

Public Lands in Public Hands: Reflections on 50 Years of Retention Policy

The Federal Land Policy and Management Act marked a new chapter in the history of public lands in the United States. In that 1976 law, Congress declared a national policy that public lands be retained in federal ownership and control for the benefit of the American people. Over the last 50 years, that retention policy has led to far reaching consequences for people and places across the country. Today, public lands provide critical support for economic, environmental, social, and cultural values, contributing to the vitality of both urban and rural communities. Yet, the nation still struggles with the effects of dispossession and forced removal of Indigenous peoples from their ancestral lands, most of which remain in the hands of the Federal government. Retention of public lands also presents certain challenges to states, localities, and private property owners.

Despite 50 years of retention policy and widespread public support for keeping public lands in public hands, the future of public lands remains uncertain. Some want the federal government to sell off federal public lands or give them to the States. Others are keen to defend and celebrate the retention policy and their love of public lands.

The legal landscape has also changed dramatically over the past 50 years. Public land planning has proved to be a mixed bag, but it engages the public on the critical issues facing public land planners, including resource development, grazing policy, land conservation, endangered species conservation, and the protection of cultural resources, among many other things. Modernizing the decision-making process has also taken center stage, with debates about strategies for making faster and smarter decisions. Adaptive management has also entered the public lands lexicon, although it sometimes seems more aspirational than real.

This year's Martz Symposium takes a deep dive into the past, present, and future of our national policy of keeping public lands in public hands. The symposium will convene experts in public lands law and policy, advocates from across the political and policy spectrum, including Tribal leaders, experts on public opinion, and many other respected voices. Our goal will be to stimulate new thinking and fresh ideas, and to inspire a new generation of public lands leaders to build on the legacy from the past 50 years. Please join us for what promises to be an outstanding opportunity to engage with old and new friends and colleagues on one of the most important issues facing the American West.

Preliminary Agenda

Thursday, October 23, 2025

8:00 – 8:45 am Breakfast and Networking

8:45 – 9:00 am	Welcome and Opening Remarks Chris Winter, Executive Director, Getches-Wilkinson Center
9:00 – 9:30 am	Who Will Speak for the Public Lands and What Will They Say Prof. Sarah Krakoff, University of Colorado Law School
9:30 – 10:30 am	Public Opinion on Public Lands – A Deep Dive into the Conservation in the West Poll Kathryn Hahne, New Bridge Strategy
10:30 – 11:00 am	BREAK
11:00 am – 12:15 pm	The Affordable Housing Question Moderator: Prof. Bret Birdsong, UNLV Law School Arthur Gailes, American Enterprise Institute Dan Gibbs, Director, Colorado Department of Natural Resources, Former Summit County Commissioner Rudy Soto, Native American Indian Housing Counsel Ronald R. Mobley, Special Legislation Program Manager Team Lead, SNPLMA Division, Bureau of Land Management, Nevada State Office
12:15 – 1:15 pm	LUNCH
1:15 – 2:15 pm	Debating The Constitutional Foundation Moderator: Chris Winter, GWC Prof. John Leshy, Emeritus Distinguished Professor of Law, UC Law San Francisco, Former Solicitor of the Department of the Interior Ethan Blevins, Pacific Legal Foundation
2:15 – 2:45 pm	BREAK
2:45 - 4:00 pm	The Land Back Movement and Public Lands Moderator: Prof. Vanessa Racehorse, University of Colorado Law School Gussie Lord, Earthjustice Prof. Kekek Stark, Davis-Johnston Associate Professor of Law, University of Montana School of Law Prof. Rebecca Tsosie, University of Arizona Law School Wizipan Garriot, NDN (Invited)
4:00 – 5:30 pm	Conference Reception

Friday, October 24, 2025

8:00 – 9:00 am	Breakfast and Networking
9:00 – 9:15 am	Welcome and Opening Remarks Chris Winter, GWC
9:15 – 10:30 am	Agency Funding and Staffing – Who Will Manage the Public Lands Moderator: Matt Lee-Ashley, Foreground Strategies, Former Chief of Staff, Council on Environmental Quality Dr. Mamie Parker, Former Head of Fisheries, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Services Tim Whitehouse, Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility Scott Fitzwilliams, Former Supervisor of the White River National Forest
10:30 – 11:00 am	BREAK
11:00 am - Noon	Fireside Chat with Secretary David Bernhardt, former Secretary of the Department of the Interior
Noon – 1:00 pm	LUNCH
1:00 – 2:15 pm	The Great Balancing Act - Evolving Issues in Multiple Use Management Moderator: Alison Flint, The Wilderness Society Louis Geltman, VP for Policy and Government Relations, Outdoor Alliance Natalie Landreth, Partner, Nashoba Consulting LLC and Co-Executive Director, Tribal Public Lands Alliance Katie Schroder, Partner, Davis Graham & Stubbs Prof. Mark Squillace, University of Colorado Law School