary new demand for electricity, water, and infrastructure to Montana. NorthWestern Energy has disclosed potential large-load projects whose combined electricity demand could grow to 1,100 megawatts or more by 2030.⁹

That kind of growth raises real questions about who pays for new infrastructure, how much water these facilities use, and what they mean for communities. Montana voters already have serious concerns about what data center development could mean for them¹⁰:



These concerns are already showing up in Montana communities. In Bonner, nearly 50,000 people signed a petition opposing a proposed data center before the project was withdrawn.¹¹ Missoula County commissioners then unanimously approved a one-year moratorium on new data center development.¹²

The MCV Education Fund supports a pause on new hyperscale data center development until Montana has strong protections in place for ratepayers, water, grid reliability, local communities, and wildlife. Our communities should have a real say in whether these projects move forward.

Data centers are likely to become a much bigger issue in Montana, and voters are already paying attention to the potential impacts on electricity costs, water, and local communities. For candidates, that means understanding what these projects could mean for the places they hope to represent and being clear about how they would protect Montanans from taking on the costs and risks.

Democracy & Voter Access

Defend the Montana Constitution

For more than 50 years, the Montana Constitution has protected the right to a clean and healthful environment, the right to know and participate in government decisions, and the right to vote.¹³ Those protections give Montanans a real role in how our state is governed.

The MCV Education Fund will defend the Montana Constitution every chance we get. Protecting voting rights and making sure Montanans can participate in the decisions that affect them are central to our work.

Every eligible Montanan should be able to cast a ballot and have that vote counted. The MCV Education Fund supports free and democratic elections and policies that make it possible for eligible voters to participate.

Having a voice in government does not end at the ballot box. Montanans should have a meaningful opportunity to weigh in before decisions are made about public lands, water, energy, development, and their communities. The Montana Constitution protects both the right to participate and the right to know what government is doing.¹⁴

If you are asking Montanans for their vote, be ready to tell them how you will protect their Constitution, their vote, and their ability to be heard.

OUR LANDS. OUR CONSTITUTION. OUR VOICE.

About the Montana Conservation Voters Education Fund

The MCV Education Fund is a nonpartisan 501(c)(3) organization that educates, engages, and empowers all Montanans to protect our clean air, clean water, public lands, and democracy.

Learn more at mtvotersedfund.org.

Citations

¹ University of Montana Crown of the Continent and Greater Yellowstone Initiative. (2026). *2026 Montana statewide survey key findings*. [2026 Voter Survey on Public Land](#)

² University of Montana Crown of the Continent and Greater Yellowstone Initiative. (2026). *2026 Montana statewide survey key findings*. [2026 Voter Survey on Public Land](#)

³ Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks. (n.d.). *Public Land Hunting Opportunities*. [Public Land Hunting Opportunities](#) and Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation. (n.d.). *Understanding Trust Lands*. DNRC manages approximately 5.2 million surface acres of State Trust Lands. [Understanding Trust Lands](#)

⁴ University of Montana Crown of the Continent and Greater Yellowstone Initiative. (2022). *2022 Voter Survey on Public Lands*. [2022 Voter Survey on Public Lands](#)

⁵ Montana Legislature. (2025). *House Bill 932, Chapter 758, Laws of Montana 2025*. [HB 932, enrolled bill](#). Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks. (n.d.). *Habitat Montana*. Approximately 92% of program revenue comes from nonresident hunting licenses. [Habitat Montana](#)

⁶ Williams, D., & Patton, D. (2026). *America's public lands leaders: Flagship benchmark report 2026*. Trust for Public Land. [America's Public Lands Leaders](#)

⁷ University of Montana Crown of the Continent and Greater Yellowstone Initiative. (2026). *2026 Montana statewide survey key findings*. [2026 Voter Survey on Public Land](#)

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ NorthWestern Energy Group, Inc. (2026). *2025 annual report*. [NorthWestern Energy 2025 Annual Report](#)

¹⁰ Williams, D., & Patton, D. (2026). *America's public lands leaders: Flagship benchmark report 2026*. Trust for Public Land. [America's Public Lands Leaders](#)

¹¹ Amestoy, A. (2026, July 8). *Bonner data center plans halted following public outcry*. Montana Public Radio. [Bonner data center plans halted](#)

¹² Amestoy, A. (2026, July 10). *Missoula County approves one-year pause in data center development*. Montana Public Radio. [Missoula County approves one-year pause](#)

¹³ Montana Constitution, art. II, §§ 3, 8, 9, 13; art. IX, § 1. *Montana Code Annotated*. [Montana Constitution, Declaration of Rights](#)

¹⁴ Ibid.