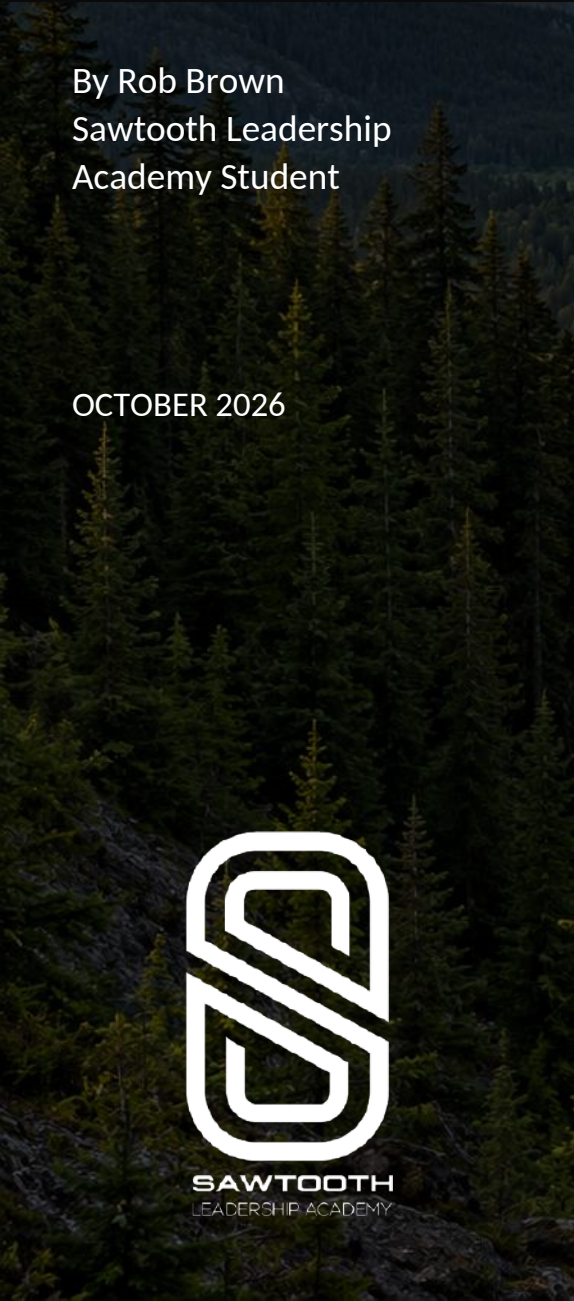




Federal or State Control?

An Analysis of Public Land Management in
Idaho, Montana, Wyoming, and Washington

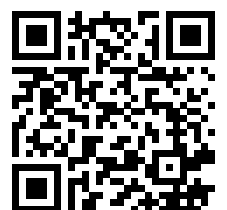


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Executive Summary

Public land management remains one of the most debated policy issues in the American West. Idaho, Montana, Wyoming, and Washington contain millions of acres of federally managed forests, rangelands, parks, and wilderness areas that support recreation, agriculture, timber, mining, wildlife conservation, and local economies. At the same time, many state officials argue that federal agencies are often too slow and bureaucratic, limiting economic development and delaying projects that improve forest health and reduce wildfire risks.¹

Supporters of continued federal ownership argue that public lands belong to all Americans and should remain under national stewardship. Organizations such as the Wilderness Society argue that federal ownership protects wildlife habitat, guarantees public access, and preserves nationally significant landscapes for future generations. Conversely, groups such as the American Lands Council contend that western states are better positioned to manage forests, grazing lands, and natural resources because they better understand local conditions and can respond more quickly to changing needs.

This policy study examines the legal foundation of federal land ownership, compares management approaches in Idaho, Montana, Wyoming, and Washington, and evaluates the advantages and disadvantages of greater state control. Rather than advocating for one position, the report presents evidence supporting both perspectives before outlining several policy options.



Mountain States Policy Center's Sawtooth Leadership Academy trains tomorrow's leaders in the lessons of free markets and civility. As part of the program, each student is asked to pick a research topic of their choosing and write a paper. The contents of the Sawtooth Papers represent the work, research, views and opinions of the student authors. This paper does not constitute an endorsement by Mountain States Policy Center of the views reflected.

¹ Congressional Research Service, Federal Land Ownership: Overview and Data (2022). Source link: <https://www.everycrsreport.com/reports/R42346.html>

KEY INFORMATION
COLUMN

FEDERAL LAND
SHARE

IDAHO

62%

WYOMING

48%

MONTANA

30%

WASHINGTON

29%

Approximate shares cited in the
paper's introduction (note 1).

Introduction

Public lands shape the economy, environment, and culture of the American West. While eastern states are primarily composed of private property, western states contain vast federal landholdings managed by agencies including the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), U.S. Forest Service (USFS), National Park Service (NPS), and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS).

Approximately 62% of Idaho, 48% of Wyoming, 30% of Montana, and nearly 29% of Washington are federally owned. These lands support industries such as livestock grazing, timber harvesting, recreation, energy production, mining, and tourism while also protecting important wildlife habitat and watersheds.²

For comparison, approximately 27.1% of land across the United States is federally owned, while Montana has roughly 29% under federal ownership. This places Montana slightly above the national average, but the difference becomes more significant when compared with states outside the West, where federal ownership is generally much lower.

The debate over public land management has intensified in recent decades as western states have experienced larger wildfires, increased recreational use, population growth, and changing environmental policies. State officials often argue that federal regulations slow forest management projects and reduce local input, while supporters of federal ownership believe national oversight is necessary to ensure consistent conservation standards and equal public access.

This report asks a central policy question: Should public lands remain under federal ownership, or should states receive greater responsibility for managing lands within their borders?

Rather than presenting the issue as a simple choice, this report evaluates both systems using legal, economic, environmental, and administrative evidence.

Historical and Constitutional Background

The debate over public land management is rooted in the history of American westward expansion. During the nineteenth century, the federal government acquired large portions of what are now Idaho, Montana, Wyoming, and Washington through treaties, purchases, and territorial agreements. Although millions of acres were transferred to settlers, railroads, and state governments through legislation such as the Homestead Act of 1862, substantial portions remained under federal ownership because of their natural resources and strategic importance.³

Federal authority over these lands is primarily based on the Property Clause of Article IV, Section 3 of the U.S. Constitution, which grants Congress the authority to regulate and manage federal property. The U.S. Supreme Court has repeatedly affirmed this authority, most notably in *Kleppe v. New Mexico* (1976), which held that Congress possesses broad authority over federal lands.⁴

² U.S. Department of the Interior, Bureau of Land Management, Public Lands Statistics (2024). Source link: <https://www.blm.gov/national-office/public-room/report/blm-public-land-statistics-2024>

³ Paul W. Gates, History of Public Land Law Development (1968). Source link: <https://librarycatalog.courts.wa.gov/cgi-bin/koha/opac-detail.pl?biblionumber=129>

⁴ *Kleppe v. New Mexico*, 426 U.S. 529 (1976). Source link: <https://www.govinfo.gov/app/details/USREPORTS-426/USREPORTS-426-529>

KEY INFORMATION COLUMN

Federal authority over public lands rests on the Constitution's Property Clause.

Supporters of continued federal ownership argue that this constitutional framework ensures nationally significant landscapes remain protected and accessible to all Americans. The Wilderness Society states that public lands "provide clean drinking water, wildlife habitat, outdoor recreation, and cultural resources that benefit the entire nation," emphasizing the importance of national stewardship.

Advocates for greater state control often rely on principles of federalism and the Tenth Amendment, arguing that western states should have greater authority over lands located within their borders. Former Utah Representative Rob Bishop argued that "local people know the land better than distant federal agencies," reflecting a common belief that state governments can respond more efficiently to regional challenges such as wildfire prevention and forest management.

Although courts have consistently upheld federal ownership, the policy debate continues because the question is not only constitutional—it is also economic, environmental, and administrative.

State Case Studies

Idaho: Forest Management and Local Control

Idaho contains one of the highest percentages of federally owned land in the nation, with roughly 62% of the state managed by agencies such as the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and U.S. Forest Service (USFS). These lands support timber production, livestock grazing, mining, recreation, and wildlife habitat, making federal policy especially important to Idaho's economy and rural communities.⁵

Supporters of federal management argue that national oversight protects public access and ensures forests are managed for multiple uses rather than a single economic purpose. Organizations such as The Wilderness Society maintain that federal ownership preserves habitat, recreation opportunities, and watersheds for future generations.

Supporters of greater state control argue that Idaho could respond more quickly to forest health issues. Former Idaho Governor Butch Otter stated that "Idaho knows Idaho better than Washington, D.C.," reflecting concerns that federal permitting and environmental reviews often delay wildfire mitigation and timber projects.⁶

Idaho's management of approximately 3.4 million acres of state trust lands demonstrates that state agencies can generate revenue for public schools through timber harvesting, grazing leases, and mineral development. However, critics note that managing millions of additional acres would significantly increase costs related to wildfire suppression, infrastructure, and law enforcement.

⁵ Bureau of Land Management, Public Lands Statistics (2024). Source link: <https://www.blm.gov/national-office/public-room/report/blm-public-land-statistics-2024>

⁶ Office of Governor C. L. "Butch" Otter, Public Lands Statements (2016). Source link: <https://gov.idaho.gov/>

State trust lands and federal public lands operate under different management priorities.

Key Considerations for Idaho

Advantages of federal management

- Protects nationwide public access
- Shares management costs across taxpayers
- Balances recreation, conservation, and resource development

Advantages of greater state control

- Faster permitting and project approval
- Increased local decision-making
- Potential expansion of active forest management

Montana: Balancing Conservation and Economic Development

Unlike Idaho and Wyoming, Montana contains a smaller percentage of federally owned land (approximately 30%), creating a different balance between federal, state, and private ownership. Public lands remain central to Montana's economy by supporting tourism, agriculture, forestry, recreation, and energy development.

Supporters of federal ownership argue that Montana's national forests and wilderness areas attract millions of visitors annually while protecting watersheds and wildlife habitat extending beyond state borders.

Supporters of increased state authority argue that local officials better understand regional conditions. The Montana Wood Products Association, for example, has advocated for increased forest thinning and timber harvests to improve forest health while supporting rural employment.⁷

Montana's Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC) manages approximately 5.2 million acres of state trust lands, generating revenue primarily for public education through timber sales, grazing leases, mineral development, and agricultural uses. While this model demonstrates successful state land management, trust lands are managed differently than federal public lands and do not always prioritize public recreation.

Key Considerations for Montana

Strengths of federal ownership

- Recreation and tourism
- Watershed protection
- National conservation standards

Strengths of state management

- Revenue generation for schools
- Greater flexibility
- Faster implementation of management projects

⁷ Montana Wood Products Association, Forest Management Policy Positions (2023). Source link: <https://www.montanaforests.com/>

State trust lands and federal public lands operate under different management priorities.

Washington: Multiple Uses and Environmental Priorities

Washington presents a different public land model because its economy relies heavily on both outdoor recreation and commercial forestry. Approximately 29% of the state's land is federally managed, while the Washington Department of Natural Resources (DNR) oversees millions of acres of state trust lands that provide funding for public schools and local governments.⁸

Federal lands include Mount Baker–Snoqualmie, Okanogan–Wenatchee, Olympic, and Gifford Pinchot National Forests, along with Olympic National Park and Mount Rainier National Park. These lands attract millions of visitors each year and play an important role in protecting salmon habitat, old-growth forests, and drinking water supplies.

Supporters of federal ownership argue that national management is necessary to preserve endangered species and internationally significant ecosystems. Organizations such as the National Parks Conservation Association emphasize that these lands provide benefits extending well beyond Washington's borders.

Supporters of greater state involvement argue that Washington's Department of Natural Resources has successfully balanced timber production with long-term forest sustainability. Former Washington Commissioner of Public Lands Hilary Franz has emphasized the importance of active forest management, prescribed burning, and collaboration with local governments to reduce wildfire risks.

Washington demonstrates that federal and state agencies often work cooperatively rather than competitively. Joint wildfire response programs and forest restoration partnerships illustrate how shared management responsibilities can improve efficiency while maintaining federal ownership.

Key Considerations for Washington

Federal strengths

- Habitat protection
- Recreation and tourism
- National conservation priorities

State strengths

- Active forest management
- Wildfire mitigation
- Revenue for schools through trust lands

Wyoming: Energy Production and Public Lands

Approximately 48% of Wyoming is federally owned, making federal land policy one of the state's most significant economic issues. Unlike Washington and Montana, Wyoming's public lands are especially important for coal, oil, natural gas, livestock grazing, and mineral production.

⁸ Washington Department of Natural Resources, State Trust Lands Overview (2024). Source link: <https://www.dnr.wa.gov/managed-lands/forest-and-trust-lands>

State trust lands and federal public lands operate under different management priorities.

Supporters of federal ownership argue that these resources belong to all Americans and should be managed using consistent national standards while protecting iconic areas such as Yellowstone and Grand Teton National Parks.

Supporters of greater state authority argue that Wyoming bears the economic consequences of federal decisions without having sufficient influence over them. The Wyoming Stock Growers Association has argued that local agencies are better positioned to balance conservation with agricultural and energy needs.⁹

Wyoming also manages approximately 3.6 million acres of state trust lands that generate revenue for education through grazing leases, mineral development, agriculture, and recreation agreements. While supporters believe this demonstrates successful state management, critics argue that assuming responsibility for millions of additional federal acres would create major financial obligations, particularly for wildfire suppression and infrastructure.

Key Considerations for Wyoming

Advantages of federal management

- Protects nationally significant landscapes
- Ensures public access
- Shares financial responsibility nationwide

Advantages of greater state management

- Greater flexibility
- Faster resource development decisions
- Increased local accountability

Comparing the Four States

Although each state has unique economic priorities, several common themes emerge:

State	Primary Issue	State Management Strength	Federal Management Strength
Idaho	Wildfire and timber	Faster forest management	National funding and public access
Montana	Tourism and forestry	Revenue for schools	Conservation and recreation
Washington	Forest restoration	Active wildfire management	Habitat and watershed protection
Wyoming	Energy and grazing	Local resource management	Protection of national parks and shared costs

The experiences of these four states suggest that neither federal nor state management offers a universal solution. Instead, each state demonstrates different trade-offs between economic development, environmental stewardship, public access, and local decision-making.

⁹ Wyoming Stock Growers Association, Public Lands Policy Statements (2024). Source link: <https://www.wyomingstockgrowers.org/>

Federal management shares costs nationally while facing concerns about administrative delays.

Comparing Federal and State Management & Policy Options

The debate over public land management is often framed as a choice between federal and state control, but the experiences of Idaho, Montana, Wyoming, and Washington demonstrate that the issue is more complex. Each system offers distinct strengths and weaknesses, and the best approach depends on the policy goals being prioritized. Across all four states, recurring themes include public access, economic development, wildfire management, environmental protection, and administrative efficiency.

Strengths of Federal Management

Federal ownership provides several important advantages that supporters believe are difficult for states to replicate.

1. Nationwide Public Access

One of the strongest arguments for federal ownership is that public lands belong to all Americans. National forests, Bureau of Land Management lands, and national parks remain open for recreation regardless of where a visitor lives. Activities such as hunting, fishing, camping, hiking, and off-road recreation contribute billions of dollars annually to western economies.

Supporters argue that federal ownership also reduces the likelihood that public lands could eventually be sold or managed primarily for revenue generation.

2. Shared Financial Responsibility

Managing millions of acres requires enormous financial resources. Federal funding helps pay for:

- Wildfire suppression
- Road and trail maintenance
- Law enforcement
- Habitat restoration
- Recreation facilities
- Scientific research

Because these costs are shared nationally, individual western states do not bear the full financial burden.

3. Protection of National Resources

Federal agencies manage resources that extend beyond state boundaries, including major watersheds, wildlife migration corridors, endangered species habitat, and nationally significant landscapes.

Organizations such as The Wilderness Society argue that consistent national management prevents short-term political or economic pressures from harming resources that benefit the entire country.

Federal management shares costs nationally while facing concerns about administrative delays.

Weaknesses of Federal Management

Although federal ownership provides many benefits, critics argue that it also creates significant challenges.

Slow Decision-Making

Federal agencies must comply with numerous environmental reviews, public comment periods, and administrative requirements before many projects can begin.

Opponents argue these delays slow:

- Forest thinning
- Prescribed burning
- Timber harvesting
- Grazing permit renewals
- Energy development

As former Idaho Governor Butch Otter stated, "Idaho knows Idaho better than Washington, D.C."

Supporters of greater state control argue local officials can often respond faster to changing conditions.

Limited Local Influence

Many western communities believe they experience the economic consequences of federal land decisions while having relatively little influence over those decisions.

Industries such as timber, mining, ranching, and energy production often depend heavily on public land policies established by federal agencies headquartered outside the region.

Strengths of State Management

Supporters of transferring greater authority to western states emphasize three primary advantages.

Local Decision-Making

State agencies generally work closer to the communities directly affected by land management decisions.

This can allow:

- Faster project approval
- Greater collaboration with county governments
- More flexibility during emergencies
- Policies tailored to local conditions

Washington's Department of Natural Resources and Idaho's Department of Lands are frequently cited as examples of agencies capable of implementing active forest management more quickly than federal agencies.

KEY INFORMATION COLUMN

Greater state authority offers local flexibility but can bring additional costs and public-access concerns.

Economic Flexibility

Unlike federal agencies, state trust lands are managed primarily to generate revenue for public institutions.

Across Idaho, Montana, Wyoming, and Washington, state trust lands provide funding through:

- Timber sales
- Grazing leases
- Mineral development
- Energy production
- Agricultural leases
- Recreation agreements

Supporters argue that expanding state authority could allow a larger share of these revenues to remain within the state.

Active Forest Management

One of the strongest arguments for increased state involvement involves wildfire prevention.

Many western officials argue that increasing forest thinning, controlled burns, timber harvests would reduce fuel loads and improve long-term forest health.

Former Washington Commissioner of Public Lands Hilary Franz frequently emphasized active forest management and prescribed fire as essential tools for reducing catastrophic wildfire risk.

Weaknesses of State Management

Despite these advantages, transferring large amounts of federal land to states presents significant challenges.

Financial Burden

Federal agencies currently spend billions of dollars managing western public lands.

States assuming responsibility for millions of additional acres would likely inherit costs associated with:

- Wildfire suppression
- Infrastructure maintenance
- Search and rescue
- Law enforcement
- Recreation management
- Environmental compliance

Critics question whether resource revenues alone could consistently cover these expenses.

Public Access Concerns

Unlike federal lands, state trust lands are generally managed to generate revenue.

KEY INFORMATION COLUMN

Greater state authority offers local flexibility but can bring additional costs and public-access concerns.

Opponents worry that expanding state ownership could eventually result in:

- Reduced recreational access
- Increased user fees
- Commercial leasing
- Potential land sales during budget shortfalls

Supporters counter that states could adopt legal protections preserving public access, although doing so would require legislative action.

Policy Options

Rather than viewing the debate as an all-or-nothing decision, policymakers have several potential approaches.

Option 1: Maintain Current Federal Ownership

Under this option, existing federal agencies would continue managing public lands under current law.

Advantages

- Protects nationwide public access
- Preserves national conservation priorities
- Maintains federal funding
- Avoids transferring significant costs to states

Challenges

- Continued concerns over bureaucracy
- Slow implementation of management projects
- Limited local decision-making

Option 2: Transfer Selected Lands to States

Rather than transferring all federal lands, Congress could authorize the transfer of selected parcels better suited for state management while retaining nationally significant areas.

Examples might include:

- Working forests
- Grazing lands
- Certain Bureau of Land Management parcels

While maintaining federal ownership of:

- National parks
- Wilderness areas
- Major wildlife refuges

Policy options include continued federal ownership, selected transfers, and expanded state-federal partnerships.

Advantages

- Greater local flexibility
- Faster management decisions
- Increased state economic opportunities

Challenges

- High management costs
- Constitutional and legal obstacles
- Potential concerns over public access

Option 3: Expand State-Federal Partnerships

A third option would preserve federal ownership while increasing state participation in management decisions.

Possible initiatives include:

- Joint wildfire management programs
- Cooperative forest restoration projects
- Shared timber management agreements
- Greater state involvement during federal planning
- Expanded Good Neighbor Authority partnerships

This option seeks to combine the strengths of both systems while minimizing conflict between federal and state agencies.

Overall Assessment

The four case studies demonstrate that no single management system consistently outperforms the other. Idaho emphasizes wildfire and forestry, Montana highlights recreation and trust land management, Wyoming focuses on energy production, and Washington illustrates how cooperative management can address both conservation and active forest restoration.

Rather than asking whether federal or state ownership is inherently superior, policymakers should consider which management structure best addresses the unique environmental, economic, and administrative needs of each region.

Policy options include continued federal ownership, selected transfers, and expanded state-federal partnerships.

Nothing in this publication shall be construed as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any legislation.

Conclusion

The debate over federal versus state management of public lands remains one of the most significant policy issues facing the American West. As demonstrated by the experiences of Idaho, Montana, Wyoming, and Washington, neither system provides a perfect solution. Instead, each reflects different priorities regarding conservation, economic development, public access, and local governance.

Federal ownership has historically ensured that public lands remain accessible to all Americans while providing national funding for wildfire suppression, infrastructure, habitat conservation, and recreation. It also allows agencies to manage natural resources that cross state boundaries, including watersheds, wildlife migration corridors, and national parks. Supporters argue that this approach protects resources whose value extends beyond any single state.

State management offers different advantages. State agencies often operate closer to the communities affected by land-use decisions and can respond more quickly to changing conditions. Idaho, Montana, Wyoming, and Washington have each demonstrated that state trust lands can successfully generate revenue for schools and other public institutions while supporting responsible timber harvesting, grazing, mineral development, and recreation. Supporters believe expanding state authority could improve forest health, reduce wildfire risk through more active management, and strengthen local accountability.

However, transferring significant amounts of federal land would also present major legal, financial, and administrative challenges. States would likely assume responsibility for wildfire suppression, road maintenance, recreation facilities, environmental compliance, and law enforcement across millions of additional acres. Questions also remain regarding long-term public access and whether state governments could balance revenue generation with conservation objectives.

Rather than viewing federal and state management as competing systems, policymakers may achieve the best outcomes through increased cooperation. Programs that expand joint wildfire management, shared forest restoration projects, and collaborative planning allow states to contribute greater local expertise while preserving the financial resources and nationwide public access provided through federal ownership.

Ultimately, the central policy question is not simply who owns public lands, but how those lands can best serve current and future generations. The experiences of Idaho, Montana, Wyoming, and Washington suggest that successful public land management depends on balancing environmental stewardship, economic opportunity, efficient administration, and continued public access. A collaborative approach that combines federal resources with greater state participation offers the greatest potential for addressing the increasingly complex challenges facing western public lands.



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Rob Brown is a senior at Montana State University studying Political Science with a focus on public policy. Originally from Hayden, Idaho, Rob has a strong interest in state and local government, free-market policy, and issues affecting Public lands and rural communities. He has experience working with political and policy organizations through internships and campus involvement, and hopes to pursue a career in public policy and government affairs.



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