


Public Lands Are On the Map

Obama Administration Served Multiple Menus for Reform



SOURCE: flickr.com/stuckincustoms Signing the Omnibus Public Land Management Act is only the first step in addressing the diverse and vexing challenges facing our 700 million-acre public land estate—the approximately one-third of our nation’s landscape owned in common by all Americans.

By [Sarah Bates](#) | Tuesday, April 7th, 2009 | [Share This](#) |  [Print](#)

On March 31, President Obama signed a massive public lands package into law, protecting more than two million acres as wilderness and creating a new national system to conserve 26 million acres of “heritage landscapes” managed by the U.S. Bureau of Land Management in the western U.S.

Selected recommendations from [“A Federal Public Lands Agenda for the 21st Century”](#):

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.

The [Omnibus Public Land Management Act](#) is a collection of 170 different bills that includes the largest expansion of the nation's Wilderness System in 15 years, as well as special provisions for management of national forests, scenic rivers, and other natural treasures throughout the country.

In signing the bill, President Obama declared his intention to fulfill Teddy Roosevelt's vision: "a vision that sees America's great wilderness as a place where what was and what is and what will be—all are the same; a place where memories are lived and relived; a place where Americans both young and young at heart can freely experience the spirit of adventure that has always been at the heart of the rugged character of America."

These are lofty sentiments, worthy of a historic moment such as this. But signing this bill is only the first step in addressing the diverse and vexing challenges facing our 700 million-acre public land estate—the approximately one-third of our nation's landscape owned in common by all Americans. This estate includes national forests, national parks, national wildlife refuges, and lands managed by the U.S. Bureau of Land Management.

Today's land stewards face uncertainties and conflicts never imagined when Teddy Roosevelt appointed his friend Gifford Pinchot as the first chief of the Forest Service. Imagine their surprise at the responsibilities of modern resource managers to address accelerating energy development, invasions of exotic plant and animal species, fierce recreation conflicts, and hazards posed by sprawling subdivisions in the "wildland-urban interface."

These challenges are outlined in a recently released report of the [National Advisory Board of the Public Land & Resources Law Review](#) at the University of Montana. "[A Federal Public Lands Agenda for the 21st Century](#)" identifies urgent issues and proposes a menu of options to address them (see sidebar). This diverse group represented all points of the political spectrum, including former Clinton and Bush administration officials, academics, and prominent advocates. They agreed 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 American people,” concluded the National Advisory Board, “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.”

Others are calling for a reinvigorated conversation about public lands as well, and are not hesitating to offer their own suggestions of new directions to address these pressing issues. Here’s a sampler:

- In an article in [Ecology Law Currents](#), a group of public land law experts convened by the California Center for Environmental Law and Policy identify 10 key public land issues demanding attention from the new administration, urging President Obama to “move beyond the traditional clashes between environmentalists and industry, restore balance to the management of the federal public lands, and give a more powerful voice to the local communities that live near and depend upon the federal lands for far more than just their livelihood.”
- A report released by the [Western Landscape Conservation Series](#) in Northern Arizona just before the November presidential election summarized ideas presented by leading scholars of public land policy in a seminar series hosted earlier in 2008. “Conservation and sound stewardship depend on an integrated, landscape-scale perspective to drive appropriate policy,” the report argues. “No longer can public lands management proceed in a piecemeal manner, with different states, communities, and public agencies acting independently, limiting their focus to particular resources or jurisdictional boundaries.” The recommendations in this report are organized around the broad themes of water, forests, and tribal partnerships.
- A gathering in the winter of 2006 sparked publication of a report focused on Forest Service reform, available for purchase in hard copy only from the [Center for the Rocky Mountain West](#). The contributing authors of “Challenges Facing the U.S. Forest Service: A Critical Review” don’t agree on everything, but editor Daniel Kemmis concludes that their commentaries “present a compelling case that the now well-established practice of on-the-ground collaboration across ideological lines is the best hope for the future of the public lands.” He argues that the diverse issues facing public land managers warrant a hard look at the institutional structures within which they operate—including the possibility of merging the Forest Service (now within the U.S. Department of Agriculture) with the Bureau of Land Management and the other public resource agencies housed in the U.S. Department of the Interior. That perennial suggestion was the subject of a hearing before the House Appropriations Committee last month, as well as the focus of a related [GAO report](#).

What conclusions can we draw from these (and other) pronouncements on public land policy reform? It is interesting to note that all these groups identified the lack of a coherent mission for public land management—a clearly articulated set of public values for which these lands have been retained in trust for future generations—as an obstacle for rational planning, development

decisions, and conflict resolution. Consistent, too, are calls for progressive fire management policies, meaningful engagement of affected communities in development proposals, and proactive steps to deal with the predicted impacts of climate change.

Perhaps we are ready to recognize that our public lands—this great reservoir of biological diversity, connectivity, and renewal—are more than the sum of their exploitable resources. President Obama has an opportunity to fulfill the promise of his presidential campaign by moving boldly to protect and restore the integrity of our public lands and the institutions that govern them. After all, this is the landscape that Wallace Stegner so famously described as “the native home of hope.”

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