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Western Voters Show a Clear Preference for Prioritizing Conservation When Asked About Public Lands Uses

Fourteenth annual Conservation in the West Poll reveals public lands issues like threats to wildlife habitats, water pollution, and the loss of natural areas are highly important to voters in the West and play a key role in how they will vote in 2024.

COLORADO SPRINGS—Colorado College’s 14th annual State of the Rockies Project [Conservation in the West Poll](#) released today shows a clear and resounding preference for conservation when voters are given a choice over how public lands are used and that those issues play a key role in who voters will support in the 2024 elections.

The poll, which surveyed the views of voters in eight Mountain West states (Arizona, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Utah, and Wyoming), found **67 percent** of voters are worried about the future of land, water and wildlife. **Majorities of voters** view issues like loss of habitats and declining fish and wildlife populations, inadequate and polluted water supplies, microplastics, uncontrollable wildfires, air pollution, loss of pollinators, and loss of natural spaces as extremely or very serious problems in their state. **66 percent** of voters think the effects of climate change in their state over the past 10 years are significant. The levels of concern about climate change, wildlife habitats, water supplies, pollution, and the loss of natural areas are at **all time highs** over the poll’s history.

Against that backdrop, conservation is top of mind with Westerners ahead of the 2024 elections. Compared to other issues like the economy, health care and education, **85 percent** of voters in the West – including **74 percent** of Republicans, **87 percent** of Independents, and **96 percent** of Democrats – say issues involving clean water, clean air, wildlife and public lands are important in deciding whether to support an elected official. **37 percent** of voters describe those issues as “very important” and the “primary factor in deciding whether to support an elected official.” Conservation issues are especially

important among many swing voter groups which could help decide close elections, including voters under 35 (**91 percent**), moms (**87 percent**), Latinos (**89 percent**), voters who are new to their state (**91 percent**), and moderates (**89 percent**).

Where voters come down on public lands priorities is decidedly one-sided and in favor of conservation. Asked what they prefer their congressional representatives place more emphasis on in upcoming decisions, **70 percent** of voters want to protect clean water, air quality and wildlife habitats while providing opportunities to visit and recreate on public lands. That is compared to just **26 percent** of voters who would rather ensure more domestic energy production by maximizing the amount of public lands available for responsible oil and gas drilling and mining. For the first time in the poll's history, prioritizing conservation over maximizing energy production receives **majority support** among Republicans and Independents.

Conservation perspectives win out in other choices presented to voters. **78 percent** of voters want more emphasis placed on conserving wildlife migration routes, providing highway crossings, and limiting more development to protect wildlife habitats, compared to **20 percent** of voters who want more emphasis on economically productive uses of land such as new development, roads, ranching, or oil and gas production.

By contrast, most voters see no conflict between clean energy production and preserving natural areas for wildlife habitat and the character of local communities. **75 percent** of voters in the West agree we can increase clean energy production while preserving natural areas, while only **20 percent** say we need to choose between production and preservation.

"There may be a lot that divides voters across the country, but in the West there is nearly universal consensus in favor of conservation," said **Katrina Miller-Stevens, Director of the State of the Rockies Project and an associate professor at Colorado College**. "Not only do voters prefer conservation when asked how public lands and water should be utilized, but issues involving water, air, land and wildlife are top of mind when they make their voting decisions."

As seen in *Conservation in the West Poll* results from previous years, public lands and the outdoors continue to play an important role in Western lifestyles. **62 percent** of voters say they visited national public lands three or more times in the past year, compared to only **12 percent** of voters who did not visit national public lands in that time.

Western voters also view connecting with nature as vital for their wellbeing. **93 percent** say spending more time outdoors would help counter growing rates of anxiety, depression and mental health problems in young people, with **67 percent** agreeing it would help a lot.

Notable percentages of voters in the West display the behaviors of committed outdoor enthusiasts. **57 percent** of voters say they seek out news on nature, wildlife or recreation, **34 percent** listen to podcasts or follow someone online who focuses on nature or the environment, **38 percent** have a recreation, hiking, nature, or wildlife app on their phone, and **39 percent** donated money or volunteered to help nature or wildlife in the last year.

The deep connection between Westerners and the outdoors, along with the importance placed on protecting public lands, are reflected in strong support for a variety of conservation policies among Westerners.

- **80 percent** support the national goal of conserving 30 percent of land and inland waters in America, and 30 percent of its ocean areas, by the year 2030.
- **85 percent** support creating new national parks, national monuments, national wildlife refuges and Tribal protected areas to protect historic sites or areas for outdoor recreation.
- **85 percent** support constructing wildlife crossing structures across major highways that intersect with known migration routes.
- **89 percent** support managing public lands to ensure there are more outdoor places free of light pollution to better see the stars at night.
- Among Colorado voters, **92 percent** support protecting public lands surrounding the Dolores River Canyon to conserve important wildlife habitat, safeguard the area's scenic beauty, and support outdoor recreation.

Asked about policies for regulating oil and gas production on public lands, Western voters overwhelmingly support conservation.

- **90 percent** support requiring oil and gas companies, rather than federal and state governments, to pay for all of the clean-up and land restoration costs after drilling is finished.
- **66 percent** support only allowing oil and gas companies the right to drill in areas of public lands where there is a high likelihood to actually produce oil and gas.
- By contrast, only **27 percent** support removing protections on some areas of existing national public lands, particularly national monuments, to allow more drilling, mining and other development.

This is the fourteenth consecutive year Colorado College gauged the public's sentiment on public lands and conservation issues. The 2024 Colorado College *Conservation in the West Poll* is a bipartisan survey conducted by Republican pollster Lori Weigel of New Bridge Strategy and Democratic pollster Dave Metz of Fairbank, Maslin, Maullin, Metz & Associates. The survey is funded by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation.

The poll surveyed at least 400 registered voters in each of eight Western states (AZ, CO, ID, MT, NV, NM, UT, & WY) for a total 3,376-voter sample, which included an over-sample of Black and Native American voters. The survey was conducted between January 4-21, 2024 and the effective margin of error is $\pm 2.4\%$ at the 95% confidence interval for the total sample; and at most $\pm 4.9\%$ for each state. The full survey and individual state surveys are available on the [State of the Rockies Project](#) 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 2,200 undergraduate students study one course at a time in intensive three and a half-week segments. For the past eighteen years, the college has sponsored the [State of the Rockies Project](#), which seeks to enhance public understanding of and action to address socio-environmental challenges in the Rocky Mountain West through collaborative student-faculty research, education, and stakeholder engagement.

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 Portland, Oregon—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 New Bridge Strategy

New Bridge Strategy is a Colorado-based, woman-owned and operated opinion research company specializing in public policy and campaign research. As a Republican polling firm that has led the research for hundreds of successful political and public affairs campaigns, we have helped coalitions bridging the political spectrum in crafting winning ballot measure campaigns, public education campaigns, and legislative policy efforts. New Bridge Strategy helps clients bridge divides to create winning majorities.

About Hispanic Access Foundation

Hispanic Access Foundation, a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization, connects Latinos with partners and opportunities to improve lives and create an equitable society. Our vision is that one day every Hispanic individual in America will enjoy good physical health and a healthy natural environment, a quality education, economic success, and civic engagement in their communities with the sum of improving the future of America. For more information visit www.hispanicaccess.org.