

March 12, 2026

From: Deputy Commissioner Joe Thiel

To: Board of Regents

Please see below for an executive overview of the Request to Plan items that are being proposed for your review and action at the March 2026 meeting of the Board of Regents. These items have been submitted by the campuses and reviewed by the Chief Academic Officers of the Montana University System and community colleges. OCHE staff has reviewed the items and provided a short analysis below relying on information submitted by the campuses. For more information and specific details on each item, please see the supporting documentation included on the Academic, Research, and Student Affairs Committee agenda.

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**Montana State University Bozeman**

**Request to Plan the Montana Geospatial Insights and Solutions Institute (MT-GIS)**

Montana State University proposes to establish the Montana Geospatial Insights and Solutions Institute (MT-GIS Institute) as a centralized hub for geospatial science, applied research, and workforce development. The Institute will integrate geographic information systems (GIS), remote sensing, unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) technologies, and advanced spatial analytics to support interdisciplinary research and problem-solving.

Demand for geospatial expertise continues to grow statewide and nationally, driven by research expansion, industry needs, and workforce shortages. Students require preparation for high-demand technical careers; researchers need coordinated access to advanced instrumentation and computational infrastructure; and Montana seeks to attract and retain science- and technology-based industries. MSU currently houses significant geospatial assets, including the Geospatial Core Facility and the Spatial Sciences Center, with specialized equipment, UAV platforms, spectrometers, and high-performance computing capacity. These resources are distributed across campus and underutilized. The MT-GIS Institute will consolidate infrastructure, streamline access, and provide coordinated education, training, grant development support, and outreach to faculty, students, industry practitioners, and tribal communities.

By centralizing expertise and infrastructure, the Institute will reduce duplication, accelerate interdisciplinary collaboration across MSU and the Montana University System, and expand applied geospatial capacity statewide. This coordinated approach strengthens Montana's research competitiveness, supports workforce development, and advances sustainable economic growth.

**Request for authorization to establish the Applied Quantum Center (QCORE)**

Montana State University proposes the Applied Quantum CORE (QCORE) to position Montana as a leader in the rapidly emerging quantum technology sector. QCORE will advance applied research, technology development, workforce training, and industry partnerships aligned with MSU's land-grant mission.

Quantum technologies are increasingly central to national security and economic competitiveness, particularly as advances in quantum computing create both risks and opportunities for modern encryption systems. National analyses identify supply chain vulnerabilities and project significant workforce shortages in quantum-related fields.

MSU is uniquely positioned to lead in this space, with established strengths in quantum materials and photonics and rare access to both photonic and superconducting quantum computing platforms. QCORE will consolidate existing infrastructure, strengthen enabling technologies such as photonics, cryogenics, and advanced materials, and expand collaboration with federal agencies and private industry.

The Center enhances research competitiveness, develops high-skilled talent, and ensures Montana's participation in a strategically critical sector.

### **University of Montana Missoula:**

#### **Request for authorization to plan a Rural Juris Doctorate**

The Alexander Blewett III School of Law proposes a four-year, part-time, flex online Rural Practice Juris Doctor. Students will complete the same 90-credit J.D. degree through primarily online coursework combined with some in-person intensive skills sessions delivered at Montana University System locations statewide.

The program addresses two pressing needs: affordability and access. Beginning July 1, 2026, new federal student loan caps (\$50,000 annually; \$200,000 lifetime) will limit borrowing for many students, while current cost of attendance exceeds annual limits. The flex model reduces relocation and lost-income costs, expanding access for working Montanans.

At the same time, Montana has approximately 3.18 attorneys per 1,000 residents—below the national average—with legal services concentrated in Missoula and Bozeman. The 2024 Rural Justice Report from the Legal Services Corporation recommends targeted investment in rural legal pipelines.

Enrollment will scale to approximately 120 students by year four, supported through phased hiring and bridge funding until self-sustaining.

#### **Request for plan a Master's of Indian Law and Policy**

The Alexander Blewett III School of Law's Department of Public Administration & Policy proposes a 36-credit Master of Indian Law and Policy (MILP), alongside a 12-credit graduate certificate. The program will be offered online and in hybrid formats, providing interdisciplinary coursework in Federal Indian Law, tribal sovereignty, intergovernmental relations, public administration, trust responsibilities, and natural resource governance.

Montana is home to twelve tribal nations, and state law (MCA 18-11-101 et seq.) underscores the importance of government-to-government relationships. Tribal governments, public agencies, nonprofit organizations, and working professionals have expressed demand for accessible, graduate-level training in tribal governance and jurisdiction.

The program builds on existing faculty expertise and coursework within the law school, the Margery Hunter Brown Indian Law Clinic, and the American Indian Governance & Policy Institute, minimizing new resource requirements.

No comparable master's program exists within the Montana University System or the Rocky Mountain West. The MILP utilizes existing offerings and creates opportunities for collaboration with Montana's seven Tribal Colleges and Universities.

### **Request for authorization to establish the Montana Climate Office (MCO)**

The Montana Climate Office (MCO) at the University of Montana serves as the state's official climate, drought, and water information hub. The Office integrates research, monitoring, education, and decision support to provide actionable climate data to communities, state agencies, tribal nations, and industry partners.

Increasing drought, wildfire, and flood risks have intensified demand for science-based guidance. Simultaneously, students seek training in climate science, hydrology, and data analytics. The MCO places students in real-world research and statewide monitoring networks, strengthening workforce readiness.

The Office leverages existing infrastructure, including the Montana Mesonet and Climate Atlas, along with federal and state partnerships and competitive grants. No new institutional funding is required. Rather than duplicating efforts, the MCO coordinates collaboration across the Montana University System, tribal nations, and federal agencies.

### **Request for authorization to plan a Bachelor of Science in Wildlife Biology with an Aquatic and Terrestrial Concentration**

The University of Montana proposes an integrated Aquatic/Terrestrial concentration within the existing B.S. in Wildlife Biology. The concentration merges current terrestrial and aquatic pathways, providing students the opportunity to learn in both areas while maintaining the 120-credit structure.

Employers increasingly seek professionals capable of working across ecological systems, applying quantitative methods, and managing landscape-level conservation challenges. The integrated concentration addresses enrollment imbalances, expands curricular flexibility, and aligns training with workforce expectations.

No new faculty, staff, or facilities are required. No comparable named concentration exists within the Montana University System, minimizing duplication. Coordination with Montana State University ensures transparency and alignment.

### **Montana Technological University:**

#### **Request for authorization to plan a PhD in Energy Engineering and Science**

Montana Technological University proposes a modular, interdisciplinary Ph.D. in Energy Engineering and Science to expand advanced research capacity, workforce preparation, and in-state doctoral pathways. The 60-credit program includes a shared core, specialization coursework, and dissertation research, with tracks in Power Systems and Technologies, Energy Conversion and Application, and Petroleum and Subsurface Engineering.

Energy employment, particularly in clean energy and grid modernization, continues to grow nationally. Montana is receiving significant federal investment in energy infrastructure, which is increasing the demand for doctoral-level expertise. No MUS institution currently offers a dedicated energy-focused Ph.D.

The program will require approximately 3–4 FTE faculty across participating departments, supported initially through existing campus structures with strategic additions as enrollment grows. The program fills a statewide gap and supports collaboration with Environmental and Mining Engineering, the Montana Bureau of Mines and Geology, and other MUS partners.

### **Request for authorization to plan a Master of Science in Nuclear Energy**

Montana Technological University proposes an M.S. in Nuclear Energy to address state and national workforce shortages. Federal investment and industry expansion are increasing the need for nuclear expertise as much of the workforce retires.

The planned retirement of the Colstrip power plant by 2043 will remove approximately 1,000 MW of in-state generation capacity. Utilities, including NorthWestern Energy, identify nuclear power as a potential long-term replacement resource. Montana currently has no graduate nuclear program.

The proposed 30-credit thesis or 36-credit non-thesis degree will include reactor theory, radiation physics, nuclear materials, safety, lifecycle analysis, and policy. The program leverages existing faculty and infrastructure and will collaborate with Idaho National Laboratory and Montana State University. Three FTE faculty (two at Montana Tech and one joint appointment) will be needed to support the program.

### **Request for authorization to Plan a Associate of Applied Science with concentrations in Construction Technology**

Highlands College proposes expanding its two-year A.A.S. in Construction Technology (Carpentry) to include Commercial Construction and Specialized Restoration Construction tracks. Students will complete a shared first-year foundation before selecting a concentration.

According to Montana's Labor Day Report, Montana's construction sector added 1,480 jobs last year, with projected openings of 3,700 from 2024–2034. Average wages exceed \$71,000, and population growth continues to drive residential, commercial, and restoration demand.

The expansion requires one additional full-time faculty member and industry-based adjunct instructors. Partnerships are underway with the Economic Development Council of Butte-Silver Bow and regional industry leaders. The model is scalable and aligns with Montana Technological University's workforce-driven mission.

**Montana University System**  
**REQUEST TO PLAN – OCHE ANALYSIS**

ITEM 223-1001-R0326

**ITEM NAME:** Request to Plan a Rural Practice Juris Doctorate

<b>OCHE ANALYSIS</b>					
<b>Labor market outlook</b>	<p>According to ONet, attorneys in Montana earn an average of \$100,000, with 150 projected job openings from 2022-2032. Currently, the UM Law School graduates 70-90 students per year with a recent average of 91% finding employment following graduation, and of that 77% in Montana.</p>				
<b>Related programs / centers / institutes</b>	While nationally other hyflex JD programs exist, there are no other options currently offered in Montana.				
<b>Budget Impact</b>		<p><b>LOW</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Only incidental costs</li> </ul>	<b>X</b>	<b>MEDIUM</b>	<p><b>HIGH</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• substantial commitment of resources relative to institutional budget</li> </ul>
<b>CAO discussion and follow-up</b>	<p>While current faculty and staff will support the program, significant new investments in additional faculty and student support will be necessary after the program launches.</p>				
<b>CAO discussion and follow-up</b>	Fiscal note to be added to RTP list.				
<b>ARSA/BOR comment and direction for Level II proposal</b>					

**Montana University System**  
**REQUEST TO PLAN – OCHE ANALYSIS**

**ITEM 223-1002-R0326**

**ITEM NAME:** Request to Plan a Masters of Indian Law and Policy

OCHE ANALYSIS					
<b>Labor market outlook</b>					
<b>Related programs / centers / institutes</b>	While other programs exist in the region, no similar program exists in Montana.				
<b>Budget Impact</b>	<b>x</b>	<b>LOW</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Only incidental costs</li> </ul>	<b>x</b>	<b>MEDIUM</b>	<b>HIGH</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>substantial commitment of resources relative to institutional budget</li> </ul>
	Program will rely on existing faculty and courses; however, there will be some additional impacts to advising loads, course loads, etc.				
<b>CAO discussion and follow-up</b>					
<b>ARSA/BOR comment and direction for Level II proposal</b>					

**Montana University System**  
**REQUEST TO PLAN – OCHE ANALYSIS**

**ITEM 223-1004-R0326**

**ITEM NAME:** Request to plan an Integrated Aquatic and Terrestrial Concentration in the BS in Wildlife Biology

OCHE ANALYSIS				
<b>Labor market outlook</b>	<b>Wildlife biologists in Montana can expect approximately 30 annual openings, which is equal to an 11% growth from 2022-2032.</b>			
<b>Related programs / centers / institutes</b>	Similar programs do exist in Montana, outside of the already offered Wildlife Biology program at the University of Montana. MSU holds a Wildlife Management program, SKC hosts a Wildlife Management program, while several other institutions host ecology and environmental biology programs. The current program at the University of Montana is one of the largest-enrolled programs at UM.			
<b>Budget Impact</b>	x	<b>LOW</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Only incidental costs</li> </ul>	MEDIUM	<b>HIGH</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>substantial commitment of resources relative to institutional budget</li> </ul>
	As the current program offers students the option to explore either terrestrial or aquatic concentrations, the faculty and curriculum are in place.			
<b>CAO discussion and follow-up</b>				
<b>ARSA/BOR comment and direction for Level II proposal</b>				

<b>Institution</b>	<b>Program</b>	<b>Purpose</b>	<b>Need / Demand</b>	<b>Resources</b>	<b>Impact</b>
<b>MSU</b>	Montana Geospatial Insights & Solutions Institute (MT-GIS)	Central hub for geospatial research & tools (GIS, UAVs, remote sensing)	Growing demand for geospatial expertise; dispersed/underutilized MSU resources	Leverages existing facilities (Geospatial Core Facility, Spatial Sciences Center)	Consolidates equipment & expertise, enables interdisciplinary research, workforce development, and economic growth
<b>MSU</b>	Applied Quantum Center (QCORE)	Advance applied quantum research, technology, and workforce	Critical for national security; workforce shortages; MSU has unique computing systems	Consolidates existing infrastructure and faculty expertise	Positions Montana as a quantum leader; supports industry partnerships and talent development
<b>UM</b>	Rural J.D. Program	4-year part-time online-flex J.D. focused on rural practice	Attorney shortage in rural areas; federal loan limits	Existing law faculty and statewide clinical partnerships	Expands access, reduces costs, builds rural legal workforce; scales to 120 students by year 4
<b>UM</b>	Master's in Indian Law & Policy (MILP)	Graduate training for tribal, state, federal governance	Montana's 12 tribal nations need trained workforce; no comparable programs	Existing faculty, courses, Indian Law Clinic	Strengthens tribal governance capacity; supports workforce development respecting sovereignty
<b>UM</b>	Montana Climate Office (MCO)	Statewide climate, drought, water data hub	Rising climate risks; student demand for applied training	Montana Mesonet, Climate Atlas, trained staff, federal/state partnerships	Enhances climate resilience, supports workforce development, enables interdisciplinary collaboration

<b>Institution</b>	<b>Program</b>	<b>Purpose</b>	<b>Need / Demand</b>	<b>Resources</b>	<b>Impact</b>
UM	B.S. Wildlife Biology – Integrated Aquatic/Terrestrial	Merge aquatic & terrestrial tracks for cross-ecosystem training	Employers demand integrated ecological expertise; current tracks limited	Existing courses & faculty; coordination with MSU	Improves student readiness for workforce/grad school; strengthens curriculum alignment
<b>MTECH</b>	Ph.D. in Energy Engineering & Science	Interdisciplinary doctoral program with three tracks	Growing clean energy sector; no in-state doctoral option	3–4 FTE faculty; existing labs/facilities	Expands advanced research, workforce development, and statewide collaboration
<b>MTECH</b>	M.S. in Nuclear Energy	Graduate training to address nuclear workforce gaps	Workforce shortages; Colstrip retirement; no in-state program	Existing faculty; partnership with Idaho National Lab	Prepares graduates for energy, defense, medical sectors; supports Montana energy strategy
<b>MTECH</b>	AAS Construction Technology – Expanded Tracks	Add Commercial & Specialized Restoration tracks to Carpentry program	Rapidly growing construction sector; projected workforce gaps	Existing first-year curriculum; 1 new faculty + adjuncts	Expands workforce-ready graduates; supports local economic development; scalable MUS model