



The  
Wilderness  
Society

# A Climate Plan for Public Lands:

Critical to Solving the Climate Crisis

*A working document for discussion*

***Table of Contents***

Protect, Connect and Restore Critical Lands.....5

Reduce Fossil Fuel Emissions from Public Lands.....7

Promote Clean Energy.....11

Strengthen Climate Resiliency for All.....15



Grand Staircase Escalante National Monument, Utah  
© Eric Bennett

# **Our public lands** and the communities who rely on them are at the forefront of the climate crisis. While current management of these lands makes them a significant contributor to the U.S. climate change problem, they have the potential to play an even bigger role in climate solutions – as a natural mitigation tool, a landscape for adaptation and a foundation for resilient communities.

Our public lands represent the greatest single opportunity available to policymakers for meeting the scope of these climate challenges. And because the federal government manages our public lands, it has the power to change course and move in a direction that harnesses the full potential of these lands to help address the climate crisis and ensure a livable world for future generations.

We must reimagine the way we manage development and undertake conservation on our public lands by centering on climate and equity in our decisions and prioritizing the survival of people and natural systems. With communities directly impacted by climate helping to shape the path forward and land managers making

decisions rooted in science, we can transition to a sustainable, just, climate-positive model for public lands – one that fulfills the U.S. government’s obligation to manage these lands in our, the public’s, interest.

We envision a commitment to managing public lands as part of a national climate solution that accomplishes four essential goals.

- 1. Protect, connect and restore critical landscapes**
- 2. Reduce fossil fuel emissions from public lands**
- 3. Promote clean energy**
- 4. Strengthen climate resiliency for all**



Canyonlands National Park, Utah

# Protect, Connect and Restore Critical Lands

Public leaders at all levels must restore, protect and connect large landscapes – at scales of a million acres or more – as a part of climate action. Biologically rich, continuous networks of public lands play an important role in reducing climate change emissions, supporting species adaptation and building resilience for the hardest-hit communities.

Healthy landscapes are natural and efficient carbon captors. Science demonstrates that natural ecosystems – especially forests – suck up and store more carbon from the atmosphere than cultivated plots of single-species crops or trees. Preventing these rich, carbon-storing lands from being converted to less productive uses also keeps them connected, which allows plant and animal species to adapt to a changing climate by migrating to new habitats. These same robust landscapes are sources of cultural, spiritual and physical resilience. They are also critical buffers against extreme weather and water scarcity for the communities most impacted by the sources and effects of climate change.

Unfortunately, instead of embracing the potential of landscape-scale conservation, the policies of the current administration are moving us backwards. This administration has presided over the largest rollback of public lands protections in our country's history, stripping protections from more than 153 million acres of land and water.

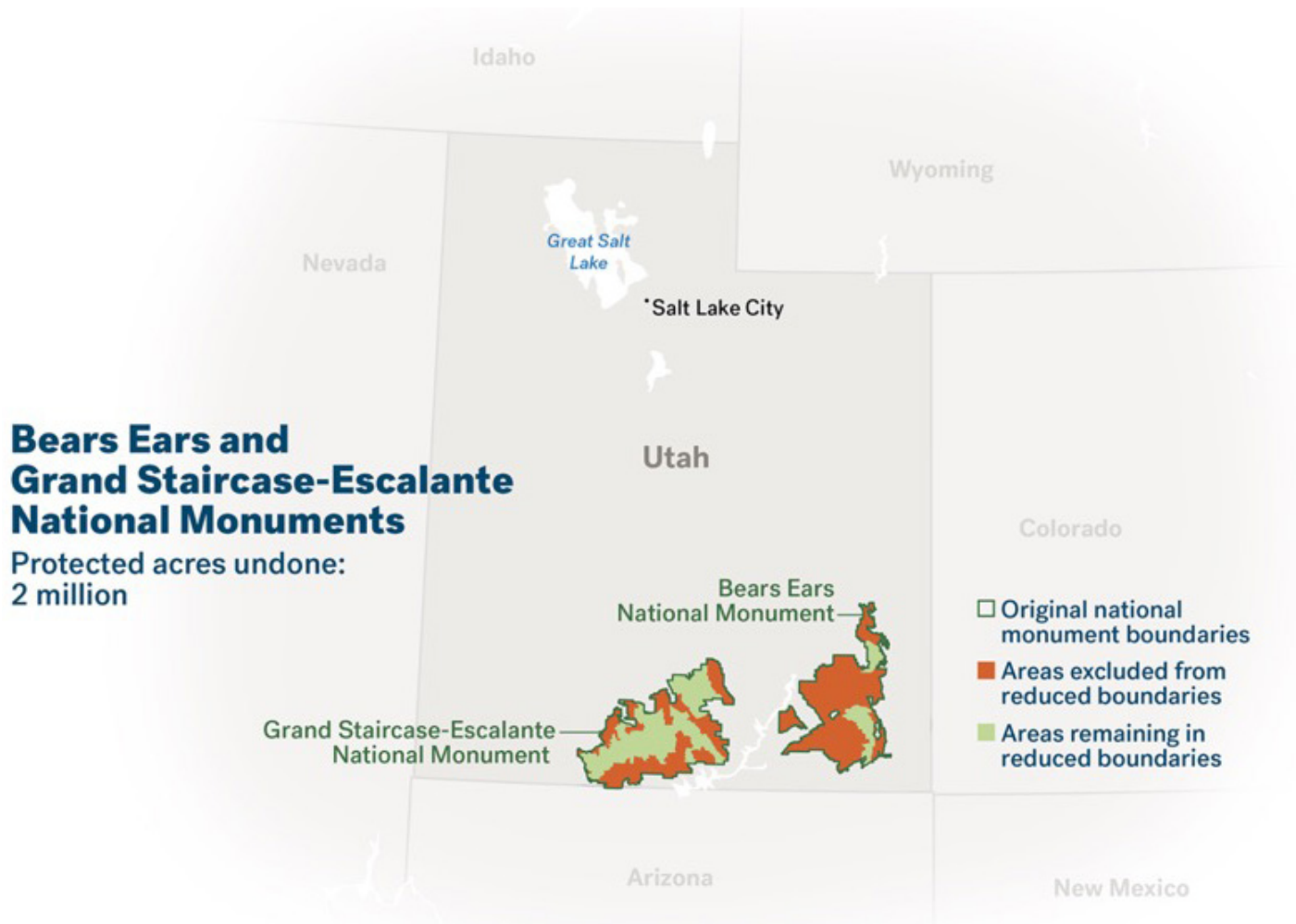
Public leaders must immediately halt this destructive agenda and restore protections for critical ecosystems, culturally significant areas and other lands and waters put at risk by this administration.

They must instead adopt an agenda that reflects the growing calls for nations to commit to the goal of protecting and conserving 30 percent of lands as healthy and functional natural areas by 2030. This requires policies and management efforts that prevent further loss of healthy natural systems, restore degraded systems, and that seize opportunities to protect more ecologically and culturally significant landscapes.



**Healthy landscapes  
are natural and  
efficient carbon  
captors.**

Climate change demands we ground public lands management in considerations of current and future resilience. Prioritizing putting people to work healing damaged public land not only makes forests and parks more resilient to climate impacts; it improves habitat quality for species already stressed by climate change.



President Trump has also stripped protections for 153.3 million acres of land and water, an area larger than California and Washington combined. This includes Bears Ears and Grand Staircase National Monuments, among many others. Learn more at <https://www.wilderness.org/articles/article/trumps-land-grab-7-maps>

***To ensure that our public lands and waters are managed in the interest of current and future generations, elected leaders must:***

- Immediately restore protections that have been removed from formerly protected federal public lands of ecological and cultural significance.
- Create a well-designed and connected system of protected areas and working lands that together sustain the biological diversity of the landscape through appropriate land designations across all levels of ownership.
- Ensure long-term and stable public funding, including sufficient resources for science that support sustainable land management and stewardship programs.
- Substantially invest in long-term programs to create good-paying jobs to restore degraded lands to a healthy natural state with significant capacity to store or sequester carbon and provide other valuable natural and economic benefits.
- Partner with communities and diverse interest stakeholders across political boundaries to conserve and restore our natural and cultural heritage, with the goal of ensuring a better, vibrant future for both people and nature.

# Reduce Fossil Fuel Emissions from Public Lands

Public leaders must reduce emissions tied to energy development on public lands and waters at or ahead of the pace dictated by climate science. This would also combat climate change by significantly expanding the carbon storage opportunities that come with healthy, resilient ecosystems.

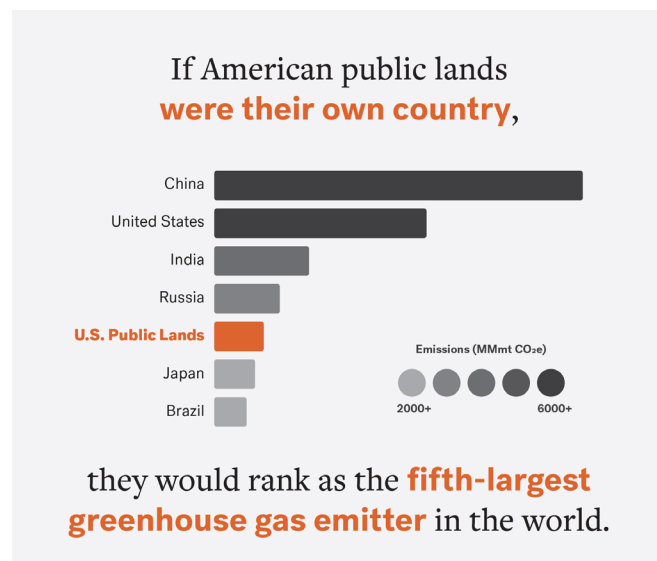
**A significant portion of the nation's energy production comes from federal lands and waters.**

Currently, however, the management of public lands is a large part of the climate problem instead of a central part of a national solution. The United States government, through the Department of the Interior, is one of the largest energy asset managers in the world, and currently makes access to fossil energy resources easy and cheap. Thus, a significant portion of the nation's energy production comes from federal lands and waters.

This comes at a high cost to the land and local communities and contributes significantly to the climate crisis in the form of greenhouse gas emissions.

According to a TWS analysis, oil, gas and coal pulled from public lands and waters were equivalent to more than 20 percent of total lifecycle U.S. greenhouse gas emissions in 2018. If public lands were their own nation, they would rank as the fifth largest source of emissions in the world, ahead of Japan, Brazil and Germany.

Under the current administration's energy agenda, oil and gas producers have had cheaper and easier access to energy resources on public lands, while the public has seen their opportunities to influence decisions decrease.



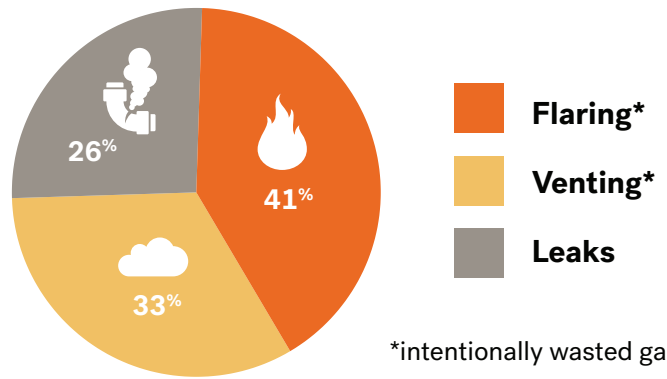


## Climate Plan for Public Lands: A working document for discussion

Less than a month after being confirmed, Secretary Zinke rescinded important climate and mitigation policies and lifted the moratorium on new coal leases. This administration has shown a willful disregard for science and tried to hide the climate impact of energy leasing, while offering more land for lease than any administration in history.

Public lands must transition away from resource extraction to uses that mitigate climate change. The federal government has the management discretion to turn our public lands from a major carbon source into a carbon sink through the carbon-capturing power of healthy forests and grasslands.

### Percentages of Wasted Gas (most is wasted intentionally)



### Sweetheart Deal

The U.S. Government heavily subsidizes fossil fuel production on public lands and waters (some estimates suggest as much as \$7 billion per year).

#### This includes a range of policies such as:

- Below-market royalty rate of 12.5% for oil and gas extraction, rates that have not changed since 1920
- Loopholes and deductions that mean companies rarely pay the full 12.5%
- Below-market rental rates that reduce the carrying cost of holding lands

Independent auditors have found these subsidies are not warranted and cost taxpayers dearly.

Pawnee National Grassland, Colorado

***To ensure energy and lands decisions help, rather than hurt, the climate, elected leaders must:***

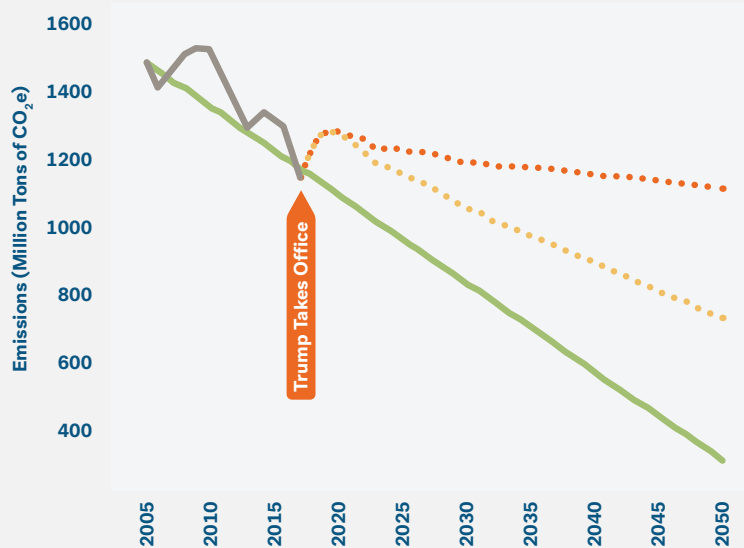
- Establish an ambitious goal of net zero emissions from public lands and waters by 2030.
- Reinstate a federal methane and natural gas waste rule informed by science-based recommendations.
- Eliminate the production subsidies for oil and gas leases on public lands and waters and invest the resulting revenue in a climate transition fund to assist workers and communities facing the greatest impacts from decreased fossil fuel production on public lands.
- Phase down future leasing and development in line with a scientifically established carbon budget.
- Increase the sequestration potential and overall ecological health of public lands and waters by protecting large intact landscapes, investing in land restoration and stewardship efforts, developing new technologies to support large scale remote effectiveness monitoring, and creating new jobs via a National Climate Conservation Corps.

**Climate Superpollutant**

Methane is a greenhouse gas 87 times more potent than carbon dioxide in the near term, and often gets released alongside toxic co-pollutants including benzene, formaldehyde and ethylbenzene, all known to cause major health problems and increased risk of cancer. In 2016, the BLM adopted a final rule that would reduce methane emissions by 40% -- the same amount of carbon pollution as what is produced by nearly 1 million vehicles each year. Rescinding the rule was a priority for the oil and gas industry and ideological conservatives, but it took several attempts before the rule was successfully eliminated. Most notably, from January 2017 to early May 2017, the Congress debated a resolution of disapproval under the Congressional Review Act (CRA) which would have wiped the rule off the books. That effort failed when the Senate rejected the resolution 49 to 51. Several subsequent attempts failed in court, but the rule was rescinded in fall 2018.

**Fossil Fuel Emissions from Public Lands**

- Target emissions reduction pathway
- Historical emissions
- Projected emissions with Obama-era policies
- Current trajectory after Trump leasing and policy changes





**Mark O Hatfield Wilderness, Oregon**  
© Michael Matti-flickr

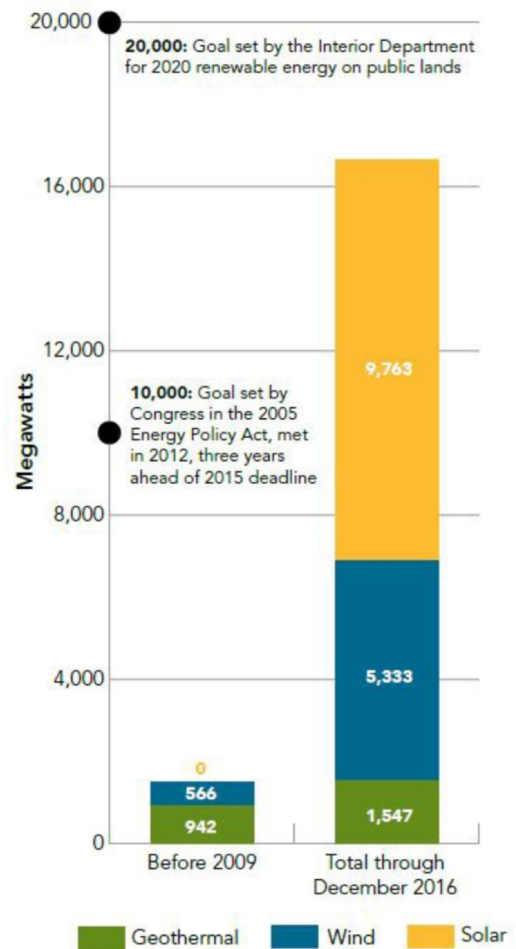
# Promote Clean Energy

Public leaders must unlock the potential of the U.S.'s public lands and waters to help achieve a clean energy future. Some of our nation's best solar, wind and geothermal resources are found on public lands. Carefully choosing the best sites and expanding renewable energy development on public lands can help boost local economies, provide new job opportunities across a range of skill levels, and generate additional revenue streams for state and local governments. At the same time, this will combat climate change and protect our most sensitive lands, wildlife habitat and cultural resources.

**Some of our nation's best solar, wind and geothermal resources are found on public lands.**

For too long, energy development of any kind on our public lands has been characterized by controversy and unnecessary conflict. Smart planning approaches are needed for new clean energy which recognize that some places are simply too wild to develop and would guide needed new development elsewhere.

Renewable Energy Permitted on Public Land



## Climate Plan for Public Lands: A working document for discussion

A strong climate plan for public lands will ensure we develop the energy we need while protecting the places we love. The U.S. can and should play a global role leading the energy revolution and building the new clean energy economy. As public leaders work to justly transition the nation to clean, renewable energy,

they should cement a modern approach to energy development that includes increasing the efficiency of permitting renewable energy projects, reducing costs and conflicts, and maintaining and enhancing the full value of resilient landscapes.



***To ensure our public lands contribute fully to a clean energy future and vibrant green economy, while conserving land and water for wildlife and communities, our elected leaders must:***

- Permit a cumulative total of 25 GW of renewable energy on public lands by 2025 and support responsible offshore wind energy projects in federal waters.
- Double the number of renewable energy zones in lower-conflict areas in regions with high demand for clean energy by partnering with local community leaders, conservation groups, indigenous advocates and other diverse interest groups to spur new areas for economic growth and improve permitting times and outcomes for projects in these zones.
- Integrate energy transmission planning with renewable energy development, including by completing the reviews of the 6,000 miles of transmission corridors to reduce conflict and avoid unnecessary loss of wildlife habitat and negative impacts to plants and animals.
- Promote reuse and restoration of previously disturbed or contaminated sites on public lands for renewable energy through new incentives and streamlined permitting, helping turn zones of economic liability into zones of opportunity for local communities.
- Reinvest revenue generated by renewable energy projects on public lands back into states and local communities to support sustainable economic development and conservation projects.
- Support the new economic growth through renewable energy and other forms of sustainable development for communities currently dependent on fossil fuel production and/or traditionally marginalized from economic opportunity.

## Doing it Smart from the Start

By identifying renewable energy zones upfront, the solar panels, wind turbines, roads, transmission lines and other infrastructure needed to tap into the world-class renewable energy resources on public lands can be guided to areas that have lower impact on habitat and high-potential for energy to ensure projects are more likely to succeed.

Pursuing this approach means the federal government can better avoid costly and time-consuming fights over inappropriately sited projects that could harm wildlands, wildlife habitat and other uses.





**Ah-Shi-Sle-Pah Wilderness, New Mexico**  
Photo: Bob Wick, BLM

# Strengthen Climate Resiliency for All

Public leaders must ensure that all people, especially the communities most impacted by the sources and effects of climate change, have access to the benefits of nature and public lands. Prioritizing protection of healthy landscapes is critical to making communities more resilient and livable in the face of climate change.

Time spent in nature, whether urban parks or vast public lands, improves physical, mental, spiritual and overall community health by providing opportunities for physical activity, clean water and air, and community engagement. However, access to these public spaces is not equitable. Many of the communities subjected to the greatest social and health inequities in the U.S. – people of color and Indigenous peoples, working-class families, children and seniors, immigrants – have the least access to nature and its benefit.

These communities are also often the most vulnerable to the powerful and unpredictable forces climate change is compounding – from extreme weather events such as heat waves and hurricanes, to sea level rise and forest fires. They are chronically ill from exposure from toxins from coal plants, oil refineries, waste management systems, wildfire smoke and water pollutants. They have limited access to nutritious food and abundant clean water, which will only be exacerbated as climate impacts such as drought and flooding affect the affordability and availability of these essential resources.

Just climate strategies recognize that access to nature is as fundamental to building resilient communities as clean water, fresh air and safe food systems, and include steps to connect communities to nature in an equitable

manner so that all people benefit. Access to nature will not address all aspects of community resiliency, but lawmakers, land managers and advocacy organizations must ensure that access to nature and climate crisis management is equitable, prioritizing our most vulnerable communities.

## *To help ensure livable communities, elected leaders must:*

- Ensure that all environmental legislation mitigates environmental discrimination and provides opportunities for local communities to engage in policy decisions that impact their communities.
- Strengthen bedrock conservation laws and agency policy and practices to ensure they help mitigate climate impacts for our most vulnerable communities, promote environmental justice, eliminate environmental discrimination and deliver access to nature for everyone.
- Increase investment and work with state and local officials to bolster community outreach and create new opportunities for youth to engage with the outdoors in ways that are beneficial, educational and rooted in a cultural context that is relevant to, and celebratory of, all youth identities and community values.
- Ensure visitor experience, agency leadership and decision processes promote and are reflective of the nation's population so that public lands are culturally welcoming and inclusive for all people.





1615 M Street NW, Washington, DC 20036

[wilderness.org](http://wilderness.org)