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Guest column

## Montanans calling for climate solutions

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**E**arlier this spring, I was arrested with 13 other Montanans protesting U.S. Sen. Steve Daines's refusal to act on climate change.

On a March morning, around 100 people rallied outside Daines's Missoula office to protest his refusal to take human-caused climate change seriously. More than a dozen of us went into the office to request that Daines stop promoting dirty fuel projects like coal exports and tar sands, embrace Montana's clean energy potential, and stop denying that burning fossils is the main cause of climate change.

We were told by a field representative that the senator had no plans to change his position, so those of us in the office decided to stay indefinitely, peacefully occupying the space to draw attention to a threat we feel imperils Montana and the world. Eventually we were arrested. While this concluded that particular protest, it was just one moment in the story of a rapidly growing Montana climate movement.

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According to NASA, 2014 was the warmest year globally since records began. All but one of the 10 warmest years occurred since 2000. In Montana we've experienced the effects of this firsthand: erratic winters, longer fires seasons and droughts that endanger our agriculture. Yet too many of our leaders ignore the signs.

Flush with fossil industry campaign donations, and encouraged by fake grassroots front groups like Americans for Prosperity (funded by the oil billionaire Koch brothers), elected officials are making us ever more dependent on fossil fuels. Fortunately, people are fighting back.

In January, people in Missoula and Bozeman joined a nationwide day of protest against the Keystone XL tar sands pipeline. Indigenous leaders spoke about how tar sands development threatens tribal lands and treaty rights. Later that month, responding to grassroots pressure, President Obama vetoed Congress' attempt to fast-track Keystone XL.

But it's not just about one pipeline. Late last year, 14 Montana environmental, social justice and human rights groups sent a letter to our new congressional delegation, urging U.S. Sens. Jon Tester and Daines and Congressman Ryan Zinke to reduce our dependence on dirty fuels and scale up renewables. Signatory organizations' combined memberships totaled several thousand Montanans.

The protest at Daines's office where I and others were arrested was a response to Congress's failure to pursue climate solutions. And the following month, when state and federal officials met in Missoula for the Asia-Montana Energy Summit, around 100 people gathered to protest the event's disappointing focus on dirty fuels. Even officials who acknowledge climate change, like Gov. Steve Bullock, used the summit to promote coal and the Keystone XL pipeline. But inside and outside

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the official event, ordinary citizens advocated switching to clean energy and leaving fossil fuels in the ground.

“Leave it in the ground” has become a rallying cry for people who want to keep our landscapes intact, protect public health and shift to clean energy. Fossil fuel companies have held back this transition, and now some of us are challenging them directly. That’s the logic of the fossil fuel divestment movement sweeping across U.S. colleges.

The idea behind divestment is that institutions shouldn’t invest in the companies most responsible for climate change. Coal and oil corporations have fought almost every climate policy ever proposed in Montana or Congress. Yet university investors are lending tacit approval to these companies’ practices.

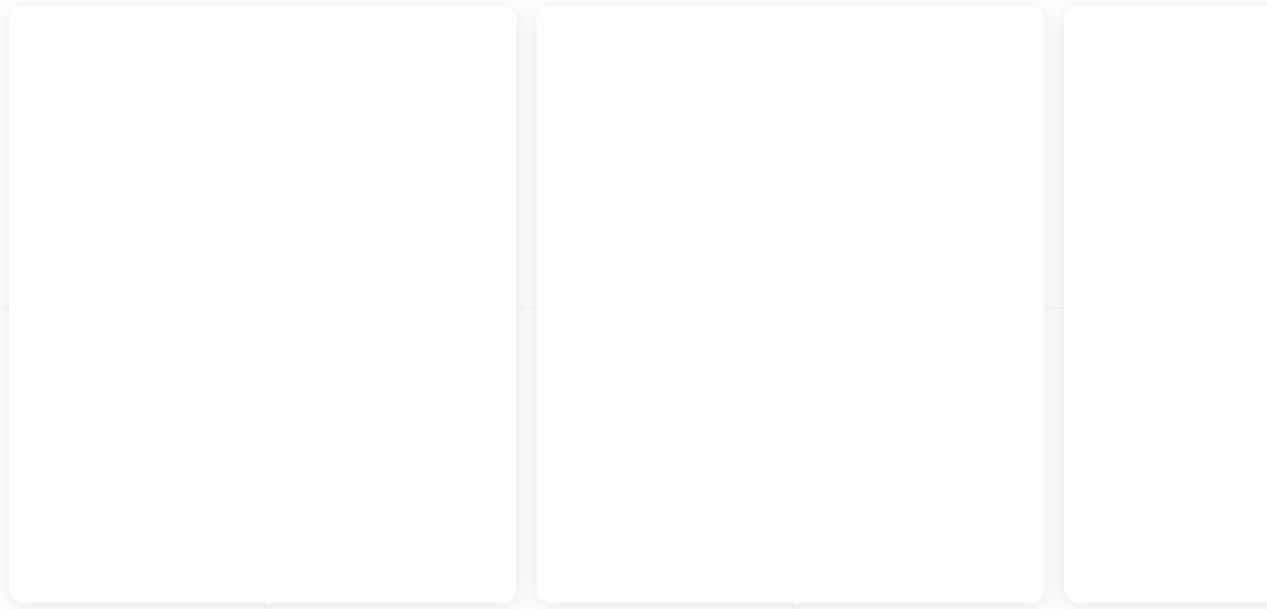
The student-led divestment campaign at the University of Montana has gained more traction than almost any political issue at UM in years. When the UM Foundation board of trustees met in Missoula last fall, over 200 students and community members staged a rally in support of divestment. More than 1,700 students have signed a divestment petition. And when students voted on a university-wide divestment referendum at the end of April, it passed by an 80 percent margin.

Our elected officials have yet to seriously address climate change, but Montanans are mobilizing for solutions. We see an opportunity to create thousands of clean energy jobs while protecting public health and safeguarding places that make Montana special.

If our leaders refuse to heed the call, they can expect to keep hearing from us as our voices only grow louder. Please join us in the streets.

*Nick Engelfried is an organizer with the Blue Skies Campaign and 350-Missoula.*

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