



COLORADO COLLEGE

State of the Rockies Project

CONTACT

Jacob Hay

jhay@wearerally.com

(310) 855-2640

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Support for Conservation Remains High in the West Despite a Rise in Other Concerns, New Poll Finds

Thirteenth annual Conservation in the West Poll reveals voters not willing to go backwards on conservation progress to address gas prices, cost of living, or water shortages

COLORADO SPRINGS—Colorado College's 13th annual State of the Rockies Project [*Conservation in the West Poll*](#) released today shows strong support for conservation policies among Westerners even as concerns around gas prices, cost of living, drought and water shortages remain high.

The poll, which surveyed the views of voters in eight Mountain West states (Arizona, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Utah, and Wyoming), found support in the **70 to 90 percent** range for conservation goals like protecting wildlife habitats and migration routes, ensuring healthier forests, preventing light pollution that blocks out the stars, and safeguarding drinking water.

82 percent of Westerners support achieving a national goal of conserving 30 percent of land and inland waters in America, and 30 percent of ocean areas, by the year 2030. Support for that proposal is up **9 percent** since 2020, while opposition to the goal dropped by **5 percent** during that time. In order to further conservation progress, **84 percent** of Westerners support presidents continuing to use their ability to designate existing public lands as national monuments to maintain public access and protect the land and wildlife for future generations.

Voters express higher levels of concern than in the past over several issues that impact Western lifestyles. Asked what they consider to be extremely or very serious problems for their state, **65 percent** of Westerners point to inadequate water supplies, **67 percent** say drought, **69 percent** say the low level of water in rivers, **78 percent** name the rising cost of living, and **60 percent** say the price of gasoline.

Those spiking concerns, however, are not dampening enthusiasm for conservation action across the West. Support remains high for a range of policies aimed at protecting land, water, air, and wildlife, including:

- **85 percent** support constructing wildlife crossing structures across major highways that intersect with known migration routes.
- **84 percent** support creating new national parks, national monuments, and national wildlife refuges and Tribal protected areas to protect historic sites or areas of outdoor recreation.
- **67 percent** support gradually transitioning to 100 percent of energy being produced from clean, renewable sources like solar and wind over the next ten to fifteen years.

- **76 percent** support directing funding to ensure adequate access to parks and natural areas for lower-income people and communities of color that disproportionately lack them.
- **85 percent** support ensuring Native American Tribes have greater input into decisions made about areas on national public lands that contain sites sacred or culturally important to their Tribe.

“This year voters in the West have a lot on their minds, but they are not willing to trade one priority for another,” said Katrina Miller-Stevens, **Director of the State of the Rockies Project and an associate professor at Colorado College**. “High gas prices, increasing costs of living, and water shortage concerns are not enough to move Westerners to reconsider their consistent support for conservation policies or seek out short-sighted solutions that put land and water at risk. In fact, people in the West want to continue our progress to protect more outdoor spaces.”

Locally, a variety of proposed conservation efforts are even more popular with in-state voters than they were when surveyed last year. In Arizona, **62 percent** of voters support legislation to make permanent the current ban on new uranium and other mining on public lands surrounding the Grand Canyon. **90 percent** of Coloradans agree with protecting existing public lands surrounding the Dolores River Canyon to conserve important wildlife habitat, safeguard the area’s scenic beauty, and support outdoor recreation. **84 percent** of Montanans support enacting the Blackfoot Clearwater Stewardship Act to ensure hunting and fishing access, protect stream flows into the Blackfoot River, and add eighty thousand acres of new protected public lands for recreation areas, along with timber harvest and habitat restoration. In New Mexico, **88 percent** of voters want to designate existing public lands in the Caja del Rio plateau as a national conservation area to increase protections for grasslands and canyons along the Santa Fe river and other smaller rivers flowing into the Rio Grande. **83 percent** of Nevadans want to designate existing public lands in southern Nevada as the Spirit Mountain National Monument to ensure outdoor recreation access and help preserve sacred Native American sites.

Voters call for bold action on water conservation in line with heightened concerns

The level of concern among Westerners around water issues remains high in this year’s poll even amidst a notable uptick in winter precipitation across the West.

The Colorado River is held in high regard by voters in the states that rely on it. **86 percent** say the Colorado River is critical to their state’s economy and **81 percent** view it as an attraction for tourism and recreation. At the same time, **81 percent** of voters say the Colorado River is at risk and in need of urgent action.

Concerns about water availability in the West translate into support for a variety of water conservation efforts, including:

- **95 percent** support investing in water infrastructure to reduce leaks and waste.
- **88 percent** support increasing the use of recycled water for homes and businesses.
- **87 percent** support requiring local governments to determine whether there is enough water available before approving new residential development projects.
- **80 percent** support providing financial incentives to homeowners and businesses to replace lawns and grassy areas with water-saving landscaping.
- **62 percent** support prohibiting grass lawns for new developments and homes.
- **54 percent** support providing financial incentives to farmers to temporarily take land out of production during severe water shortages.

Despite concerns over higher gas prices and cost of living, voters want a cleaner and safer energy future on public lands

In the face of higher gas prices and increased costs of living, Westerners still support proposals to limit the volume and impacts of oil and gas drilling on public lands.

91 percent support requiring oil and gas companies to use updated equipment and technology to prevent leaks of methane gas and other pollution into the air. **91 percent** of voters 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. **72 percent** of voters support only allowing oil and gas companies the right to drill in areas of public land where there is a high likelihood to actually produce oil and gas.

Asked what should be the highest priority for meeting America's energy needs, **65 percent** of Westerners say it should be reducing our need for more coal, oil and gas by expanding the use of clean, renewable energy. That is compared to **32 percent** who favor drilling and digging for more oil and gas wherever we can find it.

Given a choice of public lands uses facing lawmakers, **68 percent** of voters prefer ensuring we protect water sources, air quality, and wildlife habitat while providing opportunities to visit and recreate on national public lands. By contrast, only **26 percent** of voters would rather ensure we produce more domestic energy by maximizing the amount of national public lands available for responsible oil and gas drilling and mining.

This is the thirteenth consecutive year Colorado College gauged the public's sentiment on public lands and conservation issues. The 2023 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 3,413-voter sample, which included an over-sample of Black and Native American voters. The survey was conducted between January 5-22, 2023 and the effective margin of error is +2.4% at the 95% confidence interval for the total sample; and at most +4.9% 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 2,200 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 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 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 connects Latinos and others with partners and opportunities to improve lives and create an equitable society.

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Colorado College State of the Rockies Project, 825 N Cascade Ave, Colorado Springs, CO 80903 | 719-227-8145