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New Survey Separates Rhetoric from Reality When it Comes to Mountain West Voters' Support for National Public Lands

Wide margins of support for local efforts to protect public lands as national monuments; voters want a balanced approach to energy development

COLORADO SPRINGS—Against an uptick in anti-public lands rhetoric from militant extremists, a new Colorado College State of the Rockies Project *Conservation in the West Poll* released today revealed strong public support for efforts to protect and maintain national public lands.

The poll surveyed the views of voters in seven Mountain West states on key public lands issues affecting the region, including proposals to designate new national monuments in the West, establish new environmental and safety standards for oil and gas drilling, and prioritize renewable energy production on public lands.

Central to recent local controversies in Burns, Oregon and elsewhere, the poll—for the first time in its six-year history—asked voters about efforts to turn national public lands owned by all Americans over to state or private control. 58 percent of respondents oppose giving state governments control over national public lands. 60 percent of respondents oppose selling significant holdings of public lands like national forests to reduce the budget deficit. That view was echoed in Nevada, where just 30 percent of respondents identify as supportive of Cliven Bundy, the local rancher who led an armed confrontation with federal authorities in April 2014.

“Charges of government overreach from the ideological fringes are making headlines, but in reality most Westerners in this poll favor greater protection and sensible use of the open lands and national treasures that define the region,” said Eric Perramond, professor in the Southwest Studies and Environmental Programs at Colorado College, and the Faculty Director of the State of the Rockies Project.

The poll also broke new ground in examining public views on the creation of new national monuments—a topic that has often been portrayed as controversial and unpopular in the West. Yet in Utah, a tribal proposal to protect nearly two million acres of existing public lands surrounding the Bears Ears Buttes as a national monument received 66 percent support from respondents. In Arizona, 73 percent of respondents approved of a proposal to protect 1.7 million acres of existing public lands in the Grand Canyon Watershed as a national monument.

According to the poll, monuments created at the end of the Clinton administration, which generated controversy at the time, enjoy wide margins of support today. Across the West, the poll showed overwhelming support—80 percent in favor—for future presidents protecting public lands with a national monument designation.

“These results make clear Western communities care deeply about the public lands that embody the best of our nation’s culture, spirit and beauty,” said former U.S. Interior Department Secretary Ken Salazar. “Western voters see our outdoor heritage as integral to our economy and our way of life, and they certainly don’t want to see their public lands seized by ideologues or sold off by politicians in Washington.”

The poll also looked at energy issues at a time when price fluctuations and market changes make the future of oil, gas and coal industries unpredictable. Voters expressed a balanced view when it comes to how national public lands are used by private industries:

- 52 percent of respondents approve of continuing drilling and mining at the current pace, but with increased safeguards for land and water—a view that significantly outweighs alternatives approaches, including increasing drilling and mining (10 percent), maintaining the current pace without additional safeguards (10 percent), and stopping all drilling and mining (22 percent).
- 76 percent of respondents want to continue tax incentives for solar and wind energy production.
- 58 percent of respondents support increasing the royalty fees paid by companies that drill for oil and gas or mine for coal and minerals on national public lands.
- 80 percent of respondents agree with a proposed Obama Administration rule to require oil and gas producers who operate on national public lands to use updated equipment and technology to prevent leaks of methane gas during the extraction process and reduce the need to burn off excess natural gas into the air.

Additional key findings include:

- Ahead of the 2016 elections, 75 percent of respondents say issues involving public lands, waters, and wildlife are an important factor in deciding whether to support an elected public official, compared to other issues like health care and education.
- 83 percent of respondents believe the drought is a serious issue and in Colorado River Basin states (CO, NV, NM & UT) strong majorities favor using the current water supply more wisely over diverting more water from rivers in less populated areas.
- 75 percent of respondents support the renewal of the Land and Water Conservation Fund.
- 80 percent of respondents believe the U.S. Forest Service should be allowed to treat the largest and most expensive wildfires as natural disasters in order to have access to emergency disaster funding.
- 72 percent of respondents say national public lands, such as national forests, national monuments, or wildlife refuges help their state economy

This is the sixth consecutive year Colorado College has gauged the public’s sentiment on public lands and conservation issues. The 2016 Colorado College Conservation in the West survey is a bipartisan poll conducted by Republican pollster Lori Weigel of Public Opinion Strategies and Democratic pollster Dave Metz of Fairbank, Maslin, Maullin, Metz & Associates. Nevada voters were included in the survey for the first time this year.

The poll surveyed 400 registered voters in each of seven Western states (AZ, CO, MT, NV, NM, UT & WY) for a total 2,800-person sample. The survey was conducted in December and has a margin of error of +/-2.74 percent nationwide and +/-4.9 percent statewide. The full survey and individual state surveys are available on the [Colorado College website](#).

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About Colorado College

Colorado College is a nationally prominent, four-year liberal arts college that was founded in Colorado Springs in 1874. The college operates on the innovative Block Plan, in which its 2,000 undergraduate students study one course at a time in intensive three and a half-week segments. For the past twelve years, the college has sponsored the [State of the Rockies Project](#), which seeks to increase public understanding of vital issues affecting the Rocky Mountain West through annual reports, free events, discussions and other activities.

About Fairbank, Maslin, Maullin, Metz & Associates

Fairbank, Maslin, Maullin, Metz & Associates (FM3)—a national Democratic opinion research firm with offices in Oakland, Los Angeles and Madison, Wisconsin—has specialized in public policy oriented opinion research since 1981. The firm has assisted hundreds of political campaigns at every level of the ballot—from President to City Council—with opinion research and strategic guidance. FM3 also provides research and strategic consulting to public agencies, businesses and public interest organizations nationwide.

About Public Opinion Strategies

Public Opinion Strategies is the largest Republican polling firm in the country. Since the firm's founding in 1991, they have completed more than 10,000 research projects, interviewing more than five million Americans across the United States. Public Opinion Strategies' research is well respected, and prestigious media outlets such as The Wall Street Journal, NBC News, and CNBC rely on Public Opinion Strategies to conduct their polling. The firm conducts opinion research on behalf of hundreds of political campaigns, as well as trade associations, not-for-profit organizations, government entities, and industry coalitions throughout the nation.