

Impact Report



2025

Editor's Note



This past year was one of significant change and growth at the Flathead Beacon. First, the change. We settled into our new office just a few blocks north of our previous location in downtown Kalispell. We partnered with BlueLena, an all-in-one audience and fundraising management platform built for independent publishers. And we welcomed two accomplished reporters, Lauren Frick and Mariah Thomas, to our newsroom.

Now, the growth. Our flagship newsletter, The Daily Roundup, has far surpassed 7,000 subscribers with the vast majority Flathead Valley locals. The number of unique visitors to our website is now well over 2 million annually. And Editor's Club members who have signed up for recurring support now number over 600. In other words, in 2025 the Beacon took a significant step in the right (and a brand new) direction.

It has now been more than two years since we made the difficult decision to stop printing our weekly newspaper and instead focus on becoming a truly digital first news organization that still prints high-quality magazines, such as the seasonal Flathead Living and annual Flathead Valley Family. There was a learning curve to this transition that at times was steeper than others. But after hurdling a few potential stumbling blocks, we are a finally settling into what we want to be: An indispensable source of local news and information that keeps pace with the readers who call north-west Montana home.

The pace with which a reader wants to consume local media is subject to change. During a breaking news event, most of you want to find pertinent information online as fast as possible. During a lazy Sunday afternoon, a lot of you would rather flip through a feature story in a magazine than open your laptop. Our aim is to provide both. To keep pace with your changing paces.

It's approaching 20 years since I was asked to be the founding editor of the Flathead Beacon. Taking the job was the best decision I've ever made, largely because of the support of our readers. I can't wait to show you what's in store for 2026.

Kellyn Brown
Editor in Chief



**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 2025, the Flathead Beacon won the following first-place awards at the Montana Newspaper Association's Better Newspaper Contest:

- Best online newspaper – Flathead Beacon
- Best website – flatheadbeacon.com
- Best magazine – Flathead Living
- Best news video – Denali Sagner
- Best portrait photo – Hunter D'Antuono
- Best feature photo – Hunter D'Antuono

Fellowships and Grants

Staff writer Mariah Thomas attended the **Education Writers Association's national seminar** in St. Louis — an annual event that brings together journalists from across the country who focus, in whole or in part, on education issues. She received a scholarship to attend, and the three-day long event helped her home in on current topics I should be paying attention to in education, from the relationship between states and the feds to the expanding school choice movement.

The **Association of Health Care Journalists** selected staff writer Zoë Buhrmaster for Montana's fellowship that included a full ride scholarship to attend the organization's annual conference. She listened as the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Deputy Administrator Stephanie Carlton spoke about the Trump Administration's major healthcare decisions, engaged in workshops on reporting out hospital price changes and hidden insurance practices, heard from journalists on their experience covering rural healthcare and large hospital mergers, and more.

As a member of the Local Independent Online News (LION) Publishers, the Flathead Beacon was awarded a competitive **Sustainability Audit and Funding grant** to identify and respond constructively to roadblocks to sustainability within our organization. The audit included a \$20,000 grant. We used part of the funding in 2025 for the newsroom to attend a trauma-informed reporting workshop presented by the **Dart Center**. The rest was used to solidify a partnership with **BlueLena**, which is helping us cultivate and grow our membership program.



Tristan Scott

Reporting Impact

On the morning of Feb. 14, 2025, just as the chairlift I was riding crested the north face of Big Mountain and back into cell range, my ski pants pocket emitted a steady tempo of chirping. It was my birthday and, as luck would have it, it coincided with a weekend powder day. Expecting the text notifications to indicate a backlog of well-wishes, I was alarmed to notice the messages were exclusively from sources within the federal government — specifically, agencies like the National Park Service, the U.S. Forest Service, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

Within a day or two, the initial tranche of mass firings by the newly minted Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) would be nicknamed the “Valentine’s Day Massacre.” And while the true scope of DOGE’s assault on the federal government remains unknown, the degree of desperation and helplessness evident in the early pleas for help from local sources was startling as the first shock waves reverberated throughout the civil service.

For the next nine months, coverage of the federal workforce cuts, as well as the re-hirings, and the re-firings, would consume most of my time and energy, particularly because of their outsized impacts to people and policies that center on my field of coverage: public lands and the environment. There was also a sense of urgency to the storytelling that I hadn’t encountered since the early days of the pandemic, but the trepidation of park rangers, seasonal trail crew workers, biologists, and foresters losing their jobs (or waiting for the ax to fall) was more palpable

than the anxiety surrounding the coronavirus.

But sharing their stories with the public was complicated. First, there was the challenge of convincing federal employees to speak on the record, which was no easy task as many feared retribution or other consequences. Even more confounding was the obstacle of finding officials within the federal government to explain the mechanics of the layoffs. At the local level, the public information officials with whom I had weekly if not daily conversations had either been fired or muzzled, with all media requests requiring approval from agency supervisors in Washington, D.C. Even the most generic request for comment required days, weeks or, in some cases, months for approval. (A press release announcing the schedule for a popular annual family forest expo didn’t arrive until after the event had concluded.)

Despite the “muzzle velocity” of the Trump Administration’s firing blitz and the confusion it sowed, we found a way to tell stories about the people and the policies transformed by the precedent-setting cuts. I quickly became well-versed in the bureaucratese of the federal workforce and its attendant acronyms: Reduction in Force (RIF), Voluntary Separation Incentive Payment (VSIP), Voluntary Early Retirement Authority (VERA).

A raft of RIF’d workers came forward to speak on the record, while a groundswell of retired federal workers emerged as advocates for the mission-driven agencies they’d spent their entire careers defending.

We told the story of Jack Carroll, whose termination letter from

the Flathead National Forest explained that he “had not demonstrated that further employment at the agency would be in the public interest,” even after he’d spent years cleaning campground bathrooms and clearing jack-strawed trees from local trails. We wrote about Lyle Olsen, the 73-year-old north-west Montana resident whose first seasonal job with the U.S. Forest Service in 1972 led to a 31-season career at the Kootenai National Forest. And we wrote about the “dream team” of scientists at the U.S. Geological Survey’s Northern Rocky Mountains Science Center whose jobs hang in limbo.

In addition to publishing stories about the people affected by the new administration, we also published stories about the environmental policies they rescinded, including rollbacks to the Roadless Rule and a “raid” on the ever-popular Land and Water Conservation Fund. Through it all, we’ve asked tough questions of our federal delegates and elected leaders.

As the stories of the federal workforce cuts and the people and policies they’ve affected evolves, so will our watchdog reporting. But we don’t generate the sunlight necessary to expose the downstream consequences of the issues we cover; you do.

Without the employees who stepped forward, or who pinged my phone last Valentine’s Day, these important stories may never have been told.

To that end, our impact is your impact. Thanks for sharing the load.

Tristan Scott
Managing Editor



Maggie
Dresser

MONTANA'S ECONOMY

Reporting Impact



As the Trump administration continues its rollout of tariffs on close trading partners like Canada, Mexico and China, the volatility has impacted northwest Montana and prompted challenges for important industries including tourism, construction, real estate and agriculture.

For example, international travel has seen a drop as tense border relations persist and unpredictability surrounding tariffs and fear of inflation has influenced decisions, causing Canadian tourism to decline by 25%. Meanwhile, local wheat farmers are grappling with high input prices on equipment and fertilizer, and

tariffs have raised building costs and economic uncertainty has contributed to a stagnant housing market.

When the trade wars began earlier this year, I traveled north with Media Director Hunter D'Antuono to see firsthand how the tensions were impacting the border town of Eureka, which is heavily reliant on Canadian spending. At the U.S.-Canada border, tensions weren't as high as we had originally anticipated, a discovery we not have otherwise made without a face-to-face connection.

Through my reporting on tariffs, I've talked to business

owners, real estate agents, farmers, builders and tourism bureau experts who have all shared their insights and anxieties with me about policy uncertainty and the impacts it has on the local economy.

I've remained in consistent communication with local stakeholders as unpredictable federal policies leave lasting impacts on local communities. The Beacon's ongoing coverage keeps tabs on developing stories like trade policy while keeping the public informed and engaged.

Maggie Dresser
Staff Writer



Zoë
Buhrmaster

Reporting Impact

Earlier this summer, I received an invite to attend a heavy-metal festival on the Blackfeet Nation. Fire in the Mountains featured renowned artists from around the world, revered and celebrated by metalheads. This year, however, major changes befell the long-established festival. It was the first time event staff would not serve alcohol and the first time it would be hosted by the Tribal Nation, born out of a desire to center suicide awareness in Indian Country.

Montana has some of the highest suicide rates in the country, and disproportionately, the highest amount is among Native Americans at 43 per 100,000 people, compared to a nationwide average of 14 per 100,000.

To learn what brought about the festival's new, noteworthy collaboration, I chatted with Browning High School and Buffalo Hide Academy counselors about the Heavy Music Symposium they started as a safe space to help students to process difficult, complex emotions. A prevention coordinator talked with me about the reality students face in a community where death is never far away. A heavy music artist and elementary teacher shared how creativity has become integral to navigating the darkness in his own life.



Others, including a Native studies director, a tribal council member and a festival founder, each explained their distinctive work to help bring the festival onto the Blackfeet Nation. High schoolers told me what it was like to participate in the packed heavy music class, headbang with their heavy metal heroes, and use music and art to express themselves.

Together, their stories all uniquely threaded a tapestry of how heavy music opened a door for those in the Blackfeet Nation – and those welcomed from around the world – to address the presence of suicide and the value of cathartic release.

This isn't the only way Browning Public School staff have been working to address mental health, however. Through the connections I made reporting on the fes-

tival, I spoke with the same prevention coordinator and a counselor about their work to increase resource access. In September, staff installed "hush pods," soundproof, phone-booth like stalls, for students to have a private place to take telehealth calls. The pods now provide quiet spaces in busy schools where telehealth appointments have become a primary mental health resource for students.

These relationships in the community light the path for my reporting. As a writer, I would not be able to tell these stories without those who have shared their time and space with me. It's been my honor to shine a light on the creative ways that those on the Blackfeet Nation are approaching issues that affect people across the region.

Zoë Buhrmaster
Staff Writer



Mariah
Thomas

STATE POLITICS

Reporting Impact



When I first arrived in the Flathead Valley in June, the U.S. Congress was in the throes of debating President Donald Trump's "One Big Beautiful Bill." Montana's all-Republican congressional delegation was playing an outsized role in the negotiations to get it across the finish line because of one issue: public lands. Rep. Ryan Zinke took a hardline stance, publicly refusing to vote yes on any version of the bill that included a land selloff and gathering other GOP representatives who committed to do the same. Sens. Steve Daines and Tim Sheehy wouldn't go so far as to commit to voting against the bill if it included a selloff, but behind-the-scenes, they were also working to strip that provision from the legislation. The land selloff didn't make the final version — and

Montana seemed to punch above its weight in terms of the influence our delegation held in the matter.

That's what captivates me when it comes to this state's politics. Even though Montana isn't a state with many people, we are a place that doesn't fit one traditional mold, and often, it makes us stand out. We're a state where Republicans will plant a flag for public lands, or where organizers are fighting for immigrants' rights, even in the conservative Flathead Valley. In my coverage of political issues this year, capturing those nuances has been of the utmost importance.

I delved into the ways Montana's new property tax structure, which implemented a controversial second-home tax, could

have an outsized impact on property owners in the Flathead. I've followed the complex relationship between federal immigration authorities and local police, along with the community response to immigrant arrests that have taken place in the area. I've attended protests, unpacked how federal fights over Affordable Care Act subsidies could touch Montanans and shared the stories of those in our community who remember slain political activist Charlie Kirk.

Politics really are personal — and I'm proud of the ways our coverage at the Beacon has helped connect the dots for readers as to how policy and issues impact their lives.

Mariah Thomas
Staff Writer



Hunter
D'Antuono

VISUAL STORYTELLING

Reporting Impact



Photography's strength lies in its viscerality. Images communicate what words alone often cannot. I've come to see words as the "head" of story. They shine at providing hard data and contextual detail. While photographs often best serve as the "heart." They excel at conveying emotion, spatial awareness and reactivity. Much like the heart and the mind, text and imagery, when used in tandem, yield a deeper degree of understanding.

Over past couple of years, I've spent considerable time documenting the Blackfeet Nation, where, on frigid February morning along the Two Medicine River, an instance of heart-centered storytell-

ing materialized in the most literal sense.

A growing segment of the Blackfeet are shifting their focus to cultivating tribal self-sufficiency, food security and precious cultural knowledge through rearing their own herds of bison.

The Blackfeet Bison Program offers demonstrations of the culling and butchering process. Bison harvests are also punctuated with ceremonies designed to honor the species foundational to the traditional Blackfeet way of life. Custom dictates nothing from a felled animal is left to waste. While it's one thing to describe the process of cutting out the heart from the

steaming chest cavity of a bison in single-digit temperatures, it's another to show a pair of human hands gripping the warm, blood-soaked organ. Such meat is especially cherished for its nutritive value to both the body and spirit.

It is a pleasure and privilege not only to visually document Northwest Montana's cultural, political, economic and social spectrums, but to also support the dedicated writers of the Beacon newsroom daily by supplementing their in-depth reporting with imagery that I hope speaks to the heart of the place we call home.

Hunter D'Antuono
Media director



Katie Bartlett

BEACON BEGINNINGS

Reporting Impact



I joined the Beacon team in June, just weeks after graduating from college and moving over 2,000 miles from Philadelphia to Kalispell. It was not only my first post-grad job, but also my first time living off the East Coast. In the five months since, the Beacon has given me the chance to strengthen the journalism skills I developed in college while learning about communities that are drastically different from those back home.

One of the best parts of interning at the Beacon has been the chance to do meaningful reporting from the start. Working with a small team has meant I haven't just been shadowing — I've

been out in the field. In my first months, I reported on topics from controversial mining proposals to wolf management debates. These experiences taught me how to approach broad environmental issues through a local lens.

The Beacon has also helped me become a more versatile reporter by allowing me to explore a range of beats. Environmental reporting was a highlight, but I also covered arts, culture, and land use. I dug through real estate deeds to uncover who had purchased the cabin once owned by Western artist Charlie Russell, and through interviews, I learned what he planned to do with it. I even

tapped into my New Jersey roots to profile Bruce Springsteen's longtime sound engineer, who has put down roots in Whitefish. Each of these stories deepened my connection to the Flathead Valley and sharpened my ability to tell compelling stories across a variety of subjects.

Above all, my time at the Beacon has solidified my interest in pursuing a career in local news while helping me develop the skills to do so. I hope future interns will have the same opportunity to learn and contribute to this newsroom.

Katie Bartlett
Reporting Intern

Our Impact by the Numbers

5,300,000

Page views at flatheadbeacon.com over the past year.

2,080,000+

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.

7,500+

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

18

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

\$314,000

Amount the Flathead Beacon Foundation has given to area nonprofits in the last 11 years.

Testimonials from Our Members



Thank you for your commitment and expertise in covering important stories in Northwest Montana. Your in-depth pieces and regional emphasis are greatly appreciated in our household!

M. Suazo

Best reporting in the valley and best that I know of in Montana.

T. Lengacher

Trust is THE MOST IMPORTANT THING in journalism. That is lacking in this country more than ever ... The boots on the ground fact finding young journalists is why I love and trust the Beacon.

M. Deubel

Flathead Beacon is a real beacon of light for our valley and beyond.

B. Schott

Thank you for providing truly keen, traditional and honest journalism...which is damn sure in short supply ... Please keep the Beacon strong!

C. Edwards

