THE RIPPLE EFFECT
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Tracy "Ching" King stands with his dog in front of the horse paddock in his front yard. King's home rests just south of Fort Belknap Agency. (Mark Elkins Davidson photo)

THE RIPPLE EFFECT

Two thousand miles away from D.C., the impacts of federal decisions are felt across Montana's tribal nations. From shifts in federal funding, to court rulings and executive orders, these changes are sending ripple effects across Indian Country, redefining the political landscape tribes are forced to navigate.

For Montana's tribes, there are impacts to everything from natural resource management to health care and education. While federal policy has long influenced life for tribal nations, rapid changes are forcing tribes to respond in real time. Tribal sovereignty remains the foundation of that response: inherent and enduring, yet dynamic, as tribes exercise their autonomy to protect their communities and adapt to shifting federal priorities.

Students in the Native News Honors Project traveled across Montana to understand how tribal nations are exercising their sovereignty in response to decisions made in Washington D.C. Across the state, they found tribes navigating complex and often immediate challenges. On the Blackfeet reservation, leaders are working to support tribal citizens navigate the challenges of increased federal border enforcement reshaping travel and daily life.

On the Northern Cheyenne reservation, leaders and tribal citizens are weighing the implications of nuclear energy development. Farther east, the Fort Peck tribes are grappling with the intertwined pressures of economic sustainability and environmental health tied to nearby oil pipelines, while the Crow Nation is reimagining its future as it transitions from a long-standing reliance on the coal industry toward new economic opportunities. In Fort Belknap, the tribal council is looking at a water settlement for solutions to improve water quality and improve health outcomes for tribal citizens needing dialysis treatment.

On the Rocky Boy's reservation, efforts to strengthen food sovereignty and combat hunger are taking shape, while the Little Shell tribe is investing in tribally run cultural programs that support both well-being and identity. On the Flathead reservation, innovative approaches to affordable housing are emerging in response to a growing housing crisis. Meanwhile, the urban reporting team turned its focus to the upcoming election, where Indigenous representation is reaching unprecedented levels, signaling broader shifts in political engagement and leadership.

While the challenges may differ, a common thread emerges: When decisions are made thousands of miles away, tribes are not passive recipients, they are active agents, shaping outcomes in their own communities.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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If you have comments about the project, email Jason Begay at nativenewsproject@gmail.com or write to Native News, School of Journalism, 32 Campus Drive, Missoula, MT 59812.

We would love to hear from you if you enjoyed or have thoughts about the Montana Native News Honors Project.

COVER PHOTO: *State Rep. Jade Sooktis (D-Lame Deer) embraces her son, Aaron, during the "Ask Your Auntie, Not AI" event at the Charging Horse Casino in Lame Deer, Mont. Hosted by Honor the Earth, the gathering allowed community members to voice concerns regarding how nuclear energy and data centers affect Indigenous lands. (Coral Scoles-Coburn photo)*

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TSIS TSIS'TAS UNDER NUCLEAR PRESSURE AMID GOVERNMENT DISARRAY

Brandon Small, left, manager of the Northern Cheyenne Buffalo Pasture, and Christopher Scarpelli Flanagan, a visiting student studying buffalo restoration, use binoculars to scout for animals from a hilltop above the bison acreage near Lame Deer, Mont. The two were searching for bison and wild horses that moved to higher ground as part of a broader effort to monitor the herd's health and the landscape.

STORY BY MARLY GRAHAM
PHOTOS BY CORAL SCOLES-COBURN

Pacing across the carpet patterned with the neon stars inside a bingo hall, the executive director of Honor the Earth gripped a microphone in one hand and a stack of papers in the other. She wore a white blazer over a pale green shirt that read, "Ask Your Auntie, Not A.I."

This meeting was one of several in Montana that Honor the Earth, an environmental organization based out of Lame Deer on the Northern Cheyenne Indian Reservation, has held to inform the public about the developments of power plants on the reservation. Organizers hand out packets of research titled "The AI-Nuclear Connection," and "Data Centers: Myth vs. Fact," among others, all to inform tribal members like the Tsis tsis'tas of the proposals now at their doorstep.

"At the end of the day, all of this is about corporations making money for themselves, not about what's best for us, not about what's going to be good for our future," Krystal Two Bulls said.

In May 2025, President Donald Trump announced four executive orders aimed at revitalizing the U.S. nuclear energy industry by modernizing regulations and accelerating reactor development, including efforts to fast-track three advanced reactors for deployment by July 4.

As energy demand grows in Montana, driven in part by proposed data centers, attention has turned to the Colstrip Power Plant just outside of the Northern Cheyenne reservation. But ongoing internal governance disputes have made it difficult for tribal leadership to present a unified response, even as residents and community members continue to raise concerns over land, water and public health.

While no nuclear facility has been formally approved for Colstrip, discussions about Montana's energy future increasingly include both nuclear power and the growing demand for proposed data centers. In June 2025, the Southeastern Montana Development Corporation completed a Colstrip Power Plant Feasibility Study and found no deterrents for a nuclear power plant in the area, an outcome that has sustained ongoing conversations about what such a project could look like.

Although nuclear facilities and data centers are often discussed separately, they are closely linked. The question of how large-scale data centers will be powered and where that supporting infrastructure could be located has made nuclear energy one of several possibilities under consideration.

However, even as conversations continue around potential nuclear plants and data centers, the Tsis tsis'tas have been embroiled in its own political strife. In the last year, the tribe has been focused on internal governance challenges, where disputes over leadership and decision-making authority have taken precedence.

MISSING THE BIGGER PICTURE

Internal tensions within the Northern Cheyenne tribal government escalated in early 2025 after a forensic audit examined the council's use of $91.4 million in federal COVID-19 relief funds. President Gene Small raised concerns about the spending, and the conflict intensified after the council alleged he commissioned a $100,000 audit without consulting the tribal treasurer.

In September that year, eight of the 11 council members voted to remove Small from his presidency, citing that he had overstepped his authority. The following day, Small retaliated and announced that he revoked those same council members from their seats. Soon after, the Northern Cheyenne Council of Chiefs, a traditional governing body, stepped in and assumed authority of the tribal government with Small's support.

Small would appoint additional council members, but the previously removed members continued to meet, saying they were still the tribe's legitimate governing body. In early October, 2025,

Dozens of community members attend the Honor the Earth event hosted at Charging Horse Casino in Lame Deer. The gathering provided a space for community members to discuss how the expansion of data centers and nuclear energy projects could impact Indigenous lands and sovereignty.

State Rep. Jade Sooktis (D-Lame Deer) kisses her son Aaron's head during the Honor the Earth event at Charging Horse Casino in Lame Deer. The gathering allowed community members to express concerns about the impact of nuclear energy and data centers on Indigenous lands.

they were arrested on suspicion of trespassing and later charged in Northern Cheyenne Tribal Court with disrupting government operations.

In the months that followed the election of new council members, confusion over the tribe's official leadership persisted. In April, a tribal court ruling allowed the previously removed council members to return to their offices, but shortly after, Small posted on Facebook a claim that the order is "legally baseless" and shut down the tribal office under an emergency administrative leave.

Despite the opposition, the council members met on April 20, saying it was an official council meeting, though the tribal court soon after paused its earlier order and assigned a new judge to review the case.

Some say these ongoing political changes have made it harder to focus on broader issues, including emerging discussions around energy development. State Rep. Jade Sooktis, a Democrat from Lame Deer, is one of those individuals, saying that the internal governmental disputes have caused the tribe to lose sight of the bigger picture.

"We're not having great government-to-government relationships right now due to the conflict that's happening in Northern Cheyenne," Sooktis said. "We're missing the bigger picture while we're fighting with each other."

But while broader issues emerge, Small said his focus remains on resolving the ongoing audit, though he is still learning about potential nuclear development in Colstrip and its impact on the reservation.

He also acknowledged the limits of how much control the tribe may have over what happens next.

"Nuclear [power] is probably going to happen now. I can see it," Small said. "Are we going to sit and fight against everything that's gonna happen and not get a damn thing out of it?"

'WE ARE GOING TO PAY WITH OUR LAND'

Crystal clear water spills from a pipe set into the landscape just nine miles east of Lame Deer. Tribal citizens gather around the spring, filling bottles and lifting the water to their lips.

Just further down the dirt road, children bound off of a small dock, faded with decades of use. The dock and cattails on the shore rocking as they hit the water. Pine trees on all sides of the lake stand right up to the bank, shielding the recreation spot from view.

For those who live on the Northern Cheyenne reservation, water is something gathered, swam in and used in ceremonies, making the new warnings about rising industrial demand feel especially immediate.

According to the Environmental and Energy Study Institute, large data centers can use up to 5 million gallons of water per day, about the same as a town of up to 50,000 people. Nuclear power plants also rely on large amounts of water for cooling, either by withdrawing water from nearby sources or consuming it through evaporation in cooling towers, according to the World Nuclear Association.

For those like Jeanie Alderson, a sixth-generation rancher, water rights and access play a large role in their livelihood. Alderson and her sisters inherited the working cattle ranch in Birney after their father passed away in 1993. Called the Bones Brothers Ranch, it was first homesteaded in the late 1880s and has passed through the family ever since.

"Our whole world is grass and taking care of it. That's what my dad would say, the cows are the vehicle, but our life and our world is grass," Alderson said.

On a day-to-day basis, she relies on about a dozen natural springs for her cattle. In an already dry area, Alderson worries the water supply could be targeted by larger corporations in the future.

In 2025, Montana passed a law allowing short-term leasing

ABOVE: *Edina Ontiveros, a member of the Northern Cheyenne Tribal Council removed from office in 2025, organizes a binder into a box of records during a weekly meeting at a rented office space in Lame Deer. The group is working to maintain their own administrative records as they navigate the legal and political dispute regarding their removal from tribal governance.*

LEFT: *Theresa Small, left, and Tribal President Gene Small speak outside Little Wolf Capitol Building in Lame Deer. Theresa Small was the only woman remaining on the Northern Cheyenne tribal council following the events in October 2025.*

Melissa Lonebear collects water from a pipe at Crazy Head Springs east of Lame Deer. The springs are a stop for Northern Cheyenne residents to gather fresh, natural water, but Lonebear fears that the high water demands of proposed industrial data centers could threaten the long-term health and flow of these local landmarks.

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and transfer of water rights. Alderson said the change could allow ranchers to lease water to large companies, including those operating data centers, where lease payment could exceed what they earn from agriculture.

"I can't raise cattle without grass and water, and I can't do it without my neighbors," Alderson said.

In addition to water, there have been several studies that found powering AI data centers can generate air pollutants like fine particulate matter and nitrogen oxides, which have been associated with increased risks of asthma and cardiovascular issues, according to the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers Spectrum.

Nuclear energy also raises environmental concerns through highly radioactive waste, which is stored for thousands of years. With no permanent store site in the United States, most waste remains at or near plant locations where experts warn it could pose risks to water, soil, livestock and human health if contamination occurs.

Beyond concerns about nuclear and data center development, Alderson said climate change has already affected her ranch, pointing to recent wildfires in southeastern Montana, including the 2024 Remington Fire, which burned nearly 200,000 acres.

Those experiences, she said, shape how she views the pressures of future development in the region.

PLANNING IN THE DARK

The door for nuclear power first opened after a voter initiative, originally passed in 1978, was repealed in 2021. This initiative required a public vote for any nuclear power plants built in the state. After that, the 2025 Montana Legislative session signed two bills into law in May allowing for nuclear facilities and storage.

The first allows the state to approve certain nuclear facilities, including uranium conversion and enrichment plants, if they meet state environmental standards and receive federal approval. The second addresses the potential storage of high-level nuclear waste in Montana, including near tribal lands.

While these bills do not automatically authorize either construction of nuclear power plants or nuclear waste storage facilities, it gives the Legislature the authority to permit such projects if they meet specific requirements.

Rep. Sooktis introduced an amendment in the legislative bill that would have required approval from local voters and nearby tribal governments before nuclear facilities could be sited, but it was later removed during Senate voting.

"Even though we have the ability and capability to approve these bills and pass laws, I really believe that something that big needs to be discussed within the community," Sooktis said. "Tribal consultation and voter consultation should be the most important priority when bringing something that major to the community."

Montana lawmakers, led by Rep. Gary Perry, a Republican from Colstrip, introduced both bills to prepare the state to host nuclear-related facilities, citing concern about the decline in power, especially at the Colstrip plant.

Companies like NorthWestern Energy have shown interest in the nuclear project at Colstrip, taking official ownership of 592 megawatts of the plant earlier this year. While this reinforces coal's role in the short term, the prospect of future nuclear energy has raised concerns among some tribal citizens and environmental groups on the reservation.

"Current timelines indicate that the first wave of commercially viable [small modular reactors] could begin operation in the early-to-mid 2030s, with broader deployment potential extending into the 2035–2045 period," NorthWestern Energy wrote in its 2026 draft Integrated Resource Plan.

As part of Trump's executive orders last year, federal efforts from the Nuclear Regulatory Commission are working to accelerate reactor development by changing several guiding principles of nuclear safety. One example is the "As Low As Reasonably Achievable" principle, which has historically required radiation

exposure to be kept well below legal limits. Critics say loosening these standards could reduce shielding requirements and allow longer worker shifts, lowering costs for developers.

Advocates say this fast tracking of nuclear proposals and safety measures are fueled, in part, by the emergence of data centers. Montana Environmental Information Center's Campaigns and Advocacy Director Shannon James said that advocates know about two proposed hyper-scale data centers in Montana, one in Butte and the other in Broadview. She said they heard about potentially 11 others, but much of the information is not available.

"We know very little about what kind of backdoor deals we're making with these guys," James said. "Communities deserve to know what conversations are happening for these data centers that could have major impacts on their energy bills, their water resources and their community at large."

One of the areas lacking transparency, James said, is the power agreements NorthWestern Energy signed with Quantica Infrastructure to provide up to 1,000 megawatts of energy. Quantica is the company behind the 5,000-acre proposed data center near Broadview, Montana, though it is unclear whether the agreement applies to that specific project.

Reporting by the Montana Free Press found meeting that level of demand could require nearly all of the electricity NorthWestern Energy currently produces. There is no confirmed link between the proposed nuclear facilities in Colstrip and the Broadview data center, but the scale of demand raised questions about how that power would be supplied.

Much of that planning remains out of public view. In 2024, the

ABOVE: *Kaelene Spang, left, a member of Honor the Earth, and the organization's director, Krystal Two Bulls, serve a meal to community members during the Honor the Earth event at Charging Horse Casino in Lame Deer. The meeting provided a forum for residents to express concerns regarding the impact of data centers and nuclear energy on Indigenous lands.*

LEFT: *Jeanie Alderson, a sixth-generation rancher, opens a metal gate to a horse pasture at the Bones Brothers Ranch in Birney, Mont. Alderson, who manages a commercial cow-calf herd and a Wagyu beef business, expressed concern that emerging nuclear energy proposals and data center expansion could threaten the water and grass resources her family has relied on since the 1880s.*

BELOW: *Jeanie Alderson stands beside a truck while her husband, Terry Punt, sits inside at the Bones Brothers Ranch in Birney. The couple operates a commercial cow-calf herd and a direct-to-consumer Wagyu beef business on land that has been in Alderson's family since the 1880s.*

Montana Public Service Commission granted NorthWestern Energy a protective order shielding key documents related to potential data center power agreements. Environmental and consumer advocacy groups are now challenging that decision in court.

"They are able to hide a lot of information from public view and some of the information that is publicly available is almost completely redacted," James said.

Honor the Earth has raised concerns about nondisclosure agreements signed by tribal leaders related to data center discussions.

Two Bulls said many data center proposals highlight dozens of jobs in an effort to offset community concerns and secure approval from local leaders. However, the majority of those jobs are temporary positions, lasting only until the completion of the data center construction. In Abilene, Texas, construction on OpenAI's Stargate data center began in February 2025. The project employs about 1,500 workers during construction but is expected to retain only 100 full-time jobs after completion, according to the city's economic development agency.

Two Bulls said that many tribal leaders will look at this proposed opportunity and sign nondisclosure agreements, which legally bind a confidential relationship between the parties, protecting sensitive information from being disclosed to the public.

"These corporations are coming in, they sit down with our tribal council reps, and then the very first thing that they do is they set down a [nondisclosure agreement]. Even if just one person signs that, a lot of times it applies to the whole tribal council," Two Bulls said.

She said this is particularly problematic when the local leaders can't talk to the people who voted them into their positions about the agreements and what the companies are wanting to do, making it difficult for the communities to truly understand the situation.

Sooktis shares the same concerns in the Northern Cheyenne tribal government.

"It just doesn't sit right with me at all that you would do something that major without consulting your constituents," Sooktis said. "I am very, very concerned about the future of the land and the pure resources we have available now."

Sooktis said, growing up on the reservation, she has always had access to abundant natural resources, but now worries about what that could look like in the future with the lack of transparency on recent developments.

'TO HAVE AND TO HOLD'

Outside of formal organizations like Honor the Earth, individual tribal citizens like Alderson have also stepped in, aiming to protect the land passed down through her family. She said her experience is reminiscent of her parents, fighting a wave of coal and railroad development projects in 1971.

When she was about 5 years old, she remembers an archaeologist visiting their ranch to look at teepee rings, alerting her parents of the upcoming land development. After that, her parents attended a meeting in Colstrip called the North Central Power Study.

"At that meeting, my mom said they watched a slideshow and this blonde hair child bounding through this monoculture of something and the narrator says, 'This is what reclamation will do to your dry, useless land,'" Alderson said. "'It's your patriotic duty to give up your land and water.'"

Alderson said she continues to fight because she worries for the future of the ranch and being able to hand it off to her sons.

"I would love my boys to come back and to carry this on, but they look at us, worn out," Alderson said. "It's also where we go for solace, for rest, for making sense of the world."

Alderson follows a narrow dirt path worn by repeated trips, grass brushing her ankles as she climbs the hillside. Her black Wagyu cows, heavy with calves, lift their heads as she passes, calm and steady as she checks on them during calving season.

In the distance, she spots a small black shape in the grass, a newborn calf. It stirs as she approaches, slowly lifting itself with unsteady effort, its legs too long for its small body.

Alderson pauses, watching quietly as it finds its balance and takes its first steps.

On the hillside, she takes in her ranch below for a moment, seeing the rest of her 85 cattle in a distant pasture and her home that has been refined over generations.

She's grateful for what she and her family has built here, but the feeling does not quite settle. Beneath it, she can't shake the unease about whether the land or the life on it will remain unchanged.

"Dad used to always say, 'Jeanie, the early, early titles of our land read like a marriage license: This is yours to have and to hold,'" Alderson said. "That's very much what has passed onto me is this is a covenant, this is a responsibility and it's really weighty because my dad's thing was you leave it in better shape than when it came."

Across the Northern Cheyenne reservation and neighboring communities, that sense of responsibility is now shaping how residents respond to new proposals for nuclear development and data centers.

Increasingly, many say it is time to move beyond internal disputes and focus on the future health of the reservation.

A Wagyu cow leans toward a day-old calf in a pasture at the Bones Brothers Ranch in Birney. Rancher Jeanie Alderson believes recent environmental stressors, including wildfires and shifting climates, have led to more fragile births in her herd, raising her concerns over how future industrial development could impact the land.

COMMUNITY, CULTURE AND CARE

LITTLE SHELL'S CULTURAL PROGRAM WORKS FOR THE FUTURE

STORY BY BEE REISWIG

PHOTOS BY CASANDRA EVANS

The building doesn't look homey, at first. Its corrugated metal is sky blue, and there isn't much natural light. It sits on the edge of Great Falls and looks more like a storage building than anything else.

Even upon first entrance, the cold, smooth concrete floor takes a second to get used to. But there is laughter and chatter as people happily eat their macaroni soup. The space is filled with warmth.

The meal has been cooked by Kathy Fenner, the coordinator for the Little Shell Tribe of Chippewa Indians elder's lunch program for about two years. She took over after the previous coordinator had been struggling with the program for about a year or so. At the time, when Fenner stepped in, about five or six people would come in per luncheon.

In March, there were around 10 times that many, a now common turnout for the weekly event.

"I love it," Fenner said. "It makes me feel good to see them out there, so happy. If you've got someone out there who doesn't know anyone, it's not long before someone makes them feel at home."

The elder's lunches are one of many projects run through the Little Shell Chippewa Tribe Cultural Center. Though it's been around for about five years, within the last year-and-a-half it's worked to hold more events under the leadership of Jesse Eagle Speaker.

It's one of the ways the Little Shell Tribe is working to build community, which can be difficult for a tribe with no reservation. Its goal remains the same: Bring the diasporic tribe together and keep its culture alive for future citizens to come, even if lack of federal support for the recently federally recognized tribe makes it difficult to do so.

The Little Shell Tribe was federally recognized in 2019 after centuries of struggle against the U.S. government. Though it was acknowledged as a tribal nation by the state of Montana in the 2000s, federal recognition allowed the tribe to access more funding and grants. However, up to that point, the Little Shell had evolved for decades with no land base, no reservation where its citizens lived, shared and maintained culture.

Many Little Shell citizens reside in Great Falls, but numerous have spread across Montana and the nation. This can make it difficult to maintain cultural connection.

"That has caused us to almost lose our language and culture and traditions," Little Shell Chairman Gerald Gray said. "So that's why we're trying to work to bring those back. And that's hard."

Cultural Night, a bimonthly event thrown by the cultural program, is one of the ways in which the Little Shell Tribe is working to share its culture with its citizens.

One of the attendees of Cultural Night was shy but excited 10-year-old Mikenzie Azure. She arrived with her mom, Callie Parr. The two were mini-celebrities of the event: They'd driven two hours and 19 minutes from their hometown, Butte, in order to be there. And they drove back right after the event. But to Parr, it's worth it.

"You really can't explain it," Parr said. "The sense of belonging is pretty incredible."

Parr said she felt very disconnected from the Little Shell Tribe while growing up. She'd been meaning to attend a Cultural Night for a while, after seeing the tribe post online about the events. That night, she finally made it a priority.

Now seven years into recovery, Parr "fully credits getting sober to finding [her] culture." Midway through her first Cultural Night, she started sobbing, overwhelmed by emotion. She's especially

Chairman Gerald Gray stands in front of a mural of past Little Shell citizens and Chief Little Shell in the Little Shell Administration Building in Great Falls.

Mikenzie Azure learns how to braid sweetgrass for the first time at Cultural Night.

excited to share the culture with her daughter.

"This is where it's at. This is our future," Parr said. "I grew up disconnected, and I want to do everything I can to make sure she doesn't experience that."

The two were eager to attend again.

According to Gray, the Little Shell Tribe has struggled with nitpicking cultural learning. In its language program, Gray said citizens are concerned about whether they are learning proper Ojibwe dialects.

"You get a lot of people that are like, 'I'm more Indian than you are' kind of attitude," Gray said. "No, it doesn't work like that. People are sick and tired of that."

The tribe is currently working to put out a language learning app, which will hopefully launch in July. Though the program started with in-person classes, turnout for adults and high school students was low and the tribe needed to pivot to another form of education. The work is funded through the Montana Indian Language Preservation Program, which provided $187,500 to each Montana tribe in 2024.

According to Shawn Loewen, a professor of Second Language Studies at Michigan State University, while apps can be effective for learning vocabulary and phrases, it's often not as effective for spoken ability. Communicative proficiency is often better built from person-to-person dialogue.

Some of the Little Shell Tribe's funding comes from state grants, such as for the language program, as well as economic enterprises. The tribe has had to re-budget due to federal money shrinking, luckily avoiding any programs being completely cut. It is allotted $480,000 per year from the Bureau of Indian Affairs, less than $70 per tribal citizen.

"We don't have a lot of federal grants that would be taken away," Gray said. "A lot of the other tribes, they've really affected them, and mostly in education."

President Donald Trump's current budget for 2027 proposes billions of dollars in cuts to housing, business and infrastructure grants that support Indigenous people. Similar cuts were proposed in 2026, according to Tribal Business News, but Congress rejected it.

Barbara Middle Rider wears a pair of handmade earrings that feature a photograph of her husband's grandmother.

John Gilbert, a former Little Shell chairman, stands in front of a painting of Chief Little Shell at the Elders' Center in Great Falls. The art was gifted to the tribe after the Little Shell Tribe was granted federal recognition in December 2019.

Although Barbara Middle Rider, who enjoys many projects run through the cultural program, said she'd like to see more programs aimed toward Little Shell adults.

"They seem to have more for children, which by all rights that's a great thing," Middle Rider said. "But because the Little Shell has gotten recognition so late in its lifetime, you've got a lot of adults that have no idea about some of their culture."

Middle Rider makes an effort to attend many of the programs put on by the tribal government, such as the elder's lunches and a new women's group hosted by the Little Shell Health Clinic. Recently retired, she has a little more time to fit the events into her schedule. Her late husband and his family were traditional Blackfeet citizens, so Middle Rider learned a great deal about Blackfeet culture.

It's been harder for her to learn about the Little Shell Tribe's culture.

"Our people, the Little Shell, were kind of lost in our way, they called us 'garbage-can Indians,' 'landless Indians,'" Middle Rider said about white people in Great Falls. "We lost a lot of our culture. We assimilated because we were taught that we would be looked down on. We lost the best of both worlds. I've been looked down on by non-Indians and Indians."

The Little Shell Tribe of Chippewa Indians Restoration Act, signed officially by President Trump in December 2019, provided more resources for the Little Shell Tribe. Funding by the federal government, assistance from the Indian Health Services and a food distribution program are just a few benefits that came with long-due recognition. The act was slipped into the National Defense Authorization Act, which mostly focused on military spending.

Though the Little Shell Tribe has more connections with President Trump than most tribes, many still have concerns with his administration.

"I, truly, in my heart of hearts, believe that [President Trump] truly did not know that he gave federal recognition," Middle Rider said. "It's not my place to say he's right or wrong, I just don't like the way he comes across."

This administration hasn't only affected tribes monetarily. Middle Rider has noticed a change in treatment from the Great Falls community. Though she's always been cautious, not stopping in small towns for gas, she said she noticed a shift with the new presidency.

"I see a lot more 'Go back to the reservation. You live off the government,'" Middle Rider said. "It seems to me to be more prevalent now because of the administration's support of 'If you don't get what you're entitled to, other people shouldn't get what you think they are not entitled to.'"

But, Middle Rider said, she does her best to not let run-ins ruin her day. She doesn't travel much and tries to take advantage of as many of the Little Shell's programs as she can.

To support its government, the Little Shell Tribe has found many other ventures from which to make money. It owns two of three national travertine quarries. Travertine is a type of sedimentary limestone often used as flooring, especially near pools. It doesn't turn slippery when wet.

John Gilbert, a former Little Shell chairman and frequenter of elder's lunches, has a friendly, deep voice and firm handshake. He's eager to see the Little Shell continue expanding economically.

"Every governor I've seen, I said, 'Someday, Little Shell is going to be an economic powerhouse in this state,'" Gilbert said. "And we will be. We're just getting started."

One of the Little Shell's other economic endeavors, which supports the elder's lunches among other tribal needs, is a group of 10 office spaces that the tribe rents out in its programs building. That's where the cultural program is housed, it's funded through the state's Healing and Ending Addiction through Recovery and Treatment grant, which provided $62,500 to each of the Montana tribes in the 2024 fiscal year. According to the grant's initiative report, the money is to be used "to fill gaps" for drug prevention and mental health promotion.

Many tribes, including the Little Shell, used this money to build cultural and community programs, which "research shows is protective against mental health and substance use disorders," according to the grant's initiative report.

"Every program that's out there, what we're doing, is for the future generations," Gilbert said. "We want our younger tribal members to get involved and be proud of their heritage, and you never know who could be the next chairman that comes out of there in the future."

Lack of federal funding does make it difficult to maintain programs. Chairman Gray explained that with less than $70 per citizen from the federal government, it would be "impossible" to maintain the amount of programming and services that the tribe provides.

"Here I have on my wall, I have a picture of President Trump and our chairman," Gilbert said. "[Trump] got all the publicity, but he hasn't put forth what we need for funding. And that's typical politics, that's what that is. It upsets me."

Gilbert is one of many who benefit from current programs like the elder's lunch, which is run by Kathy Fenner and her husband, Jeffrey.

"This is my fun job," said Jeffrey Fenner, who also works once a week at Home Depot. "This is the best day of the week. Just to have them come in, enjoy the company, enjoy the food."

The two run the weekly get-together with their daughter, Amanda Cavallin. She also works in the Enrollment Office for the Little Shell Tribe. The position came after she had been helping her mother with the cooking, and she is paid to help at the Elders Center on Wednesdays.

One of her responsibilities is to prepare the bread, it's almost always homemade. Those coming to enjoy the food will sometimes complain if it's store-bought. It's a multigenerational skill, one that Cavallin and her four sisters learned from her mother, and that Fenner learned from her aunt.

The bread is mixed by hand. Cavallin typically makes four quadruple batches, a process that takes several hours. It may take a variety of forms, for example, frybread or bannock. Bannock is a dense, sweet bread that could be compared to cornbread. The slight tang and buttery flavor put it a step above, however. It's traditional among many tribes, including the Little Shell, and it's one that brings elders in, according to Cavallin.

Despite the length of the process, it's one that the family is glad to do.

"I love them," Cavallin said of the elders. "And I love that they love our food, so I'm happy to do that for them."

The food is a hit, clearly. The tables set up in the middle of the Elders Center are mostly filled, folks slightly clumped up into large conversation groups. Even those who work slowly through their meal, enjoying the exchanges between community members,

Citizens of the Little Shell Tribe participate in musical chairs during Cultural Night.

Margie Johnson shows her current project to others attending the Little Shell Health Clinic's cultural event.

Amanda Cavallin helps her mother, Kathy Fenner, cook at the Elders' Lunch by handmaking frybread in the Elders' Center.

leave nothing but crumbs. And, if they're lucky, the last few are able to bring home leftovers.

"I think a couple of them got clever," Fenner said with a smile. "They'll come later and stay and talk and talk."

As desserts and frybread are packed to go and the last stragglers make their way out, the family behind the scenes wraps up their seven-hour shift, not counting their preparations the day prior. Whether making macaroni soup or cleaning up the last of the disposable bowls, Fenner does her work with focus and without complaint.

"Even one meal helps [elders] know they're appreciated," Fenner said.

Though it would be great to have the event more than once per week, the budget won't allow it. That's part of the work of the tribe itself: Finding the funds that have to be available to create these opportunities.

The little blue building is one that serves many purposes for the Little Shell Tribe. The new Cultural Center will spread the weight of events more evenly, but as of March, last-minute flourishes on the building mean the Elders Center served 60 elders one moment, and around 30 community members a few hours later.

Every other Wednesday, the program hosts Cultural Night. On March 11, the focus was on braiding sweetgrass. The environment is equally as warm as the elder's lunch, but a little more subdued. Quiet, joyful chatter echoes in the space.

There's a complete openness to every part of the event that allows everyone in attendance to feel welcome.

"Anyone that comes in and participates becomes part of us as our family," said Jesse Eagle Speaker, who runs the cultural program. "Even if you don't come from us, the door's open, and we'll help you."

Even those who have lived in the area for most of their lives, like Dorothy Langan, are prepared to learn more about their culture.

Langan grew up on Hill 57 in a big family. She later married a man from Rocky Boy — her first marriage — and felt out of place not knowing a lot about the traditions or culture of the tribe. Her mother-in-law would later teach her how to bead, and Langan, in turn, taught her own mother.

"That's why we come to this stuff, because we are actually learning how to be in it," Langan said. "We are actually learning our own traditions, which we just never did."

She, alongside the rest of the happy-go-lucky crew, begin braiding sweetgrass under the tutelage of Eagle Speaker after receiving their bundle of grass from Tricia Russette, who runs the Community Health program.

"Remember when you're braiding this sweetgrass, you think about your family," Eagle Speaker said. "Pray for them when you're doing this. That's extra strength for them."

He takes a moment, then jokes: "Tricia is going to do the first 24 braids." Russette plays along, forcing a quieter attendee into this imaginary work with her. The room feels playful, welcoming.

To begin, Langan separates a smaller section of the grass and wraps it around the end a few times, maybe an inch down from the top. The long end of that grass joins into one of the three sections that will become the braid.

With the sweet flavor of the grass in her mouth, texturally close to shredded celery, and water dripping from the end, Langan braids tightly. To make an even, pretty braid, it's crucial to make the three sections relatively even and to keep a consistent tension throughout the weaving. Langan is helped by the fact that she's a beautician.

Once reaching the end, Eagle Speaker says to twist the thin end enough that it becomes akin to a rope. By tying it in a knot, the braid concludes and is ready to dry, awaiting the day that its owner burns it.

Though it's certainly educational for all, there's an angle toward children for the event. Everything is explained kindly and in terms that citizens and non-citizens, elders and children can understand alike. When there's a hesitancy to get into the center of the room and dance, Russette suggests musical chairs. A few adults join in to help the younger in attendance get past that late-elementary-age awkwardness and participate.

With the last of the sweetgrass braided and musical chairs concluded, attendees trickle out, some with a free overflow carton of eggs from the tribe's food program. As they do so, they ball up the unruly wisps of sweetgrass that they plucked out of the braid. The clumps of grass catch the wind and bounce their way across the parking lot together.

"It's like that braid. There were three stands come together, made one," Eagle Speaker said to the crowd. "That's what we need. We don't need division. Let's create a safe room for our kids and our elders, so that they have somewhere to relax. They have somewhere to be proud."

And that's what the cultural program is striving to do.

VEINS OF THE RIVER

FORT BELKNAP TRIBES' WATER RIGHTS STAGNATE IN THE HOUSE

Tracy "Ching" King walks out his front door to join a driver at 4:30 a.m. The driver will take King to a clinic in Havre, about an hour away, for dialysis treatment.

STORY BY LUCY MCDONALD-GARRITY AND SAV CHAVEZ

PHOTOS BY MARK ELKINS DAVIDSON

It started with a silent heart attack. Tracy "Ching" King required surgery for the incident. The follow up treatment required the use of contrast dye injections, which made it easier for doctors to see the heart valves, coronary arteries and heart chambers in King's heart.

However, the dye destroyed King's kidneys, which now only function at 7% capacity.

Now, King must travel to Havre three times a week to receive the dialysis treatment he needs to survive.

The drive is only about an hour away, but the process is arduous and takes about four hours, requiring the better part of each of those three days, weekly. Dialysis takes a toll on King's 68-year-old body.

Getting up hours before the sun breaks over the horizon, King sits at his kitchen table to check his vitals to keep his doctor up to date on his health. By 4:30 a.m., a minivan's headlights shine into his home, alerting him it is time to go. The van is driven by one of the three drivers working for a transportation program provided by the Indian Health Service, or IHS. After driving through the morning darkness for an hour, King arrives at Northern Montana Health Care in Havre. Here, a nurse hooks him up to dialysis.

This is the morning routine King does when he goes to his dialysis treatment, partially made possible by the Indian Health Service.

The tribes have considered constructing a dialysis center on the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation, which would help more than a dozen patients in the area. However, a lack of funding and dilapidated infrastructure has put that dream out of reach for decades.

On Fort Belknap, clean and safe water is not guaranteed. Water infrastructure in the area is outdated and, with both limited manpower and lack of funds, the reservation cannot work to meet the water demand necessary to support everyone.

For the past three years, the tribes on Fort Belknap, the Nakoda and Aaniiih, have been working on a new water rights settlement that could help resolve the water issues, however the argument has been caught up in the House of Representatives. The Senate has passed the bill unanimously

twice. The Fort Belknap Indian Community Water Rights Settlement Act would offer $1.3 billion to the tribes for water projects, $275 million specifically aimed to repair the Milk River system that provides drinking water for 18,000 people and water for 121,000 acres of irrigation, including the people and land on Fort Belknap.

A dialysis center on the reservation has been nothing more than a conversation for 20 years, and until recently, that conversation remained on the back burner. Now, members of the tribal council hope to have a building to host a center as early as next spring, but there is still the financial burden. And that's just the beginning.

Reliable access to clean water is crucial to a functional dialysis center as large amounts of water are exposed directly to the person's bloodstream during treatment. When the reservation went on a six-week boil water advisory, proper treatment was all but impossible.

In December, windstorms with gusts up to 90 mph damaged a water tower on the reservation. Hundreds of

LEFT: *The Northern Montana Health Care is a hospital in Havre housing the dialysis center closest to the Fort Belknap reservation.*

BELOW: *Nurse Vikas Yesodharan Baby (left) hooks up Tracy "Ching" King to the dialysis machine in Havre. The process takes about four hours.*

residents were left without clean water to drink and shower with. This makes the possibility of constructing a dialysis center close to home difficult to imagine.

King has served on the tribal council and was aware of the issues keeping Fort Belknap from having its own dialysis center. The frequent water and sewer line breaks mean the water quality isn't good enough for what's needed for dialysis. The water systems are outdated, originally built in 1889, and made of brick and not built for the current capacity of the reservation today.

"You look at maybe two or three times a week there's water breaks," King said.

The last time the tribal council considered a reservation-based dialysis center was in 2011, but the water from the Milk River was considered unstable. Tribal Council President Randall Werk Sr. said the reservation's water supply is tested once every two months and, on paper, is fit for human consumption. But residents complain about the taste.

While there are patients on Fort Belknap who must travel the 47 miles to Havre or the 170 miles to Great Falls to receive dialysis, some patients have managed to treat themselves at home.

Edward "Buster" Moore has been on peritoneal dialysis, home dialysis, for more than two years and prefers it to hemodialysis, which would require him to travel to a clinic.

"I'm still doing what I love and that's why I like peritoneal," he said. "I'm tired all the time, but I don't want to be more tired. I like having my freedom."

Moore started his dialysis treatment when his kidney function dropped to 12%. Though this function is still low, he is proud of how he's maintained this. While home dialysis is the preferred method for Moore, he and his wife can no longer travel because his machine is not easy to transport.

"Unless I get a kidney transplant, I'm never going to get off of dialysis," Moore said.

Buster Moore's wife, Dawn Bishop-Moore, said Moore went on dialysis at a stressful time. Around the time he started treatment, the couple's daughter passed and their granddaughter, who requires high support needs, was put in their care. Bishop-Moore was concerned about the home treatment, but now agrees it was the right choice.

"I've had people I know very close to me that have gone on hemodialysis and they're sickly," she said.

Though Moore is unable to travel, he remains active in his community by teaching crafts, running an alcoholics anonymous group and helping with a narcotics anonymous group and grief support group.

Moore required three surgeries to insert a catheter into his abdomen. The home treatment allows him to hook up to his machine every night and do his 10-and-a-half hour dialysis cycle in his bed, running three gallons of fluid through his body.

This option is only possible for Moore because he has access to a private well. A sanitation department comes every two months to test the water quality to ensure its safe for consumption.

The lack of a dialysis center also affects patients who require other lifesaving services like chemotherapy. Tescha Hawley is executive director of Day Eagle Hope Project, a cancer support organization in Fort Belknap. She said there have been times when cancer patients had to miss their chemotherapy appointments because there weren't enough drivers and the dialysis patients took priority.

"So, he missed his appointment, and I went into IHS and I'm like 'Where is everybody and what happened?' And they told me they have a shortage of drivers and that dialysis people

Edward "Buster" Moore (right) sits on his bed next to his peritoneal dialysis machine and his wife, Dawn Bishop-Moore (left) in their home in Hays, Mont. The machine is strategically placed by his bedside and near the bathroom so he can get up in the night without unhooking from the machine.

After concluding his dialysis treatment in Havre, Tracy "Ching" King stands up and waits for Nurse Vikas Yesodharan Baby to see a reasonable blood pressure in King before dismissing him from the clinic.

are a priority," Hawley said. "How do you decide which disease is a priority over another disease?"

When a patient misses a dialysis treatment, they risk overloading their bodies with fluid and toxins, which could begin to flood their lungs or cause potassium to build up which can ultimately lead to a heart attack.

"When someone misses their treatment, that means they are missing a day of getting toxins removed," said Abby Nicholas, director of dialysis at Northern Montana Health Care.

In the past when King has missed a treatment, he said he was instructed to limit his fluid intake to 32 ounces, significantly lower than the recommended water intake for an adult. According to the Mayo Clinic, an adult should drink about 115 ounces, or 3.7 liters, of water a day.

"There are some guys that miss three or four treatments. I feel bad just missing one," King said.

King said he has grown to look forward to his dialysis days, mostly because he tends to be surrounded by positivity.

"You have drivers from [the Indian Health Service] that take us," King said. "There's probably four of us that go, and what I see is the drivers are good and the nurses that hook you up to the dialysis, they have good vibes, good energy and the director does so that really helps."

LEFT: *Tracy "Ching" King stands in front of the horse paddock at his home, a few miles south of Fort Belknap Agency.*

BELOW: *Edward "Buster" Moore (left) prepares supplies for the art and crafts class he teaches in Fort Belknap Agency. Moore says that choosing the at-home peritoneal dialysis over out-patient hemodialysis grants him more freedom to do what he wants with his days.*

SOUTH OF THE PIPELINE

A KEYSTONE XL REVIVAL REIGNITES A DECADES-OLD OIL FIGHT

STORY BY MAXWELL JOHNSON

PHOTOS BY DIEGO REY

On a warm day in March, 13 miles down a gravel road, Deb Madison shepherded the oil wells of the North Poplar field through another, hopefully full, 80-hour work week.

The steady plink of gravel intensified as her Subaru crested the hill to check another pump jack. Her voice trailed off. There was a pool of black water forming 20 feet from the next jack. Several feet deep and half-a-basketball-court in size, it completely encircles the well's cylindrical holding tanks.

"Story of my life," Madison said, with a blasé tone as she goes to work inspecting the small labyrinth of pipes and sheds. The smell of gasoline billowed from a thin layer of oil standing on top of the salty groundwater known as 'brine.'

There was a steady stream of muddy brown water flowing into the pool from a leak in a white fiberglass pipe. A small amount of oil coated the top of the pipe with a thick, black, tar-like substance.

Madison shut off the well, causing the mechanical rocking of the rusty pump jack to slow to a halt. The sound of the flow of water dissipated.

Soon, a truck arrived. Jordan Moran immediately got to work in the sloughy water. By the time the pipe was replaced, his hands, clothes and pants were stained black. Wiping them with old t-shirts donated by a local church did little.

Just across the border, in a booming North Dakota industry, workers are paid $45 an hour, employed with little vetting or oversight. Moran left that behind to return home where starting pay is $21 an hour, in line with the tribal wage scale. It's hard to justify higher hourly rates when the rest of the reservation's jobs pay so little.

After 75 years of successful drilling, oil extraction on the Fort Peck Indian Reservation has largely wound down. Recent explorations for expansion have proven unsuccessful while existing wells pump up an ever greater ratio of water to oil.

Tribes across the nation, including the Assiniboine and Sioux on Fort Peck, have become skeptical of the oil industry in which environmental disasters abound and the economic payoff rarely materializes. President Donald Trump's "Drill, baby, drill," cam-

Deb Madison peers into a puddle of contaminated injection water, calling one of her technicians to fix the issue.

Deb Madison edges her way around a tank of oil-contaminated injection water, looking for the source of a spill that happened earlier that day.

paign promise regarding energy policies have only emboldened oil companies. Now, Bridger Pipeline LLC, a Wyoming-based oil transportation company, is proposing a revival of the Keystone XL pipeline skirting directly around the reservation and running across the Poplar River.

Wary of further water contamination, the tribes are attempting to take a stand in a battle of David against Goliath. The proposed Bridger pipeline would bring about half a million barrels of crude oil from Alberta, Canada, through Montana and into Wyoming, nearly 650 miles of pipe. This project runs near the Fort Peck reservation and would cross the Missouri River downstream of its border. The risk to Fort Peck would be reduced, but not eliminated.

Still, the shadow of the previous project hangs over any future oil project. Specifically, the Poplar pipeline, which was also owned by Bridger, spilled about 40,000 gallons of oil into the Yellowstone River in 2015. Around the same time, Indigenous people from around the world voiced a unified stance against the Dakota Access Pipeline, which now delivers oil just north of the Standing Rock Indian Reservation in North Dakota.

Therefore, tribes are hoping future projects could be implemented with more consideration for Indigenous communities both environmentally and financially.

"I was kind of hoping that they were going to run it through the reservation so we can get the tax from it," said Madison, referring to another proposal to route Keystone XL through Fort Peck. However, that project has since been rerouted. "Once they took it off the reservation, I just thought, 'This is just like the Dakota Access Pipeline, right? There's no benefit and all the risk.'"

More recently, the war in Iran, the partial closure of the Strait of Hormuz and the ensuing spike in oil prices have also strengthened the case for a pipeline, while not necessarily helping Fort Peck.

THE FEAR

Rick Kirn, a 16-year member of the tribal council and current chair of Assiniboine and Sioux Rural Water Supply Board, said the tribes' concerns about the projects, even if placed out of reach of the Fort Peck water supply, is justified.

"Basically, any pipeline in this area, that's what the tribes are against. Any kind of a disruption in it, or break in it, could be catastrophic," Kirn said, adding that the tribes would receive no lasting benefits from its construction.

The Bridger pipeline would transport heavy Albertan crude, which persists in the environment far longer and has more adverse effects. According to Bloomberg, Bridger's new $2 billion pipeline is slated to transport 550,000 barrels of crude oil a day.

"They say, 'Well we've got control of [the potential pipeline].' Well yes they do, but you stop and think of the pipe, the amount of crude oil that can go in a 36-inch tube and the length of it from the Poplar River, that's a lot of crude," State Rep. Frank Smith said, whose district includes a stretch along the southern border of Fort Peck. "So there's a lot of questions about their safeties and our safety."

A statement published by the Bureau of Land Management on April 1 stated it would consult tribal nations on a government-to-government basis. It also stated Indian tribal nations were invited to participate in the public input 'scoping' process. In a common theme with Keystone XL, none of the public meetings were on the reservation. Three tribal council members and the Tribal Historic Preservation Officer attend the closest meeting to Fort Peck in Glasgow, a two-hour round trip from the tribal capital in Poplar.

THE DAMAGE

Pertinent on many residents' minds is the reservation's past with oil companies.

Madison first began working for the Environmental Protection Office, the tribes' equivalent to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, or the EPA, in the late '80s. A local resident came to her shortly after she began and asked if he could have a sample of his well water tested. It was drawn from the normally sweet aquifer north of Poplar that supplied 3,000 residents.

She used a simple device to measure the salt and mineral concentration of the water and was shocked by the pollution.

The tribal office got a grant and support from federal agencies to investigate further. After several years, the contamination was found to be caused by an expanding plume of brine water that had risen from oil drilling nearly a mile underground to the city's shallow aquifer.

Brine water is essentially deep groundwater pumped up as a byproduct of oil. It's generally separated out from oil and harmlessly pumped back underground where it can cyclically push up more oil. However, it's also extremely salty, undrinkable and in some areas of Fort Peck, so acidic that residents couldn't shower because it could burn their skin.

In total, roughly 40 million barrels of this brine water leaked into the aquifer over five decades.

The catastrophe was largely a result of a single, improperly sealed oil well with a poor concrete plug that was cracked by the vibrations of a nearby injection well. It took nearly two decades of investigation and legal proceedings to prove that the well belonged to Pioneer Natural Resources. In 2012, Pioneer and two other companies reached a settlement with the EPA.

For decades, the only water available for many was either bottled or boiled. The Assiniboine and Sioux Rural Water System, a multi-million-dollar federally funded project, was constructed to draw clean water from the Missouri with the last tribal members expected to receive clean water by the end of this year.

In the EPA settlement, the three companies paid a combined $320,000 dollars to the city of Poplar. They also had to provide bottled water to residents and pay for the construction of new water lines in the immediate area of the spill.

Wilfred Lambert, who took over as the head of the Office of Environmental Protection after Madison's departure, estimates that there are approximately 900 abandoned 'orphan' wells on the Fort Peck reservation. This means their parent company cannot be found and they are out of operation.

The chances of the exact circumstances of the Pioneer's leak happening again are low, but many wells are still waiting to be plugged with concrete at the cost of up to $100,000 in federal grants.

"I think that's one of the reasons why they really like reservations, because we have ties to the federal government," Kirn said. "They could come up with these super funds and whatnot [and] use them so they could get out of their responsibility."

THE BUREAUCRACY

While Kirn said federal ties can make the reservation attractive, it comes with a number of caveats.

In its official proposal, Bridger stated that even though it provided a more direct route, it avoided crossing reservation boundaries because of potential permit challenges and delays from crossing multiple on-reservation and off-reservation tribal trust lands.

The reservation is split into a complex checkerboard of three types of land. Tribal and allotted land is held in trust by the federal government and requires approval from the Bureau of Indian Affairs to lease or sell. Fee land, also called deeded land, is owned directly by individuals and can be sold and leased without BIA approval. Roughly half the reservation is trust and allotted land while the other half is fee land.

"Well, it takes us about two years to get a permit to drill on the reservation when it takes two months to drill off the reservation [or] on deeded land," Smith said. "So the oil companies have really stayed away from the reservation basically, except for deeded land."

Federal cuts are slated to close a quarter of BIA offices, potentially slowing the process further. Conversely President Trump's executive order "Declaring a National Energy Emergency" directs federal agencies to expedite projects.

The order was mentioned in the introduction of Bridger's proposal, with the company estimating it would have all the permits required to start construction by July 2027. On April 30, Trump approved the presidential permit for the pipeline allowing the section of it crossing from Canada to the U.S. to be built. Additional federal and state permits will still be required.

Much of the fee land is owned by the third of the reservation's population that are non-Natives who acquired 'unused' land as a result of the Homestead Act of 1862 or bought it after banks seized allotted land as collateral in the fallout of the 1887 Dawes Act.

Some are worried that Indigenous land owners still aren't getting what their land is worth. Melvin "Terry" Rattling Thunder Sr. was a member of the tribal council for 14 years, including in 2012

Jordan Moran works on fixing a broken pipe that connects to the injection pump housing containers.

during the start of land buybacks, which consolidated fractionated allocated land into direct tribal trust ownership.

He said the BIA was unwilling to show the tribes how they determine the mineral value under allocated land they are seeking to buy back. He worries that some were lured into selling their land for lump sums without realizing they were also selling their mineral rights and the far greater potential long-term income that could come from royalties.

In general, Kirn estimates the tribe and most landowners receive a lease deal equivalent to 1/6 of the gross revenue from oil wells on their land. This means if a well pumps up 600 barrels of oil, the landowners receive the full monetary value of 100 barrels, usually without any of the expenses being subtracted.

THE BOOM AND BUST ECONOMY

Long-term income has proved elusive for the reservation, as Kirn estimates the vast majority of jobs provided by the potential pipeline's construction won't last longer than six months.

The Fort Peck oil industry as a whole has faded over the past few decades. Kirn estimates a peak of over 1,000 people working in it around the 1980s, while today, Madison estimated employment at less than 100. The reservation has a long history of wealth coming during the booms and leaving entirely during the bust in what some have dubbed a false economy.

The influx largely came via transplants raising rent and pushing out those with lower income jobs. Kirn said he started his own survey business in part because other companies wouldn't hire tribal members.

A national effort was made to remediate this through the Indian Mineral Development Act of 1982, which included provisions for preferential hiring of Native Americans. Fort Peck and reservations across the nation soon created Tribal Employment Rights Offices to oversee this.

For a while this worked well, but bigger oil companies still preferred to bring in their own outside crews. Several outright left the reservation and others attempted to find loopholes.

"Supposedly, the owner of a company, they'd come in here and they'd hire [Native Americans] and pay them just a little bit of money, tell them 'Go sit underneath the tree and just let us do our job,'" Kirn said.

In response, the tribes created a contractor's association that companies had to consult to hire a pool of people that had already been screened. Kirn also clarified that preference isn't the sole factor in determining who gets the job with candidates still having to be qualified. With the boom firmly a thing of the past, the contracting agency no longer exists, and the Tribal Employment Rights Offices is far smaller in size and scope.

THE NATIONAL DEBATE

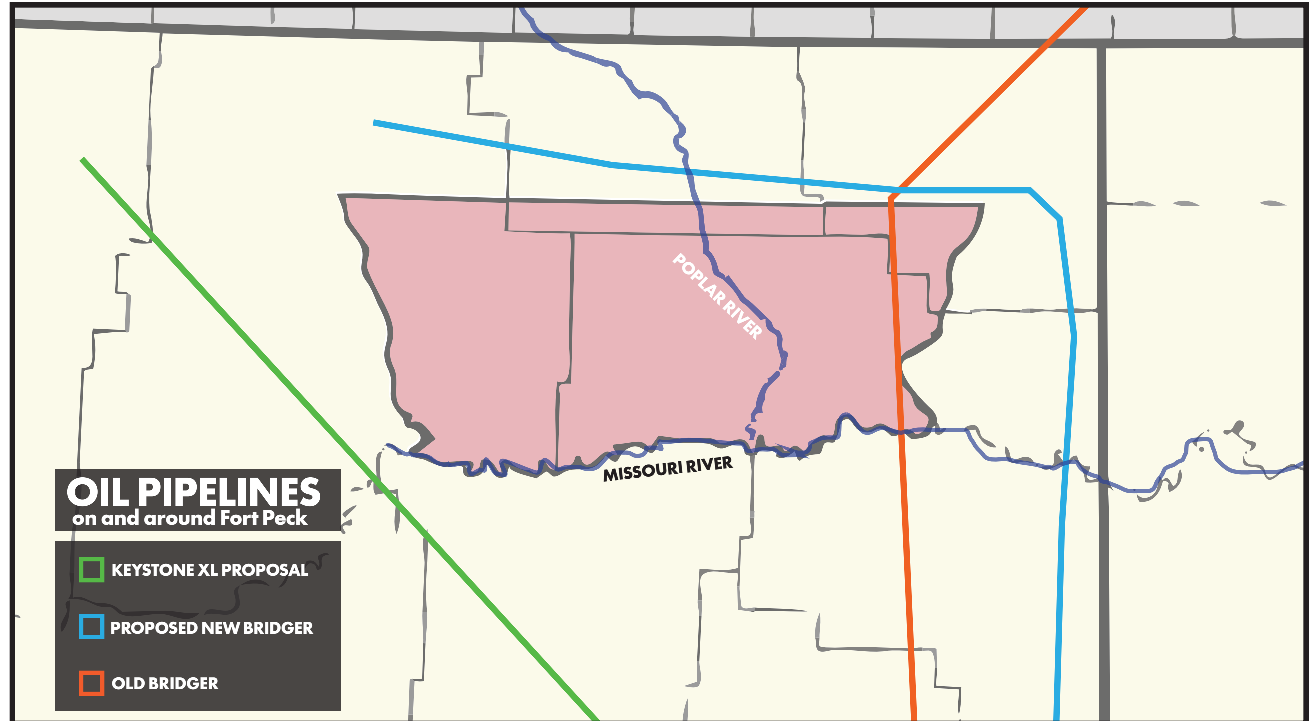
Jan Hasselman is a lawyer for the environmental nonprofit Earthjustice, which represented the Standing Rock reservation in a suit against the Dakota Access Pipeline.

Despite general success in challenging the permits for the Dakota Access Pipeline, Hasselman said the project was still pushed through and is unlikely to be shut down. Hasselman said the problems associated with oil on reservations are deep rooted and structural in nature, with the end result being oil companies socializing the cost and extracting the profits.

He suggested that oil companies should be required to put down more sure-fire financial assurance, equating to security deposits on the land that will be used in the event of environmental damage. At present, he said they use shell companies to avoid doing so.

With the inherent power imbalance of billion-dollar oil companies and individual reservations Hasselman thinks any legal fight against the pipeline will be difficult with construction likely going forward.

In the long term, he thinks America's political compass will shift toward voting for more environmental policies and candidates which could make future legal battles far easier.



FORT PECK, INTO THE FUTURE

Fort Peck has a unique history of legal acumen. The 1985 Fort Peck-Montana compact was one of the first reservation water rights settlements, guaranteeing the tribes a portion of Missouri's flow. Groundbreakingly, in 2008, Fort Peck was again one of the first in the nation to receive direct control over its brine water pumping injection wells, a misuse of which was found to be one of the primary causes of the Pioneer well leak.

A different project has seen the worst of that brine water plume begin to get pumped out of the aquifer into emptied oil deposits a mile underground. Meanwhile, the water supply system created in the aftermath of the contamination of the aquifer meanwhile supplies 30,000 across northeastern Montana with clean drinking water from the Missouri River.

Lastly, statewide Held v. Montana (2023) found that Montana violated students' right to a clean and healthy environment by passing legislation ignoring climate change. While Hasselman said it may not provide an answer due to it being hard to connect an individual pipeline to climate change, it could lay the groundwork to ask some of the right questions.

The future of oil itself still remains a contentious issue on Fort Peck with tribal chairman Floyd Azure acknowledging the good that can be done with taxation from it while still believing money is far from the end all be all. If a pipeline has to be built, he would prefer it not go through Fort Peck at all.

He grew up eating what he fished and hunted from the ranges and creeks on the northern side of the reservation, areas where even if the Poplar River runs lower and the percentage of fenced-in land is higher, the natural resources are still worth his efforts.

"Take care of the land and take care of what you got," Azure said, referring to what his childhood taught him.

For all the problems that arrive on his desk daily, he said he believes he couldn't have the life he's made on Fort Peck anywhere else on Earth. It'd take a team of horses to drag him off the reservation, he said.

Floyd's brother Howard works in oil with Madison, but if money was the end all for him, he and everyone else on Madison's crew would be 100 miles east in North Dakota. The same regulations that pushed some companies out have kept a select few of the best and brightest here, vigilantly looking below and northward for whatever is to come.

Rick Kirn, chair of the Assiniboine and Sioux Rural Water Supply board, leans against his car looking over an iced-over Poplar River.

STORY BY CLAIRE BERNARD
PHOTOS BY EMMA MCDOWELL

It was calving season on the Blackfeet Indian Reservation when the tractor's wheel broke. It was also one of the busiest times of the year, and Jonathan St. Goddard needed a replacement. Fast.

The only available part was 500 miles away in Saskatchewan. St. Goddard headed to Canada to make the $1,250 purchase. Re-entering the U.S. through a border checkpoint should have been simple, as it always had been. St. Goddard should have declared his $1,250 purchase and drove home. But for the first time, he couldn't simply cross into the U.S.

Instead, the border agent questioned St. Goddard. Why was he in Canada? Where was the receipt for his purchase? It was March 2025, still the early days of President Donald Trump's second term, when attention was focused on border security and international tariffs on incoming goods.

The border patrol took his invoice and began to punch numbers into a computer.

"You owe a tariff," the agent told St. Goddard. "It's $308."

St. Goddard was confused. He thought tariffs hadn't started yet and even if they had, the border agent had only explained it was a 25% tariff but not on what or how he got to the amount he was charged.

St. Goddard paid, but as he drove off, he began to feel frustrated. St. Goddard works on a narrow budget and receiving an extra charge every time he needed an item from Canada was never part of the plan.

"If tariffs continue, the cost from the tariffs will cause irreparable harm to our family's ranch and agricultural business," St. Goddard wrote in a later affidavit.

Nearly a year later, St. Goddard found himself in a similar position: In the middle of calving season, with a broken piece of equipment, and no place to get a replacement except Canada. But this time, he was hesitant about crossing.

He isn't the only member of the Blackfoot Confederacy whose life is changing due to federal decisions.

Since President Trump's re-election, his nationalist trade approach, alongside escalating federal border and immigration policies, has greatly impacted the Blackfoot Confederacy and Siksikaitsitapi people's relationship to the border. Taxation on goods that violate treaty rights, increased scrutiny over documentation and fear of crossing into the U.S. due to Immigration and Customs Enforcement, or ICE, presence have hurt businesses, familial ties and ceremonial events.

As a sovereign nation with a treaty-based relationship with federal governments, the Siksikaitsitapi people have used their unique political identities to assert their rights. The efforts have unfolded on both sides of the border, with lawsuits filed, documentation made more accessible and interactions with federal agents being prepared for.

As a member of the Aamskapi Pikuni, Blackfeet Nation, St. Goddard's family has traded and traveled across the 49th Parallel that divides the traditional lands of the Siksikaitsitapi people for thousands of years, long before the U.S. established itself as a nation and put up a border to divide itself from Canada.

And as a fifth-generation rancher on the reservation, St. Goddard knows he's at the whim of an ever-shifting federal government. Most of the land St. Goddard's cattle graze on is owned by the tribe, and he conducts his work through the U.S. Department of Agriculture, which is overseen by a presidentially appointed secretary, currently Brooke Rollins.

But with federal changes coming fast and frequent, St. Goddard and other members of the Aamskapi Pikuni tribe have felt the impacts trickle down from Washington D.C. to their small Montana town.

ALONG THE 49TH PARALLEL

After St. Goddard left the border checkpoint last spring, he joined a lawsuit that argued by imposing tariffs on tribal members, Trump had violated the 232-year-old Jay Treaty, which exempted Indigenous peoples from paying duties when crossing the border.

Before the case could move much further, the U.S. Supreme Court struck down many of Trump's tariffs and in February, St. Goddard's case was dismissed for lack of jurisdiction. But the legal basis for the case — the treaty — has remained relevant for more reasons than one.

After the Revolutionary War, the Jay Treaty was signed in 1794 to settle remaining disputes between the U.S. and British colonies in today's Canada. It included provisions about Indigenous peoples' right to freely cross the newly established border lands as well as trade protections.

A few decades later, the 49th Parallel was established as the official border between the U.S. and Canada. But it didn't just slice the two countries.

THE BORDER

THE BONDS OF THE SIKSIKAITSITAPI TRIBES HAVE ALWAYS EXISTED OUTSIDE PHYSICAL BORDERS. FEDERAL POLICY HAS THREATENED THEM.

Jonathan St. Goddard, 33, records the birth of a new calf in his calving notebook while feeding his herd. St. Goddard, a fifth-generation rancher, says calving season is his busiest time of year.

It directly split up the Siksikaitsitapi. Three bands remained on the Canadian side: the Kainai (Blood), Siksika (Blackfoot) and Piikani (North Peigan) nations.

For the southern Aamskapi Pikuni tribe, this meant weathering hundreds of years of oppression and abuse at the hands of the U.S. government, which included misleading treaties and reorganization acts, forced assimilation and land loss, rationing and neglect, among other atrocities.

The other bands on the northern side of the border also suffered generational impacts of colonization by Great Britain and eventually Canada. As one confederacy, the four bands share more commonalities than differences. They speak the same languages, practice the same ceremonies and share the same families.

But the treaty-based relationships the tribes developed with their federal governments separated the Aamskapi Pikuni from the rest of the Siksikaitsitapi. And the border has become a sour physical reminder of this splinter.

Under the Jay Treaty, Indigenous Canadians and Native Americans have a guaranteed right to cross the U.S.-Canada border with their tribal identification cards, no passports needed.

But now, fear has seeped into this right as inspections increase. The border crossings have evolved from symbols of impediment on Indigenous land to embodiments of the current U.S. federal government's escalating anti-immigrant rhetoric. A rhetoric that many in Browning say targets those with brown skin.

Many tribal members say there's usually an unease when crossing. There's always been the questions. The scrutiny of their tribal IDs. The misunderstandings of what ceremony means. But the tactics have changed, the way immigration enforcement in the U.S. has moved from detainment to deportation to lethal force.

It's these changes that have laid the heaviest on the shoulders of the Siksikaitsitapi people living in Canada, cloaking them in fear and uncertainty. And without the confidence to enter into the U.S., the presence of brother and sister tribal members has been greatly missed.

Rep. Tyson Running Wolf, D-Browning, walks across his yard, passing dozens of wooden skeletons of former sweat lodges. As a member of the Horn Society, Running Wolf, 51, has held traditional bundle opening ceremonies and built hundreds of sweat lodges on his land.

'FIGHTING FOR 18,000 YEARS'

As Rep. Tyson Running Wolf walked across his yard, the wooden skeletons of dozens of former sweat lodges surrounded him.

"I've built hundreds of these," Running Wolf (D-Browning) said, "one for each time ceremony happens."

Pulling barbed wire fencing off the ground, Running Wolf revealed an aged stone circle. Here, teepees were erected for centuries.

As a member of the Horn Society, Running Wolf has held traditional bundle opening ceremonies on his land for years. The location matters, Running Wolf said, as well as the people, the timing and the items that are used, often medicines, feathers or pipes, among other spiritually significant objects. While Tyson Running Wolf and his wife, Lona Running Wolf, are both bundle holders, they haven't become transferred ceremonial elders — a process that takes years of learning through oral tradition from current elders.

Most of these elders come from Canada, as many bundles were smuggled to the north during the sweeping suppression from the late 1800s to the 1970s of Indigenous religious, spiritual and traditional practices by the U.S. government. While similar policies were enacted in Canada, Lona Running Wolf said, the three Canadian bands of the Siksikaitsitapi were able to pass down traditional ceremonial practices and their native language in greater numbers.

This was due, in part, to the establishment of a reserve for the Canadian bands in 1877 by the Canadian government which

LEFT: *Jonathan St. Goddard feeds his cattle from his tractor. St. Goddard's tractor is vital to his ranching operation and aids in feeding, hauling hay and moving heavy equipment.*

Edmonton
Calgary
Siksika Nation
Kainai Nation
Piikani Nation
Blackfeet Indian Reservation
Spokane
MONTANA
Bozeman
Billings
Boise
IDAHO
Original Blackfoot Territory
Current Blackfoot Confederacy Reservations

SOURCE: *National Park Service & Blackfeet Nation*

The road to the Piegan-Carway Border Crossing has views of Glacier National Park to the west.

gave the tribes space to hunt and raise cattle, alongside supplementary government rationing. The southern tribe, alternatively, saw their main food source, bison, decimated and measly government rations led to starvation of hundreds of Aamskapi Pikuni while more white Americans poured into the region.

This led to a knowledge vacuum for the U.S. tribe, with Tyson Running Wolf estimating that there are only about 10 to 15 Aamskapi Pikuni transferred ceremonial elders in Browning versus hundreds in Canada.

Last time the Running Wolfs had a medicine pipe bundle opening, close to 100 people traveled for the ceremony, with almost half coming from Canada.

In July, the Akao'katsin ceremony — a nearly week-long circle camp that reunites the bands of the Siksikaitsitapi — will take place. But there's worry that the fear of detainment or harassment from U.S. agents will prevent those living in Canada from visiting. Last year already saw lower attendance because of this, Tyson Running Wolf said.

Fears began ramping up after immigration enforcement across the U.S. did, Tyson Running Wolf said — including in western Montana where Customs and Border Protection claimed in December that it made 51 arrests, with 41 of those being of "individuals in violation of immigration law."

While Tyson Running Wolf said he hasn't heard of any Niitsítapi people being detained or deported, the Assembly of First Nations issued a travel advisory for the U.S. in February, warning First Nations Canadians about crossing the border and noting it had received reports of Indigenous Canadians experiencing increased scrutiny and detainment by ICE.

The Siksikaitsitapi issued its own warnings, reminding tribal members about their rights under the Jay Treaty and urging them to keep copies of their citizenship, blood quantum or certificates of Indian status on hand at all times.

A spokesperson for U.S. Customs and Border Protection said in a statement that American Indians born in Canada can freely enter the U.S. if they can prove at border crossings at least 50% American Indian blood. This requires proof of Canadian citizenship, Indigenous status and blood quantum, a colonial concept that refers to how much "Native blood" an individual has.

"Protection officers may request additional evidence if what is presented is unclear," the statement continues.

Kristi Noem, former secretary of the Department of Homeland Security, who was banned from several reservations in her home state of South Dakota, repeatedly denied that tribal citizens were being detained by immigration officials. But reporting from ICT, formerly known as Indian Country Today, stated it has "collected accounts of several Native people being detained by ICE with documentation" and tribal leaders have refuted Noem's assertion.

Edward Kennedy, an Aamskapi Pikuni business owner, has felt the impacts of increased border scrutiny firsthand.

His partner was going to move to the U.S. until policies began to change in the states. Instead, she's been crossing down to visit when she can, a process which Kennedy said used to take five minutes and now takes at least 30.

"You say one thing wrong and you're toast," Kennedy said.

Port data from the U.S. Bureau of Transportation shows that personal vehicles crossing from Canada into the U.S. at the top five ports have decreased by nearly 19% from 2024 to 2025 with the biggest decrease, nearly a quarter, from the Blaine border crossing in Washington. The Blaine crossing is near several U.S. and Canadian tribal lands, most notably the Semiahmoo Indian Reserve in British Columbia, which is less than three miles from the border.

But the increasing scrutiny at the border is only one small part of the larger impacts that the Trump administration is inflicting, Kennedy said. As a sovereign nation, the Aamskapi Pikuni people have their own relationship to Canada, one that is being damaged by the administration.

"It's going to take a generation to fix," Kennedy said, adding that his tribe is resilient and has adapted throughout history.

"We've been fighting for 18,000 years," he said. "This is just another challenge."

ABOVE: *Peggy Harwood, 73, poses for a photo to update her expired tribal ID at the Blackfeet Nation Enrollment Office. Amid the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement surge in Minneapolis this April, Harwood encouraged her family living off the Blackfeet Indian Reservation to obtain tribal IDs.*

RIGHT: *Nínaiistáko, Chief Mountain, looms behind a fence at the Piegan-Carway Border Crossing. The border cuts through the traditional lands of the Blackfoot Confederacy. Many folks affiliated with the Confederacy frequently cross the border for ceremony or to visit family and friends.*

'THIS BIG PORTFOLIO OF WHO I AM, WHERE I'M FROM'

The buzz of the vending machine filled the undisturbed air. Fluorescent lights flickered above at the enrollment office in Browning during a quiet March day.

People slowly meandered in and out of the office, going in the tan door with a stack of papers and back out with a newly minted identification card in hand.

Carrying proper ID has become the first line of defense for interacting with federal immigration agents, both a top-down recommendation and a personal protection that many both on and off the reservation have adopted.

"That's the kind of mentality that both sides of the border are thinking," Tyson Running Wolf said. "That I got to be carrying this big portfolio of who I am, where I'm from, and, if I'm allowed to be traveling."

But getting this documentation can be challenging. The tribe requires proof of at least one-fourth degree of Aamskapi Pikuni blood and individuals must be approved by the tribe's enrollment office before becoming a member. Those who don't qualify for full enrollment but have Aamskapi Pikuni ancestry can be descendency enrolled and receive a tribal ID. Descendants can't vote or receive other benefits that full enrollment grants.

Locating the proper historical records for enrollment to prove lineage, such as birth certificates or marriage licenses, can be a complicated maze. Cost is another factor, so is transportation across remote plains.

Frank Jordan is one of the people who blew into the office. He's on his third descendancy ID since 2024, heading in on the

bleary Monday because he recently lost his wallet. Jordan got his ID for $10.

The cost? "No problem," he said. But it's the transportation to the office that can be harder to come by. He, alongside his friend Charlene Old Chief, were dropped off in their friend's silver Chevy. Old Chief also recently lost her ID.

The idea of ICE in Montana doesn't bother Jordan, but Old Chief has made sure to keep her ID on her since immigration enforcement across the country started ramping up. "It's a good idea to have," she said, tucking the pair's cards into her jacket pocket.

Only about half of the more than 17,000 enrolled Aamskapi Pikuni members live on the reservation, with a little over 8,100 scattered worldwide — including in Minnesota, where many tribal members became fearful after ICE raids in February led to the fatal shootings of two American citizens.

While now, things seem to have slowed at the enrollment office, the place was a hectic flurry only a few months before.

The office received around 2,000 requests to update enrollment, get paperwork or get IDs in the month after ICE arrived in the Twin Cities. It took the office two months to get through the backlog of enrollment requests, said Misty Hall, director of enrollment. Most of these requests came from people living off the reservation or who were planning on traveling.

In the year prior, the tribe had made changes in procedures to make the process easier, in part to respond to people's unease over immigration. Instead of making people travel to the office in person, the council allowed people to send in their information and receive their IDs by mail. It also offered free IDs for the month of January, leading to a large uptick of in-person requests.

Not everyone who wanted their enrollment updated was because of the national news, but Hall said she received several phone calls from people living in Minnesota who were worried. Peggy Harwood, who came in to renew her own ID, remembers phoning her youngest son down in Arizona this winter and finding out he and his son didn't have their tribal IDs. Panicked, she demanded they get them.

For the 73-year-old, ICE coming to Browning isn't a matter of if, but when.

"How long until they do?" she asked.

The Blackfeet Tribal Business Council has also grappled with this question, having conversations over the last year to make a plan.

Chairman Rodney Gervais said the tribal council met with Kurt Alme, former U.S. attorney for the District of Montana and current Republican front-runner for U.S. Senate, to discuss what ICE enforcement may look like. If immigration officials entered the reservation, Gervais said tribal councilors would initiate a call with the tribe's law enforcement and federal border patrol, who Gervais said the tribe has a good relationship with. Alme told the council they would only communicate with the tribe if there were issues of human or drug trafficking, Gervais said.

A few tribes have already taken action, including the Oglala Sioux Tribal Council which banned ICE from entering the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota after four of its enrolled members were detained in Minneapolis. Several other tribes have placed restrictions on how ICE can enter their reservations.

Other tribes who live alongside national borders have also been responding to shifts in federal policy. The Mohawk Council of Kahnawà:ke, located in southern Quebec, issued statements reasserting their crossing rights under the Jay Treaty. The Tohono O'odham Nation in Arizona has openly opposed Trump's efforts to build a wall along the U.S.-Mexico border, which tribal leaders said would effectively slice the tribe's lands in half.

On April 30, Congress passed funding for the Department of Homeland Security after a record-long 76 day freeze. The bill restored funds to most agencies under the department, except for those related to immigration enforcement. Congressional Republicans are still working to enact billions in funding for immigration and border patrol.

Many tribal members remain in limbo, anxious to see what might happen. Other tribal members are comfortable, traveling without apprehension. But most seem to agree on one thing: the Aamskapi Pikuni people have existed long before this administration, and they'll exist long afterward too.

"We're Blackfeet. We're Southern Piegan. We're very adaptable," Kennedy said. "We've had adversity that we've survived. This is just another challenge. Not a block, just a challenge."

Marlene Kindness and Carol No Runner celebrate winning a raffle during the St. Patrick's Day celebration at the Eagle Shield Senior Center. Elders in the Blackfeet Nation are regarded as vital keepers of traditional knowledge, history and culture. To support their well-being, the senior center provides free lunches for elders in the community.

A FRESH FOUNDATION

THE SALISH AND KOOTENAI TRIBES DEVELOP HOUSING OUTLOOK

STORY BY LYDIA MATTERN
PHOTOS BY ABIGAIL STENKAMP

Sitting in the cluttered office that he shares with two other employees, Steven Morigeau recalled his journey from struggling with addiction at 19-years-old. Now he is employed, working a job that he's passionate about and helping people who had similar journeys.

Morigeau, the residential director of Never Alone Support Services, a tribal program that offers housing for newly sober residents living on the Flathead Indian Reservation, has a poster hanging near his office door dedicated to his sister. She lost her life to addiction a few years ago. A different wall has a wooden sign behind his worn chair reads "No fear." Morigeau's love for his job comes directly from his personal experience.

"I'm really just here doing what I can," Morigeau said. "This is what I enjoy doing every day. When people get burnt out doing this, they get burnt out because it's a job to them. To me, I enjoy coming here. It's what I love and I love helping people."

With some of the highest housing costs in the state, the reservation has become one of the most expensive places to buy a home in Montana. While the area has historically been expensive, it has only gotten more precarious as time goes on.

Last year, the Federal Department of Government Efficiency under President Donald Trump attempted to quickly reduce government spending and cut hundreds of employees from the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the Department of Housing and Urban Development. In addition, Trump attempted to cut Native American housing program funding, although that failed. Still, the moves have led to widespread anxiety and unease among citizens of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes living on the reservation.

"When funding is disrupted, it has a huge ripple effect. We are okay financially, but most tribal housing authorities are not okay," said Jody Cahoon Perez, executive director of the Salish and Kootenai Tribal Housing Authority. "Other housing authorities in Montana were making drastic changes because of just freezing [funding] for a few days. We have longer-term goals to meet, and I'm nervous about if our funding is going to be there."

As a result, the tribes are finding new ways to provide housing to the most vulnerable citizens by merging affordable and social aid housing.

The Flathead reservation, first recognized in 1855, is home to three tribes: the Bitterroot Salish, Upper Pend d'Oreille and Kootenai tribes. The reservation is home to about 29,000 people. Stretching across 1.3 million acres, the reservation covers a diverse terrain. Grassy and wooded hills sit nestled under the rugged Mission Mountains to the east. With the Flathead River flowing throughout, the valley is picture perfect to Montana life. It's what people who aren't from Montana envision life here to be like.

As a result, the citizens of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes live in a depressed housing market. Homes on the reservation are considered some of the most expensive in the state, while families in the area are among the most impoverished.

According to the Census Reporter, the average home value on the reservation is $528,940 compared to the average Montana home value of $455,364. Still, the average household income on the Flathead reservation is $80,097, which is almost $20,000

ABOVE: *Jody Cahoon Perez, the executive director of the Salish Kootenai Housing Authority, shows incoming staff the new reunification apartments around the family complex in Pablo.*

LEFT: *Steven Morigeau, Never Alone Recovery Support Service program coordinator from Pablo, completes work in the office that he shares with other employees.*

Two Sparrow Group employees help construct the additional storage units outside the reunification family housing facility in Pablo.

below the state average of $98,908.

The lack of affordable housing on the reservation isn't an isolated issue. According to a study published by the National Low Income Housing Coalition, about 32% of Native households living on tribal land are considered impoverished, compared to about 18% nationwide.

Owning a home has long been sold as the American dream, but it is out of reach for many Indigenous people. The housing market was designed as unattainable from its foundations, Cahoon Perez said.

"Our housing problems are pretty much all the same because we were all disrupted from our way of life when European contact was made," she said. "We are all dealing with the same effects, because we all share the same story."

The housing authority receives funding for its building projects from the Indian Housing Block Grant, a subsection of the Native American Housing and Self Determination Act.

The organization's most recent project is a low-income reunification apartment complex, which Cahoon Perez hopes will be ready for move-in by July. The building will have 12 available apartments and is one of several affordable housing complexes the housing authority has worked on over the past few years.

Based in Pablo, the complex was designed for parents who are reuniting with their child after intervention by child protective services. It offers the families a chance to reconnect in a safe and affordable environment.

It's important to Cahoon Perez that Native children stay connected to their heritage, and she believes that providing parents with a safe place to live and support their children can help families stay together. The complex is specifically designed to accommodate child protective service visits.

"Who knows why [families] were taken apart," Cahoon Perez said. "There's a lot of reasons. Now that they're in a better space, they can get reunited,"

According to Cahoon Perez, the amount of control the federal government has over the reservation is concerning to many tribal citizens. Many programs, including the housing authority, rely on federal funding and grants that could be pulled at any time.

Under the Land Allotment Act of 1904, all tribal members living on the Flathead reservation at that time were allotted a parcel of land. Everything left over was taken by the U.S. government and sold to the highest bidder. Today, the Flathead reservation is considered a checkerboard reservation because its land is split between reservation trust land and privately-owned land, creating a checkerboard pattern on the map.

Because of this, building new homes or apartments on a checkerboard reservation is difficult and expensive, with different regulations and standards applied across the borders.

Allotted land is also referred to as trust land, and the housing market for this type of land is completely separate from reservation land. There are two categories of trust land: Land that's owned by individuals and land that's owned by the tribes. Either way, owning a home on a reservation makes it difficult to build equity.

Bradley Trosper, a retired soil scientist born on the Flathead reservation, owns a piece of trust land that was allotted to his family in the early 1900s. He inherited the land from his father and plans to pass it down to his son.

"There's some advantages to owning trust land and some disadvantages," Trosper said. "One of the disadvantages is if you want to convey it to somebody else, you want to sell it, you would have to sell it to somebody who's eligible to own trust land. It's a very restricted market."

Anyone who wants to buy trust land on the Flathead reservation must be an enrolled member of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes. The tribe itself could also purchase trust land.

Trosper moved back to the Flathead reservation in 1983 after serving in the Navy. While he didn't personally struggle to find housing at the time, Trosper said he noticed housing prices on the Flathead reservation rising over the last several years.

Specifically, Trosper noticed a jump in housing prices in 2020, the year many people migrated from urban centers to more rural areas throughout the United States. The population in Montana grew by about 53,000 people from 2020-24, according to U.S. Census estimates.

"It's a balloon. I expect it to pop," Trosper said about the current state of the economy. In fact, the U.S. Census estimates that the Montana population increased by nearly 7,500 people from 2024-25, the lowest rate of year-to-year growth since the pandemic.

The natural beauty of the Flathead reservation makes the land highly desirable to a wider non-native population. Trosper believes this desirability has contributed to the housing shortages on the reservation.

"Nobody's racing to move to Clancy, Montana, or Great Falls. They want to live in the Flathead area," Trosper said.

Never Alone Recovery Support Services is not just dedicated to offering sober living options, but also affordable living options. The program, which is entirely peer-led, has three complexes, including the recovery village, which is specifically set up to rehabilitate low-income tribal citizens, and a non-tribal affiliated men's and women's home.

The recovery program was created in 2019 and receives funding for its complexes from the Salish and Kootenai Housing Authority, as well as a few private donors. The Residential Director, Steven Morigeau, went through the program himself, lived in a low-income apartment for years, and has dedicated his career to the residents of the recovery village, men's and women's homes.

He spends his days reviewing tenant applications and driving residents wherever they need to go.

One resident, Tara Edner, moved into the women's home, a small white house overlooking Flathead Lake, nine months ago. Originally from Iowa, Edner moved to the Flathead reservation to attend Salish Kootenai College. She is currently the longest-residing tenant.

"I like the [recovery program] hub and I really like the community idea of it," Edner said. "The idea of having friends and family."

Edner's favorite part of living in the women's home, however, is having her own room. It's located on the first floor, decorated with various items that convey her personality. A few antique dolls are set up on the dresser along with a French press and a white bison skull.

The women's home currently houses four residents, as does the men's home, which is located about a five-minute drive away.

The main building, or the hub, associated with Never Alone Recovery Support Services is just a few steps away from the recovery village itself. It is constantly bustling with activity and is almost always stocked with food. It's become a safe space for tenants at the recovery village, community members and children without an after-school program to attend.

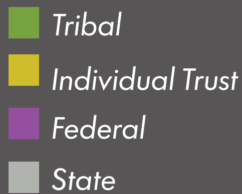
"We can get food twice a month, and it's a big load. We bring it here and it's gone in like two days," Morigeau said. "We open it up, not just to our tenants, but to the community. Anyone can come here and grab what they want."

Inside the main building, a large couch filled the living room, and four or five recovery village tenants were spread across it, talking and laughing. Another few people stood around the kitchen table, engrossed in conversation. A small brown and

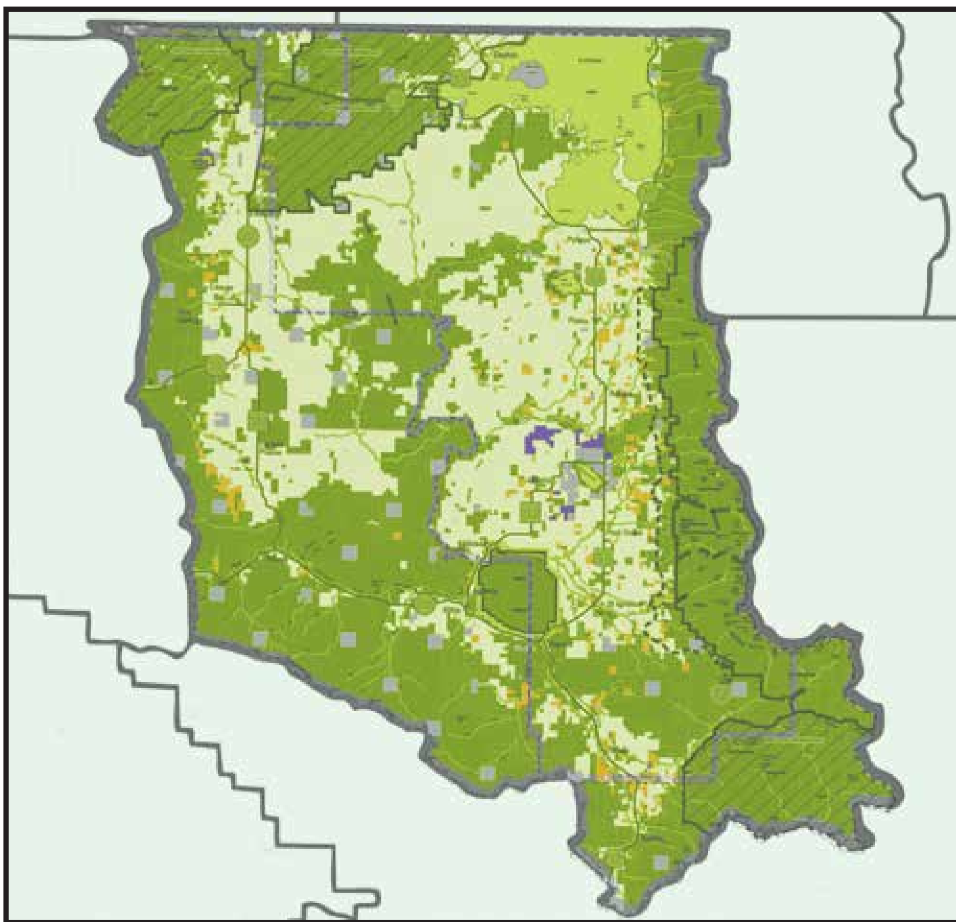
ABOVE: *Tara Edner, originally from Iowa, is now a resident of the women's home in Pablo. She shows off her room and belongings proudly.*

LEFT: *At the Never Alone Recovery Support Services Pablo hub, Steven Morigeau collects chicken eggs from the coop outside and uses the eggs to supply food for the residents. Most of the time the chickens try to peck him as he grabs the eggs from the nests, but they were nice to him this time.*

BELOW: *Adrian Stasso, one of the most recent tenants of the Recovery Village in Pablo, grabs a quick bite to eat inside of the hub before socializing with other residents.*



SOURCE RIGHT: *The Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes of the Flathead Nation website*



BELOW: *The Never Alone Recovery Support Services Pablo hub building is where a lot of the recovery support community will come together to just hang out. Many of its members will stop by for a meal, smoke out on their porch, or socialize while watching a movie.*

white dog wove in and out of their legs.

Before he got a job there, Morigeau was already spending most days hanging around the recovery program headquarters. He said the program offered something he couldn't find anywhere else; a supportive sober community. When he was offered a full-time position he jumped at it, excited to be a part of the program that helped him when he needed it most.

However, Morigeau has found sustaining an affordable home to be difficult. While he enjoyed pouring himself into the work and residents, his fulltime salary, along with his wife's salary as a nurse, meant Morigeau and his family no longer qualified for low-income housing.

"We started making more and more money and eventually we're hitting a spot where we're making too much money to stay where we're at," Morigeau said.

In 2025, Morigeau, along with his wife and daughter, applied for a $15,000 housing grant from the Salish and Kootenai Housing Authority's solidarity program. Two days after submitting an application, Morigeau and his family were approved and moved from the low-income unit where they had previously been living into their new home, conveniently located in the same area as the recovery program hub.

Seven days a week, Morigeau walks approximately 20 feet from his home to the recovery program hub to work. One sunny afternoon in April, Morigeau, clad in a black sweatshirt with the recovery village's name emblazoned on the front, made his usual commute to his office. As he walked, it was clear how deeply invested he was in his work. He waved at each resident he passed and they waved back.

"I love you," he called to each one, a wide smile lighting up his face.

Adrian Stasso moved into the recovery village about two weeks ago and found the community of residents welcoming and supportive. Stasso said joining the recovery program and living in a sober community has opened doors for him, including the opportunity to reconnect with his 14-year-old son.

"Since I've been here my walls are truly going down. I'm working on myself and I'm starting to find myself a bit better," Stasso said.

He lives with two roommates in a unit adjacent to the hub.

Programs like the recovery village are exactly what Cahoon Perez, with the housing authority, believes the reservation needs most. She is determined to implement more programs that support tenants who are struggling with addiction or mental health struggles.

Cahoon Perez also hopes to create more affordable housing opportunities for those making too much to fit into the low-income category.

"The [housing authority] has been funneling everyone through low-income housing when really they need support services. So my goal has been to create these opportunities," Cahoon Perez said.

She believes the conversation around affordable housing often overlooks a key demographic living on the reservation. The demographic of individuals, like Morigeau, who make just over 80% of the median income, which disqualifies them from low-income rent or benefits.

Cahoon Perez also mentioned another often-overlooked issue in the housing conversation: homelessness. In reservation communities, homelessness typically shows up in a different, less visible way. She estimates that just over 800 tribally affiliated citizens living on the Flathead reservation are currently experiencing homelessness or housing insecurity. Of these individuals, almost half are living doubled up with someone else.

"Homelessness on the reservation looks way different than it looks in Missoula," Cahoon Perez said. "In Missoula, you can see people who are living in places they're not supposed to. Here we let them live with us. We have families with multiple generations [living together]."

Cahoon Perez said she regularly lets friends and family live with her when they are between homes. "We just let people live with us until they find something else," she said.

According to a study published by the Salish and Kootenai Housing Authority, about 10% of households on the Flathead reservation experience overcrowding, compared to 1.9% in the rest of the state.

The housing authority charges rent for low-income housing units at 30% of the tenant's salary. Rent for all apartments and houses is capped at $200.

Since 1963, the housing authority has built more than 500 apartment units and homes on the Flathead reservation. It's also made programs like Never Alone Recovery Support Services possible.

Cahoon Perez estimates that another 2,400 apartment units and houses are needed before the reservation's housing needs are fully accommodated. About 1,300 of those apartments and houses are needed specifically for tribal citizens living on the reservation.

"Housing is the foundation of everyone's lives, and that's why it's so special," Cahoon Perez said. "That's where your safe space is, and everyone should have safe space."

RACE TO REPRESENT

INDIGENOUS CANDIDATES STAKE CLAIMS ON THE BALLOT THIS YEAR

Jade-Heather Ackerman (left), documents her daughters (from left to right) Madelyn-Joy, Elegance-Rose and Patricia-Ann, while they participate in carrying of the cross during their church's Holy Walk. The walk takes them eight miles from the Sacred Heart Mission in Santa Rita to the Little Flower Parish in Browning.

STORY BY HANNAH BENITEZ
PHOTOS BY PHOEBE MATHER

During the upcoming election cycle, Montanans can expect to see an even higher number of Indigenous representation on the midterm ballots. This follows a trend that started a decade ago with increasing numbers of Native Americans running for Montana office.

According to the Montana American Indian Caucus, 2025 saw a historic number of 13 Indigenous citizens appointed into the Montana legislature. This year, there are at least 19 Indigenous candidates on the Montana state ballot seeking public office.

This number includes Montana Sen. Jonathan Windy Boy, who had dropped out of the House race in April following sexual abuse allegations. Windy Boy, denying the allegations, resumed his candidacy in May.

The 2026 primary election is scheduled in Montana for June 2 and will determine which candidates will move forward in the November race.

It's difficult to tell the exact number of Indigenous candidates on the ballot since election paperwork does not require candidates to provide ethnicity information. However, at least 19 candidates have been confirmed to be affiliated with tribes, mostly in Montana. It's also difficult to determine how Indigenous representation in Montana measures up against other states.

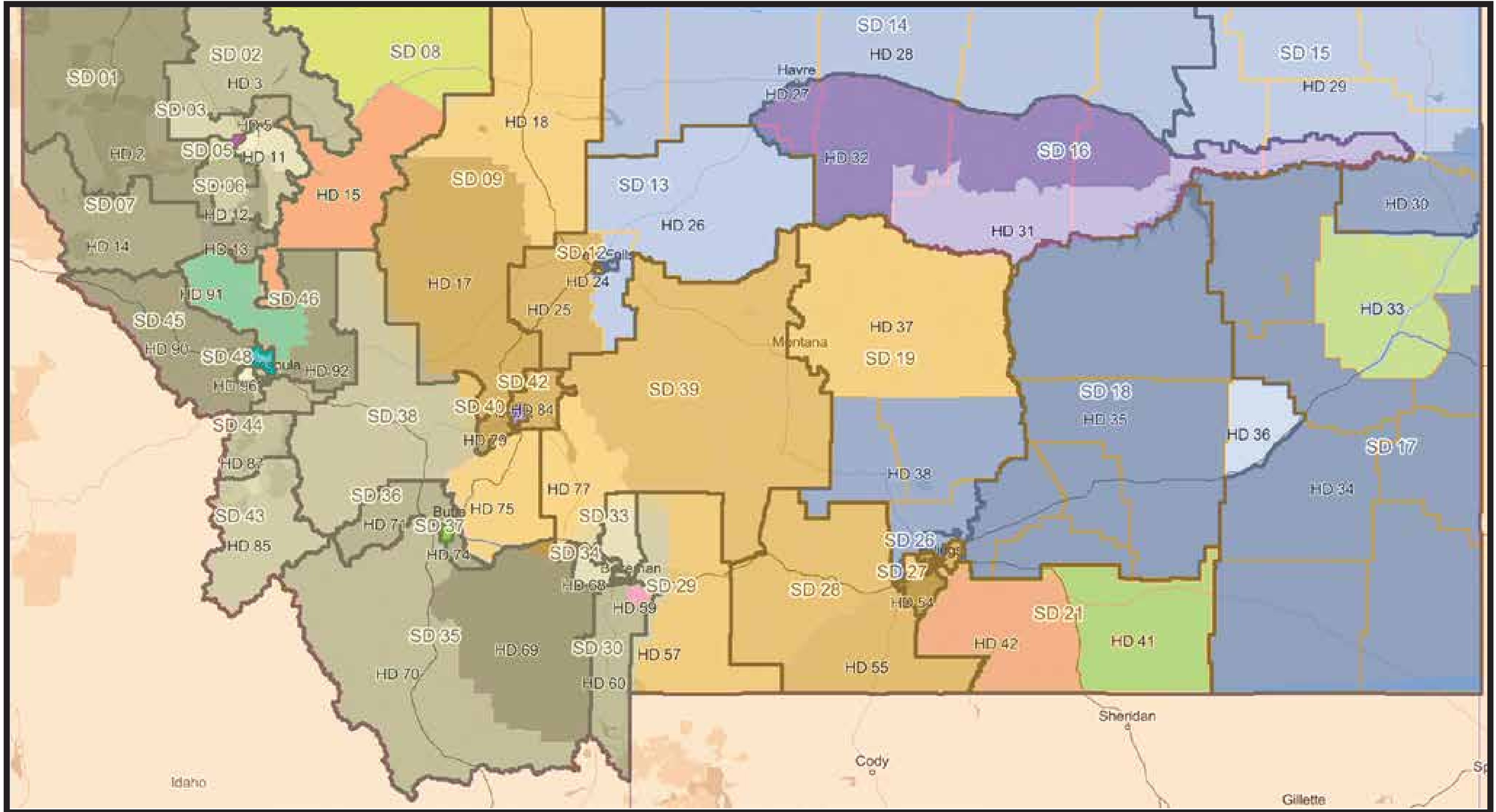
Even if most of those candidates don't make it past the primary, Montana has already established a high watermark for Indigenous representation. Montana's 13 Indigenous legislators make up 11.5% of the legislative body, which is higher than the estimated 6.5% of the state's population that Native Americans make up, according to the 2020 Census.

Other states with high Indigenous populations are noticeably lacking in comparison. Alaska, which has a 16% Indigenous population has only 2% representation in its Legislature. Arizona's population is 6% Indigenous with 4% of its Legislature representing the community.

"When someone tells you that your vote doesn't matter, quietly say, 'Montana,'" wrote journalist Mark Trahant in a Substack post in March. He was quoting himself from an analysis he wrote 10 years earlier. "Or if someone says that politicians don't listen and that nothing will change, smile, and then say 'Montana.' And, when you want proof that the Native vote works, evidence can be found in Montana."

Trahant has been following the growth of Native Americans seeking public office. He noted, in that decade-old analysis that

WHO IS RUNNING IN WHAT DISTRICT?



- Shane Morigeau SD 50, Salish-Kootenai
- Susan Webber SD 8, Blackfeet
- Thedis Crowe HD 15, Blackfeet
- Jonathan Windy Boy US House - Eastern District, Chippewa Cree
- Sidney "Chip" Fitzpatrick HD 42, Crow
- Mike Fox HD 32, Assiniboine, Chippewa Cree
- Shelly Fyant HD 91, Salish
- Michael Black Wolf US Senator, Gros Ventre/Aaniiih
- Donavon Hawk HD 72, Crow, Lakota
- Tyson Running Wolf SD 8, Blackfeet
- Lona Running Wolf HD 16, Blackfeet
- Jade Heather-Ackerman SD 8, Blackfeet, Assiniboine, Sioux
- Jade Sooktis HD 41, Tsis tsis'tas
- Angeline Cheek (Public Service Commission District 1) Dakota/Lakota
- Erin Farris Olsen (SD 41) Brothertown Indian Nation
- Calvin Lime HD 8, Blackfeet
- Adrien Owen Wagher HD 15, Blackfeet
- Nataline O'Neal HD 31, Assiniboine, Sioux
- Katie Fire Thunder HD 59, Oglala Lakota
- Lance FourStar HD 31, Assiniboine

the Montana Legislature had reached 'parity' with the state's Indigenous population, that the Native American percentage of the lawmaking body was at least equal to the population.

"The thing about having that many Native Americans serving in the Legislature is that you are building a bench," wrote Trahant in March. "This is the training ground for Congress, even the presidency." While this year's candidates might be running for different aspects of change, they are still fighting for one common goal: Bringing the rights of Native Americans to the forefront.

An issue that many Indigenous citizens are battling and advocating change for is Senate Bill 490, which reduced the time that Montanans could register to vote on election day to a four-hour window from 8 a.m. to noon.

The bill was met with frustration from first time Native American voters, since it will make it harder for those living on reservations or in rural areas to vote in the election.

Likewise, in 2024, the Montana State Supreme Court struck down two state laws, as passed by the Legislature, that tribes argued disenfranchised Indigenous voters.

One candidate that is running for Senate is hoping to change the future of Montana through better access to healthcare and mental health services.

JUGGLING IT ALL

In a small chapel just outside Browning, the interior is decorated with paintings depicting the last day of Jesus along beaded feathers hanging from crosses. Community members gathered to hold a quick service before starting the eight-mile trek to another church.

Within the members sitting in the pews is Jade-Heather Ackerman, along with six of her seven children. Ackerman commits to the walk every year, but this year is different.

After the father of her children was murdered in 2023 and after she filed for a civil suit against the United States, Ackerman has turned her attention to helping those around her.

Ackerman hopes to be one of the representatives sworn into the American Indian Caucus in January 2027.

However, as she interacts with friends on the walk her senatorial campaign is not a main topic. "I'm laying a little bit low right now," Ackerman said.

Though Ackerman is waiting to share her opinions with the rest of the world, her followers reassure her that she's got their vote. "I'm with you because you follow the word of God," one of the walkers said.

All throughout her life, Ackerman felt like she was born to be in a leadership role, during the walk she shared stories about her life. After growing up on the Fort Peck Indian Reservation, taking care of her younger brother, she moved to the Blackfeet reservation with her grandmother.

While she doesn't describe her childhood as perfect, she knows that it's what drove her to become a mother and a licensed therapist on the reservation.

"I just want to help people," she said. "We've all come from some level of trauma from what our ancestors had to live through."

Ackerman not only has put a lasting impact on her local community but also on her family.

Cadyn-Rae Hinman, Ackerman's 18-year-old daughter, was inspired by her mother. While she grew up loving the arts, through both drawing and writing comic books, she recently found a love for giving aid to people.

"My friends would come to me when they're having a bad day and I would just talk to them, not knowing that I was giving them advice," Hinman said, who has now decided to pursue a degree in general psychology.

Ackerman puts her children first, putting any conversation aside the second she hears one of her children call her name. She wants to protect them from the troubles she has faced.

"They are my number one responsibility, I don't want them to think I don't hear them or care about them," Ackerman said.

It was after the murder of the father of her children that made her want to run for the Montana State Senate.

Now, she wants to focus her attention on those across the Blackfeet reservation that need help.

"We need representation in the government, after years of not being listened to, it's time for us to make our voices heard," Ackerman said.

So, she contacted her good friend Lona Running Wolf.

Ackerman asked what it was like for Lona's husband, Tyson Running Wolf, to run his senatorial campaign. Lona Running Wolf told her it would probably take around three years to prepare for that race and to wait for the 2026 election cycle. So she did.

Ackerman looked forward to getting her campaign on the road but was met with surprise and sadness when she saw who she would be running against in the midterms.

"It's difficult to see one of your good friends [Tyson Running Wolf] up against you," Ackerman said.

But for Tyson Running Wolf it was a no brainer to move from the Montana State House to the Senate.

RUNNING TOGETHER

If they win, Lona and Tyson Running Wolf could become the first Indigenous couple to each have a seat in both the Senate and the House. But this wasn't always the plan.

They have been together for 20 years, married in 2014, and after their seven children had left, they felt as though their journey had yet to end.

"I wanted to get an all-around experience in the legislature," Tyson Running Wolf said.

Meanwhile for Lona Running Wolf, after helping Tyson Running Wolf with drafting some of his arguments and bills, she knew she was ready to run after her husband switched to the Senate.

"A long time ago, we made an agreement that once he finished out his House campaign, I would run in his position," Lona Running Wolf said.

Both hold the people on the Blackfeet reservation important to them. The couple shows up to powwows and local events.

"Especially in today's climate, people are feeling so hopeless that we really need to listen to people. So that's our kind of strategy," Lona Running Wolf said.

Recently Running Wolf was given an honorary headdress, in honor of her graduating with a doctoral degree from the University of Montana. She said her college experience was an important time for her to grow and develop.

"When I was in high school I didn't feel smart, but once I was in college, I realized my real potential," Lona Running Wolf said at the local powwow.

Lona and Tyson Running Wolf both started a nonprofit, the Blackfeet Eco Knowledge, in 2021. The nonprofit focuses on connecting citizens of the Blackfeet tribe with the land after their ancestors lost their lands.

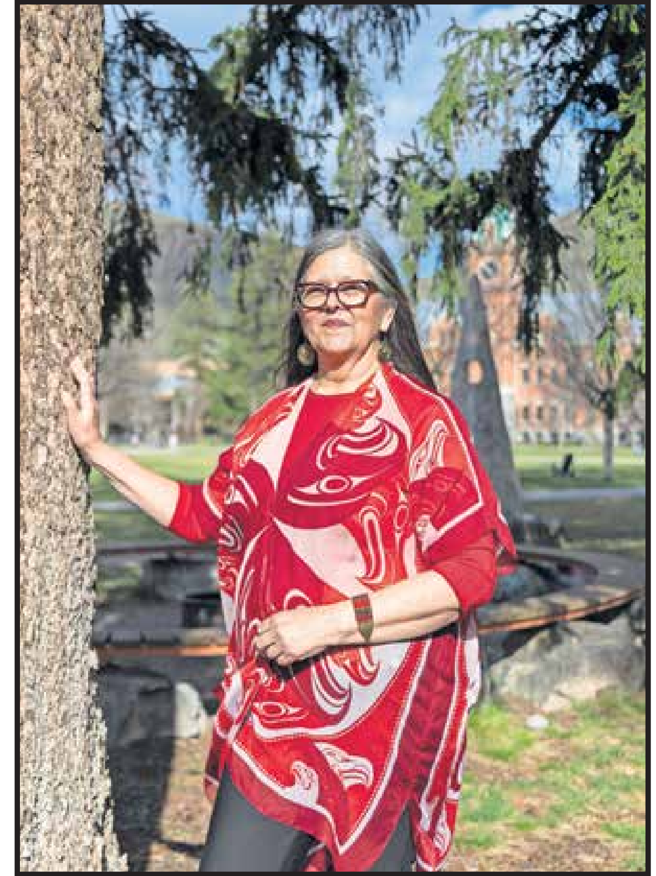
Through both their nonprofit and their potential Senate and

LEFT: *Jade-Heather Ackerman braids the hair of her daughter, Patricia-Ann, who is representing the Blackfeet Tribe as Jr. Miss Blackfeet at the Brave Dog's Society Powwow in Browning. Ackerman is running for the Montana Senate in the upcoming midterm elections.*

BELOW: *Jade-Heather Ackerman (left) stands in prayer with her children inside the Sacred Heart Mission in Santa Rita, Mont. before the Holy Walk, an eight-mile route to the Little Flower Parish in Browning.*

RIGHT: *Shelly Fyant stands outside the Payne Family Native American Center at the University of Montana. Fyant is a member of the Montana House of Representatives running for re-election representing House District 91, which includes Missoula County, Lake County and Sanders County.*

BELOW: *Lona Running Wolf receives her headdress at the Brave Dog's Society Powwow in Browning. She is running for election to the Montana House of Representatives. Walking alongside her is her partner, Tyson Running Wolf, who is running for the Montana Senate in the upcoming midterm elections.*



House seats, they hope to help not only the citizens of the Blackfeet tribe but also those that reside on the seven reservations of Montana.

"I think that Native Americans in Montana have been poorly represented in every administration. Having that representation could help us on the tax structure bills and on affordable housing," Tyson Running Wolf said.

While the Running Wolfs are drawn to their own policies of change they want to enact when they gain a position in office, Lona Running Wolf hopes to focus on education, meanwhile Tyson Running Wolf hopes to focus on the environment, they are still able to come together.

Both are looking forward to getting into session in order to change some of the issues that citizens on the reservation are having to face given the current federal administration

"How much [the American Indian Caucus] impact was at the state level in fighting against a lot of the policies that were coming from the Trump administration," Lona Running Wolf said. "I think the American Indian Caucus at the state level really helped keep that attitude at bay."

Meanwhile, 126 miles away on the Flathead Indian Reservation, another candidate prepares for the upcoming election.

FOR THE LOVE OF FAMILY

As she sits at a table, Shelly Fyant places her laptop on the desk. With the help of her son, she's able to download family pictures and pictures of her mom onto the computer.

Pointing to a black and white picture from the early 1900s, Fyant tells her son about her great-grandmother and her grandmother located on the left side of the photo.

While her great-grandmother died when she was only a couple of months old, Fyant feels as though she carries her memory with her.

Shelly Fyant grew up on the Flathead reservation and was elected to represent the tribe in 2024 as a House District 91 representative.

She now spends her time traveling to Missoula in order to take care of her mother who was placed in hospice care.

For Fyant, it was hard to balance running a campaign and taking care of her mom, but she knew it was her duty as a daughter to be there.

Before leaving the reservation and joining the House, she led the community as the Chairwoman of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes. During this time, she helped her local tribal citizens through some of the food insecurities the reservation faced.

Fyant created a program that taught how to create healthy foods on a small budget, even cutting out things like milk and dairy since it wasn't originally included in the Indigenous diet.

But when it came to running for a Montana House seat, it was a no brainer.

"I believe that if you don't have a spot at the table then you're on the menu," she said.

Fyant wants to bring issues like healthcare and environmental sustainability to the table if she gets re-elected.

"Maintaining fisheries, hunting habitats, clean air and water should be a priority for the state," she said.

Fyant also hopes to bring the issue of climate change to the docket. She said the tribes of Montana have developed adaptation plans to minimize the impact caused by climate change.

In her last session, Fyant made sure to create a secure backup plan if the current federal administration cut Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program benefits, or SNAP.

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture in 2022, around 87,500 people in Montana used SNAP benefits and the American Indian Caucus recognized this.

So at the start of the 2025 legislative session, the caucus put money into a special account which would only be tapped into once the food program was cut.

"We had raised all this money and were prepared to use it. So we went to the governor [Greg Gianforte] to distribute the funds but he refused to let us," Fyant said.

While Fyant has put her campaign on pause since her mothers passing, she is still running confident.

BACK ON THE BALLOT

Working in government positions is not something new for Lance FourStar, who has spent 10 years in Helena in the position of District 31 House representative.

FourStar felt drawn to government positions at a young age after he left the Fort Peck Indian Reservation at 16 to join Sen. John McCain in Washington D.C..

However, he knew that he needed to take the experience back to the reservation. So he returned and joined the Senate committee on Indian Affairs.

Before joining the Montana House, FourStar spent 20 years volunteering in his local community in Wolf Point, which allowed him to create a special bond with the community.

When he decided to join the ballot in 2016, he thought about the next generation of Native Americans including his nine children and 16 grandchildren.

"Seeing all the challenges that Native Americans face, being in a system and in an institution that historically wasn't created for Native Americans to be representatives, or to serve in office," FourStar said.

When FourStar ran for office during the last election cycle, he felt that he lost after voters living on reservations did not have sufficient resources for ballot casting.

"They didn't put polling stations in the communities that my family comes from on this side of the reservation," FourStar said.

But now that he's on the ballot again, FourStar is looking forward to getting back to being an advocate for Indigenous citizens throughout the state.

With the rise of Indigenous candidates, FourStar sees this as a calling for Indigenous citizens to get their own representation.

"If you do not demand a seat at the table, you will be on the menu," FourStar said. "So, if you don't demand a seat at their table, they can say whatever, they could do anything they want."

Jaynee Parisian, left, and Avery Plain Bull place soil and seeds into plastic planters during a community garden meeting. While the reservation has over 12,000 acres of farmland, the garden program works to ensure more food is grown for local consumption to combat food insecurity and rising grocery costs.

RESOLVING HUNGER, NURTURING TRADITION

TRADITIONAL FOOD PROGRAMS COMBAT HUNGER FOR CHIPPEWA CREE

STORY BY BRISTOL KETOLA
PHOTOS BY SAMUEL KOWAL

Shannon Cantrell places seeds into a soil-filled planter during the reservation's first community garden meeting of the year at the Help Lodge. The Help Lodge serves as a central hub for the tribe's food sovereignty efforts, providing emergency relief and fresh produce to approximately 350 people each month.

When the nation shut down during the COVID-19 pandemic and grocery store aisles across the nation were stripped bare because of both community need and corporate supply chain shortages, families on the Rocky Boy's Indian Reservation were left with limited resources.

The reservation sits within a designated food desert. The nearest grocery store that sells fresh food is at least 30 miles away. The Chippewa Cree tribe closed the borders of its Rocky Boy's Indian Reservation during the pandemic. Tribal citizens still had to travel that distance at least once a week to access fresh food or resort to the only food they had access to: soda pop, chips and candy from local stores.

The pandemic was when Jason Belcourt saw how critical local food programs are in keeping people fed and healthy. Then, in November 2025, he saw it again when the federal government, under guidance from the Department of Government Efficiency, cut the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program.

Both were lessons that taught Belcourt, the former Rocky Boy sustainability coordinator, that food and nutrition was in a precarious position for the Chippewa Cree.

"If something should happen, heaven forbid, the Walmart trucks can't run anymore," Belcourt said. "How do we feed our people? We're highly dependent on the outside world."

Food should not be this scarce for the tribe. The reservation sits within Montana's Golden Triangle, a fertile region of land known for its wheat production. Although the tribe has more than 12,000 acres of farmland growing wheat and alfalfa and around 30 cattle families, little of that food was kept on the reservation for local consumption until the creation of the food sovereignty programs.

"What we are doing is not cohesive to food security, and we need to change that mentality," Belcourt said. "That's tough to do, it's by design because the powers that be want us dependent. If we're dependent we agree to take whatever comes. It's like throwing a piece of meat to five dogs and watching them fight."

Since 2020, Belcourt has helped develop a flour mill, a community garden, a bison ranch and the Help Lodge food bank to provide healthier, more accessible food options. The projects are a part of a broader effort to build food sovereignty by restoring culturally significant foods while addressing high rates of diabetes and food insecurity on the reservation.

Food sovereignty is the right of tribal nations to control their own food systems, grounded in cultural traditions and protection of the natural environment, according to the Rocky Boy Food Sovereignty website. The programs aim to heal the community from historical food loss and build a sustainable local food economy through traditional foods and practices.

In March 2025, the Trump Administration cut funding to the Local Food Purchase Assistance program which provided $180,000 towards the Chippewa Cree Tribe's Help Lodge, a tribally operated food bank on the reservation.

The food sovereignty programs started through grants from organizations such as the U.S. Department of Agriculture and donations from local groups such as the Rocky Boy Health Center and Stone Child College. Most of the programs still rely on grants because they receive no funding from the tribal government. However, this funding model doesn't guarantee longevity.

"You live by the grant, you die by the grant," Belcourt said. "We don't know if we have a job in the next six months, or if funding is going to hold out. That's why we push sustainability."

Since Belcourt announced his resignation as food sustainability coordinator in early April, transitions have left specific funding amounts, including grant money for each program, unclear.

The Help Lodge was opened using Federal Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act funds in 2021 to serve as the reservation's food bank and emergency relief center. A majority of the Help Lodge funding came from the now-cut U.S. Department of Agriculture grant.

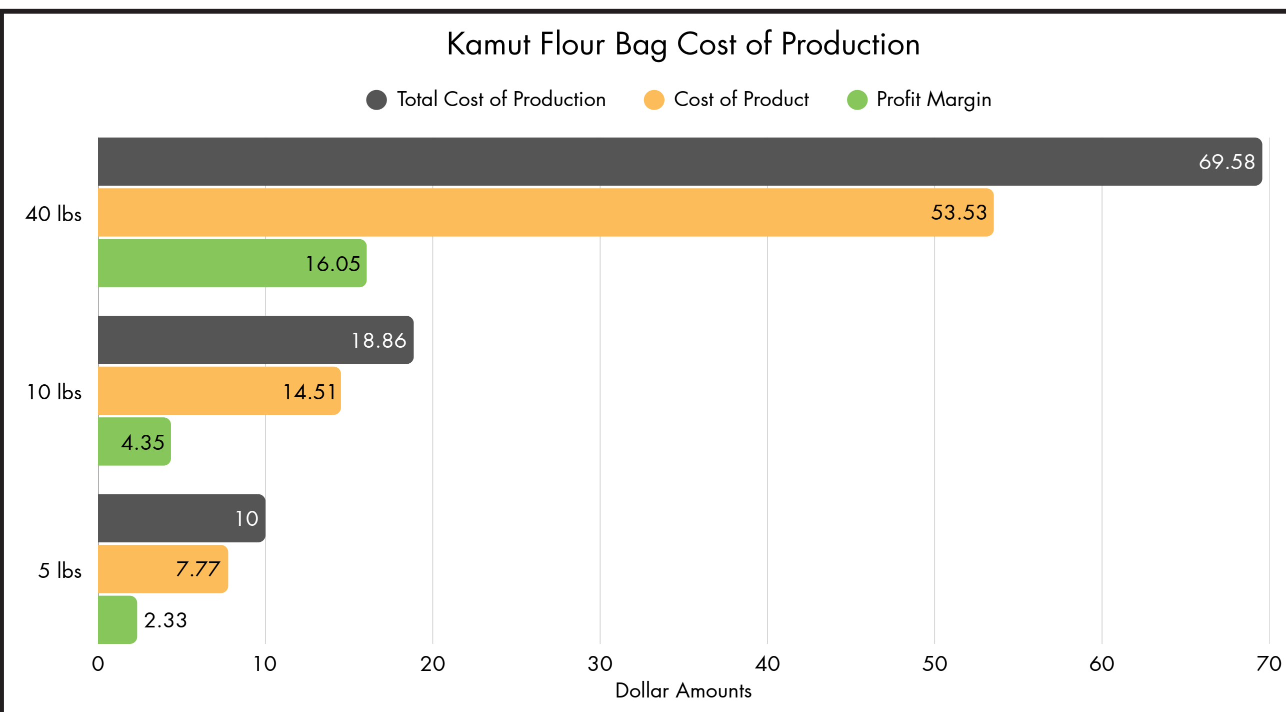
"We need some help, food sovereignty should be a priority of the tribe," Belcourt said. "If we can't find funding for the food bank and we're forced to close the doors, they're going to be at the tribal council, knocking on their door, saying 'We're hungry.'"

The food bank feeds around 350 people each month, but Belcourt said the loss of the grant had left the program's future in uncertainty. As of April, the tribal council had worked with the food sovereignty team to receive funding for the Help Lodge moving forward.

About one-in-four Native Americans currently face food insecurity, compared to one-in-seven Americans overall, according to the Move for Hunger, a nonprofit based in New Jersey. Of the 28 counties in America with majority Native American populations, 18 of them face high food insecurity due to unemployment,

ABOVE: *The tribal bison herd grazes on the Buffalo Child Ranch. The herd has grown from nine to 60 animals since 2021, serving as a critical component of a tribal initiative to provide lean protein to a community where high rates of diabetes have been linked to the lack of traditional food sources.*

RIGHT: *Kamut grain sits in a hopper at the tribal flour mill. The ancient grain is currently sold in local stores and to the neighboring Fort Belknap reservation, with plans to expand from 90 acres to 500 acres of organic production in the coming years.*



SOURCE: *Donna Gopher*

poverty and lack of access to grocery stores due to food deserts.

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, food deserts are low-income areas with limited access to grocery stores that sell healthy and affordable foods. These food deserts can often contribute to poor diet, obesity and other diet-related illnesses, such as diabetes.

Native American adults were 36% more likely than U.S. adults overall to have diabetes, according to a 2024 study by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

According to Diabetes Prevention Coordinator Terrie Stump at the Rocky Boy Health Center, around 380 people on the reservation are currently diagnosed with diabetes, not including those with prediabetes. The food sovereignty programs aim to combat diabetes by providing the community with foods that are rich in fiber and low in sugar, such as the Kamut flour.

Through the Indian Health Service Produce Prescription Program, the clinic provides vouchers to around 300 tribal citizens affected by food insecurity, most with diabetes. The program focuses on access to, and education about, fresh produce in order to combat diet-related illnesses.

The vouchers allow them $100 a month per person but require that recipients attend a 16-class program, check in with their health provider and complete medical labs to evaluate health and attend scheduled dental and optometry appointments.

The clinic intends to further educate the younger generation through classes at the new youth facility that opened in late March. This would include introducing the community to a variety of produce, healthier recipes and teaching people what fruits and vegetables do not raise blood sugar. For instance, the program encourages people to steer away from eating potatoes, which can cause spikes in blood sugar.

The vouchers provide recipients access to traditional meats, such as skinless chicken, fish and bison, as well as bottled water, Kamut flour, eggs and other fruits and vegetables through Stokes Market, Grocery Store in Big Sandy and the local C & C Market that opened less than a year ago, which offers groceries, household goods and fuel.

Rising grocery prices have also increased the gap between income and food costs. In March, food prices were about 3% higher than a year previous, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Grocery prices are predicted to increase about 3.5% in 2026, according to Marketplace media outlet. Rising costs have increased the necessity and urgency for the food sovereignty programs, Belcourt said.

The newest of the programs is the flour mill, which began operating about three years ago. The mill processes a type of ancient grain known as Kamut, which is significantly healthier than refined white flours.

Kamut contains up to 40% more protein than modern wheat and is richer in minerals such as magnesium and zinc. Kamut also has a lower glycemic response than refined white flour, meaning that it does not cause the same blood sugar spikes, which helps prevent diabetes.

Currently, the Kamut flour is being sold in stores on Rocky Boy's reservation and to the neighboring Fort Belknap Indian Reservation. The mill's focus is on producing enough flour to support the local community and cover operation costs such as salaries and production. Last year, the tribe grew around 90 acres of Kamut, with plans to turn 500 acres toward organic production moving forward.

"We want to help more tribes," said Donna Gopher, food development specialist with the Chippewa Cree Tribe. "Helping other communities by distributing some of our flour and other products to other communities is huge in helping all Native people."

Belcourt hopes to eventually expand Kamut production in order to see their Kamut in stores across Montana. Bleached all-purpose flour typically costs around $1 per pound, while Kamut sells for about $2 per pound.

"There's a sense of pride there, in knowing that we can produce value-added products here by our people," Belcourt said. "The community really responds and if you set two bags of flour next to each other, our people take enough pride that they are going to buy the Kamut."

The mill also plans to expand its utilities by adding a bakery

William Lodgepole looks out at the tribal community garden. Having overseen the production of 10,000 pounds of potatoes last season, Lodgepole has been a key figure in the tribe's efforts to combat food insecurity and provide fresh produce to local families.

to the Help Lodge that would produce bread and pasta using Kamut, along with developing organic safflower oil. The bakery is estimated to cost around $150,000 for startup costs and infrastructure. The tribe currently has about $30,000 to spend on bakery equipment from an Arthur M. Blank Family Foundation grant.

"Knowing that kids and families aren't going hungry, that's pretty amazing," Gopher said. "When you are connected to the land and the people, what we grow and establish with the ground to feed our people is all intertwined with our heritage and culture, and how we identify as Native people."

Near the Kamut fields sits the food sovereignty program's community garden. Following the success of other programs, Belcourt approached William Lodgepole, who had been working as the tribe's forester, around four years ago to help start the garden.

Now 70-year-old Lodgepole had little gardening experience prior to taking on the task of being garden manager, but he found the work fulfilling. Last year, he and his son tilled, grew and harvested nearly four acres of crops, mostly by themselves.

Last year, Lodgepole harvested 10,000 pounds of potatoes, selling around 2,000 pounds to the tribes on the Fort Belknap reservation. Over the course of four years, Lodgepole made around $30,000 from selling potatoes.

Lodgepole found the most success in growing potatoes because they had a potato harvester and planter and he found that they were easy to handle, although he had originally wanted to grow primarily corn.

Along with four varieties of potatoes, the garden also grew corn, onions, cucumbers and squash. Vegetables grown at the garden are stored in the root cellar for up to nine months and passed out as needed at the Help Lodge.

"If I win the lottery, I am going to build a big greenhouse and irrigation system and get this going year-round," Lodgepole said. "If we had the money, labor and equipment, this would be a huge success. We could feed the whole reservation."

Due to limited manpower and funding, Lodgepole decided to step away from his role as garden manager in early March. There is currently nobody lined up to take his position.

"If I had the funding I would have stuck it out," Lodgepole said. "I am hoping they will find someone who will put major effort into this project and get funding, or I don't see it going anywhere."

Lodgepole hopes to continue volunteering with the garden in the future and that grant funding will eventually be acquired for an irrigation system and small tractor.

Along with vegetables from the garden, the Help Lodge also provides tribal citizens with access to bison meat from the Buffalo Child Ranch, Rocky Boy Buffalo Project. The meat is also sold at the C & C store and distributed to schools and other food programs.

Bison meat is a healthier alternative to beef, as it is higher in protein and contains less fat.

"Buffalo has been a significant animal for us," Belcourt said. "It's been missing from our diet forever, so we're happy to bring that back and get it reintroduced."

Before the creation of the program, bison had not been on Rocky Boy's reservation for nearly 30 years. When the project was started in 2021, the program held nine bison, and it has now grown to around 60 which are housed on about 1,300 acres.

The bison program was the first food sovereignty program Belcourt started using grants from the First Nations Development Institute, the InterTribal Buffalo Council, the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation and the World Wildlife Fund.

The current Buffalo Ranch Manager, Theron Oats, has worked with the program for three years. The bison management team is developing a five-year goal to expand to 700 bison across 70,000 acres of land while becoming self-sufficient and reducing reliance on grants.

Expansion also includes a $200,000 visitors center to continue facilitating tours, a processing plant and an equipment building.

The bison project focuses heavily on establishing connections with tribal citizens by inviting people, including local students, to harvest.

"Younger ones getting to experience being a part of something of cultural significance, it gives the youth a sense of identity," Oats said.

Middle school students were invited to help harvest the bison last year for a meal at the school during Native American week, while third and fourth graders were sent to harvest potatoes at the community garden.

Currently, according to Food Service Supervisor at Rocky Boy Schools, Lori Osgood, they are only able to provide bison meat in school lunches a few times a year due to cost.

Rocky Boy Schools provides access to free breakfasts and lunches during the school week under the Community Eligibility Provision. The program provides no-cost meal options to schools and school districts in low-income areas, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

"If they don't eat we notice that they're on edge and they don't learn as well," Osgood said. "But food is expensive, and it's even more expensive to eat healthy."

Rocky Boy Schools run on a four-day school week, meaning that without the No Kid Hungry support bags, many students would be left without meals over the long weekends.

"One family, when they moved here, didn't even have running water, so they weren't able to bathe or cook food," Osgood said. "The student in her class was hungry all the time and would come up and ask for more food. We're not supposed to do that, but how do you tell a teacher who knows that they're going to feed a kid that we have a limit? We have to help."

This summer, Osgood hopes to expand the program's summer food program to provide meals to children.

In 2024, the bison program bought a $129,000 refrigerated mobile slaughter unit through grant funding. The team is now working on a Hazard Analysis Critical Control Point plan in order to get approved by the U.S. Department of Agriculture to get bison regularly into the schools and backpack programs.

With approval, any bison meat from the project will be able to go anywhere, including outside of Montana which would bring revenue back for the program.

Last year, the bison had 14 calves and Oats and his team hope to see around that number again this year.

"The generations before us didn't have that connection," said Wyatt Caplette, vice president of the Buffalo Board. "It's really exciting that we are able to rekindle that."

Caplette started working with the bison program full-time in 2024 and hopes to eventually take over as head of the project.

Caplette originally got involved with the bison project through a Smithsonian internship program that sends college students from Fort Peck, Fort Belknap, Rocky Boy's and Blackfeet to monitor ecosystem data of each of the bison programs.

This summer, Caplette will travel to Washington D.C. with other members of the team for the grand opening of a new Smithsonian exhibit that focuses on the American bison and will feature the Rocky Boy Buffalo Project.

The food sovereignty team has applied for 11 operational grants since the beginning of 2026, and has received a few of them for project specific needs and salary costs across programs.

The biggest grant the food sovereignty programs team has applied for is in the amount of $1.4 million from the World WildLife Fund, a foundation which aims to conserve and support biodiversity and sustainable use of natural resources. The grant would be used to support the bison program.

The food sovereignty team recently created a five-year plan regarding the self-sustainability of the Buffalo Child Ranch. The project is expected to cost around $1.5 million each year, but should be sustainable for the next three years with the current income and funding. Moving forward, the team hopes to create similar plans for the other programs.

"It can't happen fast enough with the buffalo, it can't happen fast enough with the value-added products," Belcourt said. "What we eat, we should grow here and what we grow, we should eat here."

FORGING A FUTURE AFTER COAL

1,000 JOBS LOST: INCOME SHIFT FROM COAL FOR APSÁALOOKE

Casey Old Horn strips the plastic netting off a fresh bale of hay as he prepares to unroll it with his tractor to feed his cattle on his ranch in the town of Dunmore, Mont. Old Horn relies on supplemental hay bales during the winter to keep his cattle fed when they cannot fully graze.

STORY BY SAM ARMSTRONG-DUBOIS

PHOTOS BY NOAH EPPS

Casey Old Horn unrolls a bale of hay for his cattle with his tractor on his ranch in the town of Dunmore, Mont. At $100 a bale, feeding the cows hay is not cheap, but they need the supplemental nutrition to get through the winter months.

Coal has been one of the strongest and deeply rooted pillars in the economy of the Crow Indian Reservation since 1958. Its roots ran so deep that when it collapsed in 2024, everything it supported crumbled.

Before that, the vitality of the coal mine generated 90% of the tribe's income. The loss of coal for the Apsáalooke happened gradually across the span of 17 years until 2024, when the Westmoreland Mine lost its last customer. The Environmental Protection Agency regulated quality checks on coal requiring a low level of foreign sediment allowed in coal. This made it much less lucrative to mine.

"Coal created 1,100 tribal jobs," said Frank White Clay, the tribe's chairman. "So right now, we're at 251."

Employment surrounding the coal trade went beyond mining. It included truck driving and several positions within power plant operation. Currently, the only positions remaining include maintenance of the Westmoreland mine property located just outside Hardin.

The market shift could have also impacted the tribe's political stance. During Donald Trump's first presidential administration, once coal-strong communities like the Crow reservation, had high hopes his commitment to mineral extraction and fossil fuels would somehow revive the coal industry. However, that failed to pan out, but the sentiment still echoes.

"If you asked me to poll everybody, we'd probably all get good Democrats," said Tribal Secretary Levi Black Eagle of the electorate on the reservation. "And that's funny because the one that was sticking up for us were all the ones on the Republican side."

Since the collapse of the coal trade in 2024, the Crow government has been working toward the expansion of hydro energy and market stands to develop more jobs and infrastructure, setting aside $500,000 to start development this summer. A proposed wind farm and hydroelectric facility has been stalled for years on the Crow Indian Reservation.

"There's really nothing stopping us from doing it except ourselves and having the willingness to say, 'Okay, I want to take full advantage of it,'" Black Eagle said.

Overall, the economy on the Crow Nation, like many reservations across the country, lacks the proper infrastructure that could help develop an economy. Black Eagle said the working class has been trying to look beyond the coal industry, which has become so ingrained in the community.

"We had a whole lot of young kids that were told, 'Go get your heavy equipment operator's license,' 'Go learn this,' 'Go work at the coal mine, you'll have retirement, you'll be able to support your family,'" White Clay said.

The Crow Nation is in a state of economic evolution. While the Apsáalooke people recognize that moving forward from the coal industry means relying more on entrepreneurship in both private and tribal owned businesses, they face an uphill battle. Reservations tend to lack the needed infrastructure to support local businesses diverse enough to sustain thriving economies.

This dramatic change for the reservation has left families developing financial independence from the coal trade. It should be no surprise then, that citizens across the Crow Nation are hoping to establish a more broad economy.

"I mean we want to diversify. The main thing that will bring revenue to our tribe in the long term is our land and agriculture," White Clay said.

Organizations located in Crow Agency have developed educational programs to help inform tribal citizens about equity and retail marketing. One of these organizations, Plenty Doors Community Development Corporation, was developed by Charlene Johnson and aims to provide financial education and assistance within the tribe to build jobs.

Plenty Doors also facilitates homeownership and other business classes to inform tribal members how they can be self-sufficient outside of tribal services. Johnson had a full career working in public well-being, including 25 years at the Indian Health Service before creating Plenty Doors.

"My intent was to always try to improve the health of our people," Johnson said. "We are also an emerging [Community Development Financial Institution]."

Plenty Doors' office entrance has a blue synthetic banner above the entrance, which has a tight-knit metal screen in front of the window. Entering through the door, a fairy-light-decorated open room, which formerly housed a coffee shop, provides seating for lectures and meetings held in the establishment.

Plenty Doors offers credit-building classes and both personal and business loans. Johnson hopes to help the community build credit and equity, the basics.

"You don't build a business from the top down, but from the ground up," Johnson said.

Being on the reservation for most of her life, she has seen the changes firsthand. When her mother suffered a stroke, she saw how much the reservation had changed.

"During that time when I cared for her, we'd drive around and we just realized how far down the communities had gone," Johnson said.

During the start of their organization's upbringing, Johnson noticed that many families didn't have access to clean water, leading to their development of water sanitation and hygiene. Through the addition, the corporation has been able to add infrastructure of wells, septics and cisterns across the community.

"So, we started including what they call wash water sanitation and hygiene, which is usually a term that's used in third world countries when there's disasters," Johnson said. "What we found is that there was enough families

Now into his second term, Frank White Clay has served as the Chairman of the Crow Tribe since 2020. Long before stepping into politics, White Clay worked in coal mining, the industry that used to be the lone pillar of the Crow economy.

***LEFT:** Charlene Johnson, executive director of Plenty Doors Community Development Corporation, stands in front of the Plenty Doors office on the Crow reservation. After a 25-year-long career with the Indian Health Service, Johnson started Plenty Doors to address a lack of resources in her community.*

***BELOW:** Rowland Medicine Horse, owner of Suwanne River Construction, and his nephew, Elijah High Hawk, cut pieces of siding to size as they work on a job site in Lodge Grass, Mont.. Since fully committing to his contracting business in 2022, Medicine Horse has utilized the services of Plenty Doors on numerous occasions and has benefited from the development corporation's help with marketing and business strategy advice.*

that didn't have access to water. We needed to add that."

Infrastructure is key to developing a robust economy. The National Congress of American Indians, which advocates on behalf of tribal nations across the country on the national stage including in Washington, D.C., lists community development and infrastructure as one of its priority interests, focusing on housing, technology and transportation.

"Proper community development and infrastructure planning has the potential to revitalize and transform the quality of life for tribal citizens across Indian Country," the organization states on its website.

Lacking infrastructure has led to a phenomenon called economic leakage, in which the money that is earned in a community is spent elsewhere. In a 2021 article for the Regulatory Review, Robert Miller, a law professor at the Sandra Day O'Connor School of Law, stated that, ideally, currency should be exchanged up to seven times within a community to maintain a healthy economy.

However, up to 80% of income earned in most reservations is immediately spent in border towns, Miller states.

"Few of the 300 Indian reservations in the United States have functioning economies in which reservation residents can be employed, spend their money, and find adequate housing," he states. "As a result, almost all reservation residents have to travel to distant cities to find banks, businesses, higher education and jobs."

Through the eight years of business on the Crow reservation, Plenty Doors has been able to keep 99.9% of its funds designated for loans as out funded. In 2023, the business had been allotted $50 million, and this process continues to help develop the tribe.

In her experience working for tribal health services, Johnson noticed a trend that every two years there would be a complete turnover of staff, making it hard to develop long-lasting services. "When you want to try to make an impact in your community, that continuity is really important," Johnson said.

Another aspect of Plenty Doors is "business incubation," where the nonprofit takes in growing businesses and grants them space for work.

One of the incubated businesses lies just behind Plenty Doors, run by Tanya Gardner, a University of Montana alumna. Leading through a chain-link-fenced backyard, steppingstones lead to the entrance of a small shop. Inside sits a kiln, porcelain clay and thousands of synthetic elk ivories. Elk ivory, also known as elk teeth, is an integral part of Crow tradition as they are sown onto Crow regalia.

Pressing organic elk ivory into clay molds, Gardner maintains the natural shape of the teeth while also being able to mass-produce the product. She sells each tooth for $1, but most customers are looking for a 400-tooth dress for events.

"The record I've made for one dress is 1,000," Gardner said.

After molding the teeth, she places a maximum of 32 into a kiln she bought for $1,400 last June. Once the firing process is complete, the product comes out pale, like sun-bleached bones found in the backcountry. To give them color, Gardner uses a slurry of coffee grounds so concentrated it almost forms a paste. As she applies it with a paintbrush, the ivory becomes nearly indistinguishable from natural teeth.

"I've fooled some hunters and elders," Gardner said. "They'll be like, 'Wait, this is synthetic?' It's always super entertaining."

Currently, many tribal citizens rely on jobs outside the reservation. "People are going off the road and spending their money there instead of putting it back into the local economy," Black Eagle said.

While the lack of infrastructure is one of the leading causes of this issue, the effects are significant.

In March of 2025, President Donald Trump passed the "Restoring Truth and Sanity to American History" executive order, resulting in the National Park Service recently removing signage leading to and on the Little Bighorn Battlefield. For many tribal members, the site of the battlefield is a point of pride, not only for its rich history but also for the economic revenue it generates for the tribe.

The Little Bighorn Battlefield is one of the most documented Indigenous history sites in media, notably being referenced in movies like 1970's "Little Big Man." Currently, Trump is making efforts to rewrite that history to "focus on the greatness of the achievements and progress of the American people," he states in the executive order.

In February, Trump flagged two exhibits at Montana's Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument as non-compliant, both of which honored tribal sacrifices. The move could have affected tribal tourism, as the parks are major draws.

In 2023, the tribe invested $20 million in a new arbor to bring tourism to Crow Fair, an annual celebration for tribal members. Chairman White Clay hopes to continue this momentum, developing vendor stations leading up to the Little Bighorn Battlefield.

Other tribal citizens turn toward agriculture and land to diversify development and generate income on their land.

A white cloud of smoke that reeks like wet dog and a grease trap at a roadside grill sizzled through the air as a red-hot brand labeled "K/C" made contact on the side of Casey Old Horn's new bull.

Old Horn, a 28-year-old first-generation rancher and owner of the Casey Old Horn Cattle, hopes to develop jobs through a packing plant, becoming FDA-certified and distributing meat through his patented "Montana Meat Market." Old Horn hopes to begin developing the business this year to bring food to the community, which is considered a food desert. In addition, as the ranch expands, he hopes to generate more jobs for the community through hiring ranch hands and wranglers.

Tribal citizens have little access to whole or fresh foods, apart from two gas stations and one store, which holds some canned foods and grains. The food desert requires tribal members to drive off the reservation to buy healthy meal supplies; otherwise, local residents are left with processed or canned foods.

Dozens of cars could be seen lining up in front of food trucks located in the city center of Crow Agency to

LEFT: *Tanya Gardner, owner of TPlainfeathers, prepares some of her porcelain elk teeth for a coat of finish, while her friend, Letonne Iron, helps her paint some of her other products in her studio in Crow Agency. Gardener sells her elk teeth beads as an alternative to the more expensive and harder to find real teeth that are used to traditionally decorate Crow regalia.*

Tanya Gardener shows off the dress she made for her graduation from the University of Montana fine arts program. The dress features the first set of ceramic elk teeth that Gardner made when she was in college.

Casey Old Horn presses his brand into his newly acquired Hereford bull at the Bighorn County Fairgrounds in the town of Hardin.

grab some fresh food. Others parked their cars along the street and began lining up for fresh eggs sold at market tents. These small businesses keep money on the reservation and are exactly what Old Horn hopes to create from his ranch.

The vision of Old Horn's meat market, bringing local agricultural produce to the tribe, is to improve not only accessibility but also keep money circulating throughout the tribe. With basic amenities placed just off the reservation, it forces spending outside the reservation. The loss of money has resulted in the tribal government relying on federal funds to build infrastructure, such as the Yellowtail Afterbay Dam.

Just like the bull rearing its head as the brand seared it into Old Horn's possession, outer-reservation expenses rear their head once more. Just two hours before to the branding, Old Horn and his cousin John Nomee were getting ready to head to Billings to meet a man about buying a new bull.

Old Horn's ranch holds 125 head of cattle, including four bulls. As the herd expands, so does the number of bulls to ensure a successful calving season. Per 25 cows, a herd should have one bull for efficient breeding. The land, owned but not cultivated by his grandfather, Dale Old Horn, is quickly becoming too small to hold the head of cattle. Casey Old Horn hopes to expand his ranch outside of Dunmore.

"You can't run this many cows on this little piece of ground all year," Old Horn said.

Like Hansel and Gretel leaving a trail of breadcrumbs, Old Horn led a trail of molded bread into the trailer bed. Dropping its head to the ground, the reddish-brown Hereford bull made its way into the trailer, lapping the loaf up with its tongue, relaxing more with each slice.

Old Horn shook his head, laughing. Reaching into his billfold, he brought out a two-inch stack of $100 bills, paying the rancher $3,000 for the bull. Until 2023, the Hardin bank refused to allot him a loan without a minimum 30% equity rate. Using Community Development Financial Institutions funds, a federal investment program meant to increase economic development in distressed communities, Old Horn was able to build his business's equity slowly.

"It took an act of Congress," Old Horn said.

The difficulty for tribal members to gain financial footing is rooted in generations of a lack of resources and education on financial practices. Locally, resources are limited, due to a narrow scope of infrastructure to harbor those resources.

For instance, tribal colleges focus degree programs first on areas where jobs exist, such as clerical and lower-level managerial positions, teaching and human services. Now, more colleges need to expand into business and public administration programs to train people in the skills needed to start businesses and revive stagnated economies. It is a trend that the Little Big Horn College is seeing.

From spring of 2024 to the fall of 2025, Little Big Horn College saw a 14.58% increase in enrollment numbers, increasing from 240 to 275. After the loss of the leading source of financial revenue, Crow Nation has seen an increase in higher education and business classes.

Through years of dependency on the coal trade, tribal citizens have seen a dip in education of home ownership and entrepreneurial skills. Financial institutions play an important role in generating economic growth and opportunity in some of the nation's most distressed groups.

By offering tailored resources and innovative programs that invest federal dollars alongside private-sector capital,

Casey Old Horn takes a moment with his horses after feeding his cattle for the morning on his ranch in the town of Dunmore. Besides the occasional help from extended family and friends, Old Horn, his father and his sister do most of the work on the ranch.

Sierra Not Afraid, a realtor who works in Billings, Mont., teaches a homeownership class at the Plenty Doors Community Development Corporation building on the Crow reservation.

the financial institution funds serve a diversity of people, utilizing a market-based approach to supporting economically disadvantaged communities.

After years of navigating the federal banking system, Old Horn turned toward financial institutions, such as Akiptan, which focus on Indigenous businesses and even grants loans to local entrepreneurs to get their business off the ground.

Through years of lacking infrastructure and being forced to rent and renovate old buildings, tribal members are now taking a deeper look at how to build equity through home and land ownership.

Sierra Not Afraid, who works as a realtor in Billings after getting licensed in 2018, leads a class at Plenty Doors. Through homeownership, members can build equity to develop their own businesses.

"It isn't ingrained, the idea of homeownership, because of years of renting, so it's important to pass on this knowledge to the next generations," Not Afraid said.

The class is active for multiple weeks from 8:30 a.m. to 3 p.m. on Fridays, holding a dozen students who participate in small tests to ingrain what they are learning into memory.

Lauri Kindness, one of the students, sat waiting for the lecture to begin, chatting with other participants. While gregarious, she defines herself as being "kind every other Friday on a rainy day." She served in the U.S. military for four years and, even with veteran benefits, cannot afford to own her own home.

"I've wanted this for a while, to stop living out of bags and boxes," Kindness said. "To live in a home that can house a family is what happiness looks like to me."

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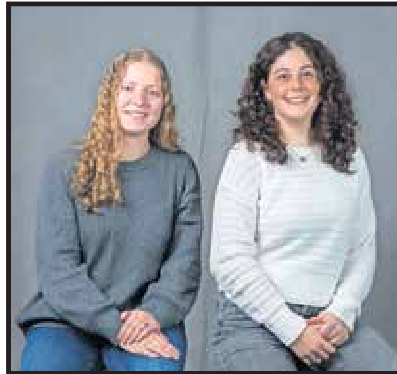

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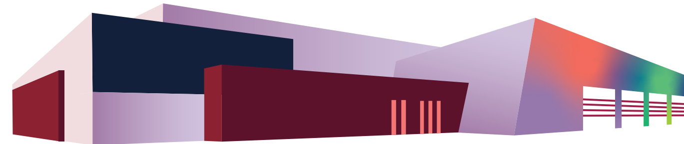

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