

DRC mixes ag advocacy with conservationism

By Jason Stuart
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For over 40 years, the Dawson Resource Council has advocated on issues they believe are crucial to the future sustainability of local agricultural producers. Oftentimes,

that means taking a firm stance on divisive environmental issues, but according to current DRC chairperson Amy Myran, there's no way around that because agriculture and the environment are inseparably linked.

"They're pretty intertwined, agriculture and the environment. I don't see how you could separate them," Myran said. "Most of the issues we work on, they impact agriculture in some way."

The DRC is the local affiliate of the Northern Plains Resource Council, a statewide organization that bills itself as a "grassroots conservation and family agriculture group that organizes Montana citizens to protect our water quality, family farms and ranches, and unique quality of life."

According to Myran, the DRC currently has about 40 members. About half of those are farmers and ranchers, while the other half "live in town," though she said they typically have a family connection

to agriculture, as she does.

Many of the issues the DRC works on are air and water quality issues, Myran said. Their stances on those issues — combined with the larger NPRC's stances on environmental issues, like their opposition to

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the Keystone pipeline, support for the Obama administration's Clean Power Plan and so forth — often put them at odds with the prevailing local opinion, Myran admits. However, she said the strong negative reactions that often get directed at the DRC come from a place of misunderstanding.

"I think it's just a knee-jerk reaction to anyone they see as an environmentalist," Myran said of the negative reactions the DRC sometimes encounters in the community.

The truth about the group is much more nuanced, she said, adding that many members would wince at being labeled "environmentalists," instead seeing themselves as "conservationists" in the tradition of Theodore Roosevelt. She added that if anyone attends a DRC meeting expecting to encounter "radical environmentalism," they'll be sorely disappointed.

"I don't think we have anyone in our group who advocates giving it all back to the buffalo," Myran said. "We try to be pragmatic."

Part of that pragmatism is that the DRC and other local affiliates of the NPRC get to pick and choose which issues they will get involved with as things come up.

For example, Myran said that right now, one of the biggest issues the group has chosen to get involved with are the regulation of oilfield waste facilities like Oaks Disposal in rural Dawson County. Presently, the group is working closely with the Montana Department of Environmental Quality as the agency develops new rules for such facilities.

"We've tried to be involved in that

process, making suggestions for air quality and water quality, not just to protect the people living near those facilities, but to protect the people working there," she said.

However, while the DRC has gotten involved with that issue — which Myran added has been misconstrued as an attack on the local family who opened Oaks Disposal, a claim she vehemently denies — they have consciously chosen to stay out of other controversies. A prime example is the fight over replacement of the Intake diversion dam, which the DRC has decided not to take a stance on.

Myran also noted that over the years, the stances the DRC has taken on certain issues have not always run counter to the prevailing local opinion. She said one of the group's "biggest issues" in its history was back in the late 90s when there were proposals to allow oil drilling within Makoshika, which she said most locals supported the DRC's position in rallying against it.

Furthermore, Myran said the DRC is "very democratic," meaning anybody can attend a meeting and express concern about an issue, which the members will then decide whether to get involved with or not.

Though many of the issues the group works on fall under the en-

vironmental category, Myran noted that's not all they do.

"We're also very interested in sustainability, local food issues and things like that," she said.

The group strives to be very supportive of local food producers, Myran added. For example, the group recently brought forward a resolution to the Dawson County Commissioners declaring the county's official support for local agricultural and locally raised foods. The commissioners passed the resolution on March 1.

While many locals may not agree with some of the stances the DRC takes, Myran said that ultimately, the members of the DRC have more in common with the rest of their neighbors than not, adding that if they take the time to talk with the DRC, they'll often find that their views are not so dissimilar after all.

"I think once they start meeting individually and talking, they see we do have a lot in common, and you can work at the same issues in different ways sometimes," she said.

The DRC meets at 7 p.m. on the fourth Wednesday of every month, typically at the Glendive Public Library.

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