



Policy Resolution 2025-09

Recreation and Tourism on Public Lands

A. BACKGROUND

Public lands are integral to the cultural, economic, and social vitality of the West. They preserve iconic landscapes and offer abundant tourism and outdoor recreation opportunities that draw millions of annual visitors – stimulating local and state economies while offering social and health benefits to western residents.

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM), U.S. Forest Service (USFS), U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), Bureau of Reclamation (USBR), and National Park Service (NPS) all manage recreation and access on federal public lands. Each agency has distinct management objectives: BLM and USFS oversee multiple-use lands, FWS focuses on wildlife conservation, USBR partners with state and federal entities, and NPS preserves unique resources for current and future public enjoyment.

Tourism and local population growth put pressure on agency resources, infrastructure, and staffing, leading to overcrowding, environmental degradation, and threats to tribal treaty and cultural resource rights. Federal agencies already struggle to maintain existing infrastructure; for example, NPS has reported a more than \$23 billion existing maintenance backlog. Investment in visitor facilities and other infrastructure, cooperative management with states, tribal governments, and territories, and public-private partnerships could address these challenges.

Federal government shutdowns, such as those in 2013 and 2018-2019, as well as even the prospect of a shutdown, have had severe consequences on state and local budgets. For example, shutdowns and potential shutdowns disrupt agency operations causing natural resource harm, pre-emptive tourism cancellations, and damage tourism-dependent rural economies. During past shutdowns, states and territories incurred unreimbursed costs to keep national parks open.

B. GOVERNORS' POLICY STATEMENT

1. Western Governors understand that not every state or territory approaches public land management in the same way. However, Western Governors recognize the role of our system of public lands in economic development and development of social values, while providing ecological, recreational, and health benefits for western citizens, the region, nation, and world.
2. Western Governors support efforts to provide public access to and at the same time protect iconic public land features, venues, resources, and landmarks while actively promoting the stewardship of natural resources and minimizing environmental impact. This is essential to ensure and maintain their respective economic, cultural, historic, and ecological values for present and future generations. Western Governors recognize that the long-term economic vitality of recreation and tourism is intrinsically linked to the health and preservation of these natural assets.

3. Consultation and coordination between federal land managers and Governors' offices is needed to improve cross-boundary management of ecological, economic, and cultural resources and to increase sustainable outdoor recreation opportunities.
4. Western Governors encourage BLM, USFS, FWS, and NPS to partner with Governor's offices and relevant state entities to improve outcomes and efficiencies related to expanded visitor services, resource protection, cost-sharing, staff training, educational programming, and other shared goals. Western Governors encourage federal partners to defer to state, territorial, and local leaders and land managers to ensure that federal efforts are consistent with state and local development and implementation of sustainable tourism practices and conservation initiatives that benefit the entire region. Western Governors also recommend that federal agencies include language in agreements that enables flexible, direct collaboration with local municipalities. This could include a standardized memorandum of understanding, developed at the federal level and adapted for local use, to streamline recreation and tourism coordination across jurisdictions.
5. Western Governors encourage federal land management agencies to explicitly integrate state management and planning for wildlife, habitat connectivity, and overall ecosystem health into recreation and tourism planning and management decisions. This includes employing best available science and considering the cumulative impacts of recreational activities across the landscape.
6. Western Governors recognize the broad array of multiple uses experienced by many of our public lands, including traditional and renewable energy, recreation and tourism, agriculture, conservation, and state wildlife management. Western Governors urge federal agencies to engage early and often with states, territories, local governments, and stakeholder groups to identify early opportunities to avoid potential areas of conflict among individual user groups or proposed land uses.
7. Western Governors support the development of programs that incentivize and recognize outdoor recreation businesses operating on federal lands that demonstrate a commitment to environmental sustainability, responsible tourism practices, customer service orientation, and active contributions to the protection of the natural landscapes they utilize. This could include initiatives around waste reduction, energy efficiency, habitat preservation, and visitor education programs relevant to the unique ecosystems of the West.
8. Western Governors request that federal agencies use tools like Good Neighbor Authority, which allows USFS, NPS, and BLM to enter into agreements with states and territories to improve management of popular outdoor recreation areas on federal lands that do not have adequate infrastructure, services, and staff. Congress should ensure that FWS is authorized to enter such agreements for outdoor recreation management.
9. Western Governors urge Congress to authorize federal agencies to enter into cooperative management agreements with states and territories, such as existing agreements between USBR and states, and encourage agencies to engage with states and territories on these opportunities.
10. Western Governors urge Congress, the Department of the Interior, and the Department of Agriculture to explore additional strategies to responsibly accommodate increased

visitation and improve visitor experiences in coordination and collaboration with states and territories. Such strategies should include evaluating the concentration of visitors rather than limiting the total number of visitors in order to protect resources and visitor experience while maintaining public lands for all.

11. Western Governors urge federal agencies to consult with states regarding hotspot management planning, including options to redirect overflow to state managed recreation areas, state parks, or suitable lesser-known recreation sites. Per the EXPLORE Act (Pub. L. 118-234), federal agencies are directed to assess impacts and needs in gateway communities while also assessing the potential ecological impacts of redirecting visitors and ensuring appropriate resources are in place to protect these alternative sites throughout the western region.
12. Western Governors urge federal agencies to collaborate with states throughout the visitor management planning process. This includes sharing current and historical visitation data for increased transparency, cooperation, and understanding of capacities. Western Governors urge federal land managers to coordinate with gateway communities and tourism offices to develop plans for sustainable visitation, taking into account local and state-wide population dynamics.
13. Western Governors urge improving, modernizing, and expanding visitor facilities, attracting investment to create new visitor destinations, using technology and real-time and historical data sharing to diffuse overcrowding issues with traffic and parking, and exploring the expanded use of public transit and shuttles, bike and e-bike rentals, and other efforts to decrease vehicle congestion while maintaining visitor access.
14. Western Governors urge land management agencies to give direct hiring authority to local agency leadership, especially in the case of seasonal hiring, to increase hiring pace and reduce bottlenecks at regional or local offices. Western Governors encourage federal land management agencies to introduce tools to provide for the cross-training of employees, specifically those that are visitor facing.
15. Western Governors encourage NPS to promote an agency culture that is welcoming, customer service oriented, and reflective of the agency's mission to preserve unimpaired the natural and cultural resources of the National Park System, and provide for the enjoyment, education, and inspiration of the public.
16. Public land access is critically important in the West. The special use permitting process should be streamlined and coordinated across federal land management agencies to provide users, especially nonprofits, schools, and colleges, a faster and more accessible experience. Reforming the complex permitting system for guides and outfitters would also better support small businesses in gateway communities and rural areas.
17. Western Governors urge Congress to appropriately fund federal agencies to provide for the routine maintenance and operation costs of important visitor infrastructure, particularly roads and utility systems, and to find innovative ways to attract private investment for improving, modernizing and expanding visitor facilities.
18. In 2020, Congress passed the Great American Outdoors Act (Pub. L. 116-152) to provide up to \$1.9 billion a year through 2025 for deferred maintenance needs across NPS, USFS, FWS

and BLM lands through the establishment of the National Parks and Public Land Legacy Restoration Fund, funded primarily by fees and royalties from offshore oil and gas drilling operations in federal waters. Western Governors urge Congress to extend funding for the National Parks and Public Land Legacy Restoration Fund beyond 2025 and to examine longer term solutions to the deferred maintenance backlog. Western Governors urge Congress to continue to support the Federal Highway Administration's Recreational Trails Program. Western Governors also urge Congress to continue supporting the allocated "financial assistance to states" as part of the Land and Water Conservation Fund and urge federal agencies to consult with state officials and state and local resource management plans when acquiring federal lands under the "federal purposes" appropriation.

19. Working with states and localities like gateway communities, Congress and land management agencies should address workforce housing needs where they are unable to recruit and retain employees due to the exorbitant cost of living or acute housing shortages.
20. Western Governors believe maintenance of national parks and other public land recreation facilities is first and foremost a federal responsibility. However, Western Governors support the federal government pursuing public-private partnerships to improve, modernize and expand visitor services and visitor facilities and to provide for the maintenance and operation of other critical public land infrastructure that supports land management and visitation. Western Governors also support federal agencies engaging with states through tools like Shared Stewardship, Good Neighbor Authority, or other innovative state-federal partnerships that support advancements in resource protection and outdoor recreation management and infrastructure.
21. Western Governors recognize the troubling trend of intentional and unintentional damage of indigenous and other historical and cultural sites. As many of the sites are located on federally managed lands, Western Governors support additional resources to protect and promote awareness of stewardship of these sensitive cultural resources. Western Governors affirm the importance of robust and meaningful consultation between federal agencies and tribes.
22. Western Governors recommend the federal government take all necessary action to avoid lapses in funding and potential harmful impacts to federal lands, particularly NPS units and major tourist attractions in the West. Congress and agencies should consider pathways for keeping parks and major attractions open and properly managed, through existing revenue or through state and nonprofit partnerships.
23. Federal shutdowns, the threat of a shutdown, or any disruption in federal funding has an immediate impact across western states and specifically on gateway communities, and clear communication can help mitigate economic impact on gateway communities and avoid further disruption to tribal access and management responsibilities. Western Governors urge federal agencies, in the case of any future potential government shutdown, to clearly communicate contingency plans and provide clear direction to regional and local land managers, communities, and state tourism offices as early as possible, including essential services determinations.
24. During any lapse in funding, Western Governors recommend the federal government work collaboratively with states and territories to follow through on any commitments it makes to those that undertake extraordinary measures to support their national parks and other

public land recreation resources.

C. GOVERNORS' MANAGEMENT DIRECTIVE

1. The Governors direct WGA staff to work with Congressional committees of jurisdiction, the Executive Branch, and other entities, where appropriate, to achieve the objectives of this resolution.
2. Furthermore, the Governors direct WGA staff to consult with the Staff Advisory Council regarding its efforts to realize the objectives of this resolution and to keep the Governors apprised of its progress in this regard.

This resolution will expire in June 2028. Western Governors enact new policy resolutions and amend existing resolutions on a semiannual basis. Please consult <http://www.westgov.org/resolutions> for the most current copy of a resolution and a list of all current WGA policy resolutions.