

From Mining to Solar Farms: Paths of Energy (In)Justice in Montana

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My dissertation research examines community-scale solar energy developments in Montana within the historical and political context of statewide energy systems and infrastructures. The study asks how these solar projects are created and managed, what the challenges are to creating them, and what their benefits or potential impacts on communities are. It also asks how the particular history of Montana's energy policy and infrastructure shapes contemporary possibilities. My project includes several case sites of existing community solar projects in the state as well as studying historical and contemporary infrastructural development, policy, and energy advocacy work in the state.

For the research, I am conducting semi-structured interviews and participant observation with interlocutors from non-profit and grassroots organizations, utilities, government, and at three project sites: 1) Lewistown—a small agricultural town where community solar offers a path to update aging infrastructure and economic relief for a town marked by economic decline. 2) Red Lodge—historically a coal town and now a tourist hub where community solar offers to both sustain the people living there and conserve the landscape that draws visitors. 3) Blackfeet Nation—where community solar entails a solar farm as well as jobs and job training for Native youth, aiming to address the longstanding structural neglect of Native tribes. While each site shares the basic structure of community solar, their experience and (re)imagination of energy and space differ based on their particular geographical and historical settings, providing different perspectives on what energy justice means and should be.

The CARTSS funding enables me to build closer relationships with organizers and community members, support organizing action, and more deeply engage with the places and communities of my study. It strengthens my research into the place-based manifestations of energy, culture, and economy and the possibilities for energy justice within them.