

A New Angle

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Justin Angle: This is A New Angle, a show about cool people doing awesome things in and around Montana. I'm your host, Justin Angle. This show is supported by First Security Bank, Blackfoot Communications and the University of Montana College of Business.

Justin Angle: Hey, folks, welcome back and thanks for tuning in. Today, I'm speaking with Lesli Allison, founding member and executive director of Western Landowners Alliance.

Lesli Allison: We've become a very consumerist society. We think we have a right to everything, but we don't talk as much as we once did about the responsibilities that come with that right.

Justin Angle: WLA seeks to advance policies and practices that sustain working lands in the West, and many of the most contentious and consequential issues here in Montana are right in the wheelhouse of this important organization. Lesli, thanks for coming on the show.

Lesli Allison: Well, thank you very much. It's good to be here.

Justin Angle: So, tell us, where did you grow up and what did your parents do?

Lesli Allison: I grew up in the mountains of northern New Mexico and spent a good part of my childhood living in a tiny forest in holding in the Santa Fe National Forest. And my father was trying to be the next great American writer. So, for the early years of my childhood, he stayed home writing and kicked me out of the house where I got to roam around the national forest, which is really how I got into my passion for land. And then my mom in the early years was a schoolteacher, and later on they ended up opening some restaurants, nightclubs. My father had a desire to introduce jazz to New Mexico. He was a big fan of blues and jazz and wanted to bring it in that way. And so, we did that for a while for my teen years of my childhood and today my mom does some bookkeeping and still lives up in that national forest.

Justin Angle: Fantastic. Talk a little bit about the experiences that led you to be a founding member of Western Landowners Alliance. What sort of positioned you in your career to kind of move to that step of organizing private landowners?

Lesli Allison: Well, it was really quite an unexpected journey. You know, I grew up in the West, as I said, in an inn holding in the national forest. And so, I'd been exposed to a lot of things, Western issues, logging, grazing, mining, all that kind of stuff. So, I was familiar with it. That wasn't what I was really focused on. And I actually went into communications journalism. Things like that, went back east to college and then came back out to New Mexico. I ended up having a unique opportunity to manage a private ranch up in southern Colorado when a friend of mine bought the ranch. And, you know, he was really a conservationist and he bought it to protect it from development. But he also wanted to figure out how we could learn to generate income so that neighbors and future generations could know how to live on a piece of land without spoiling it which is what Aldo Leopold tells us is the oldest task in human history. I really knew very little about agriculture, had never managed a piece of land before in that way and it was a large mountainous piece of land. And so, I got to spend 16 years on the ground, you know, really learning on the job about everything from running livestock, hay production, hunting programs, forestry operations, wildlife conservation. We discovered that we had neighbors all around us traditional ranchers, new buyers, all kinds of folks that really were interested in the same things we were. How do you take care of this land? How do you help support good livelihoods on it? How do you work together as a community? And we formed the Chama Peak Land Alliance, which is still going strong today, doing great work there in that that part of the country. And then I

had the opportunity in 2011 to attend what would become the founding meeting of the Western Landowners Alliance. What we felt we lacked was an informed voice from within the landowner community that was centered on what we think is the thing that matters most, which is the land. We have to take care of the land if we want it to be there for future generations, if we wanted to be there to support all of the things that we as people need from our food and fiber and energy to all the clean water and healthy forests and scenery and quality of life that we all appreciate because we're losing that land and we not only need to conserve it to stop it from going into development, but we also need to really understand how to manage it very well to support all those different values. And we felt that a landowner voice was really needed at the heart of that. And so that was sort of the birth of WLA. It was really exciting to be part of it. And soon after that, I ended up leaving the ranch just because we just didn't have the kind of school system opportunities that I wanted for my son who was coming to school age out there so moved back to Santa Fe and soon after ended up in this role here with Western Landowners Alliance.

Justin Angle: And so, describe the kind of scope of the organization. You know, how many states have members? What's kind of the, give us a little bit of description of the membership profile.

Lesli Allison: So, we span the pretty much the 11 Western states. We also have members from Texas, the Dakotas, Nebraska, other places like that as well. But our geographic focus is really the West and a lot in the intermountain west, although we do have membership in California and working more now on the coasts. We just got a new staff member in Oregon, for example. Our membership is very diverse. We have probably the majority are ranching, many of them on public lands as well as private lands. But we also have people who are farming. We have forestry operations, guest ranches. We have landowners that just own the land for their own private purposes, but care about the fate of that land and how they are taking care of it. So, we have a whole range of people and then we have the full political spectrum is remarkable. We have very, very diverse political perspectives in the organization. But everybody, the place that we really find that common theme is the love of the land and the recognition that they're not making any more of it. We have to do a better job taking care of it.

Justin Angle: So, Leslie, what are the issues that you're working on that you think are most important to Montana and Montanans?

Lesli Allison: Farms and ranches are businesses, and they have to make the bottom-line work. And if they can't make the bottom-line work, they go out of business. And often that means they go into development or some other intensive land

use. It means they can't pass that land onto their kids and so forth. So, we all lose. So, making sure that farmers and ranchers can earn a livelihood on the land and also be able to take care of that land in the process that they don't have to make hard tradeoffs between should I, you know, overgraze this pasture because the elk are also using it. Do we have to be pitting conservation against people's ability to make an income is really important. And then even with wealthy landowners, they're very conscious of the cost benefits of owning a piece of land. It's very expensive to own land and after a certain level, you know, people are just unwilling to continue putting money into that sink if they can't find a way to make that right at the bottom-line level. So that's what I mean when I say the economics of working lands and it's the economic forces that are driving land into development. It just is. Land is getting more and more expensive every day. The input costs are getting more and more expensive every day. There's less and less of it, which is part of what's driving up those costs. As land goes into develop, it drives prices higher on the remaining lands, while at the same time agriculture is increasingly challenged. There's really three economic drivers that keep open lands, open and intact, and that is agriculture, eco-tourism, which includes hunting and fishing, and then a little bit of energy development that's about it. And so, agriculture is challenging, as we all know. It's always been a challenging, risky, you know, narrow profit margin proposition. But that's getting more challenging today with Western water crisis, with some of the things that are happening around climate and food

systems. And so, agriculture is struggling at the moment. And then you look at the eco-tourism piece and that gets you straight into some of these issues around public access. And, you know, can landowners, you know, benefit from the booming outdoor recreation and eco-tourism business or are they going to be injured by it? Right. That's a big economic question that we have to ask. So, economics is at the top of the list. Water is certainly at the top of the list as we get more and more wildlife species getting closer to being listed under the Endangered Species Act, that can really affect private landowners. So, what can we do to help landowners who have done good things for wildlife not be penalized by that particular regulatory oversight? So those are some of the issues that we're focused on right now. And then there's always the conflicts between livestock and wildlife, and we've got a big program in that area as well.

Justin Angle: Yeah. Let's talk about the wildlife piece first. Given it's hunting season here in Montana and throughout the West. I mean, there are all sorts of public debate about the elk population, for example, here in Montana. And, you know, it's moved in many ways from public land to private land. And then there's a bunch of debate over how to allow public access, all sorts of things. How do you all approach an issue like that?

Lesli Allison: Well, I think you have to, you really have to start, I start anyway with thinking about going back to the economics. And if we can't keep these lands intact, if we can't keep them economically viable, we're going to lose them. And when we lose them, that habitat goes away. And with that, the wildlife go away. And so, one of the things I think people may not realize, but private and working lands provide the essential habitat for species like elk in the West. The critical winter range is really on those private working lands. So let me, I'll just give you an example of that. You know, you've got Yellowstone National Park there, for example, and the elk and the other wildlife that visitors enjoy in the summer in Yellowstone. They spend, those wildlife spend their winters on the working lands that surround the park, and they're consuming forage down in those lower elevation pastures and hay fields that farmers and ranchers have worked all year to produce. And so, as the elk populations increase or concentrate on those remaining open working lands, they're literally eating away people's livelihoods. And of course, they also destroy the fences. And they've got brucellosis. And that's a disease transmitted between elk and livestock. These things come at a very significant cost. So, it puts a downward economic pressure on the very lands that are so essential to sustaining those wildlife. So, the question is, how can we make it work that these landowners are able to continue supporting that public wildlife? How can they capitalize on the forage that they're feeding to be able to stay in business and to continue producing, you know, those crucial things that society needs,

like food and fiber and energy and so on. So, I think you have to start with that understanding of it first.

Justin Angle: That makes a ton of sense. And what are some models of kind of successfully balancing those interests?

Lesli Allison: You know, it's a challenge all over the West. And what we've been talking a lot with the sportsman's community about is how can we come together to put the resource first and by the resource we're really talking about the habitat and the wildlife that we all care about and these open lands, how do we make sure that they stay intact and healthy first before we talk about access, before we talk about all these other things? Because if that's gone, then nobody gets what they'd like to pass on to the next generation, right? Whether that's hunting opportunities or, you know, agricultural heritage, whatever it is. So, there's a big debate about whether landowners should be able to sell hunting licenses, to hunt on their properties and things like that. And sportsmen will say, well, when landowners do that, they're privatizing the wildlife. The public owns the wildlife, or at least is responsible for the for the wildlife. And so, the private landowners shouldn't be able to take advantage of that. But I think the flipside of that is to say, well, but the private landowner's also feeding the public wildlife for a good portion of the year out of their pocket. And so.

Justin Angle: And at the expense of the herd. Right. The cattle herd. Right. They're not only consuming a resource that the rancher has invested in but consuming a resource that was invested in to fund and support another sort of economic output. And that's the cattle herd.

Lesli Allison: I think what's so hard for people to understand when you, because we love land in the west, right? All of us live in the west, you have to love land to live in the west. Right. And we drive by land. And I think people don't recognize, again, that these farms and ranches are businesses. And, you know, here's an image that you might think about. Let's say that you have a whole row of parcels and parcel one is developed into, you know, a shopping mall and parcel two is developed into a subdivision of parcel three is a warehouse and parcel four is an energy field and parcel five is a farmer ranch. Well, all those other ones, they may have a fence around them, walls around them. You can't see what's going on inside of them. You know, those things have all taken habitat away. This last one, the rancher, the farm, is the only one that's left that's providing habitat, but it's just as much a business as those others. Right. And if we take its ability to stay in business away, you know, it's the only business in that block that is actually compatible with wildlife. Right. And you see

what happens next. The accusation of privatizing wildlife, I think, leads us into a dead-end public dialog, to be really honest.

Justin Angle: We'll be back to my conversation with Lesli Allison after this short break.

Justin Angle: Welcome back to A New Angle. We're talking about protecting working lands with Lesli Allison of Western Landowners Alliance.

Justin Angle: You're totally right that like when we go into that framing, it sets us up for an adversarial dead-end conversation because, you know, it just pits people against each other rather than sort of trying to find areas of overlap and common ground.

Lesli Allison: It does. And the other piece that, you know, I think creates dead end dialog, I think any time we see other one another, any time we villainize, you know, a class of people, we should a red flag should go up for us. And so, when we say, oh, those billionaires, you know, oh, those new landowners, oh, those whoever they are. Oh, those environmentalists. Oh, those ranchers. You know, we're doing a disservice to our ability to find solutions, because I can tell you that some of those billionaires are buying land that was going into subdivision in order to save it. Some people went to work in the world and made some money and have a very strong conservation and

environmental ethic. And they're trying to take their money and put it to good purpose. So, let's not do this to each other where we short each other and take that cynical view of people. And, yes, there are bad actors on all sides. And for every time somebody tells me about a landowner that's done something egregious for shutting out public access or doing something, I could cite 1500 other cases in which sportsmen were bad actors and poached or did something, you know, negative. I could point to a lot of things that's not a productive dialog either. And so, I think we need to get to a better place.

Justin Angle: And an issue that is kind of has some similar elements, is population growth, particularly in the West. I mean, we saw during COVID a lot of urban flight to more rural communities. We certainly experienced that throughout Montana. And that puts development pressure on the land. It's another economic force and there's all sorts of positions around it, you know, not in my backyard and housing policy and so forth. How is your organization kind of looked at that? Because it's very tempting to look at increased population as, oh, there's these other folks moving into our space, but, you know, people have a right to move around. And how do we kind of allow those forces to play out and manage them in a productive way?

Lesli Allison: I mean, you've said it really well. One of the challenges that we're seeing is that that pressure driving land into development means that the remaining open lands have so many more expectations on them now. Right. So, this is where the elk are starting to concentrate. You're seeing, for example, this huge increase in public outdoor recreation. And it's wonderful. We want people in the outdoors. That pressure, though, pushes wildlife away. It pushes wildlife, you know, half a mile away from where human presence is in some cases. It's pushing that combined with increasing predator populations, for example, in Montana, is pushing elk and predators with them right down on to the private lands. We're seeing elk herds that were migratory now just becoming resident herds down in those farm fields. Right. And grand pastures. Once those things are concentrated there, then everybody says, hey, we want into those ranches. We want access to those animals. Right. But once again, that's going to put even more pressure on those landowners to try to keep that habitat and that land intact. The other thing that is happening is of enormous concern to me personally as a conservationist, is that wildlife have fewer and fewer places to find refuge, and we see it in the extreme. I can tell you in the southwest, where water sources are limited and you see bumper to bumper RV's, fishermen, you name it all on every water source. And that means the wildlife aren't able to get to the water. If you have every stream you know is become a recreational footpath for the public to come fish on the weekends, then not only the spawning beds and fragile streams are really at risk, but all the

wildlife that lives along those streams and riparian areas like that are so important to the West, to the survival of all of our wildlife species. So, we down here, we have willow fly catchers and all kinds of things that live in those willows along the streams. And as we recreate and play, they don't have a place to nest. Take a rest, you know, in the afternoon, put their fawn into a, you know, tucked piece of grass to hide it. I mean, we're really pushing these things. And so private land is playing into more and more and more important role in providing refuge where animals, fish, wildlife can, can breed, can rest, can eat, can get water. So, I think we have to balance that because. Yes. We have a desire to pass on a hunting heritage, for example, and a recreational heritage. But we sure need to pass on some biodiversity, too. So how do we balance that and begin to put some constraints on our own impact? Right. We've become a very consumerist society. We think we have a right to everything, but we don't talk as much as we once did about the responsibilities that come with that right.

Justin Angle: You mentioned water as a prominent issue, and it has some of the similar dynamics. There's probably you know, I'm not a water law expert, but I would venture to say that in most Western states, the sum total of the water allocated in water rights often exceeds the amount of water in the stream, in the reservoir, etc. How are you all approaching productive conversations and policymaking around water?

Lesli Allison: We need to get to a place of more in-depth and productive dialog. And so, what you hear is, hey, farmers and ranchers use 80% of the water. They need to figure out how to give some of that up. But what isn't in that dialog is it's not farmers and ranchers drinking that water. I can guarantee you that. It's going into the food that goes on to American plates. It's what we eat and it's what we drink. It's all our beverages, our lattes, everything that we. It's us consuming that water. So, if you want to talk about cuts to agricultural production and water use, you are talking about cuts to our own diet. Then there's this other question. We work a lot in the Colorado River Basin right now, and there's a great need to get the water, you know, down to places like the big farms that are so important to the American food security, food system and diet. You know, there's a big pull to try to do that. Big pull to get that water into cities right to continue municipal growth. But when you take water out of the headwaters, out of the rural landscapes, you know that irrigation does more than just grow food. It creates wildlife habitat. It creates what we call sort of the living sponge effect of the watershed. Right. When you have a green functional watershed that's well vegetated, when rain falls, that rainfall is captured and infiltrated into the ground. It's stored effectively in good soils and down in the aquifers. And it's slow released throughout the season to those lower elevation uses. That creates a stability in our water supply. That's very important, while also supporting all the wildlife habitat. And then think about this. We have climate issues and we're trying to grow healthy forests, healthy

grasslands to sequester carbon. So, if you dewater these landscapes, these rural landscapes, you decrease our ability to do that as well. And so, there's a very big picture that has to be thought about and many tradeoffs that have to be thought about in trying to find answers to these questions. And so what we're trying to do is we're trying to bring landowners to the table who have the lived experience of owning and managing land, who care about all the values that we're talking about, and have that real world experience of what it means to manage water and to manage water at a time of drought and to come through the local community level to find what are those solutions, because we're all going to have to give something up, there's no question. But that's going to have to be all stakeholders in the system. And as you have communities, for example, that are having to fallow land, take land out of production because there just isn't enough water. How do you share that economic pain? But also, how do you do that in a way that doesn't deplete the soils, the dozen deplete the capacity of the land to regenerate. So, if you take a farm field, for example, and you fallow it for a few years, it's very difficult to get it back. It's very difficult to revegetate it. And that soil then dries up and blows away and we lose that healthy soil and that water holding capacity that's so crucial to everything else that comes after. And so, there's economic impacts. There are social impacts. There are ecological impacts of how we move this water around. And I think the bottom line is we're all going to have to do more with less. Let's do that as well as we can.

Justin Angle: Lesli in our remaining time I'd like to touch on a couple additional issues.

And the first is, you know, the concept of ownership and land ownership and the question of whether a person can own land is kind of a contested and grounded in a European worldview in many ways. How do you all interface with tribal communities and some of the Indigenous populations that exist in and around the land and the landowners that you work with?

Lesli Allison: We're doing everything we can to really pay attention to perspectives from different tribes, indigenous knowledge, the history, what their needs are trying to fit that into the world today where we've got people who have, you know, invested in many cases, you know, generations ago in land as well. And I think that the answer in the long run really is going to have to be we need to figure out a way to look forward. We have to recognize, I think, all the injustices of the past. We need to harvest from Indigenous peoples as much wisdom and guidance as we can. We need to do as much as we can to create justice and equity. And then together we need to be thinking about how do we convey what we have left of our natural heritage to future generations? How do we live together on the land? And I don't think any of us has the solutions today. You know, tribal ranchers and farmers need to make a living just as much as anybody else. Right. How do we solve that economic challenge? We have water issues

that are severe on reservations, just as they are any place else. How do we solve our water distribution problems? Wildlife cross, you know, all of these land ownerships and jurisdictions and important to all of us, how do we work together on those things? And of course, it starts as all good things start by building really good relationships, by building relationships that aren't transactional, of course, that are meaningful relationships. And that takes time. It takes a lot of trust building. And in a world where everyone's really busy, it can be really very difficult. And I feel for the tribes right now because, you know, I think there's this, finally, awareness of tribal contributions, of Indigenous peoples' contributions and needs and interests and rights. And so, everybody is, I think, has a strong desire to work with the tribes. I suspect that many of the tribes are feeling a little overwhelmed with that, to be honest. We kind of feel that way on sort of the ranching side in some cases as well. So, I think, you know, patience, relationship building, being sure we're not othering each other. I don't know if that's a good enough answer for your question, but I don't think there is an easy answer to your question.

Justin Angle: I agree. I don't think there is as well. And I do think the kernel of wisdom there that you've sort of brought up on numerous occasions throughout this conversation is the need to avoid othering and the need to avoid framing issues that lead us down dead-end roads and adversarial positions. Lesli this has been fantastic

learning more about Western Landowners Alliance, the complex issues challenging private landowners on working lands in the West and the work you all are doing to kind of avoid those dead-end paths and adversarial framing. Thanks for spending some time with us today.

Lesli Allison: Oh, well, thank you so much for inviting me and giving me the opportunity. Really appreciate it.

Justin Angle: And if folks want to learn more about the organization and the great work you do, where would you direct them?

Lesli Allison: Well, probably the best place is our website at www.westernlandowners.org.

Justin Angle: Okay, Lesli Allison, thanks very much.

Lesli Allison: All right. Thank you so much. Bye bye.

Justin Angle: Thanks for listening to A New Angle. We really appreciate it. And we're coming to you from Studio 49. A generous gift from UM Alums, Michele and Loren Hansen.

Justin Angle: A New Angle is presented by First Security Bank, Blackfoot Communications and the University of Montana College of Business, with additional support from Consolidated Electrical Distributors, Drum Coffee and Montana Public Radio. Keely Larson is our producer. VTO, Jeff Amentt and John Wicks made our music. Editing by Nick Mott, Social Media by Aj Williams, and Jeff Meese is our master of all things sound. Thanks a lot and see you next time.