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Federal Land Ownership: Overview and Data

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Federal Land Ownership: Overview and Data

The federal government owns roughly 640 million acres, about 28% of the 2.27 billion acres of land in the United States. Four major federal land management agencies administer 606.8 million acres of this land (as of September 30, 2024). They are the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), and National Park Service (NPS) in the Department of the Interior (DOI) and the U.S. Forest Service (FS) in the Department of Agriculture. A fifth agency, the Department of Defense (DOD, which is currently “using a secondary Department of War designation” under Executive Order 14347), administers 8.4 million acres in the United States. Together, the five agencies manage about 615.2 million acres, or 96% of the federal acreage. Many other agencies administer the remaining 4% of federal lands.

The lands administered by the four major agencies are managed for many purposes, primarily related to preservation, recreation, and development of natural resources. Yet the agencies have distinct responsibilities. The BLM manages 244.4 million acres and the FS manages 193.1 million acres under similar multiple-use, sustained-yield mandates that support a variety of activities and programs. The FWS manages 89.3 million acres, primarily to conserve and protect animals and plants. The NPS manages 80.1 million acres in 434 diverse units to conserve lands and resources and make them available for public use. The 8.4 million acres of DOD lands are managed primarily for military training and testing.

The amount and percentage of federally owned land in each state vary widely, ranging from 0.3% of land (in Connecticut and Iowa) to 79.8% of land (in Nevada). Federal land ownership is concentrated in Alaska (60.8%) and 11 coterminous western states (45.9%), in contrast with other states (4.1%). This western concentration has contributed to a higher degree of controversy over federal land ownership and use in that part of the country.

Throughout the history of the United States, land laws have sought to dispose of some federal lands while keeping others in federal ownership. During the 19th century, many laws encouraged western settlement through federal land disposal. Mostly in the 20th century, emphasis shifted to retention of federal lands. Congress has provided the agencies with varying land acquisition and disposal authorities, ranging from narrow (the NPS) to broad (the BLM). As a result of acquisitions and disposals, from 1990 to 2024, total federal land ownership by the five agencies declined by 31.7 million acres (4.9%), from 646.9 million acres to 615.2 million acres. Much of the decline is due to BLM land disposals in Alaska and reductions in DOD ownership in favor of other legal arrangements. By contrast, land ownership by the NPS, FWS, and FS increased since 1990. Further, 16 states had decreases of federal land during this period while 34 states and the District of Columbia had increases.

Numerous issues affecting federal land management continue to face Congress. One set of issues relates to the extent of federal ownership and whether to decrease, maintain, or increase the amount of federal holdings; the concentration of federal lands in the West; the suitability and use of acquisition and disposal authorities; and the amount, type, and location of use of acquisition funding. A second issue is the priority of acquiring new lands versus addressing the condition of current federal infrastructure. The \$45.16 billion maintenance backlog of the four major land management agencies in FY2025 is a factor for congressional consideration. A third focus is the optimal balance between land protection and use (e.g., for energy development, livestock grazing, recreation, and other purposes). Part of this debate involves whether federal lands should be managed primarily to benefit the nation as a whole or to benefit the localities and states in which the federal lands are located. Fourth, border control on federal lands, particularly along the southwestern border, presents specific challenges. This is due to the length of the border, differing agency missions, and divergent views on immigration and constructing border barriers.

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Introduction

The federal government owns and manages roughly 640 million acres of land in the United States,¹ or roughly 28% of the 2.27 billion total land acres.² As of September 30, 2024, four major federal land management agencies managed approximately 606.8 million acres of this land, or roughly 95% of all federal land in the United States.³ These agencies are as follows: the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), 244.4 million acres; the U.S. Forest Service (FS), 193.1 million acres; the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), 89.3 million acres; and the National Park Service (NPS), 80.1 million acres. Most of these lands are in the West, including Alaska. A fifth agency, the Department of Defense (DOD), which is currently “using a secondary Department of War designation” under Executive Order 14347, administered 8.4 million acres in the United States, about 1% of all federal land in the United States.⁴ Together, the five agencies manage about 615.2 million acres in the United States.⁵ The remaining acreage, approximately 4% of all federal land in the United States, is managed by a variety of other government agencies.

¹ Total federal land in the United States is not definitively known. It is estimated by the Congressional Research Service (CRS) at roughly 640 million acres. This total reflects published estimates for the five agencies of focus in this report, which have a combined acreage estimated at 615.2 million acres, as of September 30, 2024, as shown in **Table 1**. The sources for these five agencies are specified in the notes for **Table 2**. The total acreage managed by other federal agencies is not known. Based on available sources, CRS estimates that other federal agencies manage roughly 25 million acres of federal land. The estimate of 640 million acres generally excludes lands in marine refuges and marine national monuments and ownership of interests in lands (e.g., subsurface minerals, easements). It also does not reflect Indian lands. According to the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), the United States holds approximately 56 million acres in trust for various Indian tribes and individuals. There are also other types of Indian lands. For additional information, see U.S. Department of the Interior (DOI), BIA, “Frequently Asked Questions,” <https://www.bia.gov/frequently-asked-questions>, and CRS In Focus IF11944, *Tribal Lands: An Overview*, by Mariel J. Murray.

² DOI, Bureau of Land Management (BLM), *Public Land Statistics 2024*, Table 1-1, Note a, indicates that the U.S. land area is approximately 2.43 billion acres. This total includes inland waters, according to the BLM. This CRS report uses a figure of 2.27 billion acres as the total U.S. land area, which excludes inland waters, as reported in some earlier versions of *Public Land Statistics* (e.g., for FY2015). *Public Land Statistics 2024* reflects data as of September 30, 2024.

³ Acreage figures in this report for the five agencies reflect data as of September 30, 2024. That was the most recent time all of the five agencies covered herein had published data by state during the preparation of this report. Also, in this report, the term *federal land* is used to refer to any land owned (fee simple title) and managed by the federal government, regardless of its mode of acquisition or managing agency. It excludes lands administered by a federal agency under easements, leases, contracts, or other arrangements. *Public land* is used to refer to lands managed by the BLM as defined in 43 U.S.C. §1702(e).

⁴ Executive Order 14347 of September 5, 2025, “Restoring the United States Department of War,” 90 *Federal Register* 43893, September 10, 2025, <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2025/09/10/2025-17508/restoring-the-united-states-department-of-war>. The Department of Defense (DOD) is included in this report because of the relatively large amount of land it manages and the availability of acreage statistics by state over the time period covered by this report. It is not necessarily the fifth-largest land manager currently, however. For instance, as of September 30, 2024, DOD acreage totaled 8.4 million, according to DOD, *FY2025 Base Structure Report*, September 30, 2024, <https://www.acq.osd.mil/eie/imr/rpid/docs/Base-Structure-Report-FY25.xlsx>. As of the same date, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) reported acreage of 12.0 million acres. See U.S. Army, *Fiscal Year 2024 United States Army Corps of Engineers Agency Financial Report*, p. 12, <https://www.publications.usace.army.mil/Portals/76/FY%2024%20Civil%20Works%20Annual%20Financial%20Report.pdf>. Moreover, there appears to be some overlap of acreage in the DOD and USACE FY2024 data, according to the USACE, although USACE was not able to clarify the precise extent of any overlap. Personal communication between CRS and USACE, Future Directions Branch, Headquarters, January 22, 2025.

⁵ In addition, the U.S. Forest Service (FS), U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), National Park Service (NPS), and DOD manage varying acreages in the U.S. territories. Also, the FWS manages additional acres of marine refuges and national monuments and DOD manages additional acres overseas.

The U.S. Constitution expressly vests Congress with authority over federal lands. Article IV, Section 3, clause 2, empowers Congress to dispose of and regulate all federal property. The U.S. Supreme Court has explained that this means Congress's power over federal lands is virtually unlimited.⁶

Ownership and use of federal lands have stirred controversy for decades, leading to public debate over multiple issues, including the extent to which the federal government should own land.⁷ Some parties, including some states, have raised legal challenges to Congress's authority over federal lands or attempted to effect a particular disposition of federal land.⁸ Also, executive branch decisions regarding the designation, management, or disposition of federal lands sometimes have led to judicial challenges.⁹ Other issues include whether to focus resources on maintenance of existing infrastructure and lands or acquisition of new areas, how to balance use and protection of lands, and how to ensure the security of international borders along the federal lands of multiple agencies.

Recent Congresses, including the 119th Congress, have considered directing the acquisition, disposal,¹⁰ or other treatment of federal lands in accordance with their policy determinations. Congress has examined these issues through legislative proposals, program oversight, and annual

⁶ *Kleppe v. New Mexico*, 426 U. S. 529, 539 (1976), quoting *United States v. San Francisco*, 310 U. S. 16, 29 (1940).

⁷ For a range of perspectives, see John Ruple, "Western Public Land Law and the Evolving Management Landscape," pp. 20-36, in Erika Allen Wolters and Brent S. Steel, eds, *The Environmental Politics and Policy of Western Public Lands* (Oregon State University Press, 2020); Holly Fretwell and Shawn Regan, "Divided Lands: State vs. Federal Management in the West," Property and Environment Research Center (PERC) Public Lands Report, March 2015, https://www.perc.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/150303_PERC_DividedLands.pdf; and Lisa W. Foderaro, "America Needs More Public Lands, Not Less," Trust For Public Land, 2025, https://www.tpl.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/TPL-Special-Report_We-Need-More-Public-Lands-Not-Less_Final.pdf.

⁸ In 2012, for example, Utah's state legislature enacted the Transfer of Public Lands Act, which sought to require the United States, on or before December 31, 2014, to (1) extinguish its title to public lands within the state that did not fall within a list of exceptions; and (2) transfer title to those lands to the State of Utah. Utah Code Ann. §63L-6-103. No such transfer took place. In 2024, Utah attempted to bring the matter directly to the U.S. Supreme Court, requesting leave to file a bill of complaint asking whether a policy of "perpetual federal retention of unappropriated public lands in Utah is unconstitutional." The United States opposed the filing, and in January 2025, the Court denied Utah leave to file its bill of complaint, effectively choosing not to entertain the question.

Utah's actions echoed a movement in several western states a few decades earlier that came to be known as the Sagebrush Rebellion. In the 1970s and 1980s, various states enacted statutes attempting to lay claim to federal lands. See *Ariz. Rev. Stat. Ann.* §§37-901 (1980); *Ch. 633, 1979 Nev. Stats.* 13; *N.M. Stat. Ann.* §§19-15-9 (1980); *Utah Code Ann.* §65-11-1-9 (1980); *Wash. Rev. Code* §79.80.020 (1980); *Wyo. Stat.* §36-12-10 (1980). Private entities supportive of the movement used judicial challenges to try to overcome congressional withdrawal of certain public lands for conservation purposes. E.g., *Sagebrush Rebellion, Inc. v. Hodel*, 790 F.2d 760, 761 (9th Cir. 1986). For additional historical context on actions of states to foster control of federal lands within state borders, see CRS Report R44267, *State Management of Federal Lands: Frequently Asked Questions*, by Carol Hardy Vincent. For an example of judicial review in the context of withdrawing federal lands for particular purposes, see CRS Report R49048, *Presidential Authority Under the Antiquities Act*, by Cassandra J. Barnum.

⁹ For example, actions of Presidents to reduce or expand the size of national monuments occasionally have been the subject of lawsuits. As examples, see *Hopi Tribe v. Trump*, No. 17-cv-02590 (D.D.C. filed Dec. 4, 2017), consolidating three cases challenging President Trump's modification of the Bears Ears National Monument; and *Garfield County v. Biden*, No. 22-cv-0059 (D. Utah filed Aug. 15, 2023), challenging President Biden's expansion of the Bears Ears National Monument.

¹⁰ Current authorities for acquiring and disposing of federal lands are unique to each agency. For a description of these authorities, see CRS Report RL34273, *Federal Land Ownership: Acquisition and Disposal Authorities*, by Carol Hardy Vincent et al. For the BLM, see also CRS Report R48079, *Land Disposal Authorities and Processes of the Bureau of Land Management*, coordinated by Carol Hardy Vincent.

appropriations for the federal land management agencies.¹¹ Judicial challenges and legislative and executive efforts generally have not resulted in broad changes to the level of federal ownership.

Historical Background

Federal lands and resources have played a significant role in American history, adding to the strength and stature of the federal government, serving as an attraction and opportunity for settlement and economic development, and providing a source of revenue for schools, transportation, national defense, and other national, state, and local needs.

The formation of the U.S. federal government was particularly influenced by the struggle for control over what were then known as the “western” lands—the lands between the Appalachian Mountains and the Mississippi River that were claimed by the original colonies. The original states reluctantly ceded the lands to the developing new government. This cession, together with granting constitutional powers to the new federal government, including the authority to regulate federal property and to create new states, played a crucial role in transforming the weak central government under the Articles of Confederation into a stronger, centralized federal government under the U.S. Constitution.¹²

Subsequent federal land laws sought to reserve some federal lands for particular purposes (such as for national forests and national parks) and to sell or otherwise dispose of other lands to raise money or encourage transportation, development, and settlement. From the earliest days, these options took on East/West overtones, with easterners more likely to view federal lands as national public property, and westerners more likely to view the lands as necessary for local use and development.¹³ Most agreed, however, on measures that promoted settlement of the lands to pay soldiers, to reduce the national debt, and to strengthen the nation. This settlement trend accelerated with federal acquisition of additional territory through the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, the Oregon Compromise with England in 1846, and cession of lands by treaty after the Mexican War in 1848.¹⁴

In the mid-to-late 1800s, Congress enacted many laws to encourage and accelerate the settlement of the West by disposing of federal lands. Examples include the Homestead Act of 1862 and the Desert Lands Entry Act of 1877. Approximately 1.29 billion acres of public domain land was transferred out of federal ownership between 1781 and 2024. The total included transfers of 816 million acres to private ownership (individuals, railroads, etc.), 328 million acres to states

¹¹ As examples, see provisions of P.L. 111-11, Omnibus Public Land Management Act of 2009; P.L. 113-291, Carl Levin and Howard P. “Buck” McKeon National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2015; P.L. 118-234, Expanding Public Lands Outdoor Recreation Experiences Act (EXPLORE Act); P.L. 119-74, Division C, Department of the Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies Appropriations Act, 2026; and U.S. Congress, House Committee on Natural Resources, Subcommittee on Federal Lands, *The State of Our Nation’s Federal Forests and Outlook for the 2026 Wildfire Year*, 119th Cong., 2nd sess., June 4, 2026, <https://naturalresources.house.gov/calendar/eventsingle.aspx?EventID=418807>.

¹² Paul Gates, *History of Public Land Law Development* (Government Publishing Office, 1968), pp. 1-3, pp. 49-57.

¹³ Gates, *History of Public Land Law Development*, p. 28.

¹⁴ These major land acquisitions gave rise to a distinction in the laws between *public domain lands*, which essentially are those ceded by the original states or obtained from a foreign sovereign (via purchase, treaty, or other means), and *acquired lands*, which are those obtained from a state or individual by exchange, purchase, or gift. About 90% of all federal lands are public domain lands, while the other 10% are acquired lands. Many laws were enacted that related only to public domain lands. Even though the distinction has lost most of its underlying significance today, different laws may still apply depending on the original nature of the lands involved.

generally, and 144 million acres in Alaska under state and Native selection laws.¹⁵ Most transfers to private ownership (97%) occurred before 1940; homestead entries, for example, peaked in 1910 at 18.3 million acres and dropped below 200,000 acres annually after 1935, until being fully eliminated in 1986.¹⁶

Although several earlier laws had protected some lands and resources, such as salt deposits and certain timber for military use, new laws in the late 1800s reflected the growing concern that rapid development threatened some of the scenic treasures of the nation, as well as resources that would be needed for future use. A preservation and conservation movement evolved to ensure that certain lands and resources were left untouched or reserved for future use. For example, Yellowstone National Park was established in 1872 to preserve its resources in a natural condition, and to dedicate recreation opportunities for the public. It was the world's first national park,¹⁷ and like the other early parks, Yellowstone was protected by the U.S. Army—primarily from poachers of wildlife or timber. In 1891, concern over the effects of timber harvests on water supplies and downstream flooding led to the creation of forest reserves (renamed national forests in 1907).¹⁸

Emphasis shifted during the 20th century from the disposal and conveyance of title to private citizens to the retention and management of the remaining federal lands. During debates on the Taylor Grazing Act of 1934,¹⁹ some western Members of Congress acknowledged the poor prospects for relinquishing federal lands to the states, but language included in the act left disposal as a possibility. It was not until the enactment of the Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976 (FLPMA) that Congress expressly declared that the remaining public domain lands generally would remain in federal ownership.²⁰ This declaration of permanent federal land ownership was a significant factor in what became known as the Sagebrush Rebellion, an effort in the 1970s and 1980s to strengthen state or local control over federal land and management decisions. In the second decade of the 21st century, there was renewed interest in some western states in assuming ownership of some federal lands within their borders.²¹ That interest stemmed in part from concerns about the extent, condition, and cost of federal land ownership and the type and amount of land uses and revenue derived from federal lands.

¹⁵ DOI, BLM, *Public Land Statistics, 2024*, Table 1-2, <https://www.blm.gov/sites/default/files/docs/2025-07/BLM-Public-Land-Statistics-2024.pdf>.

¹⁶ U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to 1970* (GPO, 1976), H.Doc. 93-78 (93rd Congress, 1st Session), pp. 428-429. The homesteading laws were generally repealed in 1976 by the Federal Land Policy and Management Act, 43 U.S.C. §§1701, et seq., although homesteading was allowed to continue in Alaska for another 10 years.

¹⁷ Act of March 1, 1872; 16 U.S.C. §21 et seq. “Yo-Semite” had been established by an act of Congress in 1864, to protect Yosemite Valley from development, but was transferred to the State of California to administer. In 1890, surrounding lands were designated as Yosemite National Park, and in 1905, Yosemite Valley was returned to federal jurisdiction and incorporated into the park. Still earlier, Hot Springs Reservation (AR) had been reserved in 1832; it was dedicated to public use in 1880 and designated as Hot Springs National Park in 1921.

¹⁸ The Act of March 4, 1907 (34 Stat. 1269) essentially provided that forest reserves would be thereafter known as national forests. See the editorial notes to 16 U.S.C. §488. For additional information on establishment and modification of the National Forest System, see CRS Report R43872, *National Forest System Management: Overview and Issues for Congress*, by Anne A. Riddle, especially pp. 2-3.

¹⁹ 43 U.S.C. §§315 et seq.

²⁰ 43 U.S.C. §§1701 et seq. The Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976 (FLPMA) also established a comprehensive system of management for the remaining western public lands, and a definitive mission and policy statement for the BLM.

²¹ For an overview of some efforts and issues relating to state management of federal lands during that period, see CRS Report R44267, *State Management of Federal Lands: Frequently Asked Questions*, by Carol Hardy Vincent.

Current Federal Land Management

The creation of national parks and forest reserves laid the foundation for the current federal agencies whose primary purposes are managing natural resources on federal lands—the BLM, FS, FWS, and NPS. These four agencies were created at different times, and their missions and purposes differ. A fifth agency, the DOD, manages lands consisting of military bases, training ranges, and more. These five agencies, which together manage about 95% of all federal land, are described below. Numerous other federal agencies—the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Bureau of Reclamation,²² U.S. Postal Service, National Aeronautics and Space Administration, Department of Energy, and many more—each administer relatively small amounts of additional federal lands.

Agencies²³

Bureau of Land Management

The BLM was formed in 1946 by combining two existing agencies.²⁴ One was the Grazing Service (first known as the DOI Grazing Division), established in 1934 to administer grazing on public rangelands. The other was the General Land Office, which had been created in 1812 to oversee disposal of the federal lands.²⁵ As of September 30, 2024, the BLM administered 244.4 million acres, more federal lands in the United States than any other agency. BLM lands are heavily concentrated (more than 99%) in the 11 contiguous western states and Alaska.²⁶

As defined in FLPMA, enacted in 1976,²⁷ BLM management responsibilities are similar to those of the FS—sustained yields of multiple uses, including recreation, grazing, timber, energy and minerals, watershed, wildlife and fish habitat, and conservation. However, each agency historically has emphasized different uses. For instance, more rangelands are managed by the BLM, while most federal forests are managed by the FS. In addition, the BLM administers more than 700 million acres of federal subsurface mineral estate throughout the nation, including the subsurface of other federally owned lands and some privately owned surface lands.²⁸

²² The Bureau of Reclamation (Reclamation), a federal agency created in 1902, is responsible for much of the water infrastructure in the 17 states west of the Mississippi River. Reclamation is the largest water wholesaler in the country and provides irrigation water for 10 million acres of farmland. Pursuant to its authorities to develop and maintain water resources infrastructure, Reclamation owns approximately 6.1 million acres of land in the western United States, according to the agency. See DOI, Reclamation, “About Us—Fact Sheet” (last updated December 10, 2025), <https://www.usbr.gov/main/about/fact.html>.

²³ For a list of CRS experts for federal land management agencies and issues, see CRS Report R42656, *Federal Land Management Agencies and Programs: CRS Experts*, coordinated by Mark K. DeSantis.

²⁴ Paul W. Gates, *History of Public Land Law Development*, written for the Public Land Law Review Commission (Washington, DC: GPO, Nov. 1968), pp. 610-622.

²⁵ The General Land Office administered the forest reserves prior to the creation of the FS in 1905.

²⁶ The 11 western states are Arizona, California, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon, Utah, Washington, and Wyoming. Data on BLM acreage by state are contained in DOI, BLM, *Public Land Statistics, 2024*, Table 1-4, <https://www.blm.gov/sites/default/files/docs/2025-07/BLM-Public-Land-Statistics-2024.pdf>. Figures represent acreage as of September 30, 2024.

²⁷ FLPMA is sometimes called the BLM “Organic Act,” because it consolidated and articulated the agency’s management responsibilities.

²⁸ DOI, BLM, *Public Land Statistics, 2024*, Table 1-3, <https://www.blm.gov/sites/default/files/docs/2025-07/BLM-Public-Land-Statistics-2024.pdf>. Figures represent acreage as of September 30, 2024. Not all of the more than 700 million acres contain extractable mineral and energy resources. For brief information related to federal subsurface (continued...)

U.S. Forest Service

The FS is the oldest of the four federal land management agencies. It was established in the Department of Agriculture (USDA) in 1905 and is charged with conducting forestry research, providing assistance to nonfederal forest owners, and managing the National Forest System (NFS).²⁹ As of September 30, 2024, the FS administered 193.1 million acres of land in the United States,³⁰ predominantly in the West, while also managing about three-fifths of all federal lands in the East (as shown in **Table 5**).

The first forest reserves—later renamed national forests—originally were authorized to protect the lands, preserve water flows, and provide timber. These purposes were expanded in the Multiple Use-Sustained Yield Act of 1960.³¹ This act added recreation, livestock grazing, and wildlife and fish habitat as purposes of the national forests, with wilderness added in 1964.³² The 1960 act directed that these multiple uses be managed in a “harmonious and coordinated” manner “in the combination that will best meet the needs of the American people.”³³ The act also directed the FS to manage renewable resources under the principle of sustained yield, meaning to achieve a high level of resource outputs in perpetuity without impairing the productivity of the lands.³⁴

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

The first national wildlife refuge was established by executive order in 1903, although it was not until 1966 that the refuges were aggregated into the National Wildlife Refuge System (NWRS) administered by the FWS.³⁵ The NWRS includes wildlife refuges, national monument areas, waterfowl production areas, and wildlife coordination units. Outside of the NWRS, the FWS administers lands for administrative sites, National Fish Hatcheries, and national monument areas. In total, as of September 30, 2024, the FWS administered 89.3 million acres of federal land in the United States, of which 76.7 million acres (85.9%) were in Alaska.³⁶

estate, see CRS Report R48130, *Energy Production on Federal Lands: Leasing and Authorization*, by Adam Vann, pp. 1-2, and Andrew C. Mergen, “Surface Tension: The Problem of Federal/Private Split Estate Lands,” *Land & Water Law Review*, vol. 33, issue 2, art. 3 (1998).

²⁹ In 1891, Congress had authorized the President to establish forest reserves from the public domain lands administered by the DOI (Act of March 3, 1891; 16 U.S.C. §471). This authority was repealed in 1976. See also the Organic Administration Act of 1897, 16 U.S.C. §§473 et seq.

³⁰ Information in this report is based on FY2024 data, for consistency with the acreage data presented for the other agencies. The data are taken from Department of Agriculture (USDA), FS, *Land Areas of the National Forest System—As of Sept 30, 2024*, Tables 1 and 4, <https://usfs-public.app.box.com/s/rhq1lm3rq3wauhtz6yulanuzoijaaqsw/file/2101305054568>. Data reflect land within the National Forest System, including national forests, national grasslands, purchase units, land utilization projects, research and experimental areas, and other areas. The FS manages an additional 28,929 acres in the U.S. territories. For information on FS areas in FY2025, see USDA, FS, *Land Areas of the National Forest System—As of Sept 30, 2025*, <https://usfs-public.app.box.com/s/rhq1lm3rq3wauhtz6yulanuzoijaaqsw/file/2146439917355>.

³¹ 16 U.S.C. §§528-531.

³² The Wilderness Act of 1964, 16 U.S.C. §§1131-1136.

³³ 16 U.S.C. §531(a).

³⁴ For information on the National Forest System, see CRS Report R43872, *National Forest System Management: Overview and Issues for Congress*, by Anne A. Riddle.

³⁵ National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act of 1966, 16 U.S.C. §§668dd-668ee.

³⁶ Information in this report is based on FY2024 data, for consistency with the acreage data presented for the other agencies. The data are taken from DOI, FWS, *Statistical Data Tables for Fish & Wildlife Service Lands (as of 9/30/2024, Table 1A)*, https://www.fws.gov/sites/default/files/documents/2025-08/2024_annual_report_of_lands_data_tables_v2.pdf. Data reflect federally owned lands, submerged lands, and waters, (continued...)

The NWRS's mission is to administer a network of lands and waters for the conservation, management, and restoration of fish, wildlife, and plants and their habitats.³⁷ Other uses (recreation, hunting, timber cutting, oil or gas drilling, etc.) may be permitted, to the extent that they are compatible with the NWRS mission and an individual unit's purpose.³⁸ However, wildlife-related activities (hunting, bird watching, hiking, education, etc.) are considered "priority uses" and are given priority consideration in refuge planning. The relative clarity of the mission generally has minimized conflicts over refuge management and use, although there are exceptions.³⁹

National Park Service

The NPS was created in 1916 to manage the growing number of park units established by Congress and monuments proclaimed by the President.⁴⁰ As of September 30, 2024, the National Park System had grown to 434 units with 80.1 million acres of federal land in the United States.⁴¹ About two-thirds of the lands (52.5 million acres, or 65.6%) are in Alaska. NPS units have diverse titles—national park, national monument, national preserve, national historic site, national recreation area, national battlefield, and many more.⁴²

The NPS has a dual mission—to preserve unique resources and to provide for their enjoyment by the public. Activities that harvest or remove resources from NPS lands generally are prohibited. Park units include natural areas, prehistoric sites, and places relevant to American history, as well as recreational opportunities. The tension between providing recreation and preserving resources has caused many management challenges.

over which the FWS has sole or primary jurisdiction in the 50 states. The FWS manages an additional 25,219 acres in the U.S. territories and an estimated 662 million acres within the U.S. Minor Outlying Islands, which primarily include marine areas in the Pacific Ocean. For information on FWS areas in FY2025, see DOI, FWS, *Statistical Data Tables for Fish & Wildlife Service Lands (as of 9/30/25)*, <https://www.fws.gov/media/statistical-data-tables-fish-wildlife-service-lands-9302025>.

³⁷ 16 U.S.C. §668dd(a)(2).

³⁸ In the case where the NWRS mission and a unit's purpose are in conflict, the unit's purpose takes priority (16 U.S.C. §§668dd(a)(4)(D)). For example, see CRS Report RL33872, *Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR): An Overview*, coordinated by Laura B. Comay.

³⁹ On some FWS lands, there are preexisting property rights, particularly of subsurface resources but also easements or rights-of-way. In such cases, use of these rights may conflict with primary uses of a refuge. Where possible, the FWS may seek to acquire these rights through purchase from willing sellers. For additional information on FWS-managed lands, see CRS Report R48381, *National Wildlife Refuge System (NWRS): Overview and Issues for Congress*, by Eric P. Nardi.

⁴⁰ NPS was created by the Act of Aug. 25, 1916; 16 U.S.C. §§1-4.

⁴¹ Information in this report is based on FY2024 data, for consistency with the acreage data presented for the other agencies. See DOI, NPS, *National Park Service Acreage Reports, 9/30/2024*, <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/lwcf/acreagereports.htm>. Data reflect federally owned lands managed by the NPS. Also, the NPS managed an additional 26,859 acres in the U.S. territories as of September 30, 2024. For more recent information on acreage of units of the National Park System, see the quarterly reports at NPS, "National Park Service Acreage Reports," <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/lwcf/acreagereports.htm>. For information on establishment of units of the National Park System, see CRS Report RS20158, *National Park System: Establishing New Units*, by Laura B. Comay.

⁴² For additional information on the types of units within the National Park System, see CRS Report R41816, *National Park System: What Do the Different Park Titles Signify?*, by Laura B. Comay.

Department of Defense⁴³

The National Security Act of 1947 (P.L. 80-253) established a Department of Defense and placed under its purview three “military departments,” including the Department of the Army, the Department of the Navy, and the newly created Department of the Air Force.⁴⁴ These military departments retained responsibility for managing the land on federal military reservations, with some transfer of Army land to the Air Force upon its creation.

As of September 30, 2024, there were more than 4,870 defense sites worldwide on a total of 26.8 million acres of land owned, leased, or otherwise possessed by the DOD.⁴⁵ These sites include traditional military installations and naval port facilities as well as large tracts of land in sparsely populated areas that the DOD uses for training in land and aerial warfare or testing various weapons systems. The DOD owns 8.4 million acres in the United States, with individual parcel sizes ranging from 1 acre to more than 1.5 million acres.⁴⁶ Although management of military reservations remains the responsibility of each of the military departments or defense agencies, those secretaries and directors operate under the centralized direction of the Secretary of Defense. With regard to natural resource conservation, defense instruction provides in part that

a. The principal purpose of DoD lands, waters, airspace, coastal areas, and nearshore areas is to support mission-related activities and further the national defense strategy.

(1) All DoD natural resources programs should be integrated with the national defense strategy, mission activities, installation planning and programming, and other activities, to the extent practicable.

(2) In accordance with Sections 670 through 670f of Title 16, United States Code (U.S.C.), also known and referred to in this issuance as the “Sikes Act,” all DoD Components will manage natural resources to:

(a) Guarantee DoD Components continued access to, with no net loss to the capability and capacity of, DoD lands, waters, airspace, coastal areas, and nearshore areas to perform mission activities.

(b) Sustain the long-term ecological integrity and resilience of DoD lands, waters, airspace, coastal areas, and nearshore areas and ecosystems services.⁴⁷

The DOD has authority under 10 U.S.C. §2667 to lease DOD property to third parties under certain circumstances. In certain circumstances, the DOD may use the General Services Administration (GSA) real property disposition process to dispose of certain property.⁴⁸

⁴³ As noted, DOD is “using a secondary Department of War designation,” under Executive Order 14347 dated September 5, 2025.

⁴⁴ See National Security Act of 1947, Section 2, as amended, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/COMPS-1493/pdf/COMPS-1493.pdf>. This provision is codified at 50 U.S.C. §3002.

⁴⁵ DOD, Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Infrastructure, *Base Structure Report, Fiscal Year 2025 Baseline (A Summary of the Real Property Inventory Data)*, as of September 30, 2024, Fast Facts tab, <https://www.acq.osd.mil/eie/imr/rpid/docs/Base-Structure-Report-FY25.xlsx>.

⁴⁶ DOD, Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Infrastructure, *Base Structure Report, Fiscal Year 2025 Baseline (A Summary of the Real Property Inventory Data)*, as of September 30, 2024, <https://www.acq.osd.mil/eie/imr/rpid/docs/Base-Structure-Report-FY25.xlsx>. Also, the DOD managed an additional 171,524 acres in the U.S. territories and 19,921 acres overseas as of that date. USACE indicated to CRS that some (but not all) lands managed by USACE are reflected in the DOD estimate of 8.4 million acres in the United States. However, USACE was not able to readily provide the precise extent of the overlap. Personal communication between CRS and USACE, Future Directions Branch, Headquarters, January 22, 2025.

⁴⁷ DOD, *DoD Instruction 4715.03, Natural Resources Management*, July 22, 2024, change 1 effective September 9, 2025, <https://www.esd.whs.mil/Portals/54/Documents/DD/issuances/dodi/471503p.pdf>.

⁴⁸ GSA, “Real Property Disposition,” <https://www.gsa.gov/real-estate/real-property-disposition>.

Alternatively, Congress has in the past authorized a Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC) Commission, which has involved a unique DOD-led property disposition process that prioritizes community input in determining the follow-on use for surplus military property.⁴⁹ In some instances, federal statutes may make a distinction between laws governing the use of land that the DOD obtained directly from the public domain compared with “acquired lands” that the DOD purchased or otherwise obtained from a previous nonfederal landowner.⁵⁰

Federal Land Ownership, 2024

The 615.2 million acres of federal land in the United States managed by the five major land management agencies represents about 28% of the total land base of 2.27 billion acres. **Table 1** provides data on the combined acreage of federal land administered by the four major federal land management agencies and the DOD in each state and the District of Columbia. The lands administered by each of the five agencies in each state are shown in **Table 2**.⁵¹ These tables reflect federal acreage as of September 30, 2024. The figures understate total federal land, since they do not include lands administered by other federal agencies, such as the Bureau of Reclamation and the Department of Energy. **Table 1** also identifies the total acreage of each state and the percentage of land in each state administered by the five federal land agencies. These percentages point to significant variation in the federal presence within states. The figures range from 0.3% of land (in Connecticut and Iowa) to 79.8% of land (in Nevada). **Figure 1**, **Figure 2**, and **Figure 3** show these federal lands. **Figure 1** is a map of federal lands in the West; **Figure 2** is a map of federal lands in the East; and **Figure 3** is a map of federal lands in Alaska, Hawaii, Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands, and Guam.

While 14 eastern or midwestern states and the District of Columbia each contain less than half a million acres of federal land,⁵² 11 of the contiguous western states and Alaska each have more than 10 million acres managed by these five agencies within their borders.⁵³ This contrast is partly the result of early treaties, land settlement laws and patterns, and laws requiring states to surrender claims to federal lands within their borders as conditions of statehood.⁵⁴ As noted, ownership and management of federal lands often has been controversial, especially in states

⁴⁹ For additional information about DOD’s excess lands, see CRS Report R48547, *Excess Military Infrastructure and the Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC) Process*, by Andrew Tilghman.

⁵⁰ See, for example, Title 30 U.S.C. Chapter 7, Lease of Mineral Deposits within Acquired Lands.

⁵¹ Some county-level data are available through the Payments in Lieu of Taxes (PILT) program, administered by the DOI. For these data, DOI, “Payment in Lieu of Taxes,” <https://pilt.doi.gov/counties.cfm>. However, though most lands of the four major federal land management agencies are eligible for PILT payments, a small fraction are not. Also, DOD lands are among those generally not eligible for PILT payments. A small portion of PILT payments are made for certain lands managed by agencies other than the five covered in this report. Thus, the PILT county-level data do not always match the state acreage data shown in this report. For additional information on PILT, see CRS In Focus IF11772, *Payments in Lieu of Taxes (PILT): Section 6902 Payments*, by Carol Hardy Vincent and Eric P. Nardi; and CRS Report R46260, *The Payments in Lieu of Taxes (PILT) Program: An Overview*, by Carol Hardy Vincent and Eric P. Nardi.

⁵² As seen in **Table 1** below, Connecticut, Delaware, the District of Columbia, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Jersey, New York, Ohio, Rhode Island, and Vermont each contain less than half a million acres of federal land. In this report, the District of Columbia is included in descriptions of “states” unless denoted separately.

⁵³ As seen in **Table 1** below, Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon, Utah, Washington, and Wyoming each contain more than 10 million acres of federal land.

⁵⁴ For example, legislation providing statehood to several western states conditioned that statehood on the states’ agreement to disclaim “all right and title to the unappropriated public lands lying within” their territories, which remained under the control of the United States. *E.g.*, 13 Stat. 30, §4, 38th Cong. (1864) (Nevada Enabling Act); 28 Stat. 107, §3, 53rd Cong. (1894) (Utah Enabling Act).

where the federal government is a predominant or majority landholder and where competing or conflicting uses of the lands may lead to frequent disputes.

**Table 1. Total Federal Land in the United States
Administered by Five Agencies, by State, 2024**

	Total Federal Acreage	Total Acreage in State	Federal Acreage's % of State
Alabama	875,707	32,678,400	2.7%
Alaska	222,373,941	365,481,600	60.8%
Arizona	27,961,796	72,688,000	38.5%
Arkansas	3,174,549	33,599,360	9.4%
California	45,391,499	100,206,720	45.3%
Colorado	24,118,417	66,485,760	36.3%
Connecticut	9,775	3,135,360	0.3%
Delaware	29,934	1,265,920	2.4%
D.C.	9,807	39,040	25.1%
Florida	4,540,641	34,721,280	13.1%
Georgia	1,974,694	37,295,360	5.3%
Hawaii ^a	861,254	4,105,600	21.0%
Idaho	32,785,766	52,933,120	61.9%
Illinois	414,772	35,795,200	1.2%
Indiana	383,751	23,158,400	1.7%
Iowa	99,698	35,860,480	0.3%
Kansas	254,412	52,510,720	0.5%
Kentucky	1,022,623	25,512,320	4.0%
Louisiana	1,391,067	28,867,840	4.8%
Maine	305,213	19,847,680	1.5%
Maryland	209,648	6,319,360	3.3%
Massachusetts	62,956	5,034,880	1.3%
Michigan	3,642,187	36,492,160	10.0%
Minnesota	3,506,284	51,205,760	6.8%
Mississippi	1,556,411	30,222,720	5.1%
Missouri	1,704,258	44,248,320	3.9%
Montana	27,168,417	93,271,040	29.1%
Nebraska	558,783	49,031,680	1.1%
Nevada	56,081,005	70,264,320	79.8%
New Hampshire	806,343	5,768,960	14.0%
New Jersey	183,084	4,813,440	3.8%
New Mexico	24,581,379	77,766,400	31.6%

	Total Federal Acreage	Total Acreage in State	Federal Acreage's % of State
New York	210,819	30,680,960	0.7%
North Carolina	2,428,165	31,402,880	7.7%
North Dakota	1,736,495	44,452,480	3.9%
Ohio	305,753	26,222,080	1.2%
Oklahoma	653,958	44,087,680	1.5%
Oregon	32,226,209	61,598,720	52.3%
Pennsylvania	608,796	28,804,480	2.1%
Rhode Island	4,458	677,120	0.7%
South Carolina	911,150	19,374,080	4.7%
South Dakota	2,645,668	48,881,920	5.4%
Tennessee	1,269,357	26,727,680	4.7%
Texas	3,191,777	168,217,600	1.9%
Utah	33,240,265	52,696,960	63.1%
Vermont	474,866	5,936,640	8.0%
Virginia	2,321,799	25,496,320	9.1%
Washington	12,227,674	42,693,760	28.6%
West Virginia	1,140,201	15,410,560	7.4%
Wisconsin	1,855,622	35,011,200	5.3%
Wyoming	29,710,191	62,343,040	47.7%
U.S. Total	615,203,294	2,271,343,360	27.1%

Sources: For federal lands, see sources listed in **Table 2**. Total acreage of states is from U.S. General Services Administration, Office of Governmentwide Policy, *Federal Real Property Profile, as of September 30, 2004*, Table 16, pp. 18-19.

Notes: Figures understate federal lands in each state and the total in the United States. They include land of five land-managing agencies: the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), U.S. Forest Service (FS), U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), National Park Service (NPS), and Department of Defense (DOD). (The DOD is currently “using a secondary Department of War designation” under Executive Order 14347.) Thus, the figures exclude federal lands managed by other agencies, such as the Bureau of Reclamation. They also exclude any land managed by the five agencies in the territories, DOD-managed acreage overseas, submerged lands in the outer continental shelf, and FWS-managed land within the U.S. Minor Outlying Islands, primarily marine areas in the Pacific Ocean.

The total federal acreage column does not add to the precise total shown due to small discrepancies in the sources used. This is also the case for other tables in this report. Also, here and throughout the report, figures might not sum to the totals shown due to rounding.

- a. This figure includes approximately 253,000 acres of submerged lands and waters within the Hawaiian Islands National Wildlife Refuge. Thus, the percentage shown overestimates the area that is federally owned.

Table 2. Federal Acreage in Each State, by Agency, 2024

State	Bureau of Land Management	U.S. Forest Service	U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service	National Park Service	Department of Defense
Alabama	3,137	673,400	34,041	17,540	147,589
Alaska	71,105,178	22,132,738	76,653,680	52,456,775	25,570
Arizona	12,057,980	11,183,887	1,683,554	2,658,489	377,886
Arkansas	2,732	2,593,690	392,286	100,723	85,118
California	14,989,808	20,838,146	311,107	7,655,258	1,597,180
Colorado	8,344,829	14,490,250	183,145	679,044	421,149
Connecticut	0	23	2,425	5,846	1,481
Delaware	0	0	25,543	890	3,501
D.C.	0	0	0	8,479	1,328
Florida	2,345	1,217,769	306,892	2,491,692	521,943
Georgia	0	868,513	489,401	41,231	575,549
Hawaii ^a	0	0	310,218	379,534	171,502
Idaho	11,768,027	20,451,561	51,002	512,086	3,090
Illinois	20	304,723	90,726	39	19,264
Indiana	0	204,380	17,743	10,875	150,753
Iowa	0	0	75,803	2,670	21,225
Kansas	9	108,621	29,590	465	115,727
Kentucky	0	818,751	16,560	95,182	92,130
Louisiana	5,383	608,478	593,219	21,145	162,842
Maine	0	53,890	75,962	157,762	17,599
Maryland	572	0	53,624	41,878	113,574
Massachusetts	0	0	23,720	33,530	5,706
Michigan	610	2,879,011	118,132	632,443	11,991
Minnesota	1,296	2,832,995	529,986	139,900	2,107
Mississippi	5,123	1,190,990	211,668	105,754	42,876
Missouri	59	1,510,185	62,020	54,742	77,252
Montana	8,053,643	17,254,317	639,655	1,214,871	5,931
Nebraska	5,155	351,197	175,674	6,462	20,295
Nevada	47,225,132	5,761,289	2,225,565	797,690	71,329
New Hampshire	0	754,393	35,120	13,696	3,134
New Jersey	0	0	77,200	35,815	70,069
New Mexico	13,491,010	9,229,797	332,058	472,925	1,055,589
New York	0	16,389	29,679	34,115	130,636
North Carolina	0	1,258,940	425,520	368,087	375,618
North Dakota	58,674	1,103,162	492,461	71,359	10,839

State	Bureau of Land Management	U.S. Forest Service	U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service	National Park Service	Department of Defense
Ohio	0	244,357	10,120	20,497	30,779
Oklahoma	1,377	399,772	109,011	10,011	133,787
Oregon	15,727,901	15,700,419	583,280	196,271	18,338
Pennsylvania	0	514,183	15,897	53,876	24,840
Rhode Island	0	0	2,435	8	2,015
South Carolina	0	639,394	133,990	32,556	105,210
South Dakota	275,738	2,006,708	207,116	148,022	8,084
Tennessee	0	725,299	54,962	360,616	128,480
Texas	11,947	756,953	608,020	1,204,923	609,934
Utah	22,759,900	8,193,219	110,567	2,098,111	78,468
Vermont	0	414,099	38,441	10,465	11,861
Virginia	805	1,674,033	133,527	307,533	205,901
Washington	437,317	9,356,329	171,935	1,834,687	427,406
West Virginia	0	1,047,859	22,265	67,217	2,860
Wisconsin	1,992	1,526,808	204,533	62,465	59,824
Wyoming	18,049,385	9,226,016	74,517	2,345,726	14,547
U.S. Total	244,387,084	193,116,933	89,255,595	80,071,977	8,371,705
Territories ^b	0	28,929	25,219	26,859	171,524
Overseas	0	0	0	0	19,921
Agency Total	244,387,084	193,145,862	89,280,814	80,098,836	8,563,150

Sources: For the BLM: DOI, BLM, *Public Land Statistics 2024*, Table 1-4, column entitled “BLM Public Lands,” <https://www.blm.gov/sites/default/files/docs/2025-07/BLM-Public-Land-Statistics-2024.pdf>. Data reflect BLM ownership as of September 30, 2024. For earlier fiscal years, sources included the pertinent volume of *Public Land Statistics* and data obtained by CRS from the BLM.

For the FS: USDA, FS, *Land Areas of the National Forest System—As of Sept 30, 2024*, Tables 1 and 4, “NFS Acreage” column, <https://www.fs.usda.gov/land/staff/lar/LAR2024/lar2024index.html>. Data reflect land within the National Forest System, including national forests, national grasslands, purchase units, land utilization projects, experimental areas, and other areas. Table 1 shows the agency total and Table 4 shows the individual state and territory acreages reflected here. For earlier fiscal years, sources included the pertinent volume of *Land Areas of the National Forest System* and data obtained by CRS from the FS.

For the FWS: DOI, FWS, *Statistical Data Tables for Fish & Wildlife Service Lands (as of 9/30/2024)*, Table 1A, <https://www.fws.gov/media/statistical-data-tables-fish-wildlife-service-lands-9302024>. Data reflect federally owned land over which the FWS has sole or primary jurisdiction. Totals are summed from data in Table 1A columns “Reserved from Public Domain; Primary Jurisdiction,” “Acquired by Other Federal Agency; Primary Jurisdiction,” “Purchased by FWS; Acres,” and “Donated.” For earlier fiscal years, sources include the pertinent edition of the *Annual Lands Report Data Tables* and data obtained by CRS from the FWS.

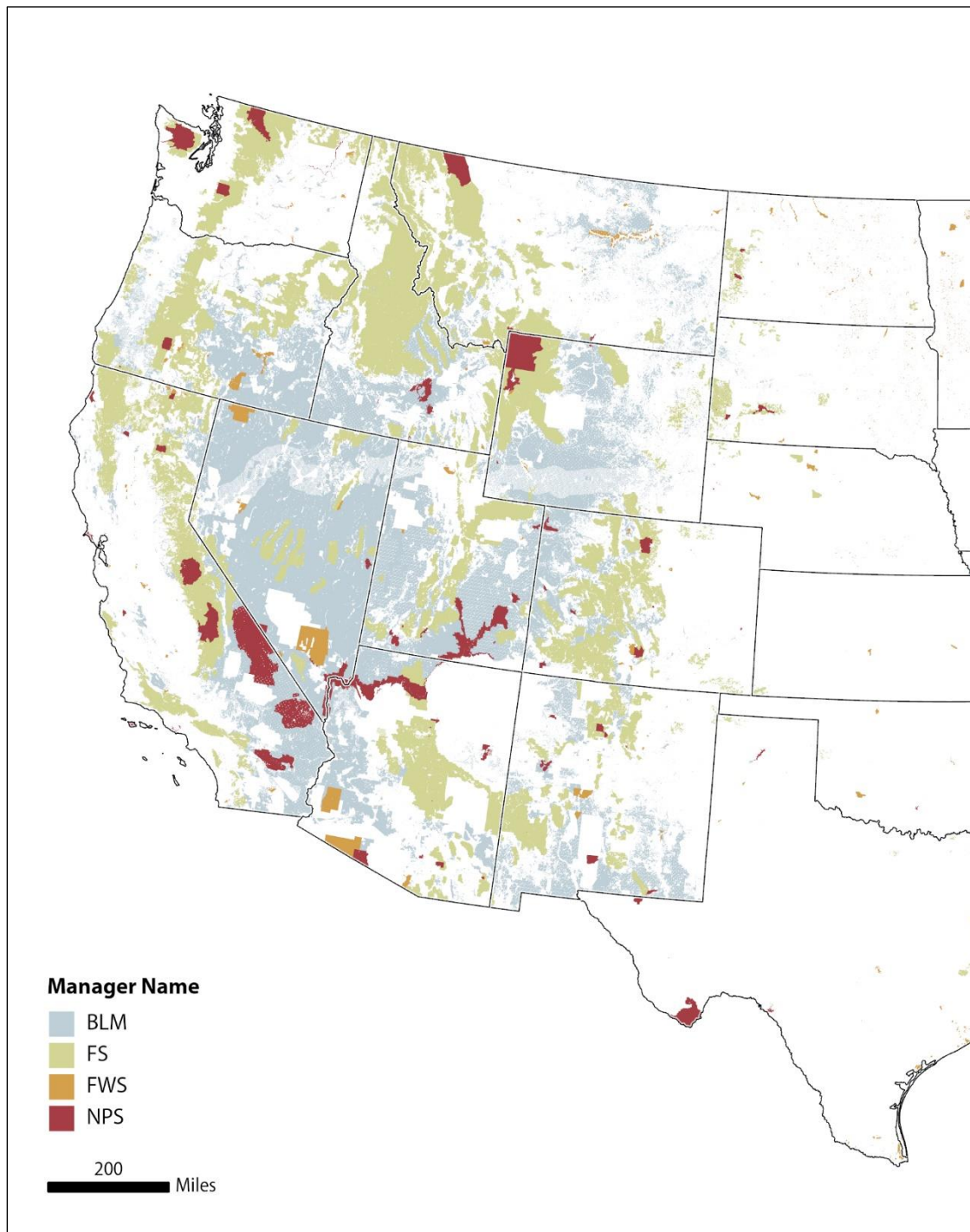
For the NPS: DOI, NPS, Land Resources Division, *National Park Service—Acreage by State—09/30/2024*, column entitled NPS Fee Acres, <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/lwcf/accreagereports.htm>. Data reflect federally owned lands managed by the NPS. For earlier fiscal years, sources included the pertinent edition of the *NPS Acreage Reports* and data obtained by CRS from the NPS.

For the DOD: DOD, Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Infrastructure, *Base Structure Report—FY25 Baseline (As of 30 Sept 2024)*, <https://www.acq.osd.mil/eie/imr/rpid/docs/Base-Structure-Report->

FY25.xlsx. Totals reflect data presented in the “Acres Owned” columns in the “Federal DOD Main Report” tab and the “Federal Other Sites” tab. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) indicated to CRS that some (but not all) lands managed by USACE are reflected in the DOD estimate of 8.6 million, as shown in this table. However, USACE was not able to readily provide the precise extent of the overlap. Personal communication between CRS and USACE, Future Directions Branch, Headquarters, January 22, 2025. For earlier fiscal years, sources included the pertinent edition of the *Base Structure Report* and data obtained by CRS from the DOD.

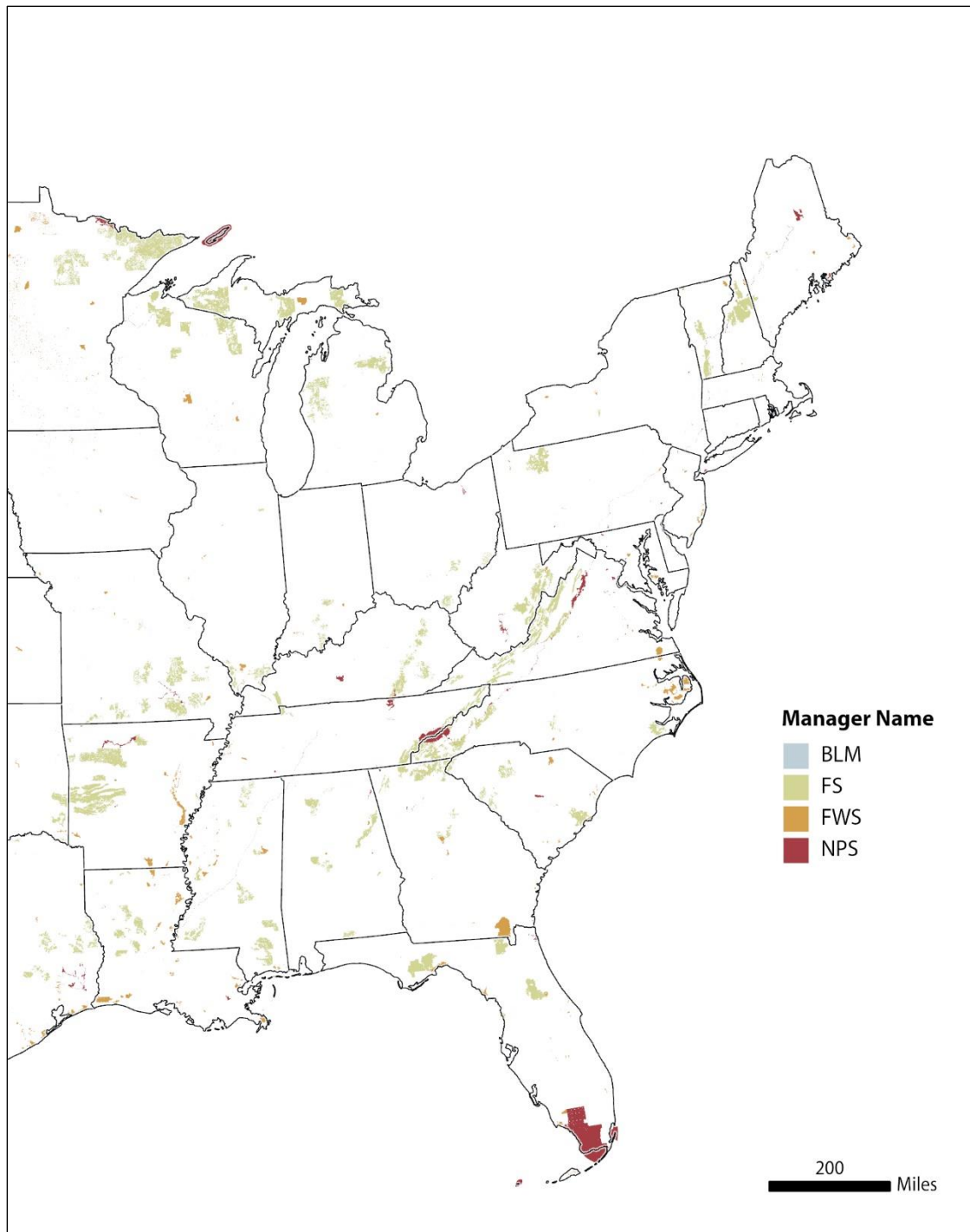
Notes: Acreage totals may not add to the precise totals shown due to small discrepancies in the sources used and rounding. The DOD is currently “using a secondary Department of War designation” under Executive Order 14347. See other notes for **Table I**.

- a. This figure includes approximately 253,000 acres of submerged lands and waters within the Hawaiian Islands National Wildlife Refuge.
- b. The FS territories total of 28,929 reflects acreage in Puerto Rico (28,789 acres) and the U.S. Virgin Islands (140 acres). The FWS territories figure of 25,219 includes acreage in America Samoa (1,613 acres), Guam (1,218 acres), Puerto Rico (21,797 acres), and the U.S. Virgin Islands (590 acres). Acreage amounts for FWS-managed land in US territories do not include lands in the U.S. Minor Outlying Islands in the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. The NPS territories figure of 26,859 reflects acreage in Guam (958 acres), Puerto Rico (53 acres), and the U.S. Virgin Islands (25,848 acres). The DOD territories figure of 171,524 includes acreage in Guam (62,128 acres), Puerto Rico (17,008 acres), the U.S. Virgin Islands (44 acres), Johnston Atoll (684 acres), the Northern Mariana Islands (89,059 acres), and Wake Island (2,600 acres).

Figure 1. Western Federal Lands Managed by Four Agencies

Source: Created by CRS using data from the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) Gap Analysis Project (GAP), 2024, Protected Areas Database of the United States (PAD-US) 4.1 and U.S. Census Bureau.

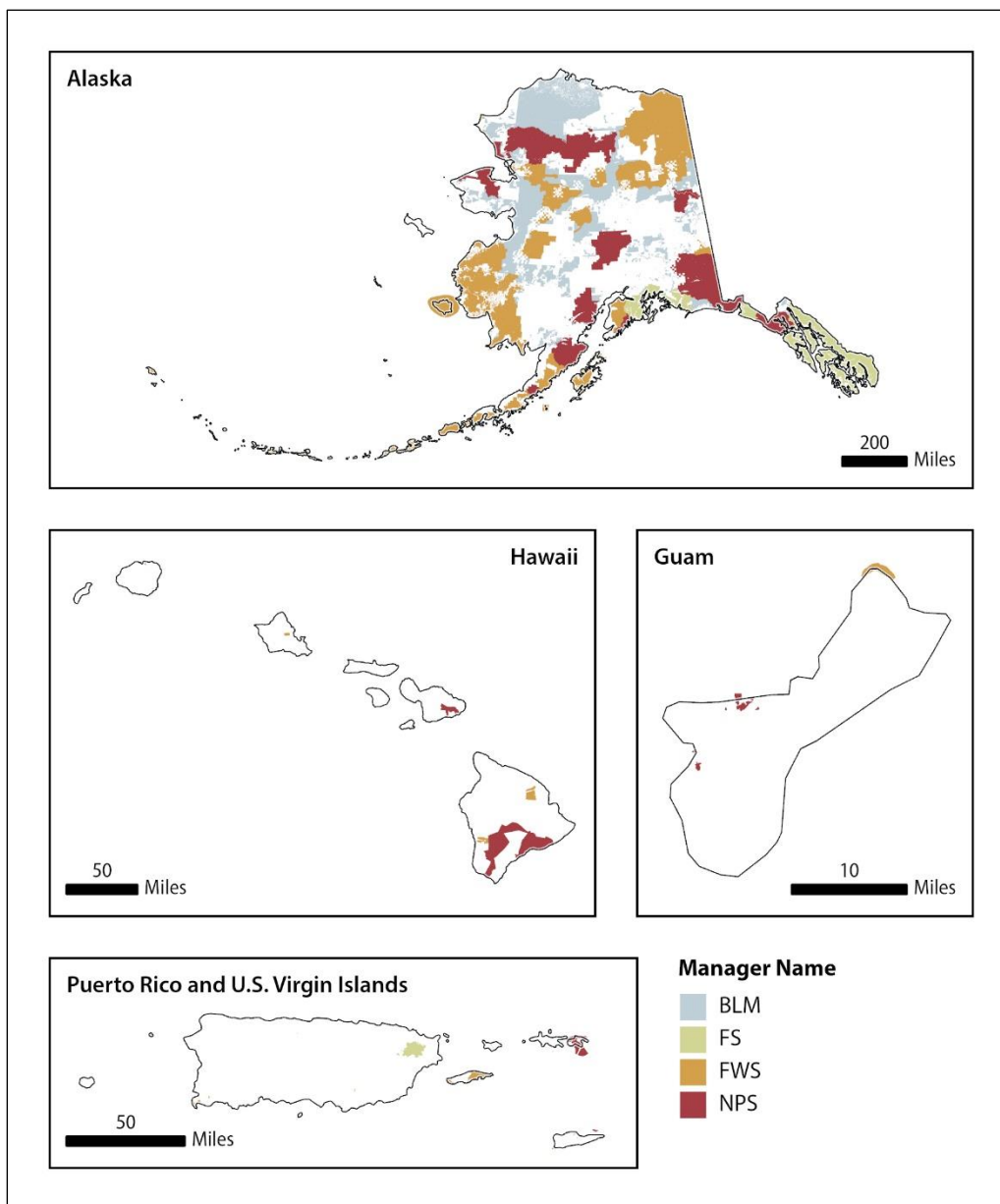
Notes: Scale 1:17,000,000. BLM = Bureau of Land Management, FS = U.S. Forest Service, FWS = U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, NPS = National Park Service. The BLM also manages numerous small parcels, (e.g., islands along the California coast that are not visible in this map). PAD-US, 2024 contains data for these land management agencies with differing dates of currency.

Figure 2. Eastern Federal Lands Managed by Four Agencies

Source: Created by CRS using data from the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) Gap Analysis Project (GAP), 2024, Protected Areas Database of the United States (PAD-US) 4.1 and U.S. Census Bureau.

Note: Scale 1:17,000,000. BLM = Bureau of Land Management, FS = U.S. Forest Service, FWS = U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, NPS = National Park Service. PAD-US, 2024 contains data for these land management agencies with differing dates of currency.

Figure 3. Federal Lands in Alaska, Hawaii, Guam, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands Managed by Four Agencies



Source: Created by CRS using data from the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) Gap Analysis Project (GAP), 2024, Protected Areas Database of the United States (PAD-US) 4.1 and U.S. Census Bureau.

Note: Hawaii scale 1:7,500,000, Alaska scale 1:33,000,000, Guam scale 1:900,000, Puerto Rico and U.S. Virgin Islands scale 1:4,500,000. BLM = Bureau of Land Management, FS = U.S. Forest Service, FWS = U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, NPS = National Park Service. PAD-US, 2024 contains data for these land management agencies with differing dates of currency.

Federal Land Ownership Changes, 1990-2024

Since 1990, the total acreage of federal land in the United States has declined by 31.7 million acres, or 4.9% of the total of the five agencies, because the acreage of disposed areas of federal

lands has exceeded the area acquired.⁵⁵ **Table 3** shows and explains the changes in ownership among the five agencies.

The total acreage decline reflects decreased acreage for two agencies and increased acreage for three others. BLM ownership decreased by 27.6 million acres (10.2%), in large part due to the disposal of BLM land, under law, to the State of Alaska, Alaska Natives, and Alaska Native Corporations.⁵⁶ DOD land ownership also declined, by 12.2 million acres (59.2%). This decline appears to be primarily due to changes in legal arrangements for managing military installations rather than changes in the sizes of the installations themselves. For instance, of the 26.8 million acres of defense sites (worldwide)⁵⁷—more than 97.1% of which are in the United States or territories—8.4 million acres (31.3%) were federally owned.⁵⁸ By comparison, of the 28.4 million acres of defense sites (worldwide) in DOD’s 2010 report, approximately 19.8 million (70%) were federally owned.⁵⁹

In contrast, the NPS, FWS, and FS expanded their acreage during the period, with the NPS having the largest increase in both acreage and percentage growth—3.9 million acres (5.2%). In some cases, a decrease in one agency’s acreage was tied to an increase in acreage managed by another agency, through enactment of laws that transferred administrative jurisdiction over federal land from one agency to another.⁶⁰

Table 3. Change in Federal Acreage in the United States Since 1990, by Agency

	1990	2000	2010	2020	2024	Change 1990-2024	% Change Since 1990
BLM	272,029,418	264,398,133	247,859,076	244,378,573	244,387,084	-27,642,334	-10.2%
FS	191,367,364	192,355,099	192,880,840	193,012,827	193,116,933	1,749,569	0.9%
FWS	86,822,107	88,225,669	88,948,699	89,256,317	89,255,595	2,433,488	2.8%
NPS	76,133,510	77,931,021	79,691,484	80,008,167	80,071,977	3,938,467	5.2%
DOD ^a	20,501,315	24,052,268	19,421,540	8,630,393	8,371,705	-12,129,610	-59.2%
U.S. Total	646,853,714	646,962,190	628,801,639	615,286,278	615,203,294	-31,650,420	-4.9%

Sources: See sources listed **Table 2**.

Notes: Acreage totals may not add to the precise totals shown due to small discrepancies in the sources used and rounding. See other notes for **Table 1**. BLM = Bureau of Land Management, FS = U.S. Forest Service, FWS

⁵⁵ Congress also has made various designations on federal lands, such as wilderness and national park.

⁵⁶ Other actions and factors contributed to the decline in BLM lands. For example, a reduction of about 1 million acres (primarily in the eastern states) resulted from a revision in the way the BLM reported acreage withdrawn or reserved for another federal agency or purpose.

⁵⁷ This figure is derived from the DOD, Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Infrastructure, *Base Structure Report, Fiscal Year 2025 Baseline (A Summary of the Real Property Inventory Data)*, as of September 30, 2024, <https://www.acq.osd.mil/eie/imr/rpid/docs/Base-Structure-Report-FY25.xlsx>.

⁵⁸ The 26.8 million acre figure used here includes lands worldwide, whereas the 8.8 million acre figure shown for FY2024 elsewhere in this report reflects land in the United States only.

⁵⁹ The 19.8 million acre figure used here includes land worldwide, more than 97% of which is in the United States. The 19.4 million acre figure shown for 2010 in **Table 3** reflects land in the United States only.

⁶⁰ For instance, a decrease in BLM acreage and an increase in NPS acreage was the result of enactment of the California Desert Protection Act of 1994 (P.L. 103-433). Among other provisions, the law established one new national park unit and expanded two other park units on land that was owned by the BLM, and transferred ownership of the lands to the NPS. The BLM estimated the total transfer of BLM land to the NPS for the three areas at 2.9 million acres. See DOI, BLM, “California Desert Protection Act Celebrates 15 Years,” press release, October 30, 2009, <https://www.blm.gov/press-release/california-desert-protection-act-celebrates-15-years>.

= U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, NPS = National Park Service, and DOD = Department of Defense. DOD is currently “using a secondary Department of War designation” under Executive Order 14347. Also, estimates generally reflect the end of the fiscal year for the years shown (i.e., September 30).

- a. The DOD data reflected in this table do not correspond to three of the years shown: 1990, 2000, and 2010. This is because reports for those years do not appear to be available and/or contained data from which it is challenging, if not impossible, to determine acres owned. For these reasons, the DOD figures for these years were derived respectively from the FY1989 Base Structure Report (published in February 1988), the FY1999 Base Structure Report (with data as of September 30, 1999), and the FY2010 Base Structure Report (with data as of September 30, 2009).

The total federal acreage decline (shown in **Table 3**) is a composite of various decreases in acreage in 16 states and increases in acreage in 35 states (including the District of Columbia). Much of the decline in federal land ownership since 1990 occurred in Alaska. As shown in **Table 4**, federal land declined in Alaska by 23.3 million acres (9.5%) between 1990 and 2024. As noted, this decline in Alaska is largely the result of the disposal of BLM land under Alaska-specific laws. Specifically, BLM land in Alaska declined from 92.5 million acres in 1990 to 71.1 million acres in 2024, a 21.4 million acre (23.1%) decline.

Since 1990, federal land also has decreased in the 11 contiguous western states, from 356.0 million in 1990 to 345.5 million in 2024, a 10.5 million acre (2.9%) decline. Reflected in the overall decline are reductions for 6 of the 11 states, with decreases of 6.4 million acres in Arizona, 3.9 million acres in Nevada,⁶¹ and smaller decreases in four other states. From 1990 to 2024, 5 of the 11 states each had increases ranging roughly from 0.2 million acres to 0.5 million acres, with the largest being in Colorado.

Outside Alaska and the other western states, federal land increased from 45.2 million acres in 1990 to 47.3 million acres in 2024. This was a 2.1 million acre (4.7%) increase. This increase was not uniform, with declines in some states and varying increases (in acreages and percentage) in others.

Table 4. Change in Federal Acreage in the United States Since 1990, by State

	1990	2000	2010	2020	2024	Change 1990-2024	% Change Since 1990
Alabama	944,505	979,907	871,232	873,019	875,707	-68,798	-7.3%
Alaska	245,669,027	237,828,917	225,848,164	222,565,221	222,373,941	-23,295,086	-9.5%
Arizona	34,399,867	33,421,887	30,741,287	28,032,427	27,961,796	-6,438,071	-18.7%
Arkansas	3,147,518	3,418,455	3,161,978	3,164,472	3,174,549	27,031	0.9%
California	46,182,591	47,490,824	47,797,533	45,375,956	45,391,499	-791,092	-1.7%
Colorado	23,579,790	24,001,922	24,086,075	24,077,855	24,118,417	538,627	2.3%
Connecticut	6,784	9,012	8,557	9,328	9,775	2,991	44.1%
Delaware	27,731	28,397	28,574	29,918	29,934	2,203	7.9%
D.C.	9,533	8,466	8,450	9,650	9,807	274	2.9%
Florida	4,344,976	4,671,958	4,536,811	4,498,013	4,540,641	195,665	4.5%
Georgia	1,921,674	1,933,464	1,956,720	1,977,442	1,974,694	53,020	2.8%
Hawaii	715,215	682,650	833,786	832,492	861,254	146,039	20.4%

⁶¹ These reductions were due primarily to relatively large reductions of both BLM and DOD land in Arizona and of DOD land in Nevada.

	1990	2000	2010	2020	2024	Change 1990-2024	% Change Since 1990
Idaho	32,566,081	32,569,711	32,635,835	32,788,125	32,785,766	219,685	0.7%
Illinois	353,061	403,835	406,734	416,306	414,772	61,711	17.5%
Indiana	274,483	394,243	340,696	384,391	383,751	109,268	39.8%
Iowa	33,247	83,134	122,602	98,221	99,698	66,451	199.9%
Kansas	281,135	300,465	301,157	253,915	254,412	-26,723	-9.5%
Kentucky	966,483	1,065,814	1,083,104	1,017,658	1,022,623	56,140	5.8%
Louisiana	1,578,151	1,565,875	1,330,429	1,386,028	1,391,067	-187,084	-11.9%
Maine	176,486	210,167	209,735	302,684	305,213	128,727	72.9%
Maryland	173,707	190,783	195,986	208,121	209,648	35,941	20.7%
Massachusetts	63,291	63,998	81,692	62,738	62,956	-335	-0.5%
Michigan	3,649,258	3,692,271	3,637,965	3,639,118	3,642,187	-7,071	-0.2%
Minnesota	3,545,702	3,581,741	3,469,211	3,509,410	3,506,284	-39,418	-1.1%
Mississippi	1,478,726	1,544,501	1,523,574	1,556,068	1,556,411	77,685	5.3%
Missouri	1,666,718	1,676,175	1,675,400	1,701,101	1,704,258	37,540	2.3%
Montana	26,726,219	26,745,666	26,921,861	27,115,921	27,168,417	442,198	1.7%
Nebraska	528,707	556,347	549,346	548,176	558,783	30,076	5.7%
Nevada	60,012,488	60,180,297	56,961,778	56,231,079	56,081,005	-3,931,483	-6.6%
New Hampshire	734,163	754,858	777,807	805,563	806,343	72,180	9.8%
New Jersey	146,436	164,865	176,691	181,047	183,084	36,648	25.0%
New Mexico	24,742,260	26,829,296	27,001,583	24,689,022	24,581,379	-160,881	-0.7%
New York	215,441	229,097	211,422	215,459	210,819	-4,622	-2.1%
North Carolina	2,289,509	2,415,560	2,426,699	2,422,686	2,428,165	138,656	6.1%
North Dakota	1,727,541	1,729,430	1,735,755	1,732,776	1,736,495	8,954	0.5%
Ohio	234,396	289,566	298,500	305,967	305,753	71,357	30.4%
Oklahoma	505,898	696,377	703,336	653,488	653,958	148,060	29.3%
Oregon	32,062,004	32,703,212	32,665,430	32,212,852	32,226,209	164,205	0.5%
Pennsylvania	611,249	598,165	616,895	607,709	608,796	-2,453	-0.4%
Rhode Island	3,110	4,867	5,248	4,523	4,458	1,348	43.3%
South Carolina	891,182	872,173	898,637	905,095	911,150	19,968	2.2%
South Dakota	2,626,594	2,642,646	2,646,241	2,642,904	2,645,668	19,074	0.7%
Tennessee	980,416	1,251,514	1,273,974	1,282,422	1,269,357	288,941	29.5%
Texas	2,651,675	2,855,997	2,977,950	3,223,919	3,191,777	540,102	20.4%
Utah	33,582,578	34,982,884	35,033,603	33,266,796	33,240,265	-342,313	-1.0%
Vermont	346,518	428,314	453,871	465,927	474,866	128,348	37.0%
Virginia	2,319,524	2,381,575	2,358,071	2,358,610	2,321,799	2,275	0.1%
Washington	11,983,984	12,646,137	12,173,813	12,198,126	12,227,674	243,690	2.0%

	1990	2000	2010	2020	2024	Change 1990-2024	% Change Since 1990
West Virginia	1,062,500	1,096,956	1,130,951	1,135,390	1,140,201	77,701	7.3%
Wisconsin	1,980,460	2,006,778	1,865,374	1,853,739	1,855,622	-124,838	-6.3%
Wyoming	30,133,121	30,081,046	30,043,513	29,457,403	29,710,191	-422,930	-1.4%
U.S. Total	646,853,714	646,962,190	628,801,639	615,286,278	615,203,294	-31,650,420	-4.9%

Sources: See sources listed in **Table 2**.

Notes: DOD = Department of Defense. The DOD is currently “using a secondary Department of War designation” under Executive Order 14347. The DOD data reflected in this table do not correspond to three of the years shown: 1990, 2000, and 2010. This is because reports for those years do not appear to be available and/or contained data from which it is especially challenging if not impossible to determine acres owned. For these reasons, the DOD figures for these years were derived respectively from the FY1989 Base Structure Report (published in February 1988), the FY1999 Base Structure Report (with data as of September 30, 1999), and the FY2010 Base Structure Report (with data as of September 30, 2009). Also, acreage totals may not add to the precise totals shown due to small discrepancies in the sources used and rounding. See other notes for **Table 1** and **Table 3**.

Current Issues

Certain issues have recurred throughout the history of federal land ownership. One is the optimal extent of ownership. Some advocate disposing of federal lands to state or private ownership; others favor retaining currently owned lands; still others promote land acquisition by the federal government, including through increased or more stable funding sources. Another focus is on the condition of federal lands and related infrastructure, and how to balance the restoration and maintenance of current assets with the acquisition of additional lands. Some assert that lands and infrastructure have deteriorated and that agency activities and funding should focus on restoration and maintenance, whereas others advocate expanding federal protection to additional lands. Debates also encompass the extent to which federal lands should be developed, preserved, and open to recreation and whether federal lands should be managed primarily to produce national benefits or benefits primarily for the localities and states in which the lands are located. In addition, border security, along and near the southwestern border in particular, raises questions related to management of, and access to, certain federal lands. These questions stem, in part, from the differing roles of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and the federal land management agencies.

Extent of Ownership

As noted above, the optimal extent of federal land ownership is an enduring issue for Congress. Current debates encompass the extent to which the federal government should dispose of, retain, or acquire lands in general and in particular areas. Advocates of retention of federal lands, and federal acquisition of additional lands, assert a variety of benefits to the public of federal land ownership. They include protection and preservation of unique natural and other resources, open space, and public access, especially for recreation. Some support land protection from development.⁶²

⁶² For illustrative perspectives supporting keeping lands in federal ownership, see Steven Davis, *In Defense of Public Lands: The Case against Privatization and Transfer* (Temple University Press, 2018); Sarah Bardeen, “America’s (continued...) ”

Disposal advocates have expressed concerns about the efficacy and efficiency of federal land management, accessibility of federal lands for certain types of recreation, and limitations on development of federal lands. Some support selling federal land for financial reasons, such as to help lower federal expenditures, reduce the deficit, or balance the budget. Others assert that limited federal resources constrain agencies' abilities to protect and manage the lands and resources. Other concerns involve the potential influence of federal land protection on private property, development, and local economic activity. Some seek disposal to governmental or private landowners to foster state, local, and private control over lands and resources.⁶³

Other issues center on the suitability of authorities for acquiring and disposing of lands and the use of such authorities in particular areas. Congress has provided to the federal agencies varying authorities for acquiring and disposing of land.⁶⁴ With regard to acquisition, the BLM has relatively broad authority, the FWS has various authorities, and the FS authority is mostly limited to lands within or contiguous to the boundaries of a national forest. The DOD also has authority for acquisitions.⁶⁵ By contrast, the NPS has no general authority to acquire land to create new park units. The five agencies have authority to acquire land by condemnation, but with the exception of DOD, this authority has been used rarely by these agencies in recent decades.

The primary funding mechanism for federal land acquisition, for the four major federal land management agencies, has been appropriations from the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF).⁶⁶ For the FWS, the Migratory Bird Conservation Fund provides an additional source of mandatory spending for land acquisition. This fund is supported by sales of Duck Stamps and import taxes on arms and ammunition.⁶⁷ Funding for acquisitions by the DOD has been provided in DOD appropriations laws. There continue to be different views as to acquisition funding, including the appropriate amount, type (discretionary and/or mandatory), and location of use.

With regard to disposal, the NPS and FWS have no general authority to dispose of the lands they administer, and the FS disposal authorities are restricted. The BLM has broader authority under provisions of FLPMA and other laws, such as the Recreation and Public Purposes Act.⁶⁸ DOD lands that are excess to military needs generally can be disposed of under the surplus property process administered by the General Services Administration (GSA). Legislation authorizing base

Public Lands: A Bipartisan Political Success Story," Public Policy Institute of California, May 16, 2022, <https://www.ppic.org/blog/americas-public-lands-a-bipartisan-political-success-story/>; and Scott Lehmann, "Privatizing Public Lands: A Bad Idea," *UC Law Environmental Journal*, vol. 3, no. 2 (Winter 1996), pp. 231-245, https://repository.uclawsf.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1477&context=hastings_environmental_law_journal.

⁶³ For illustrative perspectives supporting removing lands from federal ownership, see Randal O'Toole, "Interior Department and Public Lands," CATO Institute, 2017, <https://www.cato.org/cato-handbook-policy-makers/cato-handbook-policy-makers-8th-edition-2017/51-interior-department-public-lands>; and Paul M. Jakus et al., "Western Public Lands and the Fiscal Implications of a Transfer to States," *Land Economics*, vol. 93, no. 3 (August 2017), pp. 371-389. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26449071>.

⁶⁴ For information on the acquisition and disposal authorities of the four major federal land management agencies, see CRS Report RL34273, *Federal Land Ownership: Acquisition and Disposal Authorities*, by Carol Hardy Vincent et al.

⁶⁵ See 10 U.S.C. §2663.

⁶⁶ For information on the Land and Water Conservation Fund, see CRS Report R46563, *Land and Water Conservation Fund: Processes and Criteria for Allocating Funds*, coordinated by Carol Hardy Vincent and CRS In Focus IF12256, *Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF): Frequently Asked Questions*, by Carol Hardy Vincent.

⁶⁷ For information on land acquisition by FWS, including through the Migratory Bird Conservation Fund, see CRS Report R48381, *National Wildlife Refuge System (NWRs): Overview and Issues for Congress*, by Eric P. Nardi, pp. 12-14.

⁶⁸ For FLPMA provisions on disposal, see 43 U.S.C. §1713. For provisions of the Recreation and Public Purposes Act, see 43 U.S.C. §§869 et seq. For an overview of BLM disposal requirements and processes, see CRS Report R48079, *Land Disposal Authorities and Processes of the Bureau of Land Management*, coordinated by Carol Hardy Vincent.

realignment and closure (BRAC) rounds typically has authorized the GSA to delegate its disposal authority to the Secretary of Defense during BRAC rounds.⁶⁹

It is not uncommon for Congress to enact legislation providing for the acquisition or disposal of lands where an agency lacks authority, directing agencies to use existing authority, or modifying the terms and conditions of existing authorities for particular parcels of land. Further, recent Congresses have considered measures to establish or amend broader authorities for acquiring or disposing of land.⁷⁰

Western Land Concentration

The concentration of federal lands in the West has contributed to a higher degree of controversy over federal land ownership in that part of the country.⁷¹ In particular, the dominance of BLM and FS lands in the western states has led to various efforts to divest the federal government of significant amounts of land. As noted, the Sagebrush Rebellion in the 1970s and 1980s sought to foster divestiture of federal lands. However, that effort was not successful in achieving this end, either through legal challenges in the federal courts or through efforts to persuade the Reagan Administration and Congress to transfer the lands to state or private ownership. In more recent years, some western states, among others, have considered measures to provide for or express support for the transfer of federal lands to states, to establish task forces or commissions to examine federal land transfer issues, and to assert management authority over federal lands. Some supporters of continued or expanded federal land ownership have asserted that state and local resource constraints, other economic considerations, or environmental or recreational priorities weigh against state challenges to federal land ownership. In recent years, some states have considered measures to express support for federal lands or to limit the sale of federal lands in the state.⁷²

As shown in **Table 1** and **Table 2**, the 11 contiguous western states and Alaska have extensive areas of federal lands. **Table 5** summarizes the data in **Table 1** to clarify the difference in the extent of federal ownership in the United States between western and other states. As can be seen in **Table 5**, 60.8% of the land in Alaska is federally owned, which includes 85.9% of the total FWS lands and 65.5% of the total NPS lands. In contrast, 0.3% of DOD-owned lands are in Alaska. Of the land in the 11 contiguous western states, 45.9% is federally owned, which includes 73.4% of total FS lands and 70.8% of total BLM lands. In the rest of the country, the federal government owns 4.1% of the lands. The FS manages the largest portion of this land in other states—61.8%—and the BLM manages the least—0.8%. Slightly more than half (51.1%) of the

⁶⁹ For information on the disposal of surplus federal property by the U.S. General Services Administration, see 40 U.S.C. §§101 et seq. and CRS Report R47722, *Overview of the General Services Administration: Acquisition Services and Real Property Management*, by Dominick A. Fiorentino and Garrett Hatch, especially pp. 15-16. For information on DOD disposal during BRAC rounds, see CRS Report R48547, *Excess Military Infrastructure and the Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC) Process*, by Andrew Tilghman.

⁷⁰ For additional information on, and examples of, congressional action on measures to acquire or dispose of land, or to establish or modify current acquisition and disposal authorities, see CRS Report RL34273, *Federal Land Ownership: Acquisition and Disposal Authorities*, coordinated by Carol Hardy Vincent, especially pp. 2-3.

⁷¹ For information on these debates, see Paul W. Gates, “Public Land Issues in the United States,” *Western Historical Quarterly*, vol. 2, no. 4, (October 1971), pp. 363-376; Char Miller, *Public Lands, Public Debates: A Century of Controversy* (Oregon State University Press, 2012); and Christopher A. Simon, et al., “Western Rebellion: Who Owns the West?” in *The Environmental Politics and Policy of Western Public Lands*, eds., Erika Allen Wolters and Brent S. Steel (Oregon State University Press, 2020), <https://open.oregonstate.edu/environmentalpolitics/chapter/western-rebellion/>.

⁷² For a discussion of issues related to potential state management of federal lands, see CRS Report R44267, *State Management of Federal Lands: Frequently Asked Questions*, by Carol Hardy Vincent.

DOD lands are in the other states, with slightly less than half (48.6%) in the 11 western states. The remaining lands (0.3%) are in Alaska.

Table 5. Federal Acreage in the United States, by Agency and State or Region, 2024

	Alaska	11 Western States ^a	Other States	Total
BLM	71,105,178	172,904,932	376,974	244,387,084
FS	22,132,738	141,685,230	29,298,965	193,116,933
FWS	76,653,680	6,366,385	6,235,527	89,255,595
NPS	52,456,775	20,465,158	7,150,045	80,071,977
DOD	25,570	4,070,913	4,275,223	8,371,705
Total	222,373,941	345,492,617	47,336,734	615,203,294
Acreage of States	365,481,600	752,947,840	1,152,913,920	2,271,343,360
Percentage Federal	60.8%	45.9%	4.1%	27.1%

Sources: For federal lands, see sources listed in **Table 2**. Total acreage of states is from U.S. General Services Administration, Office of Governmentwide Policy, *Federal Real Property Profile, as of September 30, 2004*, Table 16, pp. 18-19.

Notes: Acreage totals may not add to the precise totals shown due to small discrepancies in the sources used and rounding. See other notes for **Table 1**. BLM = Bureau of Land Management, FS = U.S. Forest Service, FWS = U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, NPS = National Park Service, and DOD = Department of Defense. The DOD is currently “using a secondary Department of War designation” under Executive Order 14347.

a. The 11 western states are Arizona, California, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon, Utah, Washington, and Wyoming.

Maintaining Infrastructure and Lands

Debate continues over how to balance the acquisition of new assets and lands with the maintenance of the agencies’ existing infrastructure and the care of current federal lands. Some assert that addressing the condition of infrastructure and lands in current federal ownership is paramount. They support ecological restoration as a focus of agency activities and funding and an emphasis on managing current federal lands for continued productivity and public benefit. They oppose new land acquisitions and unit designations until the backlog of maintenance activities has been eliminated or greatly reduced and the condition of current range, forest, and other federal lands is significantly improved. Others contend that expanding federal protection to additional lands is essential to provide new areas for public use, protect important natural and cultural resources, and respond to changing land and resource conditions.⁷³

The ecological condition of current federal lands has long been a focus of attention. For example, the poor condition of public rangelands due to overgrazing was the rationale for enacting the Taylor Grazing Act of 1934 and creating the BLM.⁷⁴ Today, debates on the health and

⁷³ For information and perspectives regarding how to balance acquiring new assets and maintaining current assets, see CRS Report RS20158, *National Park System: Establishing New Units*, by Laura B. Comay; Tate Watkins and Jack Smith, “The Future of the Great American Outdoors,” PERC, December 16, 2020, <https://perc.org/2020/12/16/the-future-of-the-great-american-outdoors/>; and Michael Kellett, “A Modest Proposal: We Need More National Parks,” *Sierra: The Magazine of the Sierra Club*, August 17, 2021, <https://www.sierraclub.org/sierra/modest-proposal-we-need-more-national-parks>.

⁷⁴ S.T. Dana and S.K. Fairfax, *Forest and Range Policy: Its Development in the United States*, 2nd ed. (McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1980), pp. 158-164.

productivity of federal lands center on rangelands, forests, riparian areas, and other resources. These lands and resources might be affected in some areas by various land uses, such as livestock grazing, recreation, energy development, and rights-of-way. Many other variables might impact the health of federal lands and resources, including wildfires, community expansion, invasive weeds, and drought.⁷⁵

The deferred maintenance of federal infrastructure also has been a focus of Congress and the executive branch for many years. Deferred maintenance, often called the maintenance backlog, is defined as maintenance that was not done when scheduled or planned.⁷⁶ The agencies assert that continuing to defer maintenance of facilities accelerates their rate of deterioration, increases their repair costs, and decreases their value.⁷⁷

Congressional and administrative attention has centered on the NPS backlog. The DOI estimated deferred maintenance for the NPS for FY2025 at \$24.24 billion.⁷⁸ Of the total deferred maintenance, 38.9% was for transportation assets, 29.8% was for assets related to recreational and visitor experience, 17.0% was for water infrastructure and utilities, 11.5% was for operational buildings, and 2.7% was for other structures. The DOI estimates of the NPS backlog have increased overall since FY1999, from \$4.25 billion in that year.⁷⁹ It is unclear what portion of the change is due to the addition of maintenance work that was not done on time, the availability of more precise estimates of the backlog, or inflation and market trends (e.g., construction-related), among other factors. The NPS, as well as the other land management agencies, increased efforts to define and quantify maintenance needs over the past two decades.

While attention has focused on the NPS backlog, the other federal land management agencies also have maintenance backlogs. The FS estimated its backlog for FY2025 at \$10.81 billion.⁸⁰ Of the total deferred maintenance, 55.3% was for roads,⁸¹ 24.6% was for buildings, and the remaining 20.1% was for a variety of other assets (e.g., bridges and water systems). For FY2025, the DOI estimated the BLM backlog at \$6.60 billion, with 85.2% for transportation assets and the remainder for various other assets.⁸² The DOI estimated the FWS backlog at \$3.51 billion, with

⁷⁵ For information on public land health, see BLM, “Rangeland Health,” <https://www.blm.gov/programs/natural-resources/rangelands-and-grazing/rangeland-health>, accessed August 17, 2026; BLM, “A Critical Call to Restore Our Public Lands,” November 2024, https://www.blm.gov/sites/default/files/docs/2024-11/Restoration%20Blueprint%20508_0.pdf; and Environmental Protection Agency, “Extent and Distribution: What Are the Trends in the Extent and Distribution of the Nation’s Ecological Systems?”, <https://www.epa.gov/report-environment/extent-and-distribution>, accessed August 17, 2026.

⁷⁶ This definition is derived from the “FASAB Handbook of Federal Accounting Standards and Other Pronouncements, as Amended, as of June 30, 2025,” available on the website of the Federal Accounting Standards Advisory Board at https://files.fasab.gov/pdf/files/2025_FASAB_Handbook.pdf.

⁷⁷ For information on deferred maintenance on federal lands, including factors potentially impacting such deferred maintenance, see CRS Report R43997, *Deferred Maintenance of Federal Land Management Agencies: FY2013-FY2022 Estimates and Issues*, by Carol Hardy Vincent; CRS Report R48136, *National Park Service Deferred Maintenance: Overview and Issues*, by Laura B. Comay; CRS Insight IN12729, *Legacy Restoration Fund for Deferred Maintenance: 119th Congress Reauthorization Bills*, by Laura B. Comay and Carol Hardy Vincent; and Government Accountability Office, *Deferred Maintenance: Agencies Generally Followed Leading Practices in Selections but Faced Challenges*, GAO-24-106495, January 2024, <https://www.gao.gov/assets/d24106495.pdf>.

⁷⁸ DOI, NPS, *Budget Justifications and Performance Information, Fiscal Year 2027*, pp. 179-180, https://www.doi.gov/sites/default/files/documents/2026-04/fy2027greenbooknps_0.pdf.

⁷⁹ FY1999 is the first year for which an estimate is readily available.

⁸⁰ USDA, Forest Service, *Fiscal Year 2025, Quarter 2 Deferred Maintenance Needs*, <https://www.fs.usda.gov/sites/default/files/fy25-q2-deferred-maint-report.pdf>.

⁸¹ This estimate of the deferred maintenance for roads reflects passenger-car roads.

⁸² DOI, BLM, *Budget Justifications and Performance Information, Fiscal Year 2027*, p. 114 (pdf), <https://www.doi.gov/sites/default/files/documents/2026-04/fy2027greenbookblm0.pdf>.

31.7% for roads, bridges, and trails and the remainder split roughly equally among three other asset classes (buildings, water management, and other structures).⁸³ The four agencies together had a combined FY2025 backlog estimated at \$45.16 billion.

The agency backlogs have been attributed to decades of funding shortfalls,⁸⁴ and changes in agency methodologies for defining deferred maintenance, among other factors.⁸⁵ However, it is unclear how much total funding has been provided for the maintenance backlog over the years. Annual presidential budget requests and appropriations laws typically have not identified funds from all sources that may be used to address the maintenance backlog. Among other sources, the land management agencies receive annual discretionary appropriations for deferred maintenance. In addition, for each of FY2021-FY2025, a major source of funding for the four agencies (and the Bureau of Indian Education) was provided under provisions of the Great American Outdoors Act (P.L. 116-152).⁸⁶ That law provided \$1.9 billion annually in mandatory appropriations for agency deferred maintenance. Much of the funding is in the process of being allocated, so its full effect is not known. Opinions differ over the level of funds needed to address deferred maintenance, the extent to which funding should be discretionary or mandatory, whether to use funds from other programs and/or new sources, and how to prioritize funds for maintenance needs.

Protection and Use

The extent to which federal lands should be opened to development, available for recreation, and/or preserved has been controversial. Differences of opinion exist on the amount of traditional commercial development that should be allowed, particularly involving energy development, livestock grazing, and timber harvesting. Whether and where to restrict types of recreation, such as motorized off-road vehicles, also has been a focus. How much land to dedicate to enhanced protection, what type of protection to provide, and who should protect federal lands are continuing questions. Another area under consideration involves how to balance the protection of wild horses and burros on federal lands with protection of the range and other land uses.⁸⁷

⁸³ DOI, FWS, *Budget Justifications and Performance Information, Fiscal Year 2027*, p. 69, https://www.doi.gov/sites/default/files/documents/2026-04/fy2027greenbookfws_0.pdf.

⁸⁴ DOI, Deferred Maintenance & Repair, “What is Deferred Maintenance and Repair?,” <https://www.doi.gov/deferred-maintenance-and-repair>.

⁸⁵ Factors potentially contributing to the overall increase in the deferred maintenance of federal land management agencies are discussed in CRS products including the following: CRS Report R43997, *Deferred Maintenance of Federal Land Management Agencies: FY2013-FY2022 Estimates and Issues*, by Carol Hardy Vincent and CRS Report R48136, *National Park Service Deferred Maintenance: Overview and Issues*, by Laura B. Comay.

⁸⁶ For information on deferred maintenance funding under the Great American Outdoors Act, see CRS In Focus IF12888, *The Great American Outdoors Act (GAOA): Frequently Asked Questions*, by Carol Hardy Vincent and Laura B. Comay.

⁸⁷ For a variety of perspectives on protection and use of federal lands, see, for example, The Nature Conservancy, “Protect Public Lands: Defend Our Natural Treasures,” April 26, 2026, <https://www.nature.org/en-us/about-us/who-we-are/how-we-work/policy/america-public-lands/>; Gary D. Libecap, “The Land of Many Opportunity Costs,” Cato Institute, *Regulation*, Fall 2018, <https://www.cato.org/regulation/fall-2018/land-many-opportunity-costs>; U.S. Department of Energy, “New Interagency Study Finds Further Expansion of Renewable Energy Production on Federal Lands Could Power Millions More American Homes by 2035,” January 14, 2025, <https://www.energy.gov/articles/new-interagency-study-finds-further-expansion-renewable-energy-production-federal-lands>; Sarah Gibbens, “Activists Fear a New Threat to Biodiversity—Renewable Energy,” *National Geographic*, May 22, 2022, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/environment/article/activists-fear-biodiversity-threat-from-renewable-energy>; Dylan Soares, “Public Comment: Conservation Requires Better Wild Horse and Burro Management,” PERC, July 9, 2026, <https://perc.org/2026/07/09/public-comment-conservation-requires-better-wild-horse-and-burro-management/>; and Sierra Club, “Wild Horse and Burro Policy,” <https://www.sierraclub.org/policy/wildlife/feral-animals>.

Debates also encompass whether federal lands should be managed primarily to emphasize benefits nationally or for the localities and states where the lands are located. National benefits can include using lands to produce wood products for housing or to extract energy from traditional (oil, gas, coal) and alternative/renewable sources (wind, solar, geothermal, biomass). Other national benefits might encompass clean water for downstream uses, biodiversity for ecological resilience and adaptability, and wild animals and wild places for human enjoyment. Local benefits can include economic activities, such as livestock grazing, timber for sawmills, ski areas, tourism, and other types of development. Local benefits could also be scenic vistas and areas for recreation—picnicking, sightseeing, backpacking, four-wheeling, snowmobiling, hunting and fishing, and more.

Federally recognized Tribes also may have a stake in the management of federal lands, which frequently encompass areas of historic, cultural, or religious importance to Tribes and their members. Some Tribes may view the maintenance of sacred sites and continued access to culturally important vistas or natural resources as essential; others may prioritize the opportunities for economic growth or self-sufficiency that may come from development.⁸⁸

At some levels, the many uses and values can generally be compatible. However, as demands on the federal lands have risen, the conflicts among uses and values have escalated. Some lands—notably those administered by the FWS and DOD—have an overriding primary purpose (wildlife habitat and military needs, respectively). The conflicts typically are greatest for the multiple-use lands managed by the BLM and FS, because the potential uses and values are more diverse.

Other issues of debate include who decides the national-local balance in control of federal lands and how those decisions are made. Some stakeholders favor more local input and control by those in the areas where federal lands are located, to foster local needs and uses. Others seek to maintain or enhance the federal role in land management on the grounds that this better represents the interests and needs of all citizens.

Border Security

Border security presents special challenges on federal lands, given the extensive federal lands along the southwestern border with Mexico and the northern border with Canada. The federal lands on the borders tend to be geographically remote and include mountains, deserts, and other inhospitable terrain with limited law enforcement coverage. The lands are managed by different federal agencies, under various laws, and for many purposes.

The southwestern border with Mexico has been a particular focus. There are various estimates and depictions of federal lands on or near the border. For instance, by one estimate, six different agencies manage 621.5 (linear) miles of federal lands along the southwestern border.⁸⁹ **Figure 4** depicts federal lands located within 50 and 100 miles from the U.S.-Mexican border that are managed by the four main federal land management agencies.

The extent to which federal and other lands along the southwestern border should be used to deter illegal immigration and other illegal activity continues to be under debate. Efforts to build

⁸⁸ CRS Report R47563, *Tribal Co-management of Federal Lands: Overview and Selected Issues for Congress*, by Mariel J. Murray; CRS Report R48093, *Federal-Tribal Consultation: Background and Issues for Congress*, coordinated by Mariel J. Murray; and CRS Report R48934, *Introduction to Tribal Forestry*, by Mariel J. Murray and Anne A. Riddle.

⁸⁹ The estimate of 621.5 linear miles was prepared by CRS in 2018 based on a 2016 database. It excludes 71.9 miles of land managed by the Bureau of Indian Affairs, for a total of 693.4 miles of federal and Indian lands on the border. For additional information, see CRS In Focus IF10832, *Federal and Indian Lands on the U.S.-Mexico Border*, by Carol Hardy Vincent and James C. Uzel.

barriers and other infrastructure to reduce illicit activity at the border, such as illegal entry and drug and contraband smuggling, are a priority for the Trump Administration as well as for some Members of Congress and portions of the public.⁹⁰ By contrast, some Members of Congress and segments of the public oppose barrier construction as potentially costly, possibly damaging to lands and resources, and unlikely to be a major deterrent to illegal activity, among other reasons.⁹¹

Within DHS, the U.S. Border Patrol has responsibility for staffing and securing the international borders, but more than 40% of the southwestern border abuts federal and tribal lands overseen by the FS and four DOI agencies (including the Bureau of Indian Affairs) that also have law enforcement responsibilities.⁹² The Trump Administration has taken actions to foster the U.S. military's involvement on border lands in the interest of security.⁹³ Differences in missions and jurisdictional complexity among agencies may complicate border control. To facilitate control efforts, federal agencies at times have signed memoranda of understanding (MOUs).⁹⁴ Another focus has been on the environmental effects of illegal immigration, barrier construction, and border security enforcement on federal lands along the borders.⁹⁵

⁹⁰ Executive Office of the President, Presidential Proclamation 10886 of January 20, 2025, "Declaring a National Emergency at the Southern Border of the United States," 90 *Federal Register* 8327, January 29, 2025.

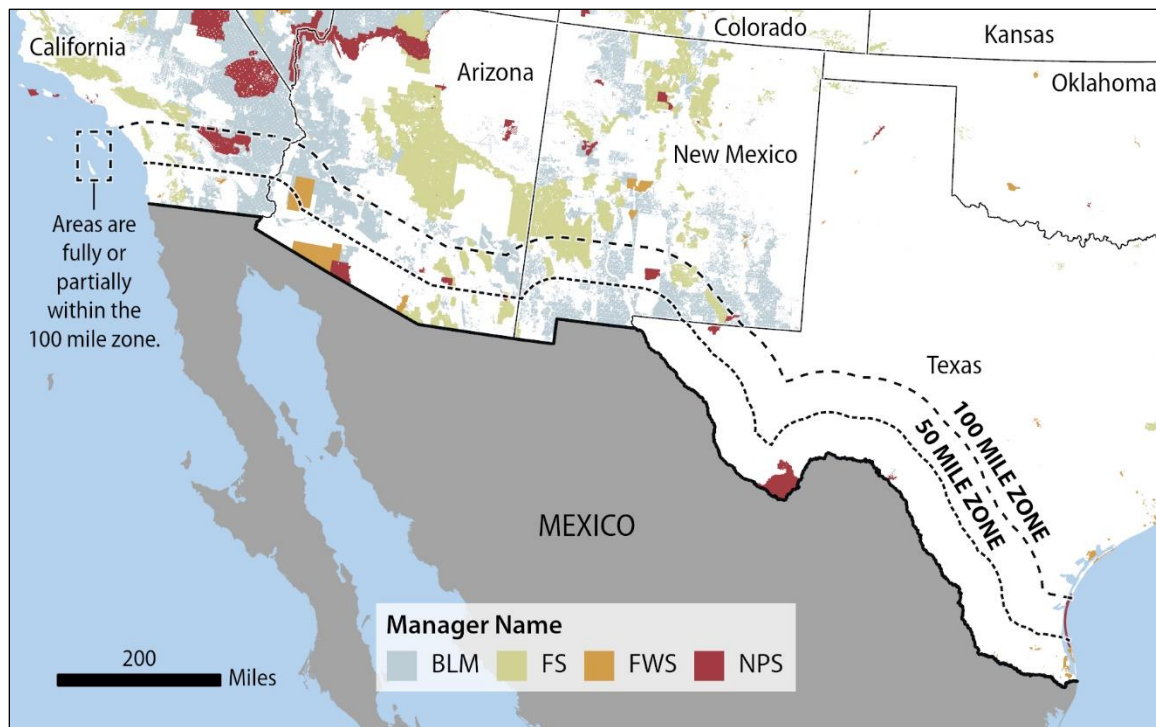
⁹¹ For information on funding appropriated for border barrier constructions, see CRS Report R47979, *DHS Border Barrier Funding Developments: FY2021-FY2024*, by William L. Painter. For a discussion of military funding of border security measures, see CRS Legal Sidebar LSB11278, *Diverting Military Construction Funds During a National Emergency: Legal Framework*, by Jennifer K. Elsea.

⁹² U.S. Government Accountability Office, (GAO), *Border Security: Additional Actions Needed to Better Ensure a Coordinated Federal Response to Illegal Activity on Federal Lands*, GAO-11-177, November 2010, p. 4.

⁹³ White House, "Military Mission for Sealing the Southern Border of the United States and Repelling Invasions," Presidential Memorandum/NSPM-4, April 11, 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/04/military-mission-for-sealing-the-southern-border-of-the-united-states-and-repelling-invasions/>; and U.S. Northern Command, "DoW Support to U.S. Border Security, National Defense Areas," <https://www.northcom.mil/BorderSecurity/#national-defense-areas>.

⁹⁴ For example, in 2006, DOI, DHS, and USDA entered into a memorandum of understanding entitled *Cooperative National Security and Counterterrorism Efforts on Federal Lands Along the United States' Borders*. These departments have entered into additional memoranda of understanding addressing issues such as "road maintenance, secure radio communication, environmental coordination, and sharing of geospatial information, among others." Testimony of Jon Andrew, Interagency Borderlands Coordinator, DOI, in U.S. Congress, House Committee on Natural Resources, Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations, *The Consequences of Federal Land Management Along the U.S. Border to Rural Communities and National Security*, hearings, 114th Cong., 2nd sess., April 28, 2016.

⁹⁵ GAO, *Southwest Border: Additional Actions Needed to Address Cultural and Natural Resource Impacts from Barrier Construction*, GAO-23-105443, September 2023, including pp. 22-30; and House Committee on Natural Resources (majority), Subcommittee on Federal Lands, *Field Oversight Hearing on "Biden's Border Crisis: The Consequences of Failing to Secure Federal Border Lands"*, hearing memorandum, February 8, 2024, pp. 6-9, https://naturalresources.house.gov/uploadedfiles/hearing_memo_updated_-_sub_on_fl_ov_field_hrg_02.08.24.pdf.

Figure 4. Federal Lands Managed by Four Agencies Near the Southwestern Border

Source: Created by CRS using data from the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) Gap Analysis Project (GAP), 2024, Protected Areas Database of the United States (PAD-US) 4.1; U.S. Census Bureau; the U.S. Department of State (2017); and ERSI.

Notes: Scale 1:15,000,000. BLM = Bureau of Land Management, FS = U.S. Forest Service, FWS = U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and NPS = National Park Service. Federal lands not administered by BLM, FS, FWS, and NPS were not included. PAD-US, 2024, contains data for these land management agencies with differing dates of currency.

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