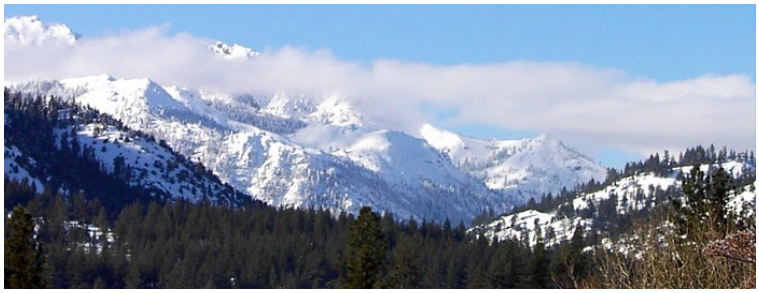
The Mountain Pact

The Link Between Climate Change and Public Lands



This Mountain Pact email looks at the relationship between America's public lands, climate change and the important role that mountain communities can play. Public lands not only provide a cultural foundation for the American West, but also a variety of environmental benefits to our communities (i.e. ecosystem services). However, due to climate change impacts, these lands are susceptible to insect disease outbreaks, catastrophic wildfire, droughts, floods, and many more system altering events. Meanwhile, the Trump Administration's willingness to dismiss the need for climate action, and investments in public lands infrastructure leaves these lands, and the people that depend upon them at risk.

Problem
A Slow Building Public Lands Crisis Exacerbated by Climate Instability

Public lands are essential to western mountain communities and their way of life. National public lands cover 640 million acres, which is roughly 28% of land in the United States. The highest concentration of public land exists in the West, shaping the lives of western Americans.

Public lands draw visitors from across the globe, benefit local economies, and attract people looking to start families and build businesses. Protected public lands showcase many of America's most spectacular outdoor spaces. They provide habitat for wildlife, help keep our air and water clean, and are the most basic infrastructure for the powerhouse that is the outdoor recreation economy.

Currently, our public lands face increasing ecological threats from climate change and related catastrophes. This puts the landscapes that have created the Western way of life and the outdoor economy at risk. U.S forests absorb more than 13 percent of human-caused U.S emissions of carbon dioxide, but forests can quickly become carbon producers as their health decreases due to climate variability. As our climate continues to warm, public lands are increasingly susceptible to tree insect diseases, drought, shrinking snow-packs, and catastrophic wildfire.

Public land agencies are struggling with countless land management issues that are routinely intensified by misdirected political action and insufficient financial resources. Our current federal political leadership continues to unveil agendas that have stunning setbacks to the health and integrity of our public lands that are an important tool to climate mitigation and adaptation.

Attempts to roll back the collection of methane on public lands, increase mining of oil, gas, and coal, and significantly compromise foundational environmental policies such as the National Environmental Policy Act and Clean Air Act clearly signal that this Administration has no intention to focus on environmental protections or climate change mitigation and adaptation.

Pairing that with federal budget negotiations that currently propose a roughly $1.4 billion cut from the Department of Interior and more to the Department of Agriculture, the impact will be immense. Cutting these agencies will strain everyday maintenance of public lands, such as enforcement for public safety, with less money for forest rangers or reducing already strained budgets for wildland fire fighting.

Solution

Fighting for Ecologically and Economically Valuable Lands

The first steps in the fight for public lands and environmental protections have been made with 2.8 million Americans standing up in support of national monument protections, and the biggest outdoor retailer trade show in the country moving from Utah to Colorado to make a statement about the importance of protecting public lands from extractive industries.

The need to respond to these types of crises, and carry this momentum forward is more critical than ever with defensive action necessary at the federal policy level. Mountain communities are uniquely positioned as both high-profile and closely tied to national public land management. They can use this position to actively urge the federal government to engage in conservation and proactive land management, which is an important tool for securing our economic infrastructure, reducing the national carbon footprint (e.g. avoided wildfire risk, carbon sequestration) and adapting to a changing climate.

Former Governor of Colorado Bill Ritter states that, "we're no longer in a situation where you can separate out climate work from other air work and water work and public land use, it all matters...it's all connected." Investments such as infrastructure upgrades, maintenance, habitat protection, and ecological restoration should be prioritized over natural resource extraction, development and public land transfer efforts.

Fostering a shared voice from the Western mountain town constituency is critical to building federal action on climate change and public lands restoration. The Mountain Pact is committed to long-term land restoration and conservation in the Intermountain West and rural economic development. It is crucial that policymakers understand that investing in the

maintenance and restoration of public lands supports rural communities and economies. We will continue to advocate for federal policies that promote the outdoor economy and invest in public lands for management that supports climate adaptation and mitigation activities.

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