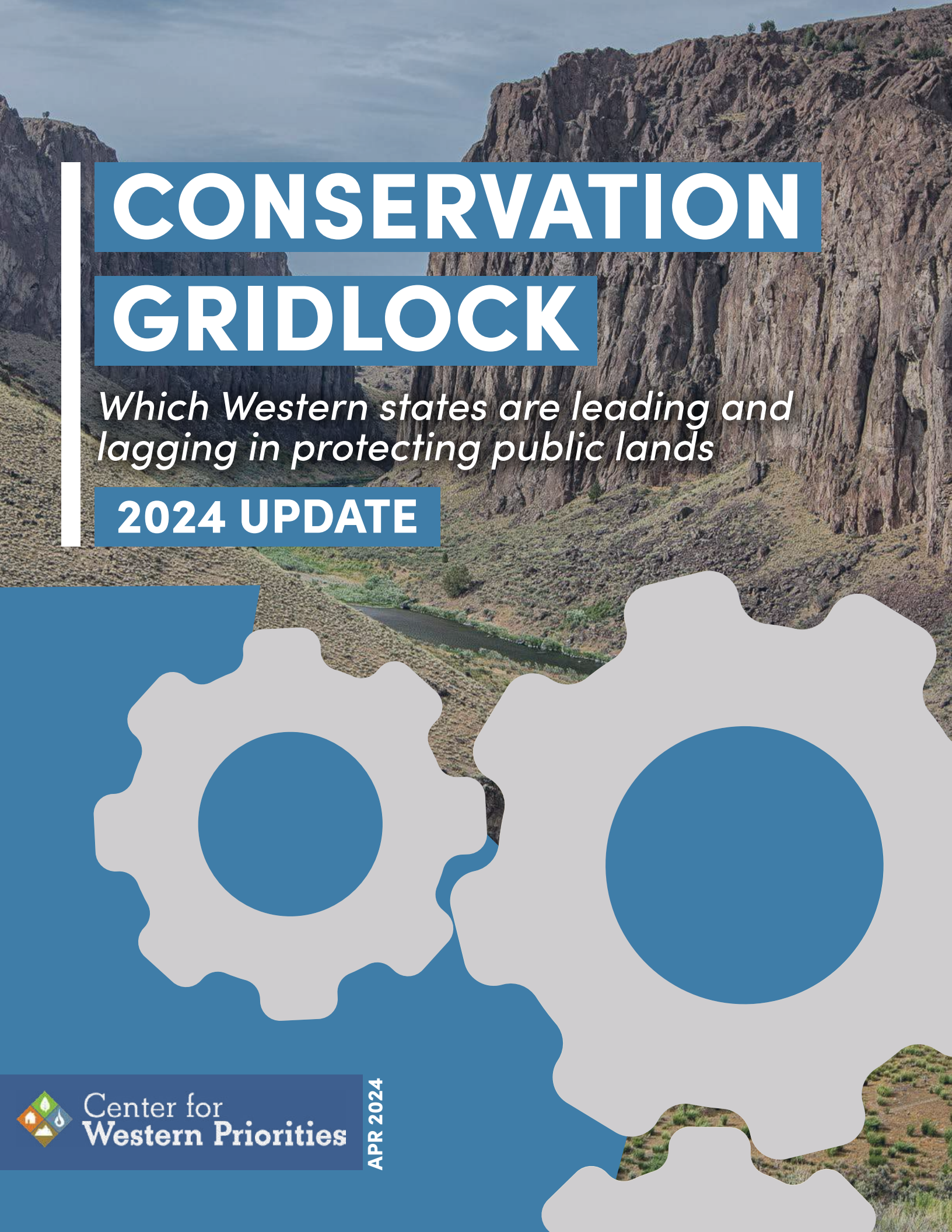


CONSERVATION GRIDLOCK

Which Western states are leading and lagging in protecting public lands

2024 UPDATE

Center for Western Priorities

APR 2024

***COVER: Oregon's Owyhee Canyonlands** |*
Photo: Bureau of Land Management

***BELOW: Thompson Divide, Colorado** |*
Photo: Zane Kessler, EcoFlight

Contents

Introduction **1**

Table 1 — Western states ranked by acres protected between 2014 & 2023 2

The Analysis: Who's falling behind on conservation? **3**

Table 2.1 — Acres of national public lands protected from 2004–2023, by state 4

Table 2.2 — States ranked by the percentage of all national public lands protected 5

Table 2.3 — Acres protected by Congress or by the president through the Antiquities Act 5

Data Considerations 6

Lagging on Conservation: Where legislation has stalled **7**

Oregon: Opportunity beckons after a decade of falling behind 7

Idaho: Idahoans want more protections for public lands 9

Wyoming: Worst in the West 10

Leaders in Conservation **11**

Conserving Public Lands Matters **12**

Appendix **13**

01 Introduction

Conserved public lands form the backdrop of everyday life in the Western United States. National parks and monuments, wildlife refuges, and other protected public lands are a destination for family getaways; they are the setting for political ads during every electoral cycle; and they are central to economic development strategies from Wyoming to Washington and Oregon to Colorado.

It is no wonder that poll after poll shows that voters of every political persuasion—Republicans, Democrats, and Independents—support expanding conservation and accelerating the pace at which our elected leaders are protecting American public lands.

But an analysis from the Center for Western Priorities based on publicly available government data shows that not every Western state is living up to its conservation reputation. In the last decade, Idaho, Oregon, and Wyoming have conserved far fewer acres of public lands than neighboring Western states (Table 1). In fact, these bottom three states, combined, have conserved 14 times fewer public land acres than the top three states: California, Nevada, and Utah.

This analysis is an annual update to a May 2022 report from the Center for Western Priorities, which spotlighted Colorado, a state whose conservation track record in recent years was not living up to its reputation as a national conservation leader. Soon after the release of the report in 2022, Colorado Senator Michael Bennet worked alongside President Joe Biden and his administration to secure permanent protections for the Camp Hale-Continental Divide National Monument. The widely celebrated action was the first new national monument created by President Biden, conserving nearly 54,000 acres in the Rocky Mountains with incredible historic and natural values, and outstanding opportunities for outdoor recreation. Following the 2023 update to the report, which highlighted Arizona as one of the states lagging behind in conservation, President Biden designated Baaj Nwaavjo I'tah Kukveni–Ancestral Footprints of the Grand Canyon National Monument. This added over a million acres of protected public land and moved Arizona from ranking 10th in 2023 to 5th in 2024.

Relative size of acres conserved by the top 3 and bottom 3 Western states, 2014-2023

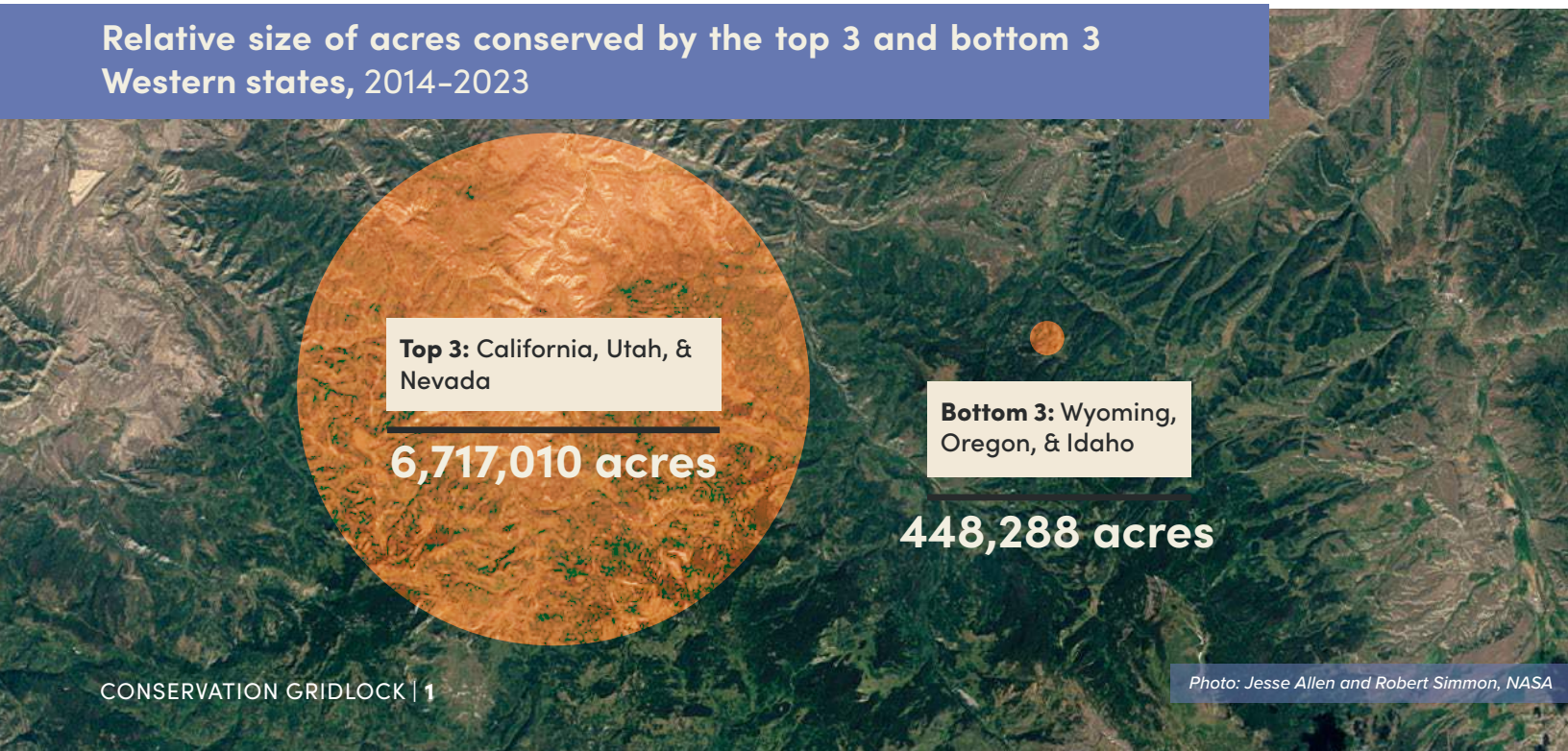


Photo: Jesse Allen and Robert Simmon, NASA

Since 2014, only 172,600 acres of public lands in Oregon have been conserved as national parks, monuments, wildlife refuges, or national conservation areas. That ranks the state 10th out of 11 Western states. In Wyoming, the lowest ranking state, not a single acre of public land has been protected in the last decade.

The lack of progress is not for a shortage of locally-supported public land conservation proposals and champions. On the contrary, in Oregon, a decades-long effort to permanently protect the stunning Owyhee Canyonlands has the support of 79 percent of Oregon voters. Legislation to conserve Oregon's Owyhee Canyonlands, championed by Oregon Senators Ron Wyden and Jeff Merkley, has languished in Congress for almost ten years.

It is time for conservation champions in Congress to reconsider their strategy. Elected leaders from Oregon and other Western states continue the important work of drafting, introducing, and endeavoring to pass bills that would safeguard important lands and waters. But Congress does not function as it is intended, and passing even the most common-sense and popular measures can be next to impossible. A single United States senator with a bone to pick can hold up legislation for no reason.

To get locally-driven, publicly-popular conservation initiatives moving again, senators and representatives should partner with President Biden to realize his historic commitment to conserve and restore America's lands and waters. In the early days of his administration, President Biden established the first ever national

TABLE 1:

Western states ranked by acres protected between 2014 & 2023

State	Rank	Change
California	1	No change
Utah	2	No change
Nevada	3	+1
New Mexico	4	-1
Arizona	5	+5
Montana	6	-1
Colorado	7	-1
Washington	8	-1
Idaho	9	-1
Oregon	10	-1
Wyoming	11	No change

Baaj Nwaavjo I'tah Kukveni – Ancestral Footprints of the Grand Canyon National Monument | Photo: Andrew Orr

conservation target to protect 30 percent of U.S. lands and waters by 2030, promising to work alongside local communities, states, Tribal nations, farmers and ranchers, hunters and anglers, and a multitude of stakeholders.

By working in partnership, congressional leaders, the Biden administration, and communities from Colorado's West Slope to Oregon's Owyhee Canyonlands can get conservation progress back on track. Together, they can take action—using legislative and administrative policy tools—to deliver for people and healthy economies across the Western United States.

U.S. Presidents: Antiquities Act, Conservation, & National Monuments

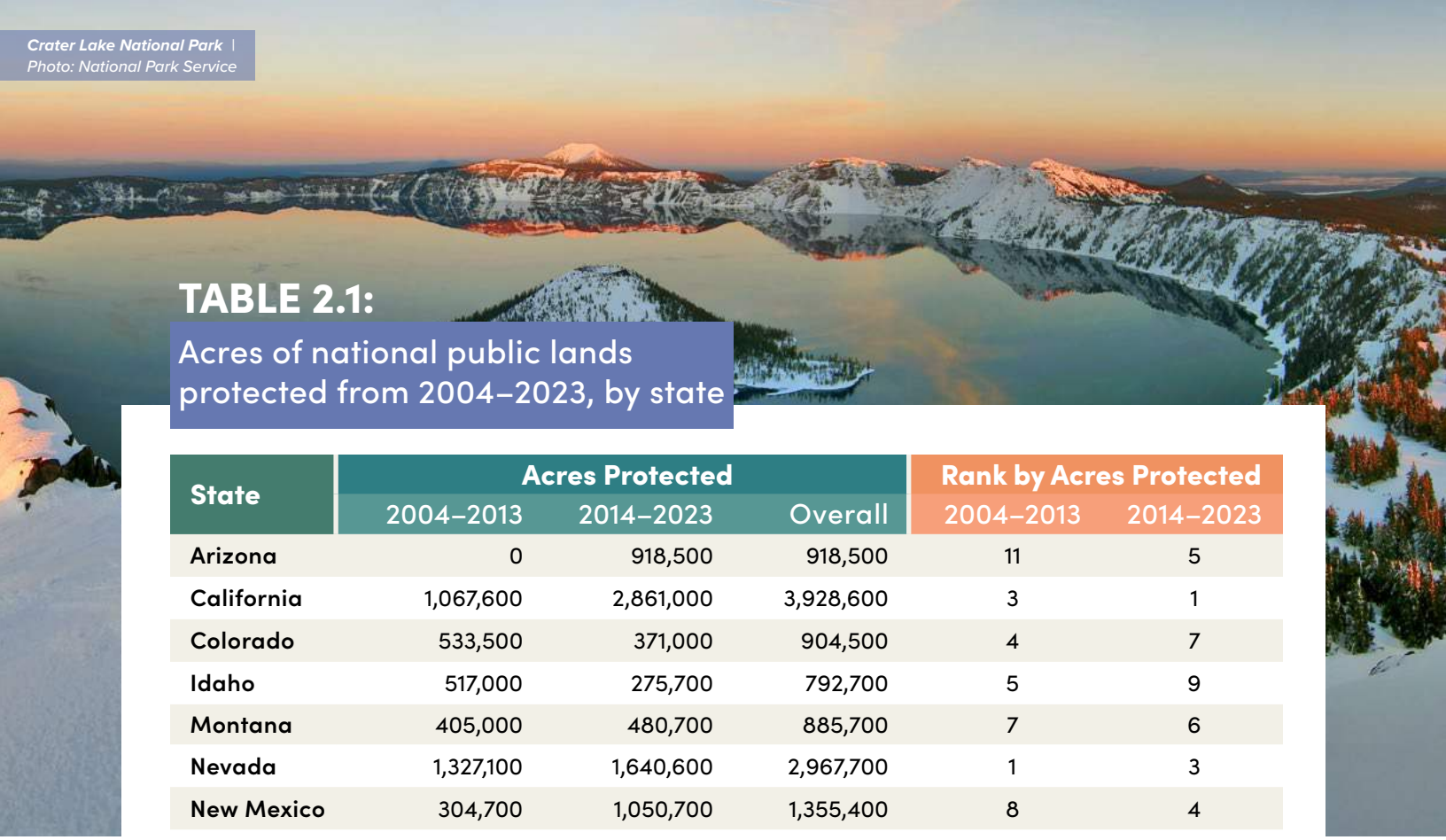
Two of the most important ways to permanently protect American public lands are through congressional legislation and through the Antiquities Act. One of the most pivotal pieces of conservation legislation ever passed, the Antiquities Act allows the President to directly preserve "objects of historic and scientific interest" as national monuments.

- Some of America's most iconic national parks—like Zion, Arches, and the Grand Canyon—were first protected under the Antiquities Act.
- Since it was signed into law in 1906, 18 presidents—from President Theodore Roosevelt to President Donald J. Trump—have designated 162 national monuments, preserving some of the nation's most culturally and scientifically rich landscapes and historical sites.

02 The Analysis: Who's falling behind on conservation?

To determine the amount of public land protected over the last two decades, the Center for Western Priorities tallied the acreage of all permanently protected areas designated between 2004 and 2023. Permanently protected areas include national monuments, wilderness areas, national wildlife refuges, and national parks, as well as other lesser known designations, like national conservation areas and mineral withdrawals. A comprehensive list of the protected areas considered in this analysis and their corresponding data sources is available in the appendix.

By breaking out protected areas by their designation date, we were able to analyze and understand two decades of conservation accomplishments in 11 Western states: Arizona, California, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon, Utah, Washington, and Wyoming.



Crater Lake National Park |
Photo: National Park Service

TABLE 2.1:

Acres of national public lands protected from 2004–2023, by state

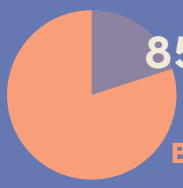
State	Acres Protected			Rank by Acres Protected	
	2004–2013	2014–2023	Overall	2004–2013	2014–2023
Arizona	0	918,500	918,500	11	5
California	1,067,600	2,861,000	3,928,600	3	1
Colorado	533,500	371,000	904,500	4	7
Idaho	517,000	275,700	792,700	5	9
Montana	405,000	480,700	885,700	7	6
Nevada	1,327,100	1,640,600	2,967,700	1	3
New Mexico	304,700	1,050,700	1,355,400	8	4
Oregon	237,900	172,600	410,500	9	10
Utah	466,100	2,215,400	2,681,500	6	2
Washington	107,000	362,300	469,200	10	8
Wyoming	1,216,700	0	1,216,700	2	11

Conservation fared worst in Idaho, Oregon, and Wyoming between 2014 and 2023. Idaho and Oregon fell to the bottom of the pack—ranking 9th and 10th, respectively—with Wyoming coming in dead last at 11th. Over the past ten years, Oregon protected just 172,600 acres of national public lands. For context, that's smaller than Oregon's Crater Lake National Park. Idaho protected just 275,700 acres, and Wyoming protected nothing at all.

POLLING | Western voters want new protected areas

According to Colorado College's 2024 Conservation in the West poll, creating new protected areas is overwhelmingly popular among Western voters.

Q: *Do you support or oppose creating new national parks, national monuments, national wildlife refuges, and Tribal protected areas to protect historic sites or areas for outdoor recreation?*



85% of Western voters support

STATE BREAKDOWN | **AZ 87% | CO 84% | ID 82% | MT 81% | NV 87% | NM 83% | UT 84% | WY 68%**

Browns Canyon National Monument |
Photo: Bob Wick, Bureau of Land Management

TABLE 2.2:

States ranked by the percentage of all national public lands protected

State	Acres of National Public Lands	* Percent of National Public Lands Protected
California	45,493,100	46%
Washington	12,192,900	44%
Arizona	28,078,000	32%
Montana	27,082,400	27%
Colorado	24,100,200	23%
Oregon	32,244,300	23%
Idaho	32,789,600	22%
Wyoming	29,137,700	22%
Nevada	56,262,600	19%
Utah	33,267,600	19%
New Mexico	24,665,800	18%

* *Protected acres are sourced from the Protected Areas Database of the U.S. and include the U.S. Geological Survey's GAP codes 1 and 2—permanently protected lands in a natural condition, where extractive uses are limited or prohibited. Last updated in July, 2022.*

These states have not always been laggards. When you consider historical protections as a percentage of national public lands, Oregon, Arizona, and Wyoming all fare better (Table 2.2). But conservation momentum has slowed considerably over the past decade.

Declines in conservation progress in the West have paralleled worsening gridlock in Congress. Between 2014 and 2023, Congress protected just 3.8 million acres, a 2 million acre drop from the previous decade.

But while acres protected by Congress have declined in recent years, acres protected by the president have increased to meet urgent conservation needs. Between 2014 and 2023, significantly more acres were protected administratively, using presidential authority outlined under the Antiquities Act (Table 2.3).

TABLE 2.3:

Acres Protected by Congress	
2004–2013	*2014–2023*
5,914,900	3,798,800
Acres Protected by the President	
2004–2013	*2014–2023*
262,900	6,549,700

We must get locally-driven conservation initiatives moving again, and there is no better tool to protect languishing public lands than the Antiquities Act. For more than a century, and especially in the past two decades, the Antiquities Act has been used to conserve public lands and waters in urgent need of protection as national monuments, reducing the impacts of energy development on our national public lands and preventing loss or further damage to our cultural and ecological treasures.

President Biden's national conservation goal—to conserve and restore 30 percent of our lands and waters by 2030—requires urgent action. We need to jump start conservation needs in order to achieve the 30x30 goal.

Data Considerations

Sometimes protected area designations overlay each other; national monuments and parks frequently include wilderness areas within their boundaries and some national monuments have later become national parks. In cases where a protected landscape was given a new protected area designation by Congress or the President, we included the new designation acreage in the tally. For example, in January 2019, New Mexico's White Sands National Monument was redesignated as a national park by Congress. Because our primary interest was conservation accomplishments over the last two decades, we included White Sands National Park in this analysis even though it was already protected as a national monument.

In 2023, more than 120,000 acres in Idaho were designated as a Backcountry Conservation Area, a relatively new designation of BLM-managed land that emphasizes the preservation of public lands that contain habitats for recreationally-important fish and wildlife species. Since this designation provides management guidance rather than strong or permanent protective status, Backcountry Conservation Areas were not included in this analysis. Similarly, Areas of Critical Environmental Concern (ACECs) were not included in this analysis since their durability and level of protection are variable.

In cases where protected areas crossed state boundaries, we determined the amount of acres in each state and allotted those acres appropriately.

Finally, the date a protected area is designated occasionally differs from the date it is established. For example, Colorado's Rocky Mountain Arsenal National Wildlife Refuge was designated by Congress in 1992 with the stipulation that the lands would first undergo environmental remediation. The refuge was formally established in 2004 after the cleanup was complete. For the purpose of this analysis, we considered the designation date only. Rocky Mountain Arsenal and similar protected areas designated before 2004 were not considered.

Bar M Trail System, Utah | *Photo: Dave Jeppesen, BLM*

03

Lagging on Conservation: Where legislation has stalled

OREGON

172,600 acres protected from 2014 to 2023.

26,158,000 acres currently unprotected & open to industrial use.

Lower Owyhee Canyon | *Photo: Greg Shine, BLM*

OREGON

Opportunity beckons after a decade of falling behind

Oregon's conservation record was on track in the early part of the 21st century, with more than 663,400 acres of American public lands protected in 2000 alone. This included permanent protections for the extraordinary Steens Mountain Wilderness and Cascade–Siskiyou National Monument. Since then, Oregon has lagged behind, with only 172,600 acres of public land protected over the past decade. The state's underwhelming conservation track record is not for a lack of opportunity—Oregon currently has over 26 million acres of public lands, primarily managed by the United States Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management, much of which are open to development. Huge expanses of this public domain should be protected for current and future generations.

Oregon's congressional leaders, including Senators Ron Wyden and Jeff Merkley, alongside the Biden administration have an opportunity to rewrite the recent past and restart conservation in the Beaver State. There is an immediate opportunity to provide leadership and finally conserve Oregon's vast and stunningly beautiful Owyhee Canyonlands. If Congress remains incapable of moving legislation, Oregon leaders should work with President Biden to conserve this landscape as a national monument using his authority under the Antiquities Act.

The Owyhee Canyonlands is the largest conservation opportunity in the American West, covering millions of acres of sagebrush grasslands, river canyons, and geologic wonders. The ecosystem is home to hundreds of bird species, including the charismatic greater sage-grouse; mule deer, pronghorn, California bighorn sheep, and Rocky Mountain elk; dazzling native fish, such as redband and Lahontan cutthroat trout; 15 bat species; myriad colorful reptiles and more than two dozen endemic plant species. Due to its remoteness, the canyonlands also boast some of the darkest night skies in the lower 48. The region is the ancestral homeland of the Northern Paiute, Bannock, and Shoshone peoples and preserves countless and irreplaceable cultural sites, artifacts and resources that evince human presence on this landscape for at least 13,000 years.

The Owyhee is clearly worthy of permanent protection, but efforts to provide it are languishing in Congress. The campaign to save the Owyhee Canyonlands is six decades in the making, and Senators Wyden and Merkley have been working for years to conserve the landscape via legislation. Now a new coalition of tribal members, sporting interests, community groups, conservation organizations, and others have formed to press for national monument designation for the landscape. If Congress won't protect the Owyhee, then President Biden should do so.

Owyhee Canyonlands *| Photo: Larisa Bogardus, Bureau of Land Management*

IDAHO

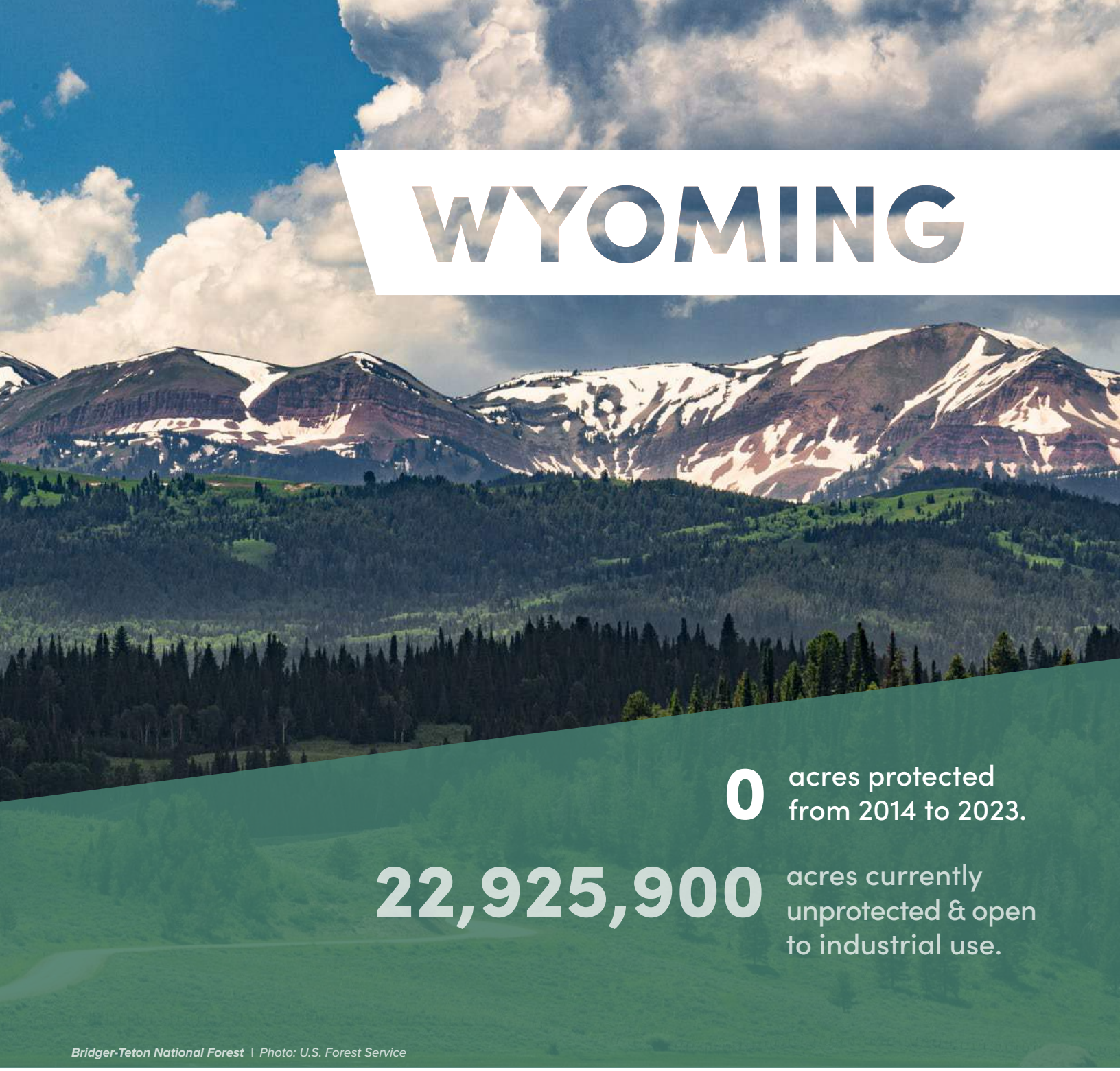
275,000 acres protected from 2014 to 2023.

25,899,000 acres currently unprotected & open to industrial use.

Wild and Scenic Snake River | *Photo: Bob Wick, BLM*

Idahoans want more protections for public lands

Idaho has a long history of conserving public lands, and has a total of over 32 million acres of public land. Yet it has fallen behind other Western states. In the past ten years, there was a nearly 50 percent reduction in acres of land conserved compared to the previous decade. Since the designation of White Clouds Wilderness Area in 2015, zero acres of public land in Idaho have been protected. Despite Idaho's increased demand for outdoor recreation opportunities and the fact that 82 percent of Idaho voters support the creation of new protected areas, Idaho's congressional leaders show little interest in pursuing conservation in their state.



WYOMING

0 acres protected from 2014 to 2023.

22,925,900 acres currently unprotected & open to industrial use.

Bridger-Teton National Forest | *Photo: U.S. Forest Service*

Worst in the West

Conservation is part of the ethos of Wyoming. Yet, conservation action has been virtually non-existent in the past two decades, with one major exception. In 2009, Wyoming's congressional delegation unified around an effort—driven by Wyoming hunters, anglers, hikers, and outdoor enthusiasts—to permanently protect the 1.2 million acre Wyoming Range from oil and gas development. Since then, zero acres have been conserved, despite two in three Wyoming voters supporting new conserved and protected areas. Due to a legal loophole, Wyoming is the only state where the Antiquities Act cannot be used.

04
Leaders in Conservation

California, Utah, and Nevada top the charts for conservation action over the last decade, collectively conserving over 6 million acres of American public lands since 2014. In this year's report, Nevada replaces New Mexico in third place thanks to President Biden's designation of Avi Kwa Ame National Monument.

The standout over the decade is California, where the state's elected leaders have helped secure conservation for nearly 3 million acres of American public lands. This conservation push has buoyed the state's commitment to conserve 30 percent of California's lands and waters by 2030. California has the opportunity to further cement its status as a conservation leader by protecting even more landscapes through the Chuckwalla, Medicine Lake Highlands, and Kw'tsán national monument proposals, and the proposed expansions of Berryessa Snow Mountain National Monument and the San Gabriel Mountains National Monument.

Unlike California, New Mexico, and Nevada—where leaders have embraced public lands conservation to safeguard nature, expand recreation access, and support rural economies—Utah's leaders might view their inclusion on this list as regrettable. The state and many of its elected officials have led the anti-public lands charge in recent decades, supporting unpopular efforts to sell off American public lands and opposing Tribally-led conservation initiatives. Utah's elected officials aggressively advocated for the elimination of Bears Ears National Monument and cheered as President Trump eliminated safeguards for millions of acres of American public lands within Bears Ears and Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monuments. The former president's actions were viewed by legal scholars as illegal. Last August, a federal judge dismissed a lawsuit from Utah politicians who challenged President Biden's restoration of the national monuments.

Though its elected leaders have been outspoken opponents of conservation, the Utah Office of Tourism has leveraged Bears Ears National Monument and other conserved public lands into a highly effective tourism campaign.

Bears Ears National Monument, Utah

Avi Kwa Ame National Monument, Nevada

San Gabriel Mountains National Monument, California

Cerro del Yuta Wilderness, New Mexico

Alabama Hills National Scenic Area, California

Organ Mountains-Desert Peaks, New Mexico

Photos: Bureau of Land Management, National Park Service, and U.S. Forest Service

05 Conserving Public Lands Matters

Expanding protections for public lands supports communities, economies, and nature

Every 30 seconds, a football field-worth of America's natural areas is lost as the footprint of human development—roads, urban sprawl, pipelines—expands. Conserving our national public lands matters. Among other things, conserving new protected areas supports:

Expanding access to outdoor spaces for underserved communities
74 percent of communities of color and 70 percent of low-income communities in the contiguous United States live in nature-deprived areas. Creating new, close-to-home protected areas can help ensure that all Americans have access to the benefits of nature and clean natural resources.

Building economic vitality
With rising demand for outdoor recreation opportunities, protecting public lands offers communities an opportunity to capture the economic benefits of the outdoor economy—job growth, visitor spending, increased tax revenue—while safeguarding the lands and waters they know and love.

Harnessing the power of nature to fight climate change
Conserving 30 percent of our lands and waters by 2030 would secure an enormous amount of stored carbon and further expand nature's capacity as a carbon sink—sequestering an additional 215 million metric tons of carbon dioxide equivalent annually, the climate equivalent of taking 47 million cars off the road each year.

Safeguarding landscapes with high ecological or cultural value
Our lands and waters reflect the diversity of the nation's geography, people, and wildlife. New protected areas can support the efforts of communities across the country—from Tribal nations to frontline neighborhoods, congressional delegations to city councils—working to fulfill their priorities for the stewardship of our natural, cultural, and historic resources.

Failing to conserve our lands and waters would have wide-reaching impacts for our communities and futures.

The Nature Gap would widen as communities of color and low income communities, who have historically lacked access to greenspace, continue to be denied safe, close-to-home outdoor spaces. Even access to existing protected areas would become more competitive as conservation progress fails to keep pace with rising demand for outdoor recreation opportunities. Indeed, the loss of nature would have profound effects on our well-being, impacting everything from the quality of the air we breathe to the availability of the food we eat and the water we drink.

Now is the time for conservation action—from Oregon to Colorado. If we're going to save the natural systems upon which we depend, we have no choice but to buck the trend of the past two decades and rapidly scale up the pace of conservation progress across the West.

Appendix

Designation	Description	How is it designated?	Data source
National monuments	National monuments protect areas of historic, cultural, or scientific significance. While they allow existing uses, like permitted grazing or energy development, monuments prohibit future development. Can be managed by any of the federal land management agencies.	By the president or by Congress	Publicly available data from the Natural Resources Defense Council and public law
Wilderness areas	Wilderness areas safeguard pristine wild lands and preserve outstanding opportunities for solitude in nature. They can be managed by any of the federal land management agencies and may be found inside national parks or monuments.	By Congress	Publicly available reports from the Congressional Research Service
National parks and preserves	National parks protect some of our most iconic large landscapes. While national parks often prohibit hunting and fishing, national preserves—which are also managed by the National Park Service—allow these forms of recreation.	By Congress	Publicly available data from the National Park Service
National wildlife refuges	Wildlife refuges prioritize the conservation of fish and wildlife habitat and provide outstanding recreation opportunities for hunters and anglers.	By the president, the secretary of the Interior, or by Congress	Public law and records in the Federal Register
Other Forest Service areas	The Forest Service has a multitude of designation types created to protect outstanding scenic, recreational, and ecological values. These include national recreation areas, national preserves, national scenic areas, and special management areas.	By Congress	Publicly available data from the U.S. Forest Service and public law
Other Bureau of Land Management areas	In addition to national monuments and wilderness areas, the Bureau of Land Management's National Conservation Landscape System includes national conservation areas, outstanding natural areas, and cooperative management areas. These public lands offer exceptional natural and cultural value protected for the enjoyment of present and future generations.	By Congress	Publicly available data from the Bureau of Land Management Areas
Mineral withdrawals	Public lands can be permanently withdrawn from mineral development by Congress. While the administration can temporarily withdraw lands from development to preserve existing values, only Congress can permanently prohibit mineral extraction.	By Congress	Public law and supporting documentation, like Public Land Orders and maps

For more information on protected area designations, please see the Congressional Research Service report 'Federal Land Designations: A Brief Guide.'

Center for
Western Priorities