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A LEE ENTERPRISES SPECIAL REPORT



BEN ALLAN SMITH, MISSOULIAN

Lou Royce, a game warden sergeant based in the Bitterroot Valley, patrols the Poker Joe fishing access site on the Bitterroot River near Florence last month. Royce has investigated all kinds of wildlife crimes and poaching cases in his nearly two decades working for the state.

NUTRIENT STANDARDS

Lawsuit filed over pollution rules

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Montana environmental groups and the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes are asking a federal judge to toss the state's new approach to regulating nutrient pollution in its rivers, streams and lakes.

Nutrient pollution, namely nitrogen and phosphorus, is often responsible for excessive algae blooms in Montana's waterbodies that can hurt fish and other aquatic animals by pulling oxygen from the water. Certain types of algae also produce toxins that can harm livestock and pets.

The complaint filed Jan. 26 by the Upper Gallatin Waterkeeper, Flathead Lakers and the tribes name the Environmental Protection Agency and its director, Lee Zeldin, as defendants. The EPA oversees its state-level counterparts, and must ensure they regulate nutrients and other pollutants consistent with the Clean Water Act.

Montana's Department of Environmental Quality loosened its standards for nutrients under rules approved by the EPA in October 2025. The state's move to adopt "narrative" water quality standards has been long pushed by industry and local governments that operate wastewater treatment systems. Those are some of the largest sources of nutrient pollution.

Narrative standards trigger responses to pollution based on observable conditions in a water body, rather than a numeric limit on the allowable levels of pollution in a river or lake. Proponents of those standards argued that numeric water quality requirements adopted a decade earlier had proved unworkable.

"A return to narrative nutrient standards will allow DEQ to take a localized approach and better tailor water quality assessments and permits to the specific stressors of a watershed and protect its beneficial uses," department director Sonja Nowakowski stated at the time.

The EPA rejected a previous attempt by Montana's Department of Environmental Quality to implement narrative standards in 2022, prompting state lawmakers to pass fresh legislation to do so during last year's session. House Bill 664 was signed into law by Gov. Greg Gianforte in May.

Environmental groups have long opposed narrative standards as overly vague and reactive. In a press release

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SILENT

Warden estimates majority of poaching cases go unsolved, undetected

SLAUGHTER

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Lou Royce, a game warden sergeant based in the Bitterroot Valley, has seen and investigated all kinds of wildlife crimes and poaching cases in his nearly two decades working for the state in various positions. This part of Montana has long been a hotspot for poaching.

There have been incidents of kids with guns in cars going on a "thrill kill" rampage on deer, or more nefarious cases like the man who poached nine trophy black bears out of one area near Darby.

He specifically remembers a case of houndsmen illegally treeing a mountain lion with the aid of dogs and then calling a friend with a permit to drive a long distance to shoot the animal — a practice that's illegal in Montana. **Please see **POACHING**, Page A3**

About this series

The vast majority of Montana's hunters operate within regulations designed to ensure the health of one of the state's most coveted and protected resources: its wildlife. But not all. As stories of headless elk, shot wolves and illegally taken bears, antelope and mule deer keep popping up, Lee Enterprises took aim at answering some of the deeper questions about poaching across Big Sky Country. This series examines the costs, challenges and trends that law enforcement, lawmakers and prosecutors face as they attempt the daunting job of stopping poachers.

MISSOULA COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Motion filed to dismiss lawsuit over student's suicide

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Editor's note: If you or someone you know are in a mental health crisis, the Montana Crisis Lifeline is free and staffed 24 hours by trained crisis responders who answer every call and text message. Dial 988. Online: <https://dphhs.mt.gov/suicideprevention/988>.

The former C.S. Porter Middle School

principal and assistant principal — named as defendants in a federal lawsuit involving a student suicide — asked the court to dismiss the case in a filing submitted Monday.

Janice Teeter, whose daughter attended C.S. Porter Middle School, accused Missoula County Public Schools of 10 separate civil claims, including negligence, wrongful death and violations of her daughter's constitutional right to an education.

Teeter's lawsuit claims school officials failed to adequately address the bullying of her daughter after being notified of the issue. In Monday's filing, MCPS said their actions did not expose Teeter's daughter to any danger she wouldn't have otherwise faced.

The lawsuit was initially filed in state District Court in February 2023 and then transferred to federal court in January after

claims surrounding the student's constitutional rights were added to the case.

Attorneys for former Principal Tyler Solberg and former Assistant Principal Dennis Juneau argued neither administrator took actions that worsened Teeter's daughter's situation, that both are entitled to qualified immunity under state law, and that the

Please see **MCPS**, Page A2

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