

# Impact Report



# 2024

# Editor's Note



First off, we want to thank you. Last year, when we decided to transition away from a free weekly print newspaper and focus on our digital operation and specialty publications, we didn't know what to expect. We wanted our products to remain free, but how would we make up for the lost revenue in print advertising? The answer, it turns out, was you.

**While the Flathead Beacon is still working toward long-term sustainability in this brave new digital world of ours, it's safe to say that we're on the right track. And that's because of the support of our readers.**

Along with the hundreds of Editor's Club members who give everything from a few bucks a month to more than \$100 a year, there are those who have donated one-time gifts up to \$1,000. We've even had community members shake our hands and drop off checks at our Main Street office. Your support is vital for our future and proves that we made the right decision by continuing to provide quality local journalism for free to the community we love.

I've worked as editor in chief for this scrappy independent newspaper since its founding in 2007 – basically, my whole adult life. In that time, I've never been prouder of a staff than I am of this one. A little over a year ago, I told employees there would no longer be a Flathead Beacon print edition and, instead of panicking, they began innovating. I've also never been more humbled than I am by the outpouring of community support since making that decision. As you'll see in the Beacon's inaugural impact report: **Your Support Matters.**

**Kellyn Brown**  
*Editor in Chief*



**FLATHEAD**   
**BEACON**

Laura Chenier swims in Yellow Bay on Flathead Lake. Chenier made the first known swim of the widest section of the lake, swimming from Elmo to Yellow Bay. Hunter D'Antuono | Flathead Beacon

# Mission Statement

The Flathead Beacon is an independent print and digital media company devoted to delivering free public-service journalism throughout Northwest Montana. Our staff of enterprising reporters, editors and photographers strives to shine a light on critical community issues through accountability journalism, investigative reporting, public records requests, in-depth storytelling, and, critically, by establishing trust with our readers.

Through our familiarity with and commitment to the communities we serve, including the gateways to Glacier National Park and two Indigenous reservations, the Beacon's staff works to educate readers about the most complex issues of our day while also serving as a cultural center of gravity. With

that mission in mind, we continue to bring awareness and insight to our diverse readership in the Flathead Valley and beyond.

The Beacon has won numerous awards since its inception, including, in 2024, having been named Montana's Best Online Newspaper.

**As a news organization first and foremost, the Beacon could neither perform its function as a pillar of the Fourth Estate nor fulfill its mission to readers without the ongoing support and contributions from generous donors.**

Thank you for reading. And thank you for your support.

## Awards

**In 2024, the Flathead Beacon won the following awards at the Montana Newspaper Association's Better Newspaper Contest:**

- Best online newspaper – Flathead Beacon
- Best magazine – Flathead Living
- Best political coverage – Tristan Scott
- Best education coverage – Denali Sagner
- Best breaking news and sports photography – Hunter D'Antuono
- Best online advertisement – Dwayne Harris
- Best digital presentation – Micah Drew

## Fellowships and Grants

The **Education Writers Association** selected Beacon staff writer Denali Sagner to participate in a competitive reporting fellowship alongside journalists from NPR, the Texas Tribune, ProPublica and PBS Newshour.

As a member of the **Local Independent Online News (LION) Publishers**, the Flathead Beacon in 2024 applied for and was awarded a competitive **Sustainability Audit and Funding** grant to identify and respond constructively to roadblocks to sustainability within our organization. The audit includes funding, as well as a thorough assessment of our news business and recommendations and resources to help enhance our organizational sustainability.

Staff writer Micah Drew was awarded the **MIT Environmental Solutions Initiative's Journalism Fellowship**, which supports journalists developing a high-impact news project that connects local perspectives, values and priorities with climate change science and solutions. Micah used the fellowship to produce a multi-part series covering the youth-led constitutional climate change lawsuit *Held v. Montana*.



Tristan Scott

# ENVIRONMENTAL

## Reporting Impact

Among the raft of news tips I received upon moving to the Flathead Valley 15 years ago, one in particular stands out in my memory, not only because of the magnitude of its environmental consequences, but also because I've been writing about it ever since.

The tip came from a young scientist who was measuring elevated concentrations of a toxic mining byproduct in Lake Kootcanusa, along the U.S.-Canada border in north-west Montana. Being new to the area, I wondered what types of mines there were on Lake Kootcanusa, which is a reservoir formed by Libby Dam on the Kootenai River, a blue-ribbon trout stream where I fly-fished often. The scientist explained that these mines weren't on Lake Kootcanusa or the Kootenai River; they weren't even in Montana. These were Canadian coal mines, and they produced millions of tons of waste rock every year. When it rained, the waste rock leached potent concentrations of a pollutant called selenium into British Columbia's Elk River, which feeds the Kootenai and Columbia rivers. The scientist speculated that the selenium concentrations were so heightened that they could be hazardous to fish and other aquatic wildlife for hundreds of miles downstream, spanning Montana, Idaho and beyond.

Unfortunately, the scientist's theory has been borne out over the ensuing decade-and-a-half, even as the global mining giant responsible for the contamination largely avoids accountability. Fortunately, fomented in part by the Flathead Beacon's watchdog reporting, an interna-



Elkview Operations, one of Teck Resources' metallurgic coal mines in British Columbia. Hunter D'Antuono | Flathead Beacon

tional coalition of state, federal, provincial, tribal, and First Nations governments recently began collaborating on long-term solutions to mitigate the environmental crisis.

In Montana, state lawmakers and environmental regulators have adopted a site-specific selenium standard at the international border, where concentrations of the chemical regularly exceed the threshold for what experts believe is safe for aquatic wildlife. Earlier this year, federal governments in Canada and the U.S. broke through a political impasse and agreed to ask the International Joint Commission to study and take steps to remediate the inflow of pollution. In 2021, in what amounted to the largest sentence ever brought under the Canadian Fisheries Act for pollution violations, the Canadian federal government imposed a \$60 million fine against Teck Coal Limited, the company responsible for the pollution. Teck was also charged with an additional five counts of Fisheries Act violations for leaching toxic contaminants into downstream

waterways, including Lake Kootcanusa and the Kootenai River system, causing harmful impacts to native fish species on both sides of the border. **For every one of these milestones, the Beacon published a half-dozen stories explaining the latest research and examining the corporate and political pushback the studies generated. We probed the complex binational political stalemate and helped elevate the voices of Indigenous stakeholders who eventually broke the deadlock. We toured the coal mines to learn about Teck's state-of-the-art water treatment technologies, and we flew over the mines in tiny airplanes to appreciate the scale of the operations and the size of the environmental footprint.**

As the story of B.C.'s coal mines continues to develop, our reporting hasn't slowed down; but without our reporting, the developments to this story certainly would have.

**Tristan Scott**  
Managing Editor



Denali Sagner

# EDUCATION

## Reporting Impact



A kindergarten student in her classroom in Browning.  
*Hunter D'Antuono | Flathead Beacon*

For thousands of students, parents, teachers and administrators across the Flathead Valley, education is the most important part of every day.

**Providing high-quality education coverage means going beyond school board meetings and graduation ceremonies. It means sharing coffee with educators, getting into the classroom with students and delving into the intricacies of curriculum changes and school finance.** My education reporting for the Beacon has taken me from Libby to Browning to Kila, where I've highlighted innovative community college programs and spent hours

in classrooms. Through my reporting, I exposed a covert case of misconduct by school administrators. I dug into the intersection between the housing crisis and youth homelessness, as well as the federal protections put in place for unhoused students. I unpacked how state and federal education policy would impact life in the classroom, following the everyday machinations of the state legislature.

My reporting in 2022 and 2023 was named "best education coverage" in the state by the Montana Newspaper Association. This spring, I was able to elevate my education reporting through a competi-

tive grant from the Education Writers Association. Through the grant, I'm digging into how two rural colleges in Northwest Montana are expanding program offerings to respond to Montana's changing economy. Through this project, I've met with educators, students and community leaders in Lincoln County and the Blackfoot Reservation, where community-based college programs are critical.

I'm proud of the Beacon's education coverage, which keeps readers informed and schools accountable.

**Denali Sagner**  
Staff Writer



Maggie Dresser

# HOUSING CRISIS

## Reporting Impact



A family sits in a hotel room in Kalispell.  
Hunter D'Antuono | Flathead Beacon

Following nationwide trends, the Flathead Valley is facing a dramatic rise in homelessness as the high cost of housing displaces residents while mental health services shrink, leaving limited social service workers scrambling to support families and individuals in need.

The multi-faceted issue is frequently raised within the community among Flathead Valley residents, government and nonprofit leaders as housing insecurity and homelessness becomes visible across the state. Through my reporting, I've listened to hours of city council meetings, talked to displaced residents and individuals suffering from mental illness and addiction

while also meeting with the social workers who are supporting them. My reporting on the housing crisis, lack of mental health resources and the justice system for the Beacon has informed the community about the complicated factors surrounding homelessness.

Last year, I began covering the homicide case of an elderly and disabled homeless man who was allegedly beaten to death by a Kalispell teenager during a time where negative rhetoric triggered harassment and assaults targeting unhoused populations. My coverage on the Kalispell City Council further exposes the controversy as councilmembers pass ordinances meant to

limit the visibility of homelessness while they are actively mulling over the fate of the city's low-barrier homeless shelter.

**I've sat down with social workers, addiction counselors, public defenders and local government officials who are working to mitigate the impacts of the gaps in the mental health system and housing insecurity. My continuing coverage for the Beacon sets the record straight and helps prevent controversial issues from turning into misinformation that circulates across social media platforms.**

**Maggie Dresser**  
Staff Writer



Micah Drew

# PUBLIC LANDS

## Reporting Impact



Flowers blossom along Bird Woman Pass above Hidden Lake in Glacier National Park. *Hunter D'Antuono | Flathead Beacon*

The residents in the Flathead Valley have a deep connection to public lands and are aware of the impacts of overuse, regulations, and a changing climate. Northwest Montana sees more than 3 million recreation-oriented tourists each summer visiting Glacier National Park and the surrounding areas. During the cold months, hundreds of thousands of tourists flock to the area to enjoy winter recreation opportunities. **As a reporter covering the environment for the Flathead Beacon, I know that early season snowmelt, late season freezes, warming rivers and fire-ravaged hillsides have a ripple effect throughout our community and econo-**

**my. Reporting on these changes seen in our backyard, as well as the laws and regulations guiding local, state and federal management of our public lands, is key to keeping Montanans informed about the world they rely on for both fun and fortune.**

In 2023, I was selected as an MIT Environmental Solutions Initiative Journalism Fellow to cover the consequential *Held v. Montana* constitutional climate change trial. I was able to use a local lens to talk to Flathead Valley youths involved in the suit, trace stalwart environmental protections throughout Montana's history and provide live coverage of a

first-of-its-kind trial in Helena. Through the support of my fellowship, the Flathead Beacon newsroom and our supporters, my work was republished in more than two dozen regional and national outlets, elevating our small-town newspaper to the frontlines of the climate change discussion.

Many news stories that captivate national and international audiences have their roots in local reporting, and the Flathead Beacon staff innately knows the nuances of the characters, the subject and the consumers most impacted by any story arc that passes through Northwest Montana.

**Micah Drew**  
Staff Writer



Mike  
Kordenbrock

# Reporting Impact

The same impulse that so often attracts us to this corner of Montana where the natural world is at its most beautiful – its ability to uncap the pressure valve on our lives and lead us to moments of reflection, growth, discovery and community – is, I think, similar to what attracts us to the arts.

Arts and entertainment, two of the topics that I cover for the Flathead Beacon, can teach us about ourselves and about the people we live alongside. They can teach us about our families and about our communities. They can teach us about our region, and about the greater world. They break us out of our day-to-day way of living and seeing, and lend greater depth to our emotions and experiences.

**When my work is at its best, and most impactful, it plays off the sense of curiosity that we all need to maintain in order to live well. I'm lucky to be able to spend my working hours sifting through news, tips and other leads about creative and artistic life in the Flathead in order to look for opportunities to dig deeper and highlight the things that just might bring a little more excitement and joy to the lives of the Beacon's thousands of readers.** In the process, I'm often in the position to offer artists



Lily Gladstone.  
Hunter D'Antuono |  
Flathead Beacon

and institutions a chance to showcase their work, skills and achievements.

In the past year that's meant a road trip to Browning to see Oscar-nominated star Lily Gladstone honored by the Blackfeet Nation; trudging over fire scars and wolfing down sporkfuls of backcountry ramen with chef Dan Moe to learn about cooking in wild places; talking with Tessa Heck in downtown Kalispell about being an artist, gallery owner and mother; taking time in Whitefish to see how Justin Barry is looking to use

his sewing skills and design expertise to cut textile and outdoor material waste; and hopping on the phone with world-class artists like the kora player Sona Jobarteh and the award-winning novelist Min Jin Lee, ahead of their visits to FVCC's Wachholz College Center.

It's my great honor to be able to bring stories to life about the artists, musicians, performers and other creative people that flock to the Flathead Valley.

**Mike Kordenbrock**  
Staff Writer



# Our Impact by the Numbers

**5,300,000**

**Page views** at flatheadbeacon.com over the past year.

**2,000,000+**

**Unique visitors** to flatheadbeacon.com over the past year.

**100,000+**

**Flathead Beacon print publications** still produced and distributed each year, including four annual magazines and four quarterly Flathead Living magazines.

**5,300**

**Newsletter subscribers** who receive our newsletter the Daily Roundup every weekday.

**17**

**Years the Flathead Beacon** has been **named** either **best weekly newspaper** or **best news website** in Montana.

**\$289,000**

Amount the Flathead Beacon Foundation has given to area nonprofits in the last 10 years.

# Reader Testimonials



**The typically comprehensive and well-written coverage of the state of the forest products industry in your story about the lumber mill closures this morning is what prompted me to contribute to the Flathead Beacon ...** I read the Beacon every morning and will continue to (contribute) every year. Thanks for the stories.

**Wendy Lane**  
Yaak

That "News Features of 2023" list is one hell of an anthology of powerhouse reporting and writing. Collectively, those stories touch the heart of the heart of this place and its people. Seriously hard to believe all that was done in one year, with limited staff, while also putting out the daily news. Really, truly genuinely impressive. **It's an honor to live in a community with such a tremendous resource as the Beacon and its trove of talent.**

**Michael Jamison**  
Whitefish

I have been judiciously following the selenium problem for the last 15 years. It has gotten very little coverage here in Eureka, where for most, Kooacanusa is our biggest asset providing enjoyment to locals and tourists alike. **Just wanted to send kudos and thanks to the great coverage you have contributed ...** Seems like more entities are getting aware and onboard of this potential catastrophe, drawing more attention to what could be a contentious international incident that is going to need pressure brought to bear on Canada.

**Carol Blake**  
Eureka

I just really need to applaud the excellent work in the reporting on the outfitting permit process in The Bob and the McAtee issue. **You really are great at your craft. Glad this is all getting the daylight it deserves.** Will's comment the Montana Outfitters and Guides Association is key to the whole article.

**Bill Hodge**  
Kalispell

Once again, thank you for a great article. **Every time you write an article about myself and my project, I feel like you get it, you get the facts right, and you tell it in a compelling story.** I've had loads of people reach out to me saying, "Great article in the Beacon!" Thanks for what you do.

**Jake Bramante**  
Columbia Falls

