



A Public Lands Overview

At birth or upon taking the oath of citizenship, every American inherits 623 million acres. This natural legacy includes some of the most stunning places on Earth: the Grand Canyon, Yellowstone, and the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. These one million square miles comprise 26 percent of the nation's land, located in all 50 states, but concentrated in the West. Alaska has 238 million acres (38 percent) of these public lands. Founded 74 years ago, The Wilderness Society remains the only national organization that focuses primarily on the conservation of all these natural treasures.

The acreage is located in four land systems: the National Park System (80 million acres), the National Forest System (192 million acres), the National Wildlife Refuge System (96 million acres), and the western tracts overseen by the U.S. Bureau of Land Management or BLM (258 million acres). About ten percent of the BLM's most sensitive lands are in its National Landscape Conservation System. Created in 2000, the Conservation System seeks to conserve the natural and cultural values of the BLM's most sensitive lands by protecting landscape-scale ecosystems and archaeological communities—not merely small, isolated tracts surrounded by development.

In 1964, Congress passed the Wilderness Act, creating the National Wilderness Preservation System. The act established criteria and a process for permanently protecting undeveloped areas that are within our national parks, national forests, national wildlife refuges, and BLM holdings. Once Congress adds a place to the National Wilderness Preservation System, it is protected from activities such as road building, construction, and the use of motorized equipment, motor vehicles, and other forms of mechanical transport. As of December 2008, there are more than 107 million acres in the system, and we continue to work with grassroots partners across the country to expand the system. (*See section 3 for details*)

The Interior Department is the steward for three of the land systems (the National Park System, the National Wildlife Refuge System, and the Bureau of Land Management), while the Department of Agriculture is responsible for the National Forest System. The National Park Service and the agencies that oversee the other three systems do not own these places; they are managers and stewards, responsible to the American people, including those yet to be born. The Wilderness Society believes President Theodore Roosevelt summarized the duties of our nation's land managers in 1906 when he said: "The nation behaves well if it treats the natural resources as assets which it must turn over to the next generation increased, and not impaired, in value."

Appropriations for all four agencies are contained in the annual Interior and Related Agencies appropriations bill. That legislation also includes appropriations from the Land and Water Conservation Fund, created by Congress in 1964 to acquire, and thereby protect, certain lands within or near any of the four federal land systems and to assist states with local recreation and conservation projects. A newer vehicle for conserving important private forest land threatened by inappropriate development is the Forest Legacy Program, which provides matching grants to states for conservation easements or full-fee acquisition of these tracts. The need for these two initiatives was dramatized by the U.S. Forest Service's 2006 report "Cooperating Across Boundaries—Partnerships to Conserve Open Space in Rural America." It documented that development sprawl consumes 6,000 acres of open space every day in the United States, or more than four acres a minute. To help prioritize and focus the agency's efforts to combat the loss of open space, the Forest Service is developing an Open Space Conservation and Implementation Plan. (*See section 11 for details on both programs*)

As the U.S. population has grown, so has the pressure on our public lands. One prominent example is the fight over oil drilling proposed for the biological heart of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in Alaska.

(See section 10 for details) During the eights of the George W. Bush administration, there also has been an intense campaign to lease environmentally sensitive public lands in the Rockies and elsewhere to the oil and gas industry *(See section 4 for details)*. Another debate involves the 58.5 million acres of national forest land that are still in their natural condition but have not been protected via addition to the Wilderness System. The Roadless Area Conservation Rule of January 2001 barred most logging and road-building on those lands, but it has been under attack ever since. *(See section 5 for details)*. Other issues include mining, livestock grazing, wildfire, wildlife management, and the appropriate use of dirt bikes and other off-road vehicles, to name a few. *(To learn more about off-road vehicle issues, see section 14. In section 13 you will find an explanation of a road-related issue called RS 2477.)*

Weaving through most of these debates is this vital question: How can the American people have their say in the management of the places that they own? Under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), the National Forest Management Act (NFMA), the Federal Land Policy and Management Act (FLPMA), and other laws, federal agencies are required to provide ample opportunity for public input. Conservationists have strongly opposed Bush administration efforts to reduce such input. *(See section 12 for details on NEPA)*

Another concern for conservationists is that current management largely reflects an outdated economic reality. Decades ago, logging, mining, and other commercial activities conducted on the public's lands made more economic sense. Increasingly, such exploitation contributes less to local economies than does the tourism and recreation drawn by these natural areas. There is also a growing understanding that undeveloped landscapes scrub our air, provide cleaner drinking water for downstream communities, conserve valuable biological diversity, and limit flood surges. The economic value of these important services is hard to measure, but it increases every day. The nation's chambers of commerce continue to find that many business owners desire to put down roots in places where natural amenities help attract and retain a desirable workforce. Put another way, a national forest tree is probably worth far more left in the ground than on the back of a logging truck.

America's public lands are a remarkable national asset. Unfortunately, they are too often threatened by shortsighted development policies. Since it is ultimately up to Congress to ensure that these lands are passed on to future generations of Americans, we wanted to acquaint you with some of the major issues that may come before the 111th Congress.

Basics of the National Wilderness Preservation System

The National Wilderness Preservation System was created on September 3, 1964, when President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Wilderness Act. The United States was the first country in the world to define and designate wilderness areas through law. Subsequently, countries around the world have protected areas modeled after the Wilderness Act. Wilderness is managed by four federal agencies: the National Park Service, the United States Forest Service, the United States Fish and Wildlife Service, and the Bureau of Land Management.

Wilderness by the Numbers

- As of December 2008, the National Wilderness Preservation System contains more than 700 wilderness areas totaling more than 107 million acres.
- Only 4.75% of the land area in the entire United States, including Alaska, is designated wilderness. Over half of all designated wilderness is in Alaska. Less than three percent of land in the contiguous United States is designated wilderness.
- Only four percent of the nation's designated wilderness Areas are east of the Mississippi, yet 60 percent of the country's population lives there.
- There is designated wilderness in all but six states: Connecticut, Delaware, Iowa, Kansas, Maryland, and Rhode Island.
- There are approximately 43.5 million acres of wilderness within the national parks, 35.1 million acres in national forests, 20.6 million acres in national wildlife refuges, and 7.4 million acres administered by the Bureau of Land Management.

Protection Provided by the Wilderness System

Wilderness areas are protected from development such as roads, dams, or other permanent structures; from timber cutting and the operation of motorized vehicles; and from new mining claims and mineral leasing. Mining operations and livestock grazing are permitted to continue in wilderness areas if these practices existed prior to an area's designation. Hunting, fishing, horseback riding, hiking, camping, canoeing and other non-mechanized outdoor recreation is permitted in wilderness areas.

How Wilderness Areas Are Designated

The Wilderness Act specifies that only Congress can designate new wilderness areas. Each federal land management agency—the United States Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, National Park Service, and United States Fish and Wildlife Service—has surveyed its lands and recommended to Congress certain areas for wilderness designation. Many of these recommendations have not been acted on by the Congress and some recommendations have been before Congress for decades.

Citizens can and do develop wilderness proposals, which is usually done area-by-area at the local level which assures that substantial local input goes into each proposal. Congress has acted on many citizen proposals. Still, the United States contains tens of millions of acres of land that qualify for wilderness designation, but has not been protected by Congress.

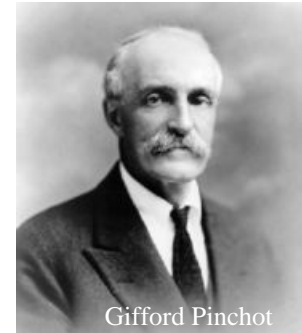


Black Ridge Canyons Wilderness, CO/UT
Photo by BLM

Basics of the National Forest System

Established in 1905, the U.S. Forest Service is an agency of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The Forest Service manages 193 million acres of national forests and grasslands, an area equivalent to the size of Texas.

Gifford Pinchot, the first Chief of the Forest Service, summed up the agency's mission: "to provide the greatest amount of good for the greatest amount of people in the long run."



The Forest Service has a national headquarters and nine regions to manage the 155 national forests and 20 national grasslands, located in 44 states, and Puerto Rico. The lands comprise 8.5 percent of the total land area in the United States. The natural resources on these lands are some of the nation's greatest assets and have major economic, environmental, and social significance for all Americans.

The Forest Service has a workforce of approximately 30,000 employees and is organized into four levels:

Ranger District

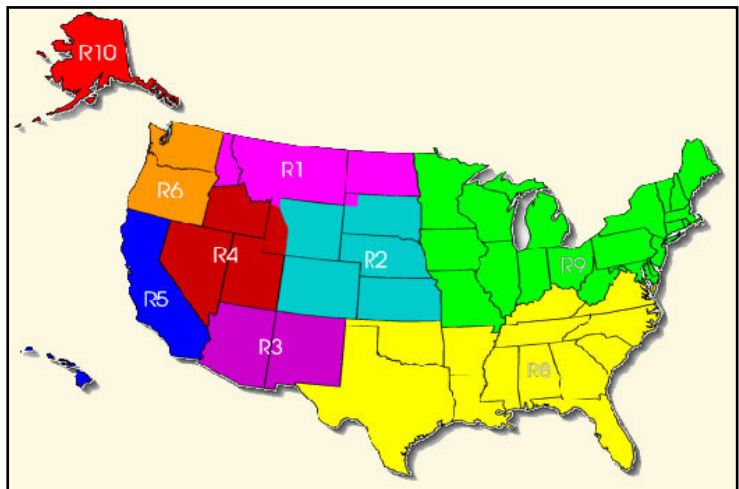
There are more than 600 ranger districts. Each district has a staff of 10 to 100 people and vary in size. Many on-the-ground activities occur in the ranger districts, including trail construction and maintenance, operation of campgrounds, and management of vegetation and wildlife habitat.

National Forest

Each National Forest is composed of several ranger districts. The person in charge of a national forest is the forest supervisor. The district rangers from the districts within a forest work for the forest supervisor. The headquarters of a national forest is the supervisor's office.

Regions

There are nine regions that cover broad geographic areas, usually including several States. The person in charge is the regional forester. Forest supervisors of the national forests within a region report to the regional forester. The regional office staff coordinates activities between national forests, monitors activities on national forests to ensure quality operations, provides guidance for forest plans, and allocates budgets to the forests.



U.S. Forest Service regions.
Data Source: <http://www.fs.fed.us/contactus/regions.shtml>

National Level

The person who oversees the entire Forest Service is called the Chief and he/she is based in Washington DC. The Chief is a federal employee who reports to the Under Secretary for Natural Resources and Environment in the U.S. Department of Agriculture.



Basics of the Bureau of Land Management (BLM)

BLM lands are located almost entirely in 12 western states: Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon, Utah, Washington, and Wyoming. In this sweeping expanse, broad basins and high deserts are uplifted and incised forming a labyrinth of rivers, canyons, mesas, deserts, wetlands, and mountains, shaping landscapes of improbable beauty.

The BLM is charged with sustaining the health, diversity, and productivity of the public lands for the use and enjoyment of present and future generations. BLM lands range from the Lewis and Clark country of the Upper Missouri River Breaks National Monument, the red rock canyonlands of Southern Utah, the stunning and remote stretches of the northern California coastline and vast reaches of America's Arctic. Though some of these lands contain designated wilderness areas, national monuments, or national conservation areas, millions of acres deserving similar protection are at risk of irresponsible energy, mining, off-road vehicles or other developments.

The BLM manages more than 258 “surface” acres and nearly 700 million acre of sub-surface mineral estate.

Wildlands and Special Places

The wildlands managed by the BLM—more than 258 million acres—are home to some of America's most diverse, spectacular, but often unprotected places. They include the National Landscape Conservation System—a 26-million-acre network of the BLM's crown jewels—Wilderness Areas, National Monuments, Wild and Scenic Rivers, and National Conservation Areas. The BLM manages more acreage than any other federal agency, yet BLM lands contain the smallest amount of designated wilderness of any agency with less than seven million acres.

Besides managing 258 million surface acres, the BLM administers the federal mineral estate beneath that acreage and the mineral estate on an additional 442 million acres of lands managed by other agencies and private lands. In all, the BLM manages nearly 700 million acres of federal sub-surface mineral estate across the nation.

The BLM administers these public lands within a framework of numerous laws, including the Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976 (FLPMA), the Mineral Leasing Act (MLA), the Endangered Species Act (ESA), the General Mining Law, the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), and the Wilderness Act. All Bureau policies, procedures and management actions must be consistent with its “organic” statute (FLPMA) and the other laws that govern the use of public lands.

Basics of The National Landscape Conservation System

The National Landscape Conservation System is America’s newest public lands system. Created administratively in 2000, the Conservation System brings together the best of the lands and waters managed by the BLM; the Conservation System currently encompasses 26 million acres in the west, or 10 percent of BLM land.

The Conservation System is a spectacular counterpart to America’s National Parks and National Wildlife Refuge Systems. BLM’s National Landscape Conservation System offers prime wildlife habitat, breathtaking vistas, and magnificent and fragile cultural and historical resources. The Conservation System also provides a uniquely rugged and primitive visitor experience, with lots of solitude, minimal infrastructure, and ample opportunity to explore, learn, camp, hunt, and get away from the crowds.

The Conservation System includes lands and waters designated for conservation by Congress or the President, including National Monuments, Wilderness Areas, Wild and Scenic Rivers, and more (see table). Protecting the outstanding ecological, scientific, cultural, and educational values of the System for future generations is a priority for The Wilderness Society (see section 7 for an overview of our National Landscape Conservation System Campaign).

Components of the National Landscape Conservation System	Number	Total Acreage or Distance
National Monuments	15	4,807,034 acres
National Conservation Areas	13	14,101,234 acres
Steens Mountain Cooperative Management & Protection Area (OR)	1	428,156 acres
Piedras Blancas Historic Light Station Outstanding Natural Area (CA)	1	19 acres
Jupiter Inlet Lighthouse Outstanding Natural Area (FL)	1	120 acres
Yaquina Head Outstanding Natural Area (OR)	1	100 acres
Headwaters Forest Reserve (CA)	1	7,472 acres
Wilderness Areas	183	7,434,767 acres
Wilderness Study Areas	604	14,089,145 acres
National Scenic and Historic Trails	13	5,487 miles
Wild and Scenic Rivers	38	2,052 miles

Basics of the National Wildlife Refuge System

The National Wildlife Refuge System, a department of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), maintains a “wildlife first” philosophy and helps preserve our nation’s wildlife legacy. The Refuge System’s mission is “to administer a national network of lands and waters for the conservation, management, and where appropriate, restoration of the fish, wildlife, and plant resources and their habitats within the United States for the benefit of present and future generations of Americans.”

Wildlife

The Refuge System is the only federal land system established to safeguard wildlife and their habitat. To provide for diverse wildlife populations, the FWS protects the ecosystems, habitats, and natural landscapes in which these animals live. America’s refuges are home to more than 700 bird species, 220 mammals, 250 reptiles, more than 1,000 fish and a wild variety of invertebrate and plant species. Nationwide refuges offer protection for 260 endangered species.

Recreation on Wildlife Refuges

The Refuge System offers a wide variety of recreational opportunities, including wildlife photography and observation, hunting and fishing, environmental education and interpretation. Environmental education programs are offered in 360 refuges, serving close to one million students and teachers. Annually, the National Wildlife Refuge System has 40 million visitors and generates annual revenues of \$1.4 billion.

Geography of Wildlife Refuges

There are 548 national wildlife refuges. There is at least one refuge in every state and territory, and at least one refuge within an hour’s drive of every major metropolitan area. In its entirety, the Refuge System encompasses 96 million acres and contains more than 20 million acres of designated Wilderness Areas on 63 refuges, and another 21 refuges that contain proposed wilderness that totals roughly 2 million acres.

The Regions of the National Wildlife Refuge System

Region 1: HI, ID, OR, WA, Pacific Islands

Region 2: AZ, NM, OK, TX

Region 3: IL, IN, IA, MI, MN, MO, OH, WI

Region 4: AL, AR, FL, GA, KY, LA, MS, NC, SC, TN, PR, U.S. Virgin Islands

Region 5: CT, DE, ME, MD, MA, NH, NJ, NY, PA, RI, VT, VA, and WV

Region 6: CO, KS, MT, ND, NE, SD, UT, WY

Region 7: AK

Region 8: CA, NV

Region 9: Headquarters, Washington, DC



Desert Big Horn Sheep
Photo by USFWS

National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act

In 1997, Congress passed landmark legislation: the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act. The Improvement Act mandates that wildlife conservation be the singular mission of the Refuge System. In addition, the Improvement Act mandates that the FWS prepare a 15-year comprehensive conservation plan that allows for public participation in the planning process.

Refuge System History

The first refuges focused on protecting breeding grounds for bird species, which were hunted to near extinction for their feathers and other parts. With the passage of the Migratory Bird Act in 1913, the Refuge System escalated the acquisition of habitats to conserve a rapidly dwindling migratory bird population. In addition to the more than 3,000 Waterfowl Production Areas in the Refuge System, about 75% of designated refuges were established to conserve migratory birds, most with an emphasis on waterfowl.

At the same time, there has also been a consistent concern for and commitment to the conservation of America’s mammals. Beginning in 1908 with the National Bison Range in Montana, the Refuge System steadily acquired vital habitats for elk, bighorn sheep, deer, antelope, caribou, sea otters, walrus, sea lions, musk oxen, brown bears, moose, and other mammal species. Since 1973, the Refuge System has also used the authority of the Endangered Species Act to acquire nearly 60 refuges for the protection of 260 endangered or threatened species.



Basics of the National Park System

"The parks do not belong to one state or to one section.... The Yosemite, the Yellowstone, the Grand Canyon are national properties in which every citizen has a vested interest; they belong as much to the man of Massachusetts, of Michigan, of Florida, as they do to the people of California, of Wyoming, and of Arizona."

-- **Stephen T. Mather, first NPS Director, 1917-1929**

The National Park Service (NPS) was established in 1916. By the time the agency was established, Yellowstone National Park had been designated for 44 years and other National Parks and National Monuments were designated by Congress or by Presidents under the Antiquities Act respectively. Today, the Park Service manages 391 units totaling roughly 84 million acres.

The National Park System encompasses iconic wild landscapes, battlefields, historic homes, and important cultural sites. Congress has been designating park units for more than 90 years and continues to designate more park units and expand their boundary lines.

Wilderness

More than half of the National Park System is managed as Wilderness—44 million acres in total. Gates of the Arctic, Wrangell-St. Elias, and Denali National Parks in Alaska hold some of the largest park designated Wilderness areas. Presently, millions of acres are proposed for wilderness designation awaiting congressional approval. Many wild lands in National Parks are not designated wilderness, but have special regulations that protect their backcountry character.

Wildlife

Grizzly bears, the Florida panther, and 367 other well-known endangered and threatened species find refuge in the National Park System. Wildlife viewing is among the major reasons Americans and international visitors take their families to these extraordinary locations.

Management Structure

The National Park Service is an agency within the Department of the Interior. The agency is led by a director based in Washington D.C. and managed by seven regional offices. Superintendents (or park managers) supervise day-to-day management of each park unit.