

Western Perspective:

New Public Lands Agenda

A new report details pressing public-lands issues for the Obama administration, lays out options for action

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for Headwaters News
March 25, 2009**

New realities are fundamentally changing the nature of public land management and use in the 21st Century. The warming global climate, unprecedented energy demand, and rapid growth and development in the West are among the major factors pushing changes on our public lands to an extent not seen since World War II. Indeed, demographic shifts and lifestyle changes affect everything from governance practices to the ways in which our public lands are valued and used.

The nation's political landscape is changing as well. The staging of the 2008 Democratic National Convention in Denver displayed the growing political importance of the West, but there are more subtle signs as well. As noted in a *High Country News* [article by Ray Ring](#) last January, the West's influx of people from across the country not only results in more voters but also in a more diverse, independent and politically mature population.

Approximately one-third of our nation's lands are owned in common by all Americans—our 700 million-acre public land estate. This estate includes national forests, national parks, national wildlife refuges and lands managed by the U.S. Bureau of Land Management (BLM).

These public lands and their resources are managed under a complex system of laws, policies and institutions developed since the Civil War in response to diverse, evolving, and sometimes competing public values and expectations. This history has created a system beset by redundancies, contradictions, inefficiencies and frequent legal conflict over missions and mandates.

The manifold challenges now facing the public land agencies are increasingly complex and often contentious. Merely continuing with business as usual in the face of global climate change, escalating energy demands, persistent wildfire threats, a globalizing economy, and other such challenges would not only put these unique lands at unnecessary peril, but could also squander scarce resources needlessly.

The public domain—with its water, minerals, timber, forage, wildlife, recreational, and spiritual values—provides the nation, as well as the surrounding states and communities, with an invaluable asset that is now woven into the fabric of our everyday living. Not to reevaluate the role these lands play in our collective welfare would be irresponsible in this rapidly changing world.

A group of concerned public land policy experts, seeking to highlight the key issues of concern and areas for action, recently released a report titled "A Federal Public Lands Agenda for the 21st Century." The report urges the new administration and Congress to consider a variety of options to improve public land management. We decided to present a set of options rather than recommendations, which include but are not limited to these:

1. Pick appointees with knowledge and professional expertise for management positions in federal agencies overseeing the public lands.
2. Establish a National Restoration Trust Fund to ensure full reclamation of natural resources impacted by energy development and other uses of the public lands.
3. Create a bipartisan Public Lands Law Review Commission to identify and resolve conflicting legal mandates and to provide a new vision for public lands management responsive to climate change, biodiversity loss, population growth and other pressures facing public lands.
4. Fund integrated and accountable planning for fire-prone communities near public lands and for other fuel-reduction efforts.
5. Support research into climate change impacts, and require federal agencies to integrate the findings

- into management plans and decisions.
6. Enable and encourage public land managers to collaborate among themselves and with local and state agencies to promote consistency in regional planning and to achieve mutual conservation objectives.
 7. Identify recreational impacts and conflicts on the public lands, and devise strategies to address these problems.

This report is the work of the [National Advisory Board](#) of the University of Montana's [Public Land and Resources Law Review](#), produced in cooperation with the University of Montana's [Public Policy Research Institute](#) and the student editors of the Public Land and Resources Law Review, with generous support from the Cinnabar Foundation.

The NAB is a diverse group, from all points of the political spectrum, including former Clinton and Bush administration officials, academics and prominent advocates. We all agree that it is time for innovative public lands policies that address the new issues that have arisen this century — climate change, energy development, wildfire concerns, and conflicts between recreation and other resource priorities.

The report was compiled and drafted in preparation for the annual public land law conference at the University of Montana School of Law, which convened a little more than a month before the 2008 election. The final report, reflecting the dialogue we engaged in at that program, is intended as a bipartisan document.

The issues we identify and the options for action represent the kind of common-sense approach that westerners have regularly, albeit sometimes grudgingly, taken to address natural resource problems that just won't go away, or so it seems to us. Though not designed as an immediate panacea or as a brief for any particular interest, the ideas set forth in this report should serve as a starting point for a broader dialogue over how public land policy might be reshaped to meet the many challenges that lie ahead.

The American people, as trustees of the public lands, have always had a prominent voice in any discussion about the future of these lands and resources. We hope to engage them, through the new administration and the next Congress, in this important and perhaps overdue conversation.

Our forbearers who left the remarkable public land legacy that we have inherited—Teddy Roosevelt, Gifford Pinchot, John Muir and Aldo Leopold, to name a few—would expect no less of us. Nor should the generations that will follow, who will inherit these special lands and all that they represent.
