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Conservation

Two become one

by Alex Sakariassen

Over the past two decades, Wildlands CPR has raised the profile of the debate over forest roads, off-road vehicle use and watershed restoration to a national level. It's done so with little more than a handful of staff members, a limited budget and a small Missoula office. But the dream for some time has been to expand.

As of this week, Wildlands CPR is—technically speaking—no more. The nonprofit announced a merger Sept. 16 with the New Mexico-based WildEarth Guardians. Bethanie Walder, former Wildlands CPR executive director and now public lands director for WildEarth, says the merger has been in the works since early this year. It was an opportunity for Wildlands to "be part of something bigger," she says. The merger also gives WildEarth, which has consistently fought coal development in the Powder River Basin, an "anchor in the Northern Rockies."

"Montana's not new to WildEarth Guardians," Walder says, adding that the two organizations have a history of working together. "They've also secured a legal ban against wolverine trapping here in the state."

For WildEarth Executive Director John Horning, Wildlands seemed an obvious choice to improve his own organization. WildEarth already has a host of programs addressing wildlife and endangered species, and has redoubled its efforts on climate and energy issues in the West. With the place-based focus and Congressional lobbying know-how Walder and her colleagues have built, Hornings says WildEarth can better influence national policy and increase its scope to the entire "spine of the continent" from Canada to Mexico.

"Guardians has always been a group with a big appetite," Horning says.

The merger comes with a significant financial boost for Wildlands as well. The group has typically operated on an annual budget of about \$500,000, Walder says. Now, as members of WildEarth, that organizational budget will increase to nearly \$3 million a year. Wildlands cut two administrative positions earlier this year in preparation for the merger. But there could be room for growth, Horning says. Five years ago, WildEarth merged with the two-person nonprofit Sinapu in Boulder. The office has since expanded its staff to eight.

Walder stresses that Wildlands isn't working "in a little box" within WildEarth, but is rather a fully integrated part of an organization primed to take on even more work in the state. "Here in Montana, we'll be able to engage in a broader scope of issues," she says, "including grazing, oil and gas development and comprehensive watershed restoration."