

Wyoming Outdoor Council

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FRONTLINE



Working to protect Wyoming's environment and quality of life since 1967

Stopping the Land Grab

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A weathered blue sign with white text is mounted on a wooden post. The sign reads "PRIVATE PROPERTY - NO - TRESPASSING". The sign is attached to a wooden post with a metal nail. A strand of barbed wire runs horizontally across the sign, partially obscuring the text. The background is a blurred landscape with trees and a clear sky.

PRIVATE
PROPERTY
- NO -
TRESPASSING

49
Years

Stopping the Land Grab



BY CHRIS MERRILL
ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR

It's been said before: Egypt has the great pyramids. Europe has its cathedrals. India has the Taj Mahal. And the United States has its public lands.

The very existence of our public lands—the access, the beauty, the wildlife habitat they provide, and most importantly the foresight it took to ensure these things remain—has been a gift to generations of Americans and citizens from around the world.

Yet, there is a small group of people in Wyoming and other western states who want to see our national forests, national parks, and other public lands privatized. They want our state to look more like many of those to our east, where nearly all the land is held by private interests—even if that means No Trespassing signs on lands where the public has always had access.

A few Wyoming legislators in recent years have been mounting a campaign to reach that goal—which starts, in their view, with the state takeover of public lands. Although some champions of this idea argue that the intent is simply to shift management to the state, the argument is a red herring: The history of this effort and the record show this claim to be disingenuous.

The people behind these legislative efforts are, in fact, pushing for Congress to approve incremental steps (like state management or takeover) as part of a longer-term strategy of seizure followed by privatization. The good news is, Wyoming people are smart enough to see this unprecedented move for what it is.

The people of Wyoming understand that once our public lands are taken and auctioned off to the highest bidder, that's it. Up go the No Trespassing signs and there goes our access. There goes our freedom to hunt, fish, camp, ski, mountain bike, snowmobile, you name it. There goes our long, proud heritage.

At the Wyoming Outdoor Council, we initially believed these land-grab efforts were harmless, if quixotic, pieces of legislation that were doomed to failure. Poll after poll has shown that Wyoming voters flatly reject these fringe ideas, flatly reject the redux of the Sagebrush Rebellion. The vast majority of Wyoming citizens love and even depend on our public lands and we want them to stay public now and for generations to come.

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But changing politics in the United States Congress have brought about a new reality. If state legislators can demonstrate what appears to be local support for the state takeover of public lands, there is a real chance that this Congress will move to allow public lands to be handed over to a state.

With your help, the Wyoming Outdoor Council is not going to let that happen here. Together we can ensure that any new bills attempting to move this land-grab campaign forward are dead on arrival in Cheyenne.

If you want to help us, contact your local elected officials and let them know you want to keep public lands the way they are. And please sign up to receive our emails (if you haven't already) and connect with us on Facebook. These are the best—and sometimes the only—ways we can keep you updated, up to the minute, about what's happening during the legislative session. And they're the best ways for us to let you know how you can help defeat any dangerous land grab bill that gains traction. Thanks for your help! 🙏



Kyle Duba



Stefani Farris



Jared Steinman



Bruce Gordon

Could We See the First Wilderness Designations in Wyoming in More Than 30 Years?



BY JULIA STUBLE
PUBLIC LANDS ADVOCATE

Some of the wildest places on our public lands are also the least well understood—and their future is tenuous, because there is nothing permanent about how they are managed.

When we think of wilderness we often imagine high mountains in national forests, but there are also incredible wilderness-quality areas in the lower country, in the basins, hills, and badlands between mountain ranges that the BLM manages.

Known technically as “wilderness study areas,” they can be found in some of Wyoming’s most special places. There are nine in the northern Red Desert alone, and many more can be found throughout the state—from the Dubois Badlands to Sweetwater Canyon to Fifteenmile Basin to the Ferris Mountains and beyond. Because they lack the

criteria for wilderness—natural places where people can seek solitude, beauty, and adventure, where the land is “untrammelled,” where nature is the primary actor on the landscape, and where people visit but do not remain.

The BLM cannot designate wilderness—only Congress can. Since 1991, when the Wyoming inventories and recommendations were complete, the agency has managed a little more than 577,000 acres as wilderness study areas in this state. Today these landscapes are managed to protect their wilderness character.

Since the BLM made its recommendations, it has been up to the citizens of our state and our elected officials to urge Congress to designate or not designate these WSAs. This has never happened. There are now a variety of stakeholders in Wyoming who would like to see a determination made and are willing to work collaboratively toward a permanent solution. We see this as an opportunity.

We’re cautiously optimistic. We believe it’s possible to create a collaborative solution that protects the values of these landscapes. We will not take part in anything that falls short of that.

permanence of formally designated wilderness, their status has been in limbo for years.

That could change, though, with a new opportunity on the horizon to collaborate with a wide range of stakeholders to create federal legislation that could permanently protect some of these areas and design management for others that would conserve their important values.

The history of these landscapes and the politics surrounding their management are complicated. The Wilderness Act, which passed in 1964, created the National Wilderness Preservation System. But it wasn’t until 1976 that the Bureau of Land Management was directed to identify areas that fit

If the question is to be resolved, stakeholders in Wyoming will have to come together, find common ground, and almost certainly make some compromises.

We’re cautiously optimistic. We believe it’s possible to create a collaborative solution that protects the values of these landscapes. We will not take part in anything that falls short of that. But if done right, there is a chance that we could see the first new wilderness designations in Wyoming in more than 30 years. This could happen only if a bill is crafted that has broad local support, as well as the support of the conservation community. In our minds, that’s a goal worth working toward for these special places. Stay tuned. 🏞️

Message From the Director

Stopping the land grab: We'll need your help.



BY GARY WILMOT
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

There's something troubling going on at the Wyoming State Legislature, and we'll need your help during the upcoming session and beyond if we're going to fix it.

While it's normal for state and federal legislatures in the United States to be a little more cautious than the general populations they represent, what's far less common is for an elected government in this country to be wholly out of step with the vast majority of its constituents.

Yet this is exactly what's happening right now in Wyoming when it comes to our public lands. A fringe idea—advocated by a small minority of lawmakers—seems to be taking hold: that the state should embark on a long-term, incremental strategy to take over national forests, parks, and other public lands. Regardless of what these legislators might say when asked directly, make no mistake about their ultimate goal: they intend to privatize our public lands and auction them off to the highest bidder.

Even many legislators who oppose this land grab campaign have, for whatever reason, been voting in huge majorities in recent years to approve so-called “studies” of the issue, along with other incremental steps toward privatization. These ill-conceived votes have lent undue credibility to the land-grab campaign and they've run the risk of creating the erroneous impression that there is local support for what is, in fact, a fringe movement. It's a dangerous trend that needs to stop. We cannot allow members of the U.S.

Congress to be led to believe, falsely, that the people of Wyoming support the state's seizure of our national forests, our national parks, and our favorite recreation areas.

Poll after poll shows that nearly all Wyoming voters treasure the national forests, national parks, and wild BLM lands in our state. Nearly all of us consider access to recreation on these lands essential. And nearly all of us understand that public lands—because of the access, wildlife, and aesthetic values they provide—are vital to our state's economy.

Colorado College conducts an annual and well-respected poll in six western states. Its most recent data show that 97 percent of respondents in Wyoming—the highest of any of the states polled—agree that our national parks, forests, monuments, and wildlife areas are “an essential part of Wyoming's economy.” And virtually all respondents—99 percent—say that public lands are essential to “the quality of life” in Wyoming.

And even though Wyoming voters rate oil and gas development and mining as the most important drivers of the state's economy, they also say that managing public lands for energy development is far less important than ensuring recreational access, conserving the land for future generations, and protecting wildlife habitat.

So what do we do? How do we make sure that Wyoming citizens are not steamrolled by a tiny contingent of legislators bent on selling off our public lands and our state's birthright?

The only way to ensure that our shared values are championed and represented in the Wyoming State Legislature is to participate, thoughtfully and tenaciously, in the political process. We all—you and I and everyone who cares about Wyoming—have a crucial role to play.

Soon you'll be receiving a preview of the upcoming legislative session from Steff Kessler, our new director of external relations. Steff will provide some background on a number of the issues that will be at stake in 2016. Please take the time to read it, be in touch with any questions, and then get ready to act. Because throughout the upcoming session and in months and sessions that follow, we're going to be asking you, repeatedly, one way or another, “Are you with us?”

We need you to say yes. We need your passion and we need your participation. If we're going to stop this land grab and demand that our state government better reflects the values we all share, we'll need everyone who loves Wyoming to stand up and say, “I'm on board with the Wyoming Outdoor Council.”

In advance, thank you.

Gary P. Wilmot

Wyoming Outdoor Council

Established in 1967, the Wyoming Outdoor Council is the state's oldest independent statewide conservation organization. Our mission is to protect Wyoming's environment and quality of life for future generations.

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Please connect with us on facebook and go to our website to sign up for electronic communications if you haven't already. It's the best way to stay informed about all of our work.



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