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## FWP BLOCK MANAGEMENT

# LAND DWINDLING AS DEMAND RISES



BRETT FRENCH, BILLINGS GAZETTE

As hunter use of private lands offered through Montana's Block Management Program has climbed, the amount of acreage enrolled has declined.

## Hunters demand FWP changes as their access gets ever more tenuous

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Much like the current U.S. economy, Montana's most-prized hunter access program is facing a K-shaped conundrum.

On the one hand, the Department of Fish, Wildlife & Parks' Block Management Program is seeing increased demand, rising from around 250,000 hunters in 1999 to close to 700,000 in 2024, a 180% increase.

That's the rising side of the K.

On the decline side is the number of acres enrolled by private landowners in the popular program, which has declined from a peak of 8.8 million acres enrolled in 2002 to 6.8 million in 2025, a nearly 23% decline.

As a result, more hunters are being

squished into less space, and they've been vocal in demanding FWP address their crowding concerns.

### Surveying landowners

Jason Kool, FWP's landowner sportsmen coordinator, told the Private Land/Public Wildlife Committee at its recent meeting that a series of surveys has been sent to Montana landowners to assess what might incentivize them to participate in the state's public access programs.

The Legislature has already raised the fees paid to Block Management participants, with \$12.3 million paid out last year

Please see **HUNTERS**, Page A4

## DATA CENTERS

# 11 more firms eye MT, SD for sites

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There are nearly a dozen more data center companies interested in buying NorthWestern Energy's electricity than the ones already in the intermediate stages of planning.

NorthWestern Energy recently revealed it is conducting "high-level assessments" with five data center companies who'd like to buy electricity and be based in either Montana or South Dakota, and is working through requests from another six more.

It's not clear where these 11 data centers would be built, it's not clear how much power they'd like to use and it's not guaranteed that they will actually materialize. And the companies are not named.

But what is clear is that there seems to be a huge interest, more than has been revealed thus far, on the part of data center firms regarding their interest in Montana and our next-door neighbor.

And a coalition of environmental nonprofit groups wrote a letter to a Montana government agency last week asking for NorthWestern to identify those 11 mysterious companies.

The 11 data center company requests are in addition to the three data center companies that are already planning to build facilities in Montana and buy an

Please see **DATA CENTERS**, Page A4

# Top MT House Republican to face challenge

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Well below the intrigue of this year's top-ticket races, a Republican legislative primary brewing in eastern Montana has pitted the state Speaker of the House Brandon Ler against former congressional GOP candidate Ric Holden.

The two are running for House District 33, which covers Dawson County and the southern tier of Richland County. It's a hardened Republican stronghold, where Ler has not faced a Democratic opponent in the last three election cycles.

A fence builder from Savage, Ler rose to leadership on a relatively quick track. As a freshman legislator in 2021, he was vice chair of the House Judiciary Committee, where some of the most contentious policy proposals are debated in long, occasionally bruising hearings. By 2023 the caucus elected him whip, and in 2025 he won the party's vote for speaker.

Ler said in an interview this week his speakership likely won't play a large role in his campaign, though he said it

Please see **HOUSE**, Page A2

# Hamilton, Corvallis take top prizes at Science Olympiad

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Hamilton High School and Corvallis Middle School Science Olympiad teams both won at the statewide competition at Montana State University in Bozeman last week — marking the fourth time in a row both teams have advanced in their respective divisions to nationals.

Science Olympiad is one of the country's largest science,

technology, engineering and math competitions, with more than 6,300 teams from 50 states participating each year. MSU has hosted the Montana statewide competition since 1985.

More than 70 teams across the state competed in Bozeman, putting their knowledge, skills and apparatuses to the test in written exams and experiments. This includes

Please see **SCIENCE**, Page A2



MSU PHOTO BY MARCUS "DOC" CRAVENS

Middle school and high school students from around Montana competed at the annual Science Olympiad hosted by Montana State University Thursday, Feb. 19, in Bozeman.

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## Weather

Rain; mixed with snow early  
**High 45 • Low 31**  
**Forecast • A8**

## Inside

Obits	A5	Home	D1
Opinion	A6	Comics	D2
Sports	B1	Classified	B7

