

CAPITOL RESEARCH

ENERGY & ENVIRONMENT

Federal Land Management in the States

Many Western states have a noticeable percentage of federally controlled land intermingled with the state and private land within their borders. Federal ownership means the land is governed by federal rules and regulations. While the federal government makes efforts to ensure activities on federal lands complement adjacent land management, complexities abound. Multiple government processes, combined with the vast number of management acres and diverse user groups, creates a unique form of issues that affect more than just neighboring landowners.

This is the first in a four-part series that will examine the distinctive policy topics that arise from public lands and how they interconnect with broader policy trends.

A Brief History of Public Lands¹

The federal government today owns nearly 30 percent of the land in the United States. The U.S. has acquired nearly 630 million acres through historic events like the Louisiana Purchase or the Mexican-American War and sales, through policy decisions like the Homestead Act and railroad land grants. The early mindset of the 19th-century land policy was aimed at putting land to productive use and generating money, both essential for a new country's growth; however, the progressive era of the 20th century ushered in new thinking. With a new interest in both efficiency and preservation, public land policy shifted toward scientific management through the establishment of land management agencies.

Agencies that Manage Federal Land

Four federal land management agencies—United States Forest Service, the National Park Service, United States Fish and Wildlife Service and the Bureau of Land Management, known as the BLM, manage public land. Each agency is charged with managing different resources and jurisdiction often overlaps.

U.S. Forest Service²

- The Office of Special Agent for forest research was created in 1876 and expanded into the Division of Forestry in 1881.
- The Forest Reserve Act of 1891 established



“forest reserves” with the mission to protect the land, preserve water flow and provide timber. The Department of Interior managed the reserves.

- The Transfer Act of 1905 transferred management of forest reserves to the Bureau of Forestry within the Department of Agriculture and the agency title was changed to the Forest Service.
- By the numbers:
 - » The Forest Service manages national forests and grasslands in 44 states, Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands.
 - » Half the managed Forest Service acres are east of the Mississippi.
 - » The U.S. is home to 155 national forests and 20 grasslands.

National Park Service³

- The Yellowstone National Park Act of 1872 established the first national park, withdrawing more than 2 million acres for the “benefit and enjoyment of the people.”
- With a growing number of national parks and national monuments, the Organic Act of 1916 created the National Park Service within the Department of Interior. The agency was charged with managing the national parks and monuments in a way that preserves the unique resource and provides for enjoyment of the resources by the public.





THE BLM IS THE LARGEST LANDOWNER OF THE FEDERAL AGENCIES; IT ADMINISTERS NEARLY 250 MILLION ACRES OF LAND.

- By the numbers:
 - » The national park system is comprised of 401 sites located across every state.
 - » Largest park site: Wrangell-St. Elias National Park and Preserve in Alaska—13.2 million acres.
 - » Smallest park site: Thaddeus Kosciuszko National Memorial in Pennsylvania—.02 acres.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service⁴

- In 1940, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service was consolidated from the Bureau of Fisheries and the Bureau of Biological Survey under the Department of Interior.
- The agency was charged with the mission to, “conserve, protect and enhance fish, wildlife and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people.”⁵
- Congress passed the Endangered Species Act in 1973 to protect species domestically and internationally; the Fish and Wildlife Service became the agency to administer the act.
- By the numbers:
 - » The Fish and Wildlife Service manages marine national monuments totaling 157 million acres.⁶
 - » The agency manages more the 551 National Wildlife Refuges and operates 70 National Fish Hatcheries.

Bureau of Land Management⁷

- Congress created the Bureau of Land Management in 1946 through the consolidation of the General Land Office and the Grazing Service with the mission to sustain the health, productivity and diversity of public lands for the enjoyment of the public.
- BLM’s responsibilities encompass livestock grazing, timber management, mineral development, recreation, wildlife conservation, cultural sites and other activities.
- By the numbers:
 - » BLM managed land is concentrated in 12 states.
 - » The agency administers mineral development for all federal lands, totaling nearly 700 million acres of mineral estate.
 - » BLM land accounts for 40 percent of national coal production, 11 percent of natural gas production and 5 percent of oil production in the United States.⁸

Federal Land Ownership⁹

Each federal land management agency’s mission is different, meaning the type and location of land owned by the agencies varies across the United States. The land management agencies overlap in duties, but each agency owns a significant amount of land and is charged as the primary caretaker. The BLM is the largest landowner of the federal agencies; it administers nearly 250 million acres of land. The Forest Service follows with approximately 193 million acres under its primary jurisdiction; the Fish and Wildlife Service administers 89 million acres; and the National Park Service administers nearly 80 million acres.

- By the Numbers:¹⁰
 - » Nevada has the highest percentage of federal land—81.1 percent, or 56.9 million acres. It also has the highest percentage and total acres managed by the BLM—84 percent, or 47.8 million acres.
 - » Connecticut has the smallest amount of land owned by the federal government—0.3 percent or 8,557 acres. The National Park Service manages more than half the federal land in Connecticut.
 - » Only 13.5 percent of New Hampshire is federal land and the Forest Service manages 95 percent of that federal land. That’s the highest percentage of federal land in a state managed by the Forest Service. The agency, however, manages the most acreage in Alaska, where 21.9 million acres is under its control.
 - » The National Park Service manages the largest percentage of federal land in District of Columbia; it’s responsible for 82 percent in the district—that’s 6,900 acres.
 - » The National Park Service manages the most acres in Alaska—52.6 million, or 23 percent of total federal lands in the state.
 - » Alaska also has the most federal land acres managed by the Fish and Wildlife Service—76.6 million acres. But the agency manages the highest state percentage of federal lands in Delaware—88 percent or 25,100 acres.



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- ⁵Ibid.
- ⁶Gorte, Vincent, Hanson and Rosenblum. “Federal Land Ownership: Overview and Data,” Congressional Research Service, February 8, 2012. <https://www.fas.org/spp/crs/misc/R42346.pdf>
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- ⁸“Bureau of Land Management Brochure.” Bureau of Land Management. http://www.blm.gov/pgdata/etc/medialib/blm/wo/Communications_Directorate/general_publications/general.Par.2133.File.dat/LowResBLMbro.pdf
- ⁹Gorte, Vincent, Hanson and Rosenblum. “Federal Land Ownership: Overview and Data,” Congressional Research Service, Feb. 8, 2012. <https://www.fas.org/spp/crs/misc/R42346.pdf>
- ¹⁰Ibid.

Public Lands

				Federal Acreage Administered by the Four Federal Land Management Agencies and the Department of Defense, 2010				
	Total Acreage in the State	Total Federal Land Acreage	% of State Land Acreage That Is Federal	Dept. of Agriculture, Forest Service	Dept. of the Interior			Department of Defense
					National Park Service	Fish and Wildlife Service	Bureau of Land Management	
Alabama	32,678,400	871,232	2.7%	670,185	16,714	32,207	3,523	148,603
Alaska	365,481,600	225,848,164	61.8%	21,956,250	52,620,514	76,626,272	72,958,757	1,686,371
Arizona	72,688,000	30,741,287	42.3%	11,264,619	2,618,735	1,683,269	12,203,495	2,971,169
Arkansas	33,599,360	3,161,978	9.4%	2,598,743	98,320	373,051	6,078	85,787
California	100,206,720	47,797,533	47.7%	20,821,541	7,570,527	286,664	15,306,243	3,812,558
Colorado	66,485,760	24,086,075	36.2%	14,520,965	609,880	173,265	8,332,001	449,964
Connecticut	3,135,360	8,557	0.3%	24	5,719	1,206	-	1,608
Delaware	1,265,920	28,574	2.3%	-	-	25,100	-	3,474
District of Columbia	39,040	8,450	21.6%	-	6,942	-	-	1,508
Florida	34,721,280	4,536,811	13.1%	1,176,222	2,437,499	278,430	3,134	641,526
Georgia	37,295,360	1,956,720	5.2%	867,199	39,754	482,694	-	567,072
Hawaii	4,105,600	833,786	20.3%	1	357,772	298,980 a	-	177,033
Idaho	52,933,120	32,635,835	61.7%	20,465,014	507,585	48,947	11,610,111	4,178
Illinois	35,795,200	406,734	1.1%	297,713	12	87,886	-	21,123
Indiana	23,158,400	340,696	1.5%	202,832	10,596	14,871	-	112,397
Iowa	35,860,480	122,602	0.3%	-	2,708	70,564	-	49,331
Kansas	52,510,720	301,157	0.6%	108,176	461	29,509	-	163,011
Kentucky	25,512,320	1,083,104	4.2%	814,045	94,395	10,938	-	163,726
Louisiana	28,867,840	1,330,429	4.6%	604,373	17,531	564,117	16,474	127,934
Maine	19,847,680	209,735	1.1%	53,709	66,898	65,987	-	23,141
Maryland	6,319,360	195,986	3.1%	-	40,543	46,504	548	108,391
Massachusetts	5,034,880	81,692	1.6%	-	32,946	21,850	-	26,896
Michigan	36,492,160	3,637,965	10.0%	2,875,957	631,718	115,217	-	15,073
Minnesota	51,205,760	3,469,211	6.8%	2,841,630	139,570	483,787	1,447	2,777
Mississippi	30,222,720	1,523,574	5.0%	1,173,898	104,004	211,164	241	34,266
Missouri	44,248,320	1,675,400	3.8%	1,492,596	54,382	59,977	-	68,445
Montana	93,271,040	26,921,861	28.9%	17,082,821	1,214,184	635,066	7,981,452	8,338
Nebraska	49,031,680	549,346	1.1%	352,463	5,650	173,614	6,354	11,265
Nevada	70,264,320	56,961,778	81.1%	5,764,262	774,751	2,335,400	47,805,923	281,442
New Hampshire	5,768,960	777,807	13.5%	735,519	13,168	25,989	-	3,131
New Jersey	4,813,440	176,691	3.7%	-	35,362	70,258	-	71,071
New Mexico	77,766,400	27,001,583	34.7%	9,417,975	376,849	327,264	13,484,405	3,395,090
New York	30,680,960	211,422	0.7%	16,228	33,483	27,997	-	133,714
North Carolina	31,402,880	2,426,699	7.7%	1,255,614	363,169	419,969	-	387,948
North Dakota	44,452,480	1,735,755	3.9%	1,106,034	71,250	484,681	58,841	14,950
Ohio	26,222,080	298,500	1.1%	241,300	19,421	8,636	-	29,143
Oklahoma	44,087,680	703,336	1.6%	400,928	10,008	106,594	1,975	183,831
Oregon	61,598,720	32,665,430	53.0%	15,687,556	192,020	574,510	16,134,191	77,153
Pennsylvania	28,804,480	616,895	2.1%	513,418	50,014	9,962	-	43,502
Rhode Island	677,120	5,248	0.8%	-	5	2,369	-	2,874
South Carolina	19,374,080	898,637	4.6%	630,741	31,538	126,653	-	109,705
South Dakota	48,881,920	2,646,241	5.4%	2,017,435	141,312	205,128	274,437	7,929
Tennessee	26,727,680	1,273,974	4.8%	718,019	356,342	52,037	-	147,576
Texas	168,217,600	2,977,950	1.8%	755,365	1,201,670	527,418	11,833	481,664
Utah	52,696,960	35,033,603	66.5%	8,207,415	2,097,106	107,885	22,854,937	1,766,260
Vermont	5,936,640	453,871	7.6%	399,565	8,830	33,540	-	11,936
Virginia	25,496,320	2,358,071	9.2%	1,664,467	304,289	129,566	805	258,944
Washington	42,693,760	12,173,813	28.5%	9,289,102	1,833,697	181,693 b	429,156	440,166
West Virginia	15,410,560	1,130,951	7.3%	1,043,794	65,044	19,133	-	2,981
Wisconsin	35,011,200	1,865,374	5.3%	1,533,517	61,744	200,210	2,364	67,540
Wyoming	62,343,040	30,043,513	48.2%	9,241,610	2,344,852	70,674	18,370,351	16,025
U.S. Total	2,271,343,360	628,801,639	27.7%	192,880,840	79,691,484	88,948,699	247,859,076	19,421,540

Source: Gorte, Vincent, Hanson and Rosenblum. "Federal Land Ownership: Overview and Data," Congressional Research Service, February 8, 2012. <https://www.fas.org/sqp/crs/misc/R42346.pdf>