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New Poll Shows Surge in Concern about Nature and Continued Bipartisan Support for Conservation Among Western Voters

11th annual Conservation in the West Poll reveals policy opportunities for new administration and Congress on public land conservation

COLORADO SPRINGS—Colorado College’s 11th annual State of the Rockies Project [*Conservation in the West Poll*](#) released today showed a marked increase in levels of support for conservation, with voters in the Mountain West calling for bold action to protect nature as a new administration and Congress consider their public lands agendas.

The poll, which surveyed the views of voters in eight Mountain West states (Arizona, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Utah, and Wyoming), found **61 percent** of voters are concerned about the future of nature, meaning land, water, air, and wildlife. Despite trying economic conditions during the COVID-19 pandemic, the level of concern for things like loss of habitat for fish and wildlife, inadequate water supplies, pollution in the air and water, the loss of pollinators, uncontrollable wildfires, and climate change outpaced the overall level of concern about unemployment.

“We are seeing strong voter concern for nature, which is translating into calls for bold action on public lands in the West,” said Katrina Miller-Stevens, **Director of the State of the Rockies Project and an Assistant Professor at Colorado College**. “If federal and state policy leaders are looking for direction on public lands, the view from the West is clear.”

Westerners' heightened concerns about their natural landscapes are matched with strong consensus behind proposals to conserve and protect the country's outdoors.

- **77 percent** support setting a national goal of conserving 30 percent of land and waters in America by the year 2030, which was recently announced in an Executive Order by the new Biden administration.
- **72 percent** support making public lands a net-zero source of carbon pollution, meaning that the positive impacts of forests and lands to create clean air are greater than the carbon pollution caused by oil and gas development or mining.
- **66 percent** support gradually transitioning to 100 percent of our energy being produced from clean, renewable sources like solar, wind, and hydropower over the next ten to fifteen years.
- **77 percent** support restoring national monument protections to lands in the West which contain archaeological and Native American sites, but also have oil, gas, and mineral deposits.
- **84 percent** support creating new national parks, national monuments, national wildlife refuges, and tribal protected areas to protect historic sites or outdoor recreation areas, in part because **77 percent** of voters believe those types of protected public lands help the economy in their state.
- **91 percent** of voters in the West agree that despite state budget problems, we should still find money to protect their state's land, water, and wildlife.

Conservation intersects with equity concerns

The poll broke new ground this year in examining the intersection of race with views on conservation priorities. Results were separated by responses from Black, Latino, and Native American voters, along with combined communities of color findings. The poll included an oversample of Black and Native American voters in the region in order to speak more confidently about the view of those communities.

The poll found notably higher percentages of Black voters, Latino voters, and Native American voters to be concerned about climate change, pollution of rivers, lakes, and streams, and the impact of oil and gas drilling on our land, air, and water. The poll also found higher levels of support within communities of color for bold conservation policies like the 30 percent conservation by 2030 effort, transitioning to one hundred percent renewable energy, and making public lands a net-zero source of carbon pollution.

Furthermore, the poll showed a desire by strong majorities of Western voters for equitable access to public lands and to ensure local communities are heard. **73 percent** of voters in the West support directing funding to ensure adequate access to parks and natural areas for lower-income people and communities of color that have disproportionately lacked them. **83 percent** of voters in the West support ensuring that Native American tribes have greater input into decisions made about areas within national public lands that contain sites sacred to or culturally important to their tribe.

Concerns over climate and fires are growing and viewed as interconnected

More voters than in the past expressed deep concern over both climate and wildfires. **51 percent** of voters in the West say climate change is an extremely or very serious problem in their state, compared to **27 percent** when the survey began in 2011 and **47 percent** as recently as 2020. Similarly, **60 percent** of voters in the West say uncontrollable wildfires that threaten homes and property are an extremely or very serious problem in their state, which is up from **32 percent** in 2016 and **47 percent** in 2020. **71 percent** of voters in the West say wildfires are more of a problem than ten years ago, with **42 percent** saying the reason is changes in the climate and **40 percent** citing drought.

Sights on a cleaner and safer energy future on public lands

With oil and gas drilling taking place on half of America's public lands, Western voters are well aware of the harmful impacts and want to ensure their public lands are protected and safe. **91 percent** of voters support requiring oil and gas companies to use updated equipment and technology to prevent leaks of methane gas and other pollution into the air and **93 percent** support requiring oil and gas companies to pay for all of the clean-up and land restoration costs after drilling is finished.

Asked about what policy makers should place more emphasis on in upcoming decisions around public lands, **69 percent** of Western voters pointed to conservation efforts and recreation usage, compared to **27 percent** who preferred energy production.

Nearly three-fourths of Western voters want to significantly curb oil and gas development on public lands. **59 percent** think that oil and gas development should be strictly limited on public lands and another **14 percent** say it should be stopped completely. That is compared to **25 percent** of voters in the West who would like to expand oil and gas development on public lands.

Growing support for water and wildlife protections

The level of concern among Westerners around water and wildlife issues is growing. **52 percent** of voters in the West say loss of habitat for fish and wildlife is an extremely or very serious problem in their state, which represents a sharp increase compared to **38 percent** in 2011 and **44 percent** in 2020. **63 percent** of voters in the West believe the loss of pollinators is an extremely or very serious problem. **54 percent** of voters in the West also say pollution of rivers, lakes, and streams is an extremely or very serious problem in their state, up from **42 percent** in 2011 and **54 percent** in 2020.

Those concerns translate into strong support among Western voters for water and wildlife protections:

- **81 percent** support designating portions of existing public lands where wildlife migrate each year as areas which should not be open to oil and gas drilling.

- **85 percent** support restoring Clean Water Act protections for smaller streams and seasonal wetlands.
- **73 percent** support restoring protections for threatened species under the Endangered Species Act that were removed.
- **67 percent** support restoring limits on drilling or industrial activities that could negatively impact threatened wildlife on national public lands, such as sage-grouse.
- **94 percent** support dedicating funding to modernizing older water infrastructure and restoring natural areas that help communities protect sources of drinking water and withstand impacts of drought.

This is the eleventh consecutive year Colorado College has gauged the public's sentiment on public lands and conservation issues. The 2021 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 poll surveyed at least 400 registered voters in each of eight Western states (AZ, CO, ID, MT, NV, NM, UT, & WY) for a total 3,842-voter sample, which included an over-sample of Black and Native American voters. The survey was conducted between January 2-13, 2021 and the effective margin of error is $\pm 2.2\%$ at the 95% confidence interval for the total sample; and at most $\pm 4.8\%$ for each state. The full survey and individual state surveys are available on the [State of the Rockies 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 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 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 New Bridge Strategy

New Bridge Strategy is an opinion research company with roots in Republican politics. The firm specializes in public policy and campaign research. NBS has been a member of bipartisan research teams and led coalitions across 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.