

# Roylene: ‘She is proactive, she is positive, she is persistent’

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This is a great example of this.”

## Longest-serving conservationist

Roylene, 52, is the nation’s current longest-serving state conservationist, having held the position in two states since 2005. Today, she steers the efforts of the Natural Resources Conservation Service in Washington state.

NRCS tailors its programs to farmers’ and ranchers’ needs to help them protect and improve water quality and soil health and gain efficiencies. Partners include tribes, counties, conservation districts and other agencies and land trusts that help finance farmers’ projects.

“I love Washington’s attitude, we don’t talk about it — well, we do talk about it, but we do it, and we get it done,” said Roylene, who grew up in Montana.

## The old fence

An old five-wire slip fence stands on the ridge above Roylene’s family ranch in northcentral Montana.

Her great-great-grandfather built it nearly 100 years ago, she estimated. It divides her family’s ranch and land owned by the Blackfoot Nation, of which she is a member.

When the reservation was formed, many members of the tribe did not know how to raise livestock, so others could use the land free of charge, bringing in sheep.

Roylene’s family built the fence to keep sheep out and their horses in.

The family still operates the original tribal allotment, owning and leasing 4,000 acres.

The fence perfectly captures Roylene’s devotion to her family, her tribe, the land, and to farmers and ranchers.

“It is so cool to go up there and touch that wire and know that all of six generations have worked on this fence and hard on this land to take care of it and ensure that we continue,” she said, visibly moved at the thought.

Roylene’s father, Roy, was a rancher and her mother, Cynthia, is a retired science teacher. Their backgrounds made NRCS a perfect fit for their daughter, who has worked for the agency 33 years.

She earned a bachelor’s degree in range management at Montana State University.

Before arriving in Washington, she was state conservationist in Rhode Island for three years.

She longed to return to the West.

“As a person who grew up in Montana, the mountains and the prairies are in my spirit,” she said. And Washington intrigued her, with its diversity of natural resources and crops.

“I was asked by the (NRCS) chief in 2008 during the interview for the Washington state conservationist position, if I felt I could build and (strengthen) partnership,” she recalled.



Matthew Weaver/Capital Press

**Washington State Conservationist Roylene Comes At Night beams while looking over solar panels installed with the assistance of the state Natural Resources Conservation Service on rancher Ben Merrill’s pasture.**

“Without a doubt, I said, ‘Yes.’”

When she arrived, Washington state’s NRCS budget was \$9 million. Funding increased as partners got involved through regional conservation programs and applied for more federal support. Today, the budget is \$59 million.

Before Roylene’s arrival, Washington State Conservation Commission members were frustrated, said Bahrych, the former commissioner. The previous administration had left a huge backlog of grant applications for major federal programs.

Because it didn’t process the applications for shovel-ready projects quickly enough, the state had to send money back to Washington, D.C., at the end of each fiscal year, Bahrych said.

“They were sending back like \$1 million a year just because they couldn’t get their act together to get it out to the farmers and ranchers for the conservation practices that they really wanted and needed to do,” she said. “And because we weren’t using all our money, the next year we got less.”

Roylene pledged to use every dollar and access the extra funding that came back from other states.

“Within a very short period of time, she had the backlog completely gone and ... she was the first in line to get more funding from other states...,” Bahrych said. “She did that every year — she used every dollar we got, it all went on the ground for conservation, and she got more.”

## Doing right by the land

Roylene comes by her love of the land naturally. Her father would often buy marginal land and revitalize it.

“One of the units he was so excited about, it was totally white, it had salts in it, and I was like ‘Dad!’” she remembered. “And he goes, ‘We’re going to rebuild it.’”

The family still owns that piece of property, and it now produces “some of the most outstanding alfalfa,” she said.

“It took about three or four years to do right by that land and restore it,” she said.

Her father died in 2016.



Courtesy photo

**Roylene has always had a passion for the Earth and science. Here, she competed in an international science fair in 1985, where she studied the migration patterns of deer mice.**

Her nephew took over and is the sixth generation to run the operation, which now raises cattle.

She visits often, serving as an adviser and “absentee landowner,” she said, but remaining hands-off because of her role in NRCS.

Her maiden name, Rides At The Door, has special meaning.

“We earned the name because my great-great-grandfather actually stole medicine pouches from other tribes that hung outside the tepee doors,” she said. “He also counted coup on other tribes (got close enough to touch an enemy without causing him harm, considered the ultimate act of bravery) by stealing horses from them. At one point he had 900 head of horses. The horse was who we were.”

NRCS later told the family to sell all its horses and switch to calves. “That didn’t go over real well,” she said.

“What I learned from us being in the programs is how they tried to change us to fit the program,” she said. “My goal is to make sure we change the program to fit the needs of the producers. They shouldn’t have to change something they’ve been doing for six generations.”

## ‘Tremendously compassionate’

With the help of the NRCS Environmental Quality Incentives Program, or EQIP, rancher Ben Merrill installed a solar-powered water pump

times, (she) finds the money. She is willing to do whatever she can.”

“She wants to understand what the issues are and then empower people to get a solution,” said Mark Clark, retired director of the conservation commission. “She truly wants to work on relationships and understanding what the problems are with everyone. She won’t shy away from that.”

“She is proactive, she is positive, she is persistent,” said Bahrych, the former conservation commissioner. “She’s also tremendously compassionate. She brings that compassion to the landscape, wildlife, tribes in the state, farmers and ranchers — to everyone.”

## Building bridges

Roylene hopes another part of her legacy is as a bridge builder between cultures and communities.

She’s conducted cultural awareness training for USDA for 28 years, leading many courses and training more than 10,000 people.

She hopes that’s one of the reasons tribes have become more included in NRCS programs.

“I don’t necessarily believe culturally we believe different, but I think legally, because of treaties and others, there are some complications there that can cause a barrier or be a benefit,” she said. “I’m hoping that people will see it as a benefit.”

She’s proudest of linking partners together in watershed projects.

“To me, conservation and Mother Earth are politically neutral,” she said. “We all want clean air, we all want clean water. Sometimes, it’s just getting the right people at the right time at the table.”

“Being Native, a woman and a producer means that Roylene grew up with her feet in multiple worlds,” said Paul Ward, former manager of Yakama Nation Fisheries. “Roylene grew up on a tough landscape doing all the work that her father, brother and male cousins did. She is an accomplished horsewoman, which shows through in her patience and calm approach.”

Ward calls her presence in Washington “fortuitous.”

“Roylene has taken what can be a difficult bureaucracy to navigate and really

brought Washington NRCS to a place of working closely and productively with the collective conservation body across the state,” he said. “We have a long way to go in salmon and steelhead recovery and water security for all sectors, and Roylene’s leadership style fits well to the challenge we are facing in Washington state.”

Roylene would like to see large national companies bring funding to the table. NRCS can figure out how to match any funding they’d provide with federal dollars, she said.

“We have some of the lead corporations and companies in Puget Sound and in the state of Washington, but I have yet to see them come to the table and really be a main partner in what we’re doing,” she said. “I know there are conversations going on, but I still haven’t seen them come to the table completely. I think we’re missing that opportunity together. We haven’t got there yet.”

## Sundancing

Roylene is also a sundancer, participating in a ceremony in which she dances from sun up to sun down.

She fasts during the four-day ceremony, which is an offering to the Creator, asking him to hear the prayers of the people, as well as her own.

The ceremony includes collecting plants such as sage, sweetgrass, sweet pine, cedar and others to burn in a smudge as prayers are lifted to the Creator. The plants are collected in summer and prepared in winter for the following summer’s ceremony.

She also spends time with family and others in the tribe, teaching and leading ceremonies. Her husband, Michael Comes At Night, is also involved with spiritual leaders in the tribe.

The couple hunts for buffalo and elk, preparing the meat for ceremonies, which can draw up to 400 people.

They attend other sundances hosted by other families during the summer.

“The next ceremony, we might be the family that provides a meal, or we might be the family that helps to sing the songs, or we might be the person that helps the dancers,” she said.

## ‘Keep fighting the fight’

Roylene’s not planning to depart NRCS any time soon.

“I’ll still be the longest-standing (state conservationist) for a few more years,” she said.

Farmers and ranchers are the foundation of who and what America is, she said.

“As we know with history, if agriculture fails, those countries fail,” she said.

Her goal is to help farmers and ranchers continue their work as they pass their culture and traditions on to new generations.

Her message to them: “Keep fighting the fight, because I know days it gets tough, and I know days it’s hard, and I hope they will just keep hanging in there and keep helping us to build what they need to continue. Without them, we’re nothing as a country.”

## Attack: A specialist spent several days monitoring area; wolves did not return

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would apply for compensation funds. The state Office of Species Conservation distributes money for wolf-caused losses of livestock as verified by USDA Wildlife Services.

The state Department of Fish and Game authorized Wildlife Services to conduct a control action in the area through the end of May but no wolves were killed.

Jared Hedelius, state director for Wildlife Services, said the agency sent a wildlife specialist to the site. The specialist spent several days monitoring the area and the wolves did not return.

“Right now we are continuing to monitor the situation up there but do not have an active control action in that area anymore,” Hedelius told Capital Press June 2.

“We know that wolves are present on the Boise Front” mountain range, Brian Pearson, a Fish and Game regional spokesman, said in the release.

The attack was in Game Management Unit No. 39, where wolves chronically kill livestock.

“We have expanded seasons and methods of take” in the unit “and often have to address depredations using control actions,” Pearson said. Fish and Game officials

said they are unsure whether the wolves were dispersing from a pack or whether a pack is in the Shaw Mountain area.

Shirts could not immediately be reached for comment.

The sheep have since moved away from the area where the attack occurred. Wildlife Services typically removes five to 14 wolves annually from the Boise foothills in response to livestock depredation.

Fish and Game estimates there are about 1,600 wolves in the state after pups are born in the spring. The population typically dips below 900 during late winter due to hunting, trapping seasons and other causes of wolf mortality.

## Drought: California already buys one-third of its power from out-of-state sources

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the EIA forecasts.

Normally, hydroelectricity meets about 15% of the state’s summer energy needs. This year, it will provide 8%, the EIA projects.

To partially fill the gap, California will use more electricity generated by natural gas. The EIA estimated carbon emissions from the energy sector will increase by 978,000 tons, or 6%.

Even then, the state will need to import another 2.9 million megawatts-hour. California already buys one-third of its power from out-of-state sources.

The EIA projected California

will generate about as much hydro-power this summer as it did in 2015, another poor water year.

The state, however, has less ability than it did seven years ago to ramp up during peak demands to offset the loss of hydropower, according to the EIA.

California has added solar power and battery storage since 2015, but 58% of the state’s natural gas-fired power capacity was shut down.

The EIA said droughts in Arizona and Nevada also could push up the cost of electricity. Prices could be held down if retail customers adjust and use less electricity during peak times, according to the report.