



Governor Mark Gordon's  
State of the State Address  
To the 66th Wyoming Legislature

February 14, 2022

State Capitol

President Dockstader, Speaker Barlow, members of the 66th Legislature, thank you for your welcome this morning.

It is with a heavy heart that I begin by remembering some friends of Wyoming that we lost this past year: US Senator Mike Enzi and Senator Leland Christensen. They both have a history in this body and continued to serve Wyoming long after they made their impressions here. They will both be sorely missed. There are others we will miss as well – friends and family, but I also want to share that Bobbi Barrasso had significant surgery and is recovering well with her husband Senator John Barrasso at her side. They ask for best wishes and prayers and are thankful to live in Wyoming.

Jennie, I love you and want you and everyone to know Wyoming is a better place because of your work on the Wyoming Hunger Initiative. Programs like Food from the Field, Food from the Farm and Ranch and one of my favorites that we will talk about a little later, Grow a Little Extra, have made the lives of so many of our citizens better. You have shown how Wyoming takes care of our own.

It is an honor to be here with Chief Justice Fox, Justices Kautz, Boomgaarden, Gray, and newly robed Justice Fenn. I am also joined by Secretary of State Ed Buchanan, Auditor Kristi Racines, Treasurer Curt Meier, and Superintendent of Public Instruction Brian Schroeder who is just beginning his second week on the job.

Distinguished guests, friends, family and most importantly you, the people of Wyoming; thank you for this opportunity to address you here in this remarkable chamber. Over the past couple of years, Wyoming has faced down many challenges. Together we have emerged stronger, more engaged, and better equipped to tackle new challenges and seize fresh opportunities.

As I was thinking of this State of the State, I was remembering the June mornings in my youth, when my family drove our cattle to the mountain. The hardest and longest days always came

midway through the drive, when we were already tired from a week's worth of 2 AM risings. Regardless of whether it was snowing, raining, or clear, dusty or muddy, that day we rode the 9 miles from our barn, gathered, mothered, and started our cattle up the "Slip," a steep, rocky, and densely timbered trail. Beyond the elements, there were always challenges that came up: a bull might duck off into a canyon, or a calf might break back.

The day was always brutal for the horses and exhausting for us. The drive had to be completed before the day could become too hot. That meant most of the drive happened before sunrise. It was a hard pull, and at times it seemed like it was never going to end.

Here in Wyoming, we have had a hard pull too over the past couple of years, and folks are wondering if the end will ever come into view. But I believe we are beginning to see the first rays of our sunrise. Over the past couple of years, Wyoming's people kept working. Our students kept learning. Instead of rolling over when DC mandates came our way, we countered and led coalitions of states to test the constitutionality of federal vaccine mandates, leasing moratoriums, and we offered aid to secure our borders.

Despite tremendous challenges, Wyoming is strong and getting stronger. We are strong because of our character, resilient because of our nature, and optimistic because Wyoming people are doers. We respect folks who get things done, not the critics and naysayers. I believe there is an undeniable momentum in Wyoming these days. We can feel that momentum as businesses rebound and unemployment falls away to the lowest level since 2008.

Part of the reason we can feel good about our future is the work of our National Guard. I want to take a moment to recognize these folks, represented today by Adjutant General Greg Porter and Major Jacque Morey. General Porter calls our Guard the sword and the shield of Wyoming and they have earned it. These men and women are essential to our national security. But they have also pulled shifts in Wyoming's hospitals and long-term care facilities, delivered supplies, fought fires across the West, and generally made our lives more secure. I am proud of our airmen, and women, our soldiers, and our civilians. General Porter and Major Morey, would you stand so that we can show our appreciation for our Guard and all they have done. Thank you.

You know, the world has become a decidedly scarier place with China and Russia rattling sabers. Bear in mind, what is happening in the Ukraine is as much about energy as it is about geopolitics and security. The old adage of peace through strength remains true.

That is why our nation's nuclear arsenal remains essential. We can be proud that Wyoming will remain a critical component of our nuclear triad. F.E. Warren Air Force Base – just up the street – will remain a central element of the new Ground Based Strategic Deterrent. Wyoming has always welcomed members of our Armed Forces as family. There is a relationship here in Cheyenne that is historic and, accordingly, I would like to recognize Colonel Catherine Barrington, Commander of the 90th Missile Wing, and 90th Missile Wing Command Chief Master Sergeant Nicholas Taylor. Colonel and Command Chief Master Sergeant, please stand so we can express our appreciation to you and to what the Air Force means to our nation and our state.

Wyoming is a patriotic state, and that is why I remind *everyone* of the words of Article 1, Sections 2 and 3 of our Wyoming Constitution which speak clearly and emphatically about civil rights and equality for “all members of the human race.” And that’s why I remind the world that we always stand for our national anthem in Wyoming.

This patriotism is found in one of the most amazing museums anywhere in the world, the National Museum of Military Vehicles. It is the brainchild of Dan Stark who is here with us today.

Dan built this museum in Dubois and laid it out in a very educational way. It tells a story about America’s involvement in the world. I saw there the same vintage Army Ambulance that my dad drove during World War II, as well as the kind of river boat from the Mekong that my business partner, friend, River Rat and former Senate President John Schiffer served on in Vietnam. There are lessons in that collection that every American needs to know. Thank you, Dan for putting Dubois on the list of must-visit places in Wyoming. You have helped us to remember who we are and how we got here. Dan, would you stand so that we may recognize you.

Across this state, we are stepping up our efforts to remember our Veterans. In a little over a month, we will be recognizing the 50th anniversary of the Vietnam War. That war, perhaps more than most, reminds us of how important it is that our nation stands together and behind the men and women who fought to keep us free.

There are more than thanks needed as we appreciate those who have fought for our freedom. Far too many have suffered PTSD and other war-related injuries. Suicide sadly remains an all too frequent event, especially for our veterans.

I ask you to consider using American Rescue Plan dollars to do more in our fight against suicide. My budget also staffs and opens the new Veterans’ Skilled Nursing Facility in Buffalo.

Particularly poignant this summer was the honor of attending the dedication of the new Path of Honor Veterans Memorial in Ethete, Wyoming. It was too long in coming, but it is absolutely worth the wait.

I want to recognize our neighbors and fellow Wyoming citizens, the Eastern Shoshone and Northern Arapaho tribes. We have always been able to enjoy direct, respectful, and committed dialogue that allows us to work through difficult issues and find a path that is beneficial to all of us.

I am pleased to recognize Chairman Jordan Dresser of the Northern Arapaho Business Council and Wyoming Liaison to the Eastern Shoshone, Marine veteran Lee Tendore.

I am particularly grateful for our work with the Business Councils of both tribes in raising the issue of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Persons and improving enforcement procedures and victim services. Chairman Dresser is working on a documentary that will highlight this important issue to a wider audience. We are proud to lead with you and Chairman St. Clair in stopping this devastating inhumanity.

## DUTIES

There are two constitutional duties that need to be addressed in the coming days: preparing a balanced budget for the upcoming biennium and making sure that legislative districts are properly reapportioned after the last census. Last year you passed and I signed into law a strong voter ID law. Election integrity is critical. Wyoming is proud of its citizen legislators -- and the way we select them.

## BUDGET

Wyoming's Constitution obliges me to present a balanced budget. The one you have before you this session is well-planned, transparent, and forward-looking. And appropriately, it is a frugal one.

We all recognize the challenges we have faced over the last couple of years and it is encouraging that we have seen an uptick in revenues. But even these have come in the teeth of the highest inflation rate we've seen in 40 years. Those of us building businesses at that time remember how devastating the cure to high inflation was too many of our farms and ranches. It crippled energy businesses, and it changed Wyoming.

That is why the budget I have submitted to you reflects a dual commitment – to keep our state government operating effectively and efficiently, and to ensure Wyoming continues to live within her means. We have not seen the end to the assault on our state's core industries perpetrated by this Administration. Therefore, my focus must remain on the long-term fiscal viability of Wyoming and our ability to fight back.

That is why I have proposed placing an additional \$400 million in savings. I have also proposed several other actions to deal with inflation.

My top priority is a market adjustment for state employees. I regard this as critical to the functioning of our state enterprise. From our troopers, snow plow drivers, social workers and others, Wyoming is struggling to staff the very agencies that provide the services the people of Wyoming need. 90 percent of Wyoming state employees are earning less than their peers were - five years ago. And 30 percent of our workforce need a second job to make ends meet.

We cannot ignore these sobering facts. We must do better. Our towns and counties can. They are by hiring our staff away. Neighboring states can and do hire our folks away. This market adjustment is absolutely essential. It cannot be put off any longer.

## ENERGY

The actions of the Biden Administration regarding public lands and energy, are deeply flawed and clearly miss the mark. Instead, they hit Wyoming squarely in our breadbasket. Stopping the exploration and production of federal oil, gas and coal means that our state bears a disproportionate burden of reduced royalties, reduced severance taxes, and reduced economic

benefit. And, for what? These actions won't reduce global warming or benefit consumers. Instead it has caused inflation to soar.

As a matter of fact, during 2021, while the Biden Administration limited oil production in Wyoming, it increased Russian oil imports and called for more production from OPEC. So, I ask you, does anyone in this room think there is an iota of common sense in that policy?

Mr. Biden, tear up your energy policy! Let Wyoming power the country!

Give us the tools and the chance to make this nation energy independent again. Wyoming has it all: the best wind, solar, gas, coal, nuclear and the ability to store 50 years' worth of our nation's total carbon emissions.

Innovation, not regulation is our way forward to give our nation the energy it requires and simultaneously solve the world's climate concerns. We do not need to choose between fossil fuels or new types of energy, to quote the old baseball sage Yogi Berra, "When you come to a fork in the road, take it." And that's what we should do, because we need an all-of-the-above energy strategy.

One company took Yogi's advice. L&H Industrial is from Gillette. It still maintains a strong commitment to coal mining, but they have also taken their expertise to expand to alternatives like wind energy and even aerospace. Today, we are joined by Jason Percifield. He is the third generation of his family to help lead L&H and shows vision about where our state can go while respecting its core industries. Jason, will you stand so that we might recognize you and the industrial spirit of Wyoming.

We have a plethora of opportunities coming our way: advanced nuclear; carbon capture utilization and sequestration; bio-energy CCUS; hydrogen; better, cleaner ways to burn and use coal. Wyoming is leading the research on ways to keep our legacy industries viable and take up new ones as well. We must seize these opportunities. And we will, by fighting ridiculous regulation, promoting sensible development, and embracing new opportunities.

In this budget I have asked for the ability to access \$100 million so we can be ready to – and I say this again – seize the opportunities that match federal and private investments in large-scale energy projects that will help us innovate and grow our mineral and energy economies.

Wyoming is committed to remaining an energy exporter. However, to export energy, we must have reliable, secure sources of transmission. Years ago, Wyoming was a leader in identifying transmission corridors. I remain supportive and committed to ensuring that transmission lines to energy consumer states, particularly to our south and west, are established.

## **AGRICULTURE AND TOURISM**

Just the other day, Jennie was at the Fremont County Farm and Ranch Days. You all know her passion has been to end food insecurity in Wyoming. She reminded me of a story about Bobby Lane who works at the Honor Farm. Bobby knows how to grow hay. But when we had to cut

budgets last year, Bobby was given a new task – grow vegetables for the Honor Farm. He was so successful he donated the excess produce to Jennie’s Grow a Little Extra program. So, Bobby raises food, but more importantly he raises self-esteem.

The inmates that tended to the garden have come away with an interest in farming and a chance to lead productive lives. This is just another example of what state employees do – they go above and beyond. Bobby is here today. Would you stand and be recognized.

The First Lady and I have not been idle with regard to agriculture. We are engaged across the sector to promote our industry. And we look forward to doing even more in the years to come.

As ranchers, Jennie and I know how critical water is to our lives. Water in Wyoming is sacred, and we need the ability to stand our ground when it comes to protecting it. The ongoing drought in the West has raised the stakes over water rights in the Colorado, Snake, Platte, and Yellowstone drainages. When drought or the federal government threatens Wyoming water users, our agricultural producers, our industry, our communities; we cannot afford to be short-handed or unprepared. That is why you will see that I have asked for additional resources for both our State Engineer and our Attorney General.

One continued bright spot for Wyoming is our tourism industry. More people continue to come here to visit and enjoy what we love about this state. Revenue from lodging is now saving the general fund money and creating opportunities for new investments in outdoor recreation. People love Wyoming. We need more camping spots, boat ramps and trails so we can continue to provide more access to Wyoming’s great outdoors – Wyoming people love the great outdoors.

We love our wildlife and we love our open space. That is why now is the time to use one-time revenues to fill the Wyoming Wildlife and Natural Resource Trust. This investment will bring returns many times over for Wyoming, our ranches, our businesses, and our way of life.

## HEALTHCARE

The pandemic has revealed that the demands on Wyoming’s healthcare system and the accompanying costs require a focused approach. That’s why I established the Health Task Force as a way for stakeholders to improve accessibility and affordability. We began by focusing on Wyoming’s fragile Emergency Medical System. We need stability in emergency medical response in Wyoming, and the Task Force is recommending funding to standardize emergency medical dispatch. The Wyoming EMS system will be a top priority for me and the Task Force in 2022.

Remember, our state’s healthcare system is only as effective as the people who work in it.

With us today is Will Deans, a Critical Care Nurse at Cody Regional Health. Will and his colleagues have been dependably providing care for patients with COVID-19, along with the other ailments that require medical attention, regardless of pandemic waves. Will, we salute you and all healthcare workers.

## EDUCATION

One of our state's top priorities must be our education system. Wyoming schools were reported as having educated more kids in-person for more days during the pandemic than any other school system in the country. That is amazing stuff, and when I report this to my colleagues they ask how we did it. I have to answer it has been our school boards, school staff, students, parents, teachers and communities that made it happen and deserve our gratitude.

I want to take this opportunity to recognize Anne Ochs, an educator for more than 30 years. Mrs. Ochs was elected to the Campbell County Board of Trustees in 2010 and has served as the Board Chair since 2017. She is a great example of how many Wyoming citizens are willing to serve their community on behalf of Wyoming students and families. Anne, thank you for your courage and your leadership in this truly remarkable time. Please join me in a round of applause for Anne and those she represents who serve on local school boards around the state.

There are two other individuals I would like to recognize. The Wyoming Teacher of the Year from 2021, Alexis Barney, and the 2022 Teacher of the Year Brittney Montgomery. You two are absolutely amazing and your students know it. Alexis, who was unable to join us today, is a fourth- and fifth-grade teacher at Evansville Elementary and Brittney teaches first grade at Harrison Elementary in Green River. Your commitment to our children is critical to our state's future. Let's give them a hand.

The future of our state depends on a quality education system that helps students stay competitive in a changing world and continues to make Wyoming an attractive place to raise a family. There is more to that equation than just cost. To that end, I have launched the Reimagining and Innovating the Delivery of Education Advisory Group, or RIDE, to examine Wyoming's primary and secondary education system and make recommendations to elevate it into a position of national leadership. We cannot do that without understanding what those closest to education expect from their schools, and that starts with parents, businesses, and community members.

## WIP

We rightfully invest a lot in the education and development of our kids. But data show what we all know -- they are leaving. The crux of this issue is a catch 22: our children leave because they don't see long-term opportunities for employment or careers, and businesses are hesitant to relocate or expand because they are uncertain about their future workforce. But this is changing. Our focus on economic diversification has broken this Catch 22. Wyoming kids have a work ethic that is second-to-none, and already new enterprises are coming: Ranging from advanced nuclear, to digital assets and outdoor recreation because they are seeing what Wyoming is doing to change the game. We are investing in new ways of looking at career, technical and higher education. It's essential that we always stay ahead of the curve. We have to keep this momentum going, and that is what the Wyoming Innovation Partnership or WIP is all about.

WIP was born of communication across community colleges, and the University; but it quickly has evolved to include the Business Council and Workforce Services, and shortly, it will expand

to include community economic development organizations, and industry. All of these entities will be important in identifying opportunities and local needs, building curriculum, and importantly measuring performance. More than a set of programs, it is a way of envisioning how Wyoming can use her unique strengths to attract, build, refine, and engage our entire capacities to advance Wyoming and diversify our economy. If you are not at the table in this new time, then you are on the menu.

Wyoming is actually bursting with opportunity across all of our sectors. We want our education system to be part of the way we grow. WIP is all about more people who do, and more people who can. I want to thank the presidents of our community colleges and UW, and the others who have nurtured this effort for their vision.

## CLOSING

Let me close by finishing the story of our cattle drive.

When we got to the top of the Slip, we knew the drive would be easier. And to be there, just as the sun came up, I could look out over the red hills of my home, and make out the shadow of the Pumpkin Buttes to the east and the Big Horns to the North. I could smell the pine and hear the meadowlark. Being there on a Wyoming morning, with a good horse, a sense of accomplishment, and a clearer path forward was a feeling I will never forget. Things were right in the world and our job would become easier. It made all the struggle of the earlier darkness worth it.

And so it is with our state these past few years.

As Governor, I am always asked why am I so optimistic? It's simple. To paraphrase a wise man, what lies behind us are small matters compared to what lies ahead, and that depends on what lies within us.

Members of the 66th Legislature, thank you for your service to the State. Thanks to your families that are here or at home supporting you. I especially want to thank President Dockstader and Speaker Barlow for their leadership through these trying times and for their friendship. I know for some of you this could be your last session, while others are just starting, but together we can and must do much for Wyoming. Let us move forward with courage, confidence, and conviction.

There are a lot of things that come to mind when the term "cowboy" comes up. To me it is not a big hat, angora chaps, or tough talk. A cowboy is a decent, practical, hard-working, sort of person, whose humility is infectious, whose ability knows no bounds, and who would do anything for a buddy, knows horses, and is not afraid to admit mistakes.

Right now, the world needs more cowboys.

Thank you. God bless America and God bless Wyoming.