

# The Register-Guard

GUEST VIEWPOINT

## Who should control our public lands?

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Public land is the best thing we have going in the West.

For many of us, public open spaces are within view as we look to the mountains, within our river basin as we turn the tap and drink clean water, or within a short drive when we want to escape from everything else and breath easy, relax, or check in on nature.

Just consider the numbers. For recreation alone, our combined national forests, national parks, Bureau of Land Management acreage and national wildlife refuges nationwide accommodate more than 600 million visits every year — about two for each man, woman and child in America. The federal government's public lands generated \$385 billion in economic development and 2 million jobs in 2011 alone, according to data collected by the Center for American Progress.

As a resident of southern Oregon, I can go walking, camping, fishing, hunting, bird watching, canoeing, rafting, horseback riding, bicycling or simply driving through undeveloped forest and mountain terrain to my heart's content, for free, virtually out the back door.

People without public land nearby — most Americans — can't do that. If they can find a place to go at all, they pay, endure the crowds and consider themselves lucky to sit in the shade of a tree or two.

And recreation is only a small slice of the pie. Sixty million people get their water supply from National Forests alone, and the fact that it comes from undeveloped public land means that it's generally clean and pure, free for the taking with low costs of treatment, and always there.

Our finest wildlife habitat — and often the only habitat for everything from deer and elk that we hunt to endangered species that we're struggling to sustain — is public land. This includes the spawning beds of salmon that are central to our sport and commercial fisheries, which are vital engines of local economies.

Our public land gives us clean air, not only because this acreage lacks the pollution of cars, farms and industry, but because trees produce oxygen and Uilter pollutants blowing in

from elsewhere. Public land is our buffer against poisons we'd otherwise breathe.

Think about the climate crisis. Fifteen percent of global warming gases are generated by the elimination of forests. Trees take gaseous carbon dioxide from the atmosphere — where it's the principal cause of global warming — and convert it to solid carbon in the form of wood. Next to reducing our burning of fossil fuels, sequestering of carbon in forests is our top defense against even higher global temperatures. Trees on private forests will be cut; only with public land and the forests spared there do we have opportunities to save ourselves from the ravages of a super-heated world.

Some people don't like public land. They say it should be "taken back" by private owners. They fail to note that federal open space in the West was always public land. After the Native Americans, it belonged to the federal government. Following a 40-year frenzy of free giveaways under the Homestead Act, colored by colossal fraud, Presidents Benjamin Harrison and Teddy Roosevelt set aside some of the remaining federal land as national forests.

Proposals to transfer land from federal stewardship to state or county governments are thinly disguised attempts to facilitate private ownership or unfettered development by extraction industries. Look no further than proposals to privatize Oregon's Elliott State Forest near Coos Bay.

The principal organization pushing for liquidation of federal public land is the American Legislative Exchange Council, receiving 98 percent of its funding from large corporations like Exxon Mobil, according to the Center for Media and Democracy. Corporate and industrial funding have been typical of "Sagebrush Rebellion" movements seeking a homespun image since the 1980s.

Those who prefer more private land and freer reins on development have a lot of America to choose from. Even in my rural county in Oregon, where more than half the land is public, the private land that remains would accommodate many times today's total population under current zoning.

Nationwide, two-thirds of all the land is private. If the grand open and public spaces of Wyoming or Oregon are not your cup of tea, then maybe the private expanses of Illinois, New Jersey, or any one of 38 states with nominal public land would be a better fit.

The national forests, along with other federal property, are the birthright and heritage of every American, now and yet to come.

Those who want to dismantle this extraordinary estate and take it for their own fail to recognize that this land serves us all. They fail to recognize that when they talk about taking our federal land away, they're talking about taking my land away from me, and away from every single one of us.

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