

Response to COVID-19: Perspective from Montana

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The northern Plains are an empty place. For a brief period in history, when the railroad and federal government led people astray, and the dreamers longed for the western landscape, the towns boomed. Now, many of them are filled with only ghosts and the memories of the oldest generation that still remember what life was like in the heyday of European settlement in the early 1900s.

But life does still exist out here. The communities that remain are many miles apart and though population growth is negative, the people that choose to stay try to keep their lives and businesses as vibrant as they can. Largely based on either the agriculture or oilfield industry, the towns are required to figure out how to survive the boom and bust cycles that come with both, and when the bust cycle hits for each industry at the same time, Main Streets and lives are stretched to their breaking point.

We often feel as a collective group that we have been written off by the rest of the world, that our industries are perceived to be unsustainable and that no one really cares where their bread or beef or fuel come from, that the purpose of our lives is anathema to the success of society. We know differently. As farms get bigger because they have to with today's commodity prices, and the oilfield lays off workers due to world economies, the effects are personalized and real.

Then throw in a pandemic.

My husband is a farmer/rancher and I am the CEO of a credit union that serves eastern Montana. While our kids are learning what it is like to stay home with only each other for friendship, we have hardly had to learn the meaning of self-isolation. We have essential businesses to run and we believe that life must go on. Having said that, we needed a weekend escape so got in the car to drive to the Fort Peck Dam project on a Saturday evening.

As I said before, eastern Montana is a desolate place. Coupled with a stay-at-home order, the feeling of desolation was made exponential. Driving across a miles-long dam, with ice stretching in one direction below the backdrop of badlands, and the prairie stretching off to the north and Canada for as far as the eye could see, with no other souls around except the people parked behind a locked gate at the power plant, the loneliness was palpable. We arranged for curbside delivery at a restaurant on the other end of the dam and turned back, the cover of darkness a welcome relief to shield us from the desolation.

When I travel to town every day to provide financial services for our community members, I am reminded of the desolation when I look at Main Street. I've taken to parking my car not in the employee lot, but on the street, diagonal, to give the perception that Main Street is alive and well. But it's not. It hasn't been for a very long time and the pandemic only serves to exacerbate the problem.

We keep on trying to do what we can, though. Nearly every business in our little community is considered essential and so we go to work and try to keep life flowing as much as we can. Agriculture is in the midst of calving season for those who own cows, and planting season for those who grow wheat, pulses, oilseeds and other commodities will be upon us any day. This means that life has to begin bustling. Fuel and fertilizer deliveries will need to be made, tractors will be seen on the highways moving from one field to the next, and the grass of the prairie will green up and give us a sense of hope, like it does every year. Pandemic or not, agriculture doesn't wait for shelter in place orders to be lifted.

We watch from afar as federal policy is shaped and do our best to mold it to our needs, much of it not making any sense to us, a \$1,200 check existing more as weekly allowance than a month's lifeline given the cost of living given the job losses and reduced economic activity that is occurring. But when it comes down to it, it is we who will save ourselves, it is we who know best what our community needs to stay afloat even as the population dwindles and commodity prices suffer.

The people of the northern prairie are a self-sufficient lot. They always have been. They've always had to be. We lift up whoever is hurting with community donations, we support the local theater and restaurants with ingenious ways to comply with stay-at-home orders yet keep the money flowing. And even though the small town gossip might indicate otherwise, we love one another deeply because we know that each individual in our little town is a critical piece of the puzzle to keep life going.

The pandemic will end, we will have taken what community financial infusions we can from federal programs that are not designed for us, and we'll emerge to fill Main Street once again, my car hopefully being moved to the parking lot where it should be. A community divided on how best to handle the issue will once again meet in the middle and life will go on. I know this. I've seen it happen time and again. We are unique in our isolation and experience, a saving grace that will get us through to the other side.