

Energy and Public Lands in the West



Western voters overwhelmingly side with protecting the conservation value of public lands over expanding energy development on those lands. By the widest margin recorded to date, voters want their Members of Congress to prioritize conservation, clean water, air quality, and wildlife habitat over maximizing oil, gas, and mining activity on public lands. Similarly, Westerners support strong guardrails on any energy development that happens, including holding companies fully accountable for cleanup and restoration. They oppose allowing Congress to override local resource management plans or limiting on public input. Voters also express growing concern about the environmental impacts of oil and gas drilling and show a clear preference for expanding renewable energy.

Western voters overwhelmingly side with the conservation value of public lands when asked what their Member of Congress should prioritize - conservation or increased energy production. By the largest margin ever, Westerners want Congress to focus on “ensuring we protect sources of clean water, our air quality, and wildlife habitat while providing opportunities to visit and recreate on our national public lands” (76 percent) versus “ensuring we produce more domestic energy by maximizing the amount of national public lands available for responsible oil and gas drilling and mining” (21 percent).

2019 2020 2021 2022 2023 2024 2025 2026

Ensuring we protect sources of clean water, our air quality and wildlife habitat while providing opportunities to visit and recreate on our national public lands.

65% 67% 69% 67% 68% 70% 72% **76%**

Ensuring we produce more domestic energy by maximizing the amount of national public lands available for responsible oil and gas drilling and mining.

24% 25% 27% 28% 26% 26% 24% 21%

Voters across the political spectrum and in every state prioritize the conservation value of public lands over maximizing energy production. Majorities of Republicans (62 percent), independents (81 percent), and Democrats (89 percent) favor conservation over expanded energy development. Conservation is also prioritized by strong majorities of Native American voters (82 percent), Generation Z voters (81 percent), women (81 percent), and in every type of community including rural areas (71 percent).

Westerners voice overwhelming opposition to a number of changes that would result in opening up more public lands to resource extraction. The 2026 survey tested five different policies that are being considered. These policies generate considerable opposition among voters across party lines and in every state.

Allowing Congress to override local resource management plans developed with community input, in order to increase mining and oil and gas development on national public lands

Total Oppose: 75%

Strongly Oppose: 49%

Selling some national public lands to private companies for oil, gas and mining development

Total Oppose: 74%

Strongly Oppose: 55%

Requiring government agencies to allow oil and gas companies access to lands they can develop even if local communities raise concerns about impacts on wildlife, water or communities

Total Oppose: 74%

Strongly Oppose: 55%

Fast-tracking oil, gas and mining projects on national public lands by reducing environmental reviews and local public input

Total Oppose: 70%

Strongly Oppose: 49%

Building industrial roads in undeveloped areas of national public lands for new mines, oil and gas development, or timber harvests

Total Oppose: 65%

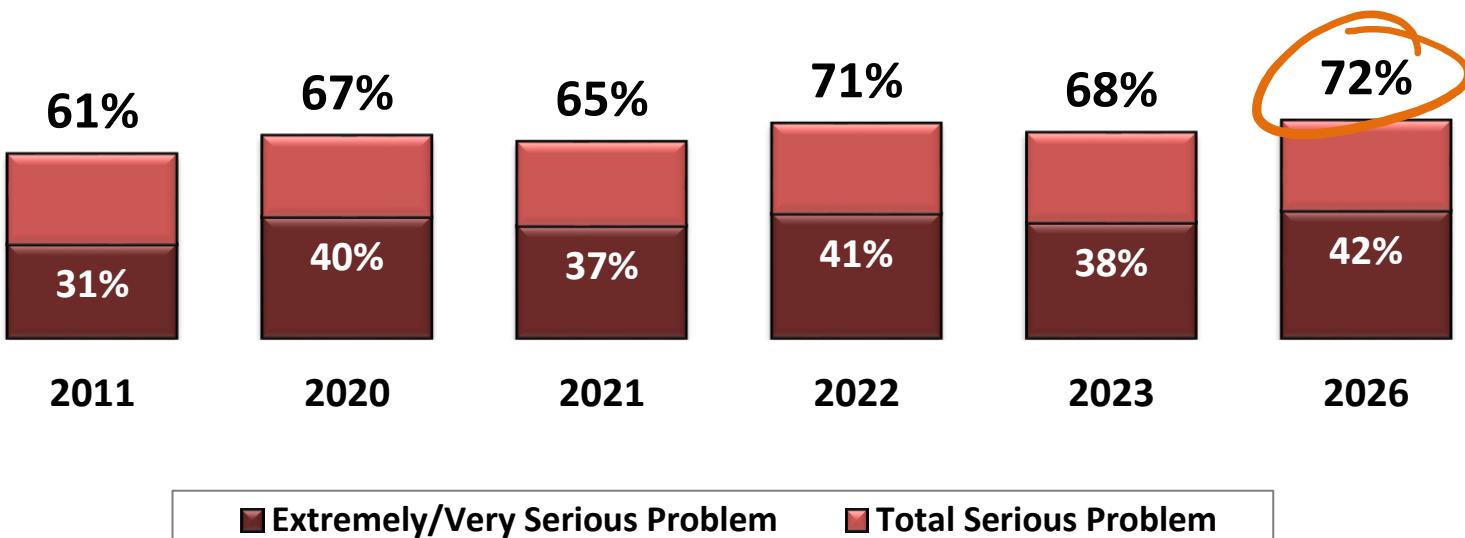
Strongly Oppose: 39%

Opposition to lifting existing land protections is also evident in one notable example in New Mexico. New Mexico voters strongly oppose removing public land protections around Chaco Culture National Historical Park to allow expanded drilling. More than seven in ten voters (71 percent) oppose this proposal, including a majority (54 percent) who say they strongly oppose it.

Western voters offer almost unanimous agreement that oil and gas companies should be required to pay clean-up and land restoration costs after drilling is finished. Nearly nine in ten voters (89 percent) support this requirement, consistent with high levels of support in prior years. Support reaches at least 85 percent in every state, with 70 percent or more strongly supporting cleanup and restoration requirements. This view transcends gender, age, party affiliation, community type, and ethnicity.

Concern about the environmental impacts of oil and gas drilling in the West continues to grow. Nearly three-in-four Westerners (72 percent) say the impact of drilling on land, air and water is a serious problem, including more than two-in-five (42 percent) who describe it as extremely or very serious. This concern has increased steadily over time, as shown in the graph below.

The impact of oil and gas drilling on our land, air and water



Voters prioritize meeting America's energy needs through renewables significantly more than in prior years – preferring them to oil and gas by a nearly **3-to-1 margin**. Nearly three-in-four (72 percent) voters in the region say they would prioritize reducing the need for more coal, oil and gas by expanding the use of domestically generated renewable energy rather than drilling and mining wherever possible. The 47 point preference margin is far wider than even three years ago when it stood at 34 points as illustrated here: (Note, this trend compares only the states surveyed in 2012: Arizona, Colorado, Montana, New Mexico, Utah and Wyoming.)

2012 2023 2026

Reducing our need for more coal, oil and gas by expanding our use of clean, renewable energy that can be generated in the US

65% 65% 73%

Drilling and mining for more coal, oil and gas wherever we can find it in the US

30% 31% 26%

More specifically, when asked which energy sources they would want encouraged in their state, nearly two-thirds of Westerners say they would encourage the use of solar power, followed by wind power. Nuclear, natural gas and energy efficiency efforts are nearly on par with one other in a lower tier of energy sources they would want to see encouraged in their state.

