

US MARSHAL NOMINATION

TRUMP NOMINEE TAKES FWP JOB



THOM BRIDGE, INDEPENDENT RECORD

Brian Gootkin, director of the Montana Department of Corrections, talks about the work to repair the Montana State Prison's water system failure during a tour of the facility on Oct. 17, 2025.

Gootkin will be second-highest paid official in temporary post at agency

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President Donald Trump's pick to be the next U.S. Marshal for the District of Montana, who late last year left his post as head of the state's prison system, has meanwhile been hired as the second highest-paid official at the state's wildlife agency.

Brian Gootkin has been awaiting Senate confirmation to the federal post since Trump nominated him in October. He had served as director of the Montana Department of Corrections since 2021, resigning after the federal nomination.

Gootkin was hired in early March as a "temporary consultant" for the Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks, agency spokesman Greg Lemon told the Missoulian on Friday. He was selected by FWP Director Christy Clark to help the department as it works to reform its beleaguered law enforcement division, which for years has been rife with poor staff morale, a lack of trust in leadership and other workplace issues amid high-level shakeups.

"Director Clark wanted to bring on somebody that has experience and a track record of turning around tough law enforcement cultures, and an experienced leader, and Brian fit that bill," Lemon said.

As the Director of Corrections, Gootkin has been credited for helping to correct high turnover and vacancy rates

among the state prison system's correctional officers.

Since Gootkin's hiring was Clark's decision, Lemon said the job was not advertised. Clark declined an interview request by the Missoulian on Friday, and Gootkin did not return a phone message left Thursday.

Lemon said Gootkin is not under contract, and was instead hired as a regular employee amid current vacancies. He said there is no job description for the position.

A public-facing database of state employee salaries shows Gootkin is being paid \$65 an hour in his new job at FWP, equal to \$135,000 per year. It's the same amount paid to the department's deputy director and chief legal officer. Of the roughly 700 employees at FWP, Clark is the only official with a bigger paycheck.

Lemon said that high salary is commensurate with "the value he brings to the agency for this short window."

That database lists Gootkin as a Helena-based game warden, but Lemon clarified that the database only reflects the employee coding chosen for the temporary position. The full-time position does not include a law-enforcement role.

Clark and Gootkin are next-door neighbors, Lemon confirmed. According to public property records, the two own homes near Lake Helena.

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Trafficking hotline has a change of guard

Operator for past 7 years replaced by a different national nonprofit group

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A new organization is running the Montana Human Trafficking Hotline, replacing a previous nonprofit who ran the key reporting tool for the last seven years, according to the Montana Department of Justice.

National nonprofit Safe House Project is taking over the hotline, which is paired with a mobile app called Simply Report meant to allow for reports of human trafficking to instantly reach law enforcement.

Importantly, the hotline's number remains the same, at 1-833-406-STOP, in addition to simplyreport.com.

The change replaces the longtime operator of the hotline, the LifeGuard Group, although the Missoulian found the nonprofit continues to seek public funds to increase its presence across the state related to the new hotline operation.

MTN News first reported the change last week. After four days of the Missoulian requesting comment from the Department of Justice, a Thursday morning press release confirmed the new hotline operator.

Attorney General Austin Knudsen said in the release that his department has made it a priority to raise awareness of human trafficking in Montana, and the new system will make it easier for people to report possible cases.

"I look forward to working with Simply Report as their platform will provide a more efficient way for Montanans to report trafficking and improve law enforcement response times so we can end human trafficking in Montana," Knudsen said in the press release. "I'm very grateful for their investment in our state."

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Daines' China trip advocates mutual respect

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Montana's senior U.S. senator last week led a bipartisan delegation to the Chinese capital to discuss Iran, international trade and an incoming visit from President Donald Trump.

The trip was the seventh for U.S. Sen. Steve Daines, R-Montana, since he was first elected to Congress, including some work as an informal mediator in the U.S.-Chinese trade war during Trump's first term. Daines, a member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, emphasized at a meeting Thursday that the group of senators were not there on Trump's behalf, but encouraged stability between the two nations.

"I strongly believe that we want to de-escalate, not decouple," Daines said at a meeting with Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi. "We want stability; we want mutual respect."

A readout from Daines' office said the discussions included sustained trade in agriculture markets and the importance of China's relationship with U.S. aircraft manufacturer Boeing. Top of mind was the discussions on how the two countries could cooperate to choke off the fentanyl precursors that originate in China and reopen the Strait of Hormuz during the ongoing conflict between the U.S. and Iran.

Trump is expected to meet with Chinese President Xi Jinping in Beijing this week. In a video of the meeting with Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, Daines emphasized that he and the others in the delegation are U.S. senators, not members of the executive branch, and that they were each representing their constituents at home.

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Court order allows Molnar to return to PSC in person

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It didn't take long for defiant Public Service Commissioner Brad Molnar to return to office.

The Laurel commissioner was ordered to work remotely by the Public Service Commission after findings of workplace harassment last Wednesday, but he filed a lawsuit in federal court Monday.

Molnar got a temporary

restraining order in his favor the same day.

Tuesday morning he was back in his seat with the four other commissioners as they held a hearing on a proposed \$3.6 billion merger between NorthWestern Energy and Black Hills Energy. The lawsuit described the PSC hearing as "what may be the most

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SONNY TAPIA, INDEPENDENT RECORD

Montana Public Service Commissioner Brad Molnar listens to comments made during a hearing in Helena on May 12 inside the Bollinger Room.