



THE GREATER
GOOD INITIATIVE

Framework for Prioritizing Public Lands

A Response to the Ecological and Political
Consequences of Poor Federal Land Management

The Greater Good Initiative

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POLICY BRIEF

As the new administration settles into office, President Joe Biden has been busy at work realizing the ambitious climate agenda that over 80 million Americans endorsed at the polls.¹ His administration has demonstrated a promising commitment to environmental concerns, enacting a flurry of executive orders and statements in the first few weeks. From rejoining the Paris Agreement and revoking the permit for the Keystone XL oil pipeline, much of this work has centered around undoing actions taken by the previous administration.² On January 27, 2021 Biden implemented an Executive Order to confront climate change which included a section on the preservation of public lands.³ While the order initiates preliminary Department of the Interior research and outlines general goals, it marks the beginning of a longer process of reinforcing America's commitment to public lands. This brief seeks to diagnose the problems with the current trends in public lands management and provide a tentative framework for continued federal action in response.

In the span of four years, the Trump administration enacted various rollbacks that undermine the security of America's public lands. The federal government offered more than 25 million acres of onshore public lands for sale and sold 5.6 million acres. The leasing of protected land is perhaps an even bigger concern. The fossil fuel industry has accumulated over 26 million acres via leasing for oil and gas extraction. Much of this land is currently unused, creating future concerns about greenhouse gas emissions and fossil fuel dependency.⁴ Current trends in

¹ Lindsay J. (2020, December 15). *The 2020 Election by the Numbers*. Retrieved February 21, from <https://www.cfr.org/blog/2020-election-numbers>

² Jaffe A. (2021, March 10). *Biden's first 50 days: Where he stands on key promises*. Retrieved March 11, from <https://apnews.com/article/joe-biden-first-50-days-key-promises-d40e38b8125d1ab2b98661c9ba919238>

³ White House Press Briefing Room (2021, January 27). *Executive Order on Tackling the Climate Crisis at Home and Abroad*. Retrieved February 20, from <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2021/01/27/executive-order-on-tackling-the-climate-crisis-at-home-and-abroad/>

⁴ United States Department of the Interior (2021, January 27). *President Biden to Take Action to Uphold Commitment to Restore Balance on Public Lands and Waters, Invest in Clean Energy Future*. Retrieved February 20,

development mean that, every 30 seconds, 100 yards worth of America's natural land is lost to development.⁵ Unfortunately, these trends are more than the result of a single presidency. From 1990 to 2018, there was a 4.9% decrease in federal acreage across all land management agencies.⁶ While Trump-era rollbacks have presented additional problems, there have been persisting reductions in public lands in past decades as well.

Public lands are a crucial piece of conservation efforts. They serve important roles in maintaining vulnerable ecosystems, preventing habitat loss, and facilitating animal migration. Public lands are a valuable source of clean air and water. For example, National Forest Service lands are responsible for supplying water to more than 60 million people across 33 States.⁷ Beyond their existing ecological value, public lands prevent dangerous practices of fossil fuel extraction. The irresponsible drilling and mining for oil and gas can contribute greenhouse gases to climate change and pose potential threats in the form of procedural mishaps such as oil spills.⁸

Public lands also serve an important role in maintaining the heritage and history of America's wildlands. A 2016 Harvard Kennedy School study found that roughly 93% of Americans believe it's important that historical sites, public lands and national parks be protected now and in the future.⁹ Roughly 80% of Americans consistently view protecting public lands as

from

<https://www.doi.gov/pressreleases/fact-sheet-president-biden-take-action-uphold-commitment-restore-balance-public-lands>

⁵ Lee-Ashley M. (2019, August 6). *How Much Nature Should America Keep?* Retrieved March 3, from <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/green/reports/2019/08/06/473242/much-nature-america-keep/>

⁶ Congressional Research Service (2020, February 21). *Federal Land Ownership: Overview and Data*. Retrieved February 12, from <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/R42346.pdf>

⁷ United States Forest Service (n.d.). *Water Facts*. Retrieved March 7, from <https://www.fs.usda.gov/managing-land/national-forests-grasslands/water-facts>

⁸ United States Department of the Interior (n.d.). *Emergency Response to Oil Spills and Hazardous Material Release*. Retrieved March 7, from

<https://www.doi.gov/oepc/preparedness-and-response-oil-spills-and-hazardous-substance-releases>

⁹ Cole H. (n.d.). *Why Should the Public Care About Public Lands?* Retrieved March 7, from <https://www.patagonia.com/stories/why-should-the-public-care-about-public-lands/story-32329.html>

patriotic, and think that protecting public lands is “one of the things our government does best.”¹⁰ This public support is reinforced in Western states with significant federal acreage, where 67 percent of voters preferred congressional efforts to protect public lands instead of allowing mining and drilling.¹¹ The wealth of polling data in support of public lands protection demonstrates their cultural significance. A report from the Outdoor Industry Association found that United States consumers spend \$887 billion annually on outdoor recreation and create 7.6 million jobs, much of which is concentrated on federally managed land.¹² This public mandate is also present at the polls and our brief suggests that there is a correlation between congressional electoral outcomes and support for public lands. The consistent support and ecological significance of public lands demand swift and comprehensive federal action.

The Biden administration must go further to adopt a comprehensive framework for prioritizing public lands. This policy brief provides a few key areas through which the administration can reverse negative trends and better utilize publicly managed land. As Biden has already begun doing, it is crucial to halt and review the irresponsible leasing of public lands to the fossil fuel industry. There must be a clear standard that is established to prevent future leasing and ongoing projects must also be subject to review and rigid environmental standards. In accordance with Biden’s long term goal to conserve 30% of United States land by 2030, the federal government must designate additional natural areas as protected land and ensure their continued security.¹³ There also needs to be an effort, with the cooperation of relevant land

¹⁰ Vet Voice Foundation (n.d.). *America’s National Public Lands Belong To All of US*. Retrieved February 25, from <https://www.vetvoicefoundation.org/docs/Public-Lands.pdf>

¹¹ Colorado College (2021). *Public Lands in the West*. Retrieved March 1, from <https://www.coloradocollege.edu/other/stateoftherockies/conservationinthewest/2020/2020-conservation-in-the-west-poll-data/2020%20State%20of%20the%20Rockies%20Topic%20Report%20on%20Public%20Lands%200003%20-%20d1d.pdf>

¹² Outdoor Industry Association (2017, August 25). *Outdoor Recreation Economy Report*. Retrieved February 14, from <https://outdoorindustry.org/resource/2017-outdoor-recreation-economy-report/>

¹³ Dillon T. (2021, January 27). *President Biden’s 30% Conservation Commitment Is Good News for People, Too*. Retrieved February 2, from

management agencies, to promote renewable energy initiatives and green jobs using public lands. By clarifying issue rhetoric and adopting a coherent framework committed to these goals, the Biden administration can reinstate confidence in the federal government's management of public lands.

PRELIMINARY REPORT

What is the problem we're trying to fix?

Over the past four years, the Trump administration offered 25 million acres of onshore public lands for sale, selling 5.6 million acres. There is significantly more land currently leased out to private oil and gas interests and much of it has been accumulated for later use.¹⁴ This concerning management, while adding newfound pressure for environmental action, are aligned with longer trends; since 1990, there has been a 4.9% decrease in federal acreage across all land management agencies.¹⁵ With the Biden administration beginning to research a plan for federal land management, it is crucial they develop a well-thought-out framework to ensure the long-term prosperity of America's public lands. This brief seeks to diagnose the problem by identifying the specific ecological consequences of mishandling public lands. It also seeks to resolve any lingering uncertainty about the constituent support of public lands, showing how electoral outcomes are often influenced by the commitment—or indifference—to public lands. With this foundational understanding, this report seeks to aid in the creation of a framework for the future management of public lands that can be used to both inform public officials and mobilize environmental organizations.

What is the solution proposed?

This issue brief will examine how public perception of outdoor spaces, and ecological health, has already been harmed by rollbacks in federal land protection. By first identifying the

¹⁴ United States Department of the Interior (2021, January 27). *President Biden to Take Action to Uphold Commitment to Restore Balance on Public Lands and Waters, Invest in Clean Energy Future*. Retrieved February 20, from <https://www.doi.gov/pressreleases/fact-sheet-president-biden-take-action-uphold-commitment-restore-balance-public-lands>

¹⁵ Congressional Research Service (2020, February 21). *Federal Land Ownership: Overview and Data*. Retrieved February 12, from <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/R42346.pdf>

key environmental consequences of irresponsible federal land management, this report provides a succinct explanation of the importance of public lands—and by extension the need to prioritize them. It also reveals the electoral benefits of a continued commitment to public lands, by showing that congressional candidates who oversaw a rollback in federal land tend to have lost support. For the Biden administration and subsidiary management agencies, these truths merit a concrete and complete policy response.

This brief provides a tentative framework to support the restoration of public lands at the federal level. In order to quell increasingly threatening rollbacks, the current administration must seek to prevent irresponsible leasing and selling of public lands, even reviewing ongoing operations on federally managed land. In doing so, this brief suggests that there should be a commitment to preventing dangerous oil and gas leasing in the future. Beyond preventative measures, it is crucial that the relevant executive agencies help facilitate the research and cultivation of renewable energy from public lands—stimulating local job markets with government-funded programs. There also should be more funding and research for the procurement of new public lands, building on some of Biden’s promises such as protecting 30 percent of the United States by 2030.¹⁶ The brief does not focus on one area of land or one dimension of the issue in an attempt to mobilize other environmental organizations and lobbies for a broader push towards the sustainable management of the United States’ land.

¹⁶ Gibbens S. (2021, January 27). *The U.S. commits to tripling its protected lands. Here’s how it could be done.* Retrieved February 12, from <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/environment/article/biden-commits-to-30-by-2030-conservation-executive-orders>

Why was this specific issue chosen?

As the Biden administration begins to define its environmental agenda, it is crucial that relevant public officials adopt a long-term framework that prioritizes public lands. This is especially important after four years of setbacks in terms of federal land management, with decreases in ownership and increases in irresponsible fossil fuel extraction.¹⁷ The new administration has shown some promising support for public lands, with early executive actions helping to pause new leasing and begin researching these issues more extensively.¹⁸ This report seeks to expand upon and clarify these early steps into a full fledged framework that continually supports federal land management.

Public lands remain heavily supported by most Americans. According to 2012 polling conducted by the Nature Conservancy, 77 percent of Americans believe that protecting public lands is “one of the things our government does best.”¹⁹ This is especially true in the American West, where 67 percent of Western voters preferred congressional efforts to protect public lands instead of allowing mining and drilling.²⁰ While this polling data is conclusively in support of public lands protection, there persists a myth that public lands are not a key issue for voters. Our report sought to demonstrate that federally managed lands were a key issue at the polls, and often influenced electoral outcomes in relevant congressional districts. The voter mandate for

¹⁷ Holden E. (2020, February 12). *Trump ‘turns back the clock’ by luring drilling companies to pristine lands*. Retrieved February 14, from <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/feb/12/trumps-legacy-drilled-public-lands-and-the-resulting-carbon-emissions>

¹⁸ United States Department of the Interior (2021, January 27). *President Biden to Take Action to Uphold Commitment to Restore Balance on Public Lands and Waters, Invest in Clean Energy Future*. Retrieved February 20, from <https://www.doi.gov/pressreleases/fact-sheet-president-biden-take-action-uphold-commitment-restore-balance-public-lands>

¹⁹ Vet Voice Foundation (n.d.). *America’s National Public Lands Belong To All of US*. Retrieved February 25, from <https://www.vetvoicefoundation.org/docs/Public-Lands.pdf>

²⁰ Colorado College (2021). *Public Lands in the West*. Retrieved March 1, from <https://www.coloradocollege.edu/other/stateoftherockies/conservationinthewest/2020/2020-conservation-in-the-west-poll-data/2020%20State%20of%20the%20Rockies%20Topic%20Report%20on%20Public%20Lands%200003%20-%20d1d.pdf>

protecting public lands and the current policy window of Biden’s administration make it an ideal time for updated research and swift action to preserve America’s public lands.

What were the broad questions that guided research into this issue?

What are the environmental impacts of not protecting public lands? There is a significant body of academic research documenting the negative consequences of irresponsible federal land management. Protecting public lands prevents habitat loss and enables animal migration that supports broader ecosystems. The various reductions of the Trump administration destabilized the top 25 percent of most important areas for wildlife connectivity.²¹ Irresponsible management can result in a number of negative environmental outcomes, namely increasing greenhouse gas emissions and fossil fuel dependency.²² There are also benefits to protecting public lands. They can host innovative programs that explore renewable energy, create green jobs, and better local environmental conditions. Actively conserving these publicly owned lands also helps to build a more sustainable future and ensure environmental security thereafter.

Is there existing research on the voter mandate for public lands protection? There is some general polling data that supports a policy response to the public land rollbacks. Americans appreciate and support conserving America’s public lands, viewing it as patriotic and preferring it to oil and gas extraction. There is also research specifically based in the American West amongst the communities that are most affected. For those nearby some of the largest areas of federal land, public lands are especially important to their daily lives. This report seeks to

²¹ The Wilderness Society (2020). *Trump's land grab—in 7 maps*. Retrieved January 12, from <https://www.arcgis.com/apps/Cascade/index.html?appid=3c85766bc4c44579a2a7bb133b70e774>

²² United States Department of the Interior (2021, January 27). *President Biden to Take Action to Uphold Commitment to Restore Balance on Public Lands and Waters, Invest in Clean Energy Future*. Retrieved February 20, from <https://www.doi.gov/pressreleases/fact-sheet-president-biden-take-action-uphold-commitment-restore-balance-public-lands>

supplement the wealth of polling data through analyzing electoral results in relation to public lands rollbacks.

How can the Biden administration prioritize federal lands? The Biden administration has a number of tools at their disposal to help foster effective federal land management. Executive orders are the most obvious and can issue immediate support for public lands. They are also important for reversing many of the harmful public lands rollbacks Trump had initiated via executive order.²³ For more incisive reforms, the Biden administration can alter current practices within the U.S. Forest Service, National Park Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Department of Defense (DOD), and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and their respective portion of public lands. The Department of the Interior (DOI) also plays a significant role in the administration of land management policy. There is no need for significant bureaucratic restructuring; the Biden administration can utilize existing channels to promote significant positive change.

What is the relevance of this policy to average citizens?

Voters continually express support for America's public lands. 82 percent of Americans believe that conserving our natural resources is patriotic.²⁴ The support is especially concentrated in the American west, where the majority of federal acreage lies. Beyond the public support, there exists problematic consequences if public lands are not sufficiently protected. Every 30 seconds, 100 yards worth of America's natural land is lost to development.²⁵ Securing current public lands and protecting other natural areas is crucial to preventing habitat loss and stopping

²³ Hall T. (2017, April 26). New Executive Order Puts Public Lands in the Cross Hairs. Retrieved January 23, from <https://www.blueridgeoutdoors.com/newswire/new-executive-order-put-public-lands-cross-hairs/>

²⁴ Vet Voice Foundation (n.d.). *America's National Public Lands Belong To All of US*. Retrieved February 25, from <https://www.vetvoicefoundation.org/docs/Public-Lands.pdf>

²⁵ Lee-Ashley M. (2019, August 6). *How Much Nature Should America Keep?* Retrieved March 3, from <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/green/reports/2019/08/06/473242/much-nature-america-keep/>

further ecosystem destruction. These environmental concerns are linked to future economic downturn and worsen the effects of larger environmental threats such as climate change.²⁶ With national parks and forests in danger, it also threatens land that is culturally significant. Public lands are an important cornerstone of local communities, but they also serve a necessary role in the larger ecosystem. Curbing the mismanagement of these lands requires a federal policy response.

Why is this an issue that requires a governmental response?

Without a governmental response, preventative measures will not be taken to vet the leasing of public lands. As a result, the fossil fuel industry will continue to accumulate land for short-term profits that cause long-term environmental problems. Moreover, there is a need for the active prioritization of public lands. Without it, there is no clear plan for the future protection of public lands and the land would not be used to its full effect: creating green jobs and harnessing renewable energy. In order to achieve conservation goals to facilitate environmental sustainability, the federal government must actively seek out new land to protect. Public lands are managed by five executive agencies and, as a result, it is their responsibility to ensure they are properly managed and utilized. Otherwise, the recent trends of private interest and fossil fuel extraction will continue to degrade the United States' public lands.

What are the arguments for the creation of the policy response that will be proposed?

²⁶ The Wilderness Society (2021, March 5). *Why protecting 30% of lands and waters is critical*. Retrieved March 12, from <https://www.wilderness.org/articles/blog/why-protecting-30-lands-and-waters-critical#:~:text=Protecting%2030%25%20of%20U.S.%20lands%20and%20waters%E2%80%94as%20part%20of%20corridors%20and%20stop%20the%20bl%20eeding>.

There are two primary reasons for the prioritization of public lands: preventing environmental degradation and appeasing concerned citizens. Public lands serve a prominent role at the local and regional level, but are also foundational for larger ecosystems. Conservation is necessary in order to preserve the United States' ecosystem and promote sustainability amidst worsening environmental conditions. In addition to preventing short-term exploitation and greenhouse gas emissions, there is a need for a comprehensive framework for lasting protection.²⁷ The science clearly demands that a significant portion of the United States' nature areas are preserved and valued for the security of current and future generations.

The political consequences of irresponsible federal land management are equally supportive of a policy response. There is ample polling that reveals Americans' support for public lands—especially when it comes to stakeholders in the American west. The support stretches across party lines and reveals the bipartisan voter mandate for an impactful policy response.²⁸ This report seeks to analyze congressional electoral results in order to connect this polling data to votes at the polls. Adopting a framework and firmly committing to preserving public lands is a key to electoral success.

What is the basic form of our policy response?

This policy brief serves as a report and framework that detects the ecological and political consequences of public lands rollbacks while also providing a tentative framework for federal action. By detailing the environmental issues and political consequences, this brief outlines why the Biden administration must exercise its executive powers to reimagine federal land

²⁷ Lee-Ashley M. (2019, August 6). *How Much Nature Should America Keep?* Retrieved March 3, from <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/green/reports/2019/08/06/473242/much-nature-america-keep/>

²⁸ Vet Voice Foundation (n.d.). *America's National Public Lands Belong To All of US*. Retrieved February 25, from <https://www.vetvoicefoundation.org/docs/Public-Lands.pdf>

management and reinforce conservation efforts. Subsequently, our policy response is a collection of federal actions that prevent irresponsible fossil fuel extraction and encourage sustainable management of public lands. This framework is flexible and not overly specific, partially due to the complexity and situational nature of managing public lands across five different executive agencies. The goal of this format is to inform public officials and rally other environmental organizations for the continued support of public lands.

What ongoing questions might you have?

Why not focus on state and local land management? Local and state land management is often very important, but federally protected lands have been especially under attack in recent years. The Trump administration's various public lands rollbacks have worsened negative trends in favor of the fossil fuel industry and it requires sweeping federal action.²⁹ The Biden administration has the tools and platform to establish a precedent of conserving the United State's natural land—by both reversing recent rollbacks and going above and beyond to ensure lasting security. Local and state governments may need to act similarly, but Biden's arrival in office marks a crucial policy window for the protection of public lands.

Why not prioritize congressional action to support public lands? While long-lasting congressional bills might be preferable in theory, the bureaucratic red tape and legislative agenda make it very hard to enact meaningful laws. Many immediate policy responses simply require executive orders or regulatory changes within government agencies. This provides much needed aid immediately and bypasses congressional gridlock. The management of public lands is principally a task of the executive branch and only for broad overhauls would Congress be

²⁹ Congressional Research Service (2020, February 21). *Federal Land Ownership: Overview and Data*. Retrieved February 12, from <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/R42346.pdf>

required. This does not exclude the possibility of future congressional efforts, and hopefully the Biden administration can reinstate a precedent of supporting public lands that lends itself to further supportive reforms.

POLICY PROPOSAL AND ANALYSIS

What is the policy response to the problem that was chosen?

This report begins by outlining the ecological and political consequences of rollbacks to public lands. By disregarding the security and sustainability of federally managed lands, the current administration not only damages local ecosystems and worsens the effects of climate change, but also threatens the electoral prospects of local, regional, and congressional candidates [cite]. Our analysis suggests that prioritizing public lands is an electoral win for candidates with affected constituents. This report reflects the need for public officials to reverse the concerning trends in federal land management and establish a new path forward that encourages sustainability and prosperity.

In terms of specific steps forward, our report offers several compelling steps to combat the threats to the long-term security of America's public lands. First, there are important preventative measures like deterring irresponsible leasing of public lands to prevent fossil fuel reliance and greenhouse gas emissions. There also needs to be an active effort to expand public lands and ensure the continued security of more important natural state land. Also, the federal government must act to use public lands more effectively, like the cultivation of renewable energy, in order to create new jobs and spur environmentally conscious innovative efforts. While the Biden administration is exploring some of these initiatives, this report acts as a crucial framework through which these goals can be realized.

How will our policy proposal be implemented? What systems, agencies, and authority will need to be in place?

The implementation of this report's suggestions requires the coordination of federal land management agencies and the chief executive. Most significant policy changes, like Biden's executive orders initializing planning, can be passed using executive order.³⁰ However, these orders require the cooperation and administration of the U.S. Forest Service, National Park Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Department of Defense (DOD), and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM)—the five federal land management agencies. While the acreage varies between agencies, their roles in administering an environmentally conscious approach to land management is crucial for the success of any federal action. The policy response to public land rollbacks does not require any significant change in organization structure or responsibility. It simply requires additional funding and practices. The process of identifying specific regions and crafting targeted policy solutions is slightly more complicated, with this report outlining the key themes and principles that should guide that policy response.

Why is this something that should be addressed at the federal level?

In recent years, there has been a significant disruption in the protection of federal lands [cite]. While protecting public lands is important at all levels of government, the long-term security of federally-protected land is especially uncertain amidst the current political climate. As a new administration assumes office, it is crucial that advocacy organizations and voters alike demonstrate the national responsibility of protecting sacred land. Creating a framework

³⁰ Bureau of Land Management (2021, January 27). *President Biden to Take Action to Uphold Commitment to Restore Balance on Public Lands and Waters, Invest in Clean Energy Future*. Retrieved February 1, from <https://www.blm.gov/press-release/fact-sheet-president-biden-take-action-uphold-commitment-restore-balance-public-lands>

benefiting environmental lobbies and organizations would be the most effective at the federal level since many of the recent rollbacks have far-reaching implications across state lines [cite]. By corroborating multiple instances of federal land rollbacks across different regions of the United States and examining its effect on public perception and electoral politics, clearer causes and effects can be established, strengthening the validity of any framework developed. Additionally, a nationwide framework can build upon any potential interstate trends which may not be observed if a state-level piecemeal method were to be used. Disregarding legislative processes, federal land management agencies and executive orders already play a massive role in managing land nationally, allowing for the swift and continued support of public lands.

Are there alternative responses that should be taken into account?

A plausible alternative to the establishment of a framework for the federal management of public lands could be the creation of a public advocacy campaign. This campaign would serve to allow constituents especially passionate about the topic of environmental restoration to raise local awareness on a grassroots level. As it would have the ability to reach citizens that are not necessarily deeply involved in environmental protectionism, but are still very enthusiastic about the topic, this campaign would be very valuable to the broad movement for environmental consciousness. Furthermore, a grassroots campaign would have the ability to enlighten citizens who are uneducated in the topic of restoration, and ideally impact electoral outcomes which would result in positive policy outcomes. Through relational organizing, the goal of this type of campaign would be to inspire a fervent support for public lands that inspires the long-term protection of federal lands. The process of identifying new public officials who prioritize public lands is important, but it requires significant amounts of time and resources. As Biden's

administration settles into office, it is crucial to establish positive trends immediately, ensuring that the Biden administration has committed to properly managing public lands. That being said, grassroots organizing is not necessarily mutually exclusive from a report directed to federal officials; the conclusions can simultaneously be distributed to citizens using digestible graphics and fact sheets.

Another alternative is the creation of state or local level policy to address the management of local and state land. While state and local land is extremely important for regional and local concerns, it is significantly smaller in total acreage than federal lands, with 27.1 percent of the country managed at the federal level. There are concerns with the recent rollback of federal land and the general decline in federal land ownership, roughly 5% between 1990 and 2018.³¹ With the Trump administration leaving office, now is a crucial time in the prioritization of federal land and the reversal of these problematic trends—which can only be accomplished with prompt action at the national level.

Why is our proposed policy the appropriate response to the identified problem?

This brief highlights the ecological and political issues that demonstrate the need to support and protect federal lands. By synthesizing the environmental consequences, the brief helps identify the importance of these lands and their relationship to surrounding ecosystems. This research can also help inform steps forward, suggesting courses of action to ensure federal lands are prioritized. Instead of proposing a rigid legislative solution, this response allows for a flexible, multifaceted approach which can be applied across the federal land management agencies and the executive branch at large. Moreover, by not fixating on a single policy, the

³¹ Congressional Research Service (2020, February 21). *Federal Land Ownership: Overview and Data*. Retrieved February 12, from <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/R42346.pdf>

report helps provide a framework that is palatable for other environmental organizations and can mobilize greater support for the restoration and protection of public lands. Developing a thorough framework is especially crucial with the transition of federal administrations as constituents seek more than vague issue rhetoric without a clear path forward.³²

The report's focus on the electoral consequences of the recent forfeitures of federally protected land shows the need for a significant federal response. By analyzing how recent attitudes towards protected land impact congressional elections, it is clear that—in addition to the environmental impact—valuing federal lands is an electoral win. This helps inspire support from public officials and dispel the myth that environmental issues lack Americans' interest. By coupling the ecological consequences with this electoral research, this report provides sufficient reason for political action while also providing tentative paths forward to ensure the prosperity of public lands at the federal level.

What are the resources that will be needed to carry out this policy response?

The report itself only requires public information and can be distributed electronically with not significant organizational costs. However, further collaborations with other organizations might require additional time and effort as deemed necessary. In terms of federal action to preserve public lands, this report's suggestions require a few costs. Biden has already paused new oil and natural gas leasing on public lands and the continued reevaluation of these practices can limit short-term revenues.³³ However, it does provide positive downstream economic benefits by preventing negative environmental outcomes in the long run. The Federal

³² Robbins J. (2021, January 20). *On U.S. Public Lands, Can Biden Undo What Trump Has Wrought?* Retrieved March 12, from <https://e360.yale.edu/features/on-u-s-public-lands-can-biden-undo-what-trump-has-wrought>

³³ Bureau of Land Management (2021, January 27). *President Biden to Take Action to Uphold Commitment to Restore Balance on Public Lands and Waters, Invest in Clean Energy Future.* Retrieved February 1, from <https://www.blm.gov/press-release/fact-sheet-president-biden-take-action-uphold-commitment-restore-balance-public-lands>

Grazing Program, whose appropriations massively outnumber the grazing fees, is an expected cost without changes to the program.³⁴ Other expenses are required for the management and security of federal lands, though nothing that is directly implicated in this brief. The Biden administration already plans to conserve 30 percent of America's lands and oceans by 2030. The Department of the Interior is still outlining more details, but these types of conservation efforts will require additional funds, either supporting local and state initiatives or working at the federal level. With only 12 percent of land permanently protected, this report demands extensive commitments to securing more land.³⁵ Protecting public lands will forfeit some fleeting revenue but secure environmental sustainability for Americans' future.

What criteria are we using to determine if our policy is successful?

This policy brief can be considered successful if it sparks meaningful grassroots activism and helps inform a federal response to the recent rollbacks of public lands. Ideally, through advocacy efforts and networking with other organizations, our policy could be reviewed by officials at the federal level and influence further action on this issue. While this may be difficult given our available resources, the policy should serve as a tool to connect and energize other concerned citizens into action. While this issue requires immediate commitments, just spreading the message serves a valuable purpose as well.

In terms of tracking the protection of federal lands, the effective management of these lands can be measured in a few ways. It is crucial to limit the irresponsible leasing of public lands. The United States Geological Survey (USGS) found that roughly 25 percent of greenhouse

³⁴ Glaser C., Romaniello C., and Moskowitz K. (2020). *Costs and Consequences*. Retrieved February 21, from https://www.perc.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/CostsAndConsequences_01-2015.pdf

³⁵ United States Geological Survey (n.d.). *PAD-US Data Overview*. Retrieved March 12, from https://www.usgs.gov/core-science-systems/science-analytics-and-synthesis/gap/science/pad-us-data-overview?qt-science_center_objects=0#qt-science_center_objects

gas emissions are the result of fossil fuel cultivation on public lands.³⁶ Limiting the impact on climate change, air quality, access to water, and other environmental concerns is a crucial measure of successfully preserving public lands. Another important step is to reclaim and secure public lands long-term. Either with the goal of 30 percent by 2030 or a more situational approach, it is important that federal action confronts the rollback of public lands. In addition to protecting and preserving this land, the federal government must actively seek ways to use this land to harness renewable energy and advance greater environmental goals. Biden has already begun looking at potential initiatives and this policy brief could successfully inform more specifics to that effect.

What would happen if no action is taken by the government?

Developing a comprehensive plan to preserve and secure public lands is a necessity for the new administration. If no action is taken, the continued exploitation of public lands will destabilize ecosystems and worsen local environmental conditions, while contributing to broader environmental phenomena like climate change. There will also be missed opportunities in the form of potential job creation centered around renewable energy and prospective federal land. In order to defend against environmental threats, action is necessary to ensure prosperous and sustainable use of the land. The Biden administration is uniquely positioned to change current trends and confront public land management head on. Otherwise, federal land ownership will continue to decline and problematic leasing could worsen the impending effects of climate

³⁶ United States Geological Survey (2018). *Federal Lands Greenhouse Gas Emissions and Sequestration in the United States*. Retrieved January 24, from <https://pubs.usgs.gov/sir/2018/5131/sir20185131.pdf>

change.³⁷ The time-sensitive and severe nature of this crisis requires rapid federal action with a clear plan to secure, preserve, and nurture public lands.

³⁷ Congressional Research Service (2020, February 21). *Federal Land Ownership: Overview and Data*. Retrieved February 12, from <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/R42346.pdf>

RESEARCH AND FRAMEWORK

Environmental and Economic Consequences

The previous administration's large-scale reductions of federally protected public land guarantees disastrous effects on the environment and sustainable economic development in the American West and Arctic, without immediate action.

A majority of the land affected by Trump's reductions is in the top 25% of wildest areas in the contiguous U.S., and the top 25% most important areas for wildlife connectivity.³⁸ All of this land will be greatly scarred by infrastructural development and oil developments, especially considering areas were selected with these purposes in mind.³⁹ The destruction of some of the most biologically rich areas in the country will be detrimental to scientific research as well as the continued prosperity of some of the most delicate ecosystems in the United States. Vegetation will be destroyed, and natural disasters such as landslides and flooding could become widespread. This will lead to critical fallout that will severely damage habitats and their animals.⁴⁰ It would be much more difficult than it already is for affected wildlife to survive, leading to the possibility of the breakdown of important ecological systems. Species affected include but are not limited to the bighorn sheep, golden eagle and desert tortoise of California, and the caribou, polar bears and reindeer of the Arctic. An end to a guarantee of federal protection of this land will also result in various other disturbances, such as unwarranted noises, which can lower birth rates of animals that are already highly endangered. Even more concerning

³⁸ The Wilderness Society (2020). *Trump's land grab—in 7 maps*. Retrieved January 12, from <https://www.arcgis.com/apps/Cascade/index.html?appid=3c85766bc4c44579a2a7bb133b70e774>

³⁹ NPR Weekend Edition Sunday (2020, February 9). *Tourism Worries And Few Takers As More Utah Land Offered For Drilling, Mining*. Retrieved February 17, from <https://www.npr.org/2020/02/09/804232481/tourism-worries-and-few-takers-as-more-utah-land-offered-for-drilling-mining>

⁴⁰ National Parks Conservation Association (2021, January 21). *The Undoing Of Our Public Lands and National Parks*. Retrieved February 28, from <https://www.npca.org/articles/2171-the-undoing-of-our-public-lands-and-national-parks>

is the possibility of disasters such as oil spills, which could permanently damage environments and their ecosystems. This is especially troubling when considering the Arctic Refuge area, as there is currently no established and approved method of cleaning oil from ice waters. Oil spills will even affect the wellbeing of American citizens, as chemicals from offshore drilling will be pumped into the ocean and could end up in American-consumed seafood. A reduction of federally-protected public land could also degrade natural defences against climate change. An international committee of Canadian, Mexican, and U.S. land management agencies identified six ways public lands combat global warming: the conservation of biodiversity, protection of ecosystem services, connection of landscapes, capture and storage of carbon, development of knowledge and understanding, and inspiration of the public.⁴¹ Each of these functions is reduced or greatly threatened by the Trump administration rollbacks.

While continuity in federal protection of wild spaces has both inherent value, and strategic importance from an environmental standpoint, the economic consequences of failure are potentially devastating. Public lands generate over \$646 billion annually through outdoor recreation, drawing in hundreds of millions of visitors and creating hundreds of thousands of jobs.⁴² The average state's outdoor recreation value, measured as a percent of state GDP, is 2.1%. Of the states that saw significant reductions in federal land protection under the Trump administration, the average is 3.36%.⁴³ Western economies with burgeoning eco-tourism industries- dependent on scenic landscapes and safe, accessible trails, rivers, and forests- will be burdened by oil tanks, infrastructural development and noisy equipment. Decrease in travel to

⁴¹ La Comisión Nacional de Áreas Naturales Protegidas (n.d.). *North American Protected areas as natural solutions for climate change*. Retrieved February 27, from

<https://nawpacommittee.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/NAWPA-CCWG-Brochure.pdf>

⁴² Sturges F. (2014, August 18). *The Economics of Public Lands*. Retrieved March 12, from

<https://blog.nwf.org/2014/08/the-economics-of-public-lands/>

⁴³ Bureau of Economic Analysis (2020, November 10). *Outdoor Recreation Satellite Account, U.S. and States*.

Retrieved March 12, from <https://www.bea.gov/news/2020/outdoor-recreation-satellite-account-us-and-states-2019>

certain regions could be detrimental to local communities that rely on tourists as important sources of revenue, especially regarding highly remote regions that are sustained completely by the tourists that stimulate their local economies. Recreational activities in places such as Bears Ears and the Grand Staircase-Escalante, both in Utah, will lose popularity and risk resulting in their state losing essential tourism revenue. All of these factors may result in serious damage to counties with more federally protected lands, which perform better in employment metrics, personal income,⁴⁴ and per capita income growth than their peers.⁴⁵

To meaningfully address the environmental and economic risks outlined above, the Biden administration must engage in rapid restorative action in the American West.

Political Consequences

The economic role of public lands stems from the deep-rooted grassroots support for public lands. Across the country, Americans value public lands as a way to honor our heritage and history for generations to come.⁴⁶ For many Indigenous American communities, publically protected land is often sacred and spiritual.⁴⁷ The history and beauty associated with public lands is what inspires consistent support for their continued protection. Polling data from across the country reflects a bipartisan consensus in favor of public lands. 2016 research from the Harvard Kennedy School found that over 90% of Americans believe it's important that historical sites,

⁴⁴ Raskar R. (2017). *Protected Lands and Economics*. Retrieved March 12, from https://headwaterseconomics.org/wp-content/uploads/Protected_Lands_Economics.pdf

⁴⁵ Harvard Forest (n.d.). *Assessing the local economic impacts of land protection*. Retrieved March 6, from https://harvardforest.fas.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/Sims_et_al-2019-Conservation_Biology.pdf

⁴⁶ Franklin M. (2017, October 9). *The benefits of public wildlands, explained*. Retrieved January 12, from <https://www.vox.com/ad/16447278/wildlands-benefits-protection>

⁴⁷ United States Department of the Interior (2020, October 30). *10 Public Lands with Powerful Native American Connections*. Retrieved March 1, from <https://www.doi.gov/blog/10-public-lands-powerful-native-american-connections>

public lands and national parks be protected for current and future generations.⁴⁸ 77% of Americans think that protecting public lands is “one of the things our government does best.”⁴⁹ In Western states with significant acreage of federal lands, 67 percent of voters preferred congressional efforts to protect public lands instead of enabling fossil fuel mining and drilling. And 77% of Western voters support actualizing Biden’s pledge to conserve 30% of America’s land.⁵⁰ Public opinion, both nationally and from relevant stakeholders, supports the strengthening of protections for public lands.

In order to ensure that the consensus of public opinion carried electoral significance, we attempted to analyze congressional elections and their relationship to rollbacks in public lands. We decided to review electoral results from the United States House of Representatives because the representatives are simultaneously connected to local issues while also having a say in the federal government that presides over the public lands. For background, we first looked at the congressional vote in 2018 and the Presidential vote in 2020. In both cases, there was a definitive trend that increased support for preservation resulted in negative outcomes for Trump and Republican congressional candidates, both of which are associated with recent rollbacks in federal land protections (see Appendix I). Another noteworthy finding is that, despite population density having a higher correlation to preservation, congressional districts in the Big Sky and Southwest regions, as defined by FiveThirtyEight’s Nate Silver,⁵¹ tended to support preservation

⁴⁸ Cole H. (n.d.). *Why Should the Public Care About Public Lands?* Retrieved March 7, from <https://www.patagonia.com/stories/why-should-the-public-care-about-public-lands/story-32329.html>

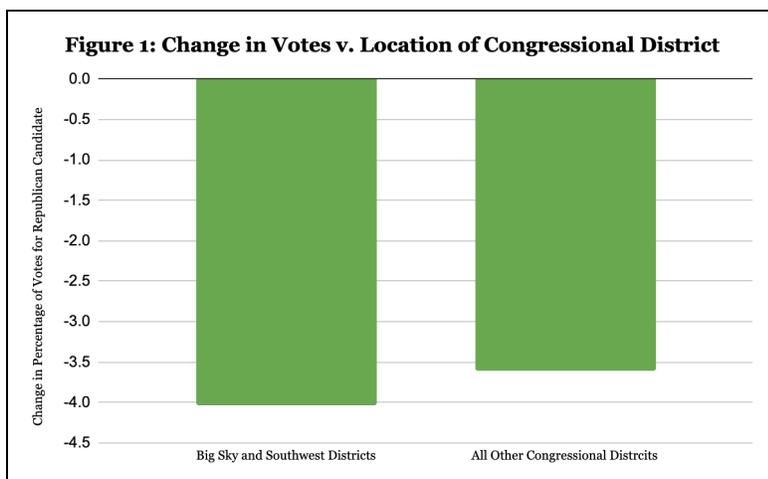
⁴⁹ Vet Voice Foundation (n.d.). *America’s National Public Lands Belong To All of US*. Retrieved February 25, from <https://www.vetvoicefoundation.org/docs/Public-Lands.pdf>

⁵⁰ Colorado College (2021). *Public Lands in the West*. Retrieved March 1, from <https://www.coloradocollege.edu/other/stateoftherockies/conservationinthewest/2020/2020-conservation-in-the-west-poll-data/2020%20State%20of%20the%20Rockies%20Topic%20Report%20on%20Public%20Lands%200003%20-%20d1d.pdf>

⁵¹ Silver N. (2008, April 12). *Regions, the resolution*. Retrieved March 3, from <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/regions-resolution/>

more than similar rural communities (see Appendix II). However, this research does not denote a change over time and does not reflect the electoral consequences of recent rollbacks.

In order to answer those questions, we compared congressional results from 2016 to 2018—the period of time in which the Trump administration reversed Obama-era conservation practices. In order to rule out outlying districts with external anomalies, we removed districts that had a larger than 15 percent swing in either direction. This eliminated extraordinary circumstances such as candidates who ran unopposed. While the cut-off point was slightly unscientific, it eliminated roughly 10% of congressional districts—a relatively fair calculation given the abnormal distribution of the data set. We chose to not control for factors such as incumbency because the number of Republican and Democrat seats are relatively equal and should cancel out given the number of House seats. When averaged out, House congressional candidates for the Republican Party lost 4.03 percent vote in Big Sky and Southwest districts, the districts most affected by public lands rollbacks. This was more than in all other districts by a factor of around 1.12, with other Republican congressional candidates losing 3.6 percent of the vote on average (see Appendix III). This indicates that congressional electoral outcomes in districts with significant amounts of public lands are heavily connected to federal protection of public lands. While this research is a far cry from a longitudinal analysis of voter opinions and



electoral outcomes, it demonstrates a tentative correlation between support for public lands and congressional success in the western United States. More research is needed to

determine the effect on congressional districts nationally, but Biden's victory and proposals for conversation could suggest further positive relationships.

The slight difference in electoral results demonstrates that, coupled with the ecological and economic consequences of disregarding public lands, federal officials ought to prioritize their federal responsibility to tend to public lands.

CONCLUSION

If the ecological and economic consequences of public lands rollbacks were not enough to inspire a policy response, the added political benefits ought to bring about a clear-cut plan from the Biden administration. Though the new administration has inspired confidence through the early planning stages, more steps need to be taken to proactively prevent fossil fuel extraction and the loss of public lands. There also needs to be a continued push for expanding conservation efforts and investing in renewable energy while creating green jobs. The Trump-era rollbacks may be an immediate concern, but managing public lands requires a long-term commitment to achieve true sustainability for generations to come.

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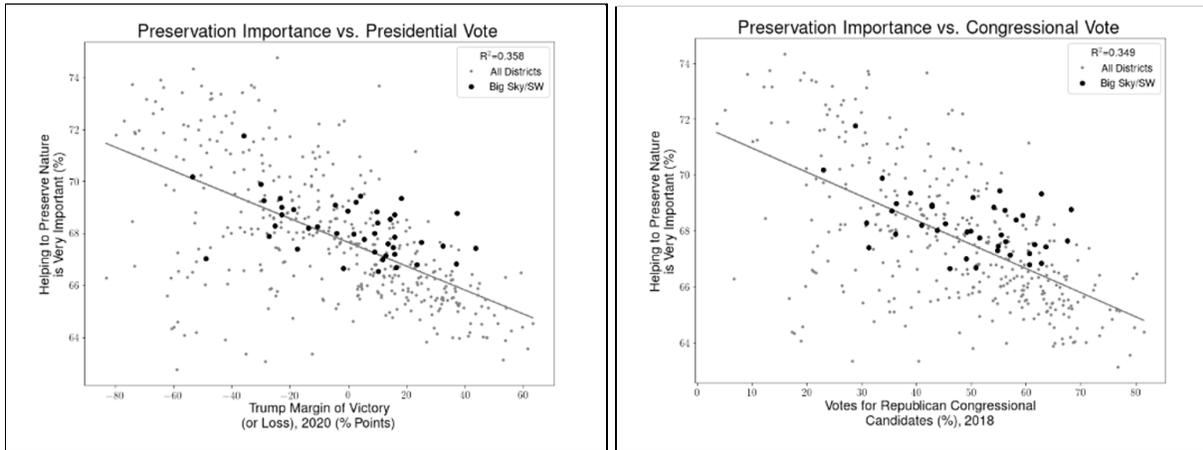
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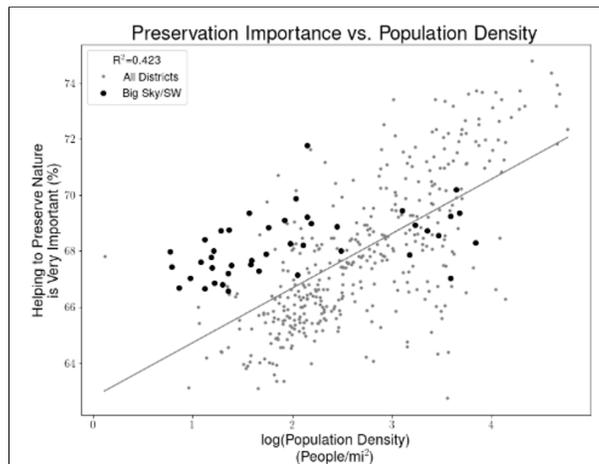
APPENDIX I

Analysis of Federal Elections in Relation to Preservation Importance



APPENDIX II

Analysis of Population Density in Relation to Preservation Importance



APPENDIX III

Spreadsheet with Data Processing for Congressional District Results by Location

[Congressional District Data.xlsx](#)