

News & Features

2018 News in Review

A roundup of the top news stories in Northwest Montana in 2018

BY [TRISTAN SCOTT](#) // DEC 25, 2018



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Kalispell Regional Healthcare

Kalispell Regional Healthcare agreed in September to pay \$24 million to settle a whistleblower lawsuit with the Department of Justice, which during the course of its investigation alleged that 63 physicians were involved in

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an illegal kickback scheme to boost revenues and enrich themselves, a violation of the federal Anti-Kickback Statute, the False Claims Act and the Stark Law, which prohibit physician self-referrals.

It was the largest False Claims Act recovery in Montana history.

The settlement resolves allegations originally brought in two lawsuits filed by Jon Mohatt under the qui tam

provisions of the False Claims Act, which allow private parties to bring suit on behalf of the government and to share in any recovery. Mohatt, who was employed as the hospital's physician network chief financial officer, will receive \$5,411,521 as his share of the recovery in the two consolidated cases.

The settlement will be paid over a six-year period.

In settling the case, KRH resolved the allegations and entered into a Corporate Integrity Agreement, but the subsequent turmoil has continued to roil staff.



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Most recently, the Montana Nurses Association filed an unfair labor practices charge with the National Labor Relations Board, alleging KRH violated federal law when it announced a “leadership redesign,” a move that included laying off more than 100 charge nurses, the MNA alleged.

Neo-Nazi Lawsuit

A lawsuit against the publisher of a neo-Nazi website who is accused of orchestrating an anti-Semitic harassment campaign against a Whitefish woman continues to plod along, with the defendant most recently asking a magistrate judge to push back his January trial date.

Attorneys for Daily Stormer publisher Andrew Anglin said in a court filing that requests for information between Anglin and plaintiff Tanya Gersh are still pending and his case will be hurt if the Jan. 22 case isn’t delayed.

Anglin wrote on his website in 2016 that it was time to unleash a “troll storm” on Gersh, whom he accused of trying to force the mother of white nationalist Richard Spencer to move out of Whitefish.

Trump Rallies in Montana

President Donald Trump, in an unsuccessful bid to rally support for state auditor Matt Rosendale in his campaign to unseat U.S. Sen. Jon Tester, visited the Treasure State an unprecedented four times, marking the most visits ever made to Montana by a sitting president.

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Slashing Tires - Flathead B...
12:29 a.m. A Columbia Falls ...
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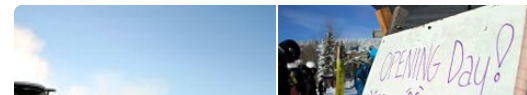


Dec 11, 2018



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Some views from opening day at @SkiWhitefish
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At rallies in Great Falls, Billings, Missoula, and Belgrade, Trump targeted Tester after vowing to campaign against the Democrat from Big Sandy due to the role he played in the failed nomination of Rear Adm. Ronny Jackson to run the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. After Trump nominated Jackson, who was also his doctor as president, in April to run the massive agency, Tester made public several allegations of inappropriate behavior by Jackson. That included drinking while on the job and improperly prescribing medications.

Jackson eventually withdrew his nomination and is under investigation by the Pentagon. Tester supported Trump's next nominee, Robert Wilkie, who is now in the job. But the issue stuck with Trump and the president has held a vendetta against Tester.

Despite the president's efforts, Tester, 62, won for the third consecutive time in a contest that wasn't called until the day after Election Day. He also had never won more than 50 percent in each of his previous victories, which featured a Libertarian candidate than won a few percentage points. His eventual 2018 victory marked the first time he cracked 50 percent of a statewide vote.

The Senate race was the most expensive single electoral contest in Montana history, with more than \$60 million spent by the candidates and outside groups.

Zinke's Meteoric Rise and Fall

Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke, the Whitefish native facing federal investigations into his travel, political activity and potential conflicts of interest, will leave the



administration at year's end, President Donald Trump announced Dec. 15.

Trump, in tweeting Zinke's departure, said the former Montana congressman "accomplished much during his tenure" and that a replacement would be announced soon. The Cabinet post requires Senate confirmation.

Zinke is leaving weeks before Democrats take control of the House, a shift in power that promised to intensify probes into his conduct. His departure comes amid a staff shake-up as Trump heads into his third year in office.

Zinke, 57, played a leading part in Trump's efforts to roll back environmental regulations and promote domestic energy development. When he recently traveled to survey damage from California's wildfires, Zinke echoed Trump claims that lax forest management was to blame in the devastation.

Wildfires Scorch Glacier Park

Though nowhere near as devastating as previous wildfire seasons in Montana, the 2018 summer brought visible smoke to the Flathead Valley, and a fire in Glacier National Park destroyed numerous historic homes and structures along Lake McDonald.

The Howe Ridge Fire near Lake McDonald burned 14,500 acres after it blew up Aug. 11, taking off in heavy lodgepole regeneration from the 2003 Robert Fire.



The Howe Ridge Fire was one of three fires that started following a lightning storm, forcing the evacuation of the Lake McDonald Lodge complex and the Sprague Campground while laying waste to numerous private homes and historic buildings owned by the National Park Service.

Outside of Glacier, the Coal Ridge and Whale Butte fires burned near Polebridge as the Paola Ridge Fire coughed up columns of smoke near Essex. The Boundary Fire west of Waterton Lake in northeast Glacier National Park forced the closure of Waterton Lakes National Park, including all waterbodies.

Water Bottling Plant Lawsuit

A divisive plan to build a water bottling plant near the Flathead River has continued to draw intense scrutiny since an initial permitting application revealed the full scope of the proposal in January 2016, with emotions running high ever since giving rise to multiple legal challenges.

Dozens of neighbors and community groups continued their efforts to halt the production and expansion of the Montana Artesian Water Company.

Flathead County officials now have until Dec. 31 to provide a district court judge with detailed information surrounding their investigation into whether the Montana Artesian Water Company's bottling plant near Creston is in violation of the Egan Slough Zoning District Regulations, according to a recent court order.



Under a ballot measure that passed earlier this year with 70 percent of the vote, the 1,150-acre Egan Slough Zoning District gained an additional 530 acres.

Land added to the district now includes the site of the bottling facility, which isn't in full production but is capable of producing about 30 gallons a minute — a violation of the zoning district's requirements, according to neighbors who filed a complaint with Flathead County officials.

Badger-Two Medicine

Attorneys representing the U.S. Department of the Interior, tribal and environmental groups have filed a notice of appeal challenging a federal judge's decision to reinstate the last remaining oil and gas leases on the Badger-Two Medicine, an area flanking Glacier National Park that holds cultural and ecological significance to members of the Blackfeet Nation.

The filings came just days before the Nov. 23 deadline, and preserve the government's right to appeal Judge Richard J. Leon's Sept. 24 order overturning the 2016 cancellation of leases held by Solenex LLC of Baton Rouge, Louisiana and W.A. Moncrief Jr. in the Badger-Two Medicine area, a 130,000-acre swath of land between Glacier, the Bob Marshall Wilderness Area and the Blackfeet Indian Reservation.

The leases were originally canceled by the Interior Department under President Barack Obama, but Leon ruled that action was improper.



Transboundary Mining Pollutants

A team of researchers from Montana and British Columbia ramped up water-quality monitoring efforts on Lake Koocanusa due to the increasing threat of upstream mining contaminants rushing into Montana's prized watersheds from Canadian coal mines.

The group of scientists and stakeholders hail from Wildsight, Sierra Club B.C., Headwaters Montana, and the University of Montana's Flathead Lake Biological Station, which is performing the testing. In October, the group launched the first installment of its new monthly water sampling program on the sprawling reservoir that straddles the U.S.-Canada border, where concentrations of the mining contaminant selenium has been accumulating at alarming rates.

The goal of the expanded sampling campaign is to learn more about how the watershed behaves during different seasons when concentrations of contaminants like selenium, nitrate, cadmium, and sulphate are greater due to lower flows, as opposed to when concentrations are diluted during high flows in the spring.

Election

More voters cast ballots in the Nov. 6 election than any other midterm in Montana history, and only two presidential elections have had higher voter numbers.

Top races included the unsuccessful bid by Republican state auditor Matt Rosendale to unseat Democrat incumbent U.S. Sen. Jon Tester, which ended as the most



expensive race in Montana history, and Democrat Kathleen Williams failed effort to remove U.S. Rep. Greg Gianforte from the Republican caucus.

Two failed ballot initiatives also gained attention — one to raise the state's tobacco tax, the other to add new mining regulations.

The secretary of state's results from the election puts total turnout at 497,393 voters. That's the state's third-highest total behind the 516,901 people who voted in 2016 and the 497,599 in 2008.

The percentage of registered voters who cast ballots was 69.9 percent, which is the highest percentage for a midterm since 1994.

The 711,322 people who registered to vote is the highest in state history. Another record was set when more than 369,000 people voted absentee — that's 74 percent of all people who cast ballots in the election.

The previous record was 73 percent, set in the 2017 special congressional election.

Sperry Rebuild

More than a year after it was gutted by a wildfire, Glacier National Park's beloved Sperry Chalet is slowly rising from the ashes. Just before the snow began flying in the high country, contractors put the finishing touches on the first and second floors of the dormitory building and the roof before wrapping up their work for the season.



If everything goes according to plan, the chalet will be completed in 2019 and once again welcoming guests soon after.

It's an impressive resurrection following the devastating wildfire fire that gutted the century-old chalet built by the Great Northern Railway. On Aug. 31, 2017, the Sprague Fire made a sudden run toward the chalet that had been evacuated weeks earlier. Despite the best efforts of five firefighters, an ember got inside the building and burned it from the inside out. What had taken more than a year to build in 1913 and 1914 took less than an hour to destroy.

Soon after the fire, Secretary of Interior Ryan Zinke announced that he wanted the historic wilderness chalet to be rebuilt. Last fall, Glacier employees conducted emergency stabilization work to ensure that the remaining stonewalls would survive the winter. The National Park Service streamlined the permitting process for rebuilding the chalet and in June 2018 announced that it would spend \$12 million reconstructing Sperry over the next two years.

Bypass

Montana's U.S. delegation announced that Kalispell would receive a \$12.7 million Better Utilizing Investment to Leverage Development (BUILD) grant to widen two miles of the U.S. 93 bypass south of town and replace the roundabout near Foys Lake with an overpass.

Local officials lobbied hard for the project.



They traveled to Washington D.C. in September to state their case, citing numbers that showed the road was far busier than initial estimates. Traffic flow along the Foys Lake stretch of the bypass was predicted to reach 16,000 to 18,000 cars per day by 2040. It's already reached that number.

The BUILD grant was formerly known as the Transportation Investment Generating Economic Recover, or TIGER, grant, which may sound familiar. Just three years ago, Kalispell and the Flathead County Economic Authority were awarded \$10 million through the program to establish Glacier Rail Park and replace railroad tracks slicing through the heart of the city with a pedestrian trail.

Kalispell Rail Park

In October, the Glacier Rail Park was completed, clearing the way for what local officials have called a “transformative” project: the replacement of an old rail line through downtown Kalispell with a walking path. Contractors are currently designing that path and hope to finalize those plans in 2019. Meanwhile, CHS Kalispell is currently building its new facility at the rail park and Northwest Drywall is hoping to break ground in the spring. Once both of those businesses move into the rail park, rail service in downtown Kalispell will cease and the tracks will be abandoned, some 126 years after they were first put down.

Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women



The U.S. Senate in December passed a bill aimed at battling the epidemic of missing and murdered Indigenous women in the United States, requiring better crime data reporting and collection from law enforcement and creating guidelines for responding to such cases.

Savanna's Act, named for Savanna LaFontaine-Greywind who was brutally killed in North Dakota in 2017, was introduced by Sen. Heidi Heitkamp, D-North Dakota, and co-sponsored by 17 other senators, including Montana's Democratic Sen. Jon Tester.

Indigenous women go missing and are murdered at an alarmingly high rate, with more than 80 percent of Native American women experiencing violence. On some reservations, Indigenous women are murdered at a rate 10 times the national average.

There is no single comprehensive database tracking these cases so there's not a set number of how many women are actually missing, and the current legal framework surrounding these cases is a quagmire of jurisdictional issues among tribal police, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Bureau of Indian Affairs, and state police.

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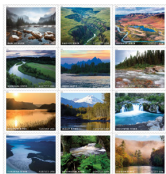


James Morrison

The boundary creek fire west of Waterton DID NOT force closure of the park. An evacuation alert was issued but no one had to leave Waterton.

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