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Via email only to rbird@mt.gov

Chief Justice Cory Swanson
Montana Supreme Court
c/o Robert Bird, Office of the Court Administrator
215 N. Sanders Street
Helena, MT 59601

Hon. Chief Justice Swanson:

I am honored to offer this letter in support of Julia (Julie) Nordlund's application to be the next Associate Judge of the Montana Water Court. Over the last decade, I have had the privilege of appearing before or practicing with each of the applicants for the Associate Water Judge position. And while there are several highly qualified applicants, Julie's experience, temperament, professionalism, and broad public support make her the best fit for the position.

I first met Julie in 2011 when we were first year law students at the University of Montana. During law school, I was impressed with Julie's intelligence, work ethic, and leadership. These qualities led to Julie being overwhelmingly elected Student Bar Association President.

After law school, Julie secured a judicial clerkship with District Court Judge Todd. She then worked as an attorney with a well-known and respected law firm in Bozeman. From there, Julie went to the Water Court where she was promoted to the role of Senior Water Master. This background sets Julie apart and it gives her an understanding of both sides of the bench, with experience in private practice representing clients in Water Court cases and deciding cases as a Water Master. Also of note, Julie has worked closely with recently appointed Chief Water Court Judge Steve Brown since he was appointed Associate Water Judge in 2018, and should she be appointed, they will continue to work well together.

A substantial portion of my practice involves cases before the Water Court, including several cases before Julie as a Water Master. Julie manages her cases in an efficient manner, she ensures that all parties have an opportunity to be heard without tolerating unnecessary delays, and she issues timely, accurate, and well-reasoned Orders and Master's Reports. This includes Julie's "landmark" Master's Report in the *City of Belgrade* case (Water Court Case 41H-0008-R-2020), which survived a challenge before the Montana Supreme Court. Since it was issued, Julie's

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January 10, 2025

Page 2 of 2

decision in *City of Belgrade* has been cited as the leading decision concerning municipal water rights in subsequent cases. Although Julie has written important and influential decisions as Water Master, that does not mean she has an agenda or that she is trying to change the law. Julie simply applies the facts to the law in an unbiased manner and, in my experience, she has demonstrated no desire to force the law to fit a particular outcome or her personal beliefs. If you have any questions concerning the quality of Julie's work and whether she would be a great Judge, her Master's Reports and Orders speak for themselves.

As further evidence of Julie's judicial experience and respect from her colleagues, in a pair of cases where Chief Judge McElyea and Associate Judge Brown were both recused, the cases were transferred to District Court Judge Elizabeth Best, as the Upper Missouri Division Water Judge (Water Court Cases 41H-0049-2021 and 41H-0092-2021). Judge Best then decided to transfer the cases to Julie, rather than keeping the cases for herself or transferring the cases to one of the other Water Masters working for the Water Court. This clearly demonstrates the judiciary's confidence in Julie and her work.

The future of the Water Court will be a significant issue during the 2025 Legislative session and the individual you select is subject to Senate confirmation. Thus, it is important that Julie's application is supported by Senator Butch Gilespie, Chair of the Senate Agriculture, Livestock & Irrigation Committee, and Representative Llew Jones, Chair of the House Appropriations Committee. Moreover, Julie has experience testifying before the Legislature concerning potential changes to Montanan's water laws. Julie's Legislative support and experience at the Capital will be an asset to the Water Court (and judiciary in general) if she is selected.

Finally, it is notable that Julie's application is supported by the outgoing Chief Water Court Judge, a former attorney general, three members of the Legislature, a district court judge, a clerk of district court, court appointed water commissioners, practicing attorneys (including several water law attorneys), leaders of various non-profits, a fellow Water Master, a well-respected water rights consultant, ranchers, irrigators, and various water users. The next Associate Water Court Judge will have to work with various stakeholders and Julie's application stands out for having strong support across the relevant constituencies.

As the Water Court pushes to complete the adjudication process, the selection of the next Associate Water Court Judge will have a significant impact on the speed and ultimate success of the adjudication. In private practice and as a Water Master, Julie has successfully handled the most complex water law cases, and she has the knowledge, experience, and judicial temperament for the job. Therefore, I highly recommend Julie Nordlund to be the next Associate Water Judge.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Jack G. Connors