



7 Ways that Looming Budget Cuts to Public Lands and Oceans Will Affect All Americans

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On January 2, 2013 a set of large, across-the-board spending cuts to nearly all federal agencies is set to take place in accordance with the Budget Control Act 2011.¹ These massive slashes—known as the “fiscal showdown” or “sequestration”—are a direct result of conservatives in Congress holding the American economy hostage in order to safeguard tax breaks for the wealthiest Americans. While much has been written and said about what this would do to the economy, health care, national security, and other major domestic programs, one relatively unexplored issue is the effect it would have on some of America’s most treasured assets: our oceans and public lands.

The fiscal showdown is the latest in a series of budget conflicts that have come to a head over the last year. Because the Joint Select Committee on Deficit Reduction—the “super committee”—was unable to come to an agreement on how to address the deficit, massive, automatic cuts to federal programs will take place unless Congress agrees by year’s end on an alternative set of budgetary measures to replace sequestration. If they fail to do so, federal spending will be automatically slashed by \$1.2 trillion from 2013 through 2021,² with approximately \$109 billion in cuts coming in fiscal year 2013.³

Despite the fact that Speaker of the House John Boehner (R-OH) offered a plan with \$800 billion in new revenue,⁴ he has not outlined any specific or realistic path to get there and wants to lower tax rates—a plan that heads in the wrong direction. As a result, the country is now in a precarious situation. Only an eleventh-hour deal will prevent cuts that former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates—who served under both President George W. Bush and President Barack Obama—has said would have a “catastrophic effect” on national security.⁵ Sequestration’s impacts could be equally calamitous for the management of federal programs that safeguard American lives, fuel our economy, and provide treasured sites for rest and recreation.

Congressional Republicans are beginning to wake up to the reality that our financial woes cannot be solved simply by slashing spending—additional sources of revenue must be part of the equation. Several conservatives have recently broken ranks from GOP taxation task-master, lobbyist Grover Norquist, who is most known for the pledge

Sequestration will have a big—and negative—impact on land and ocean management agencies. Here’s how it’ll affect all Americans:

1. Less accurate weather forecasts
2. Slower energy development
3. Fewer wildland firefighters
4. Closures of national parks
5. Fewer places to hunt
6. Less fish on your table
7. Diminished maritime safety and security

he convinced many in Congress to sign promising to reject any tax increases.⁶ Sen. Bob Corker (R-TN) recently suggested that he is not “obligated” to honor the pledge he made with Norquist to oppose tax increases.⁷

This is good news for the American people who enjoy government services—everything from a strong military to the interstate highway system to public education—because it means that an honest conversation about addressing the deficit that includes both new revenues and cuts can move forward. But unless more conservatives join this trend, sequestration will be inevitable, in which case we are going to have to start making do without some of these vital services we now consider fundamental to our daily lives.

In this issue brief, we examine seven key areas where federal land and ocean management agencies, such as the Department of the Interior and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, make critical investments on which Americans have come to depend and what cutting these agencies might mean, including:

- Less accurate weather forecasts
- Slower energy development
- Fewer wildland firefighters
- Closures of national parks
- Fewer places to hunt
- Less fish on our tables
- Diminished maritime safety and security

Overall, the Office of Management and Budget predicted in a recent report⁸ that sequestration will cut \$2.603 billion in fiscal year 2013 alone from the agencies that manage the hundreds of millions of acres of lands and oceans that belong to U.S. taxpayers.⁹

There is no doubt Americans will feel the impacts of such massive cuts. In particular, we will see reductions in many services provided by land and ocean management agencies such as weather satellites, firefighters, American-made energy, and hunting and fishing opportunities. Additionally—and perhaps most obviously—the cuts will likely cause some level of closure, if not complete closure, at many of our parks, seashores, and other cherished places. Losing funding for these critical services and infrastructure also reduces their tremendous value as job creators and economic drivers.

Americans depend on our public lands and ocean management agencies in three crucial areas:

- Providing safety and security (weather forecasting, park rangers, firefighters, the Coast Guard, etc.)

- Enhancing economic contributions (the Department of the Interior leveraged \$385 billion in economic activity such as oil and gas, mining, timber, grazing, and recreation in 2011¹⁰)
- Preserving America's shared history, heritage, and recreation opportunities (national parks, forests, seashores, and historic landmarks)

Voters recognize the value of these services and by nearly a 3-to-1 margin oppose reducing conservation funds to balance the budget. A poll conducted by the Nature Conservancy determined that 74 percent of voters say that, “even with federal budget problems, funding for conservation should not be cut.”¹¹ And in the 2012 election, voters across 21 states approved ballot measures raising \$767 million for new parks and conservation initiatives.¹² As these statistics clearly show, many citizens are willing to pay a little more in order to fund conservation and related programs.

In order to continue providing these necessary services to the American people, congressional Republicans must put forward a realistic plan that embraces both revenue increases and spending cuts. Such an approach would maintain as much funding as possible for these critical and valued government programs. The cost to administer our lands and ocean agencies is a sound investment for Americans due to the economic and societal benefits they provide.

Attempting to balance the budget and avoid the fiscal showdown simply by cutting spending without a plan to increase revenue means we will be less prepared for the next Hurricane Sandy. It means we will be unable to control massive wildfires as quickly as we can today. And it means we will have fewer places to hunt, fish, and relax.

Impact on public lands and oceans

The White House Office of Management and Budget released a report in September determining that the “sequestration percentages for the non-defense function would be a reduction of 8.2 percent for discretionary appropriations and 7.6 percent for direct spending.”¹³ All of the cuts described in this issue brief are nondefense discretionary, except for one account in the Coast Guard that has a defense function and would receive a 9.4 percent cut totaling \$50 million in fiscal year 2013.

It is important to note that the Office of Management and Budget does not provide much specificity about how these cuts would be administered to individual programs within agencies. It lists them only in terms of high-level budget line items where appropriations are tracked. For example, the analysis shows that the National Park Service operations budget will lose \$183 million, but it does not specify which services or which parks will bear the brunt of this reduction—those decisions are left to the agencies and

departments themselves. It is therefore difficult to guess what sort of cuts the agencies might make—for example, which areas might close, which programs might end, how many jobs will be lost, and other details. Nevertheless, we can easily assume that cuts on such a massive scale will have a major impact on a number of fronts, and that Americans will feel them with regard to the services and values that the agencies provide.

Less accurate weather forecasts

One of the most important and evident investments that the federal government makes is in weather prediction. But sequestration could threaten the government's ability to provide accurate weather forecasting by cutting the budget for the agency where weather prediction is housed. If this happens, Americans will get less precise daily weather reports and will suffer through less accurate natural disaster predictions for hurricanes, blizzards, droughts, tornadoes, and other weather events from the mundane to the catastrophic.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Agency is the central agency for critical weather prediction resources. Its National Weather Service is the nation's primary source of the data and analysis, forming the basis of everything from the forecasts you receive from meteorologists on the morning news to the National Hurricane Center's storm-tracking capabilities to the long-term projections of global climate change.¹⁴ Even the Weather Channel's forecasts come from this agency's data.¹⁵

The United States is already falling behind other nations when it comes to forecasting capabilities. As accurate as the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Agency's predictions of the track of Hurricane Sandy proved to be, European models predicted its landfall days before U.S. models did.¹⁶ As a result, when meteorologists sought to predict the arrival and intensity of the large storm that slammed into the New York/New Jersey area less than a week after Sandy, they frequently referenced the European model's predictions to lend more credibility to their reports.¹⁷

Even though our domestic weather prediction capabilities trail the Europeans in many capacities, sequestration's 8.2 percent cut would make them even worse. One specific example involves the ongoing effort to replace our nation's aging weather monitoring satellites. The Government Accountability Office predicted that even at current spending levels, to buy replacement satellites, "there will likely be a gap in satellite data lasting 17 to 53 months"—the time it takes the old satellite to shut down and when its replacement can come online.¹⁸ During this time, the accuracy of advance warnings of impending weather disasters such as hurricanes and blizzards could decline by as much as 50 percent.¹⁹

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Agency's "Procurement, Acquisition, and Construction" account would face a \$149 million reduction, according to the Office of Management and Budget's projections. This would almost certainly extend the amount of time the country will have to get by with lower-quality storm predictions and warnings, potentially causing more damage and fatalities due to inaccurate weather prediction.

Slower energy development

Energy development is an important and legitimate use of our lands and oceans. Both onshore lands and the Outer Continental Shelf (lands owned by the U.S. that are underwater offshore) provide substantial natural resources used for energy. In fact, 32 percent of the oil, 21 percent of the natural gas, and 43 percent of the coal produced in the United States comes from federal lands and waters.²⁰ Sequestration, however, could potentially hinder government agencies from planning, studying, and permitting this energy development by limiting their resources and available staff.

Public lands and oceans also offer significant opportunities for renewable energy development. Recently, the Department of the Interior announced that it had approved 10,000 megawatts of solar, wind, and geothermal energy on public lands, more than all previous administrations combined.²¹ The agency is also making progress when it comes to offshore wind development. The Cape Wind project has received all its permits and is preparing to begin construction on the country's first offshore wind farm, in Massachusetts' Nantucket Sound.²² And after completing the first phase of its "Smart from the Start" initiative, which identifies areas off the Atlantic coast that will be offered to developers,²³ the agency issued its first lease under the program in October: Deepwater Wind LLC now has exclusive rights to develop an area off the coast of Delaware.²⁴

But all of this progress could be drastically slowed under sequestration. Land and ocean management agencies face cuts to the programs that allow them to plan for, study, permit, and help build fossil fuel and renewable energy projects on an efficient timeline. This means projects will take longer to get approved and set up, delaying the process of energy development and in some cases potentially stopping it completely. The stalling of energy development from our own public lands and oceans will also mean a greater reliance on foreign energy sources—an outcome we've been trying to get away from for years.

Specifically, the Department of the Interior's Bureau of Land Management faces an \$85 million cut to its "Management of Lands and Resources" account in fiscal year 2013 alone. Part of this account is devoted to energy and minerals management, including permit processing and environmental analyses of energy projects. The Department's Fish and Wildlife Service also has funds that allow it to study the impacts of energy development on species and habitats, but the account that is in part devoted to this purpose—"Resource Management"—will be slashed by \$105 million in 2013 under sequestration. These types

of cuts could delay the environmental review process, making it more difficult for renewable energy projects on public lands to actually get off the ground.

In terms of offshore energy development, the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management will be cut by \$13 million in fiscal year 2013 if the sequester moves forward. This agency manages exploration, science, leasing, permitting, and development of offshore energy resources, both fossil and renewable.²⁵ Such a large cut to this agency's budget could slow down the recent progress made on offshore wind energy development on the Outer Continental Shelf.

Additionally, offshore drilling safety could be compromised by the fiscal showdown. The Office of Management and Budget notes that the agency that oversees offshore oil and gas rigs to ensure safety and environmental standards—the Bureau of Safety and Environmental Enforcement—is slated to be slashed by \$16 million altogether in fiscal year 2013. As this agency noted in its budget justification:

The bureau conducts thousands of inspections of OCS [Outer Continental Shelf] facilities and operations—covering tens of thousands of safety and pollution prevention components—to prevent offshore accidents and spills and to ensure a safe working environment. The bureau strives to conduct annual inspections of all oil and gas operations on the OCS, while focusing an increasing proportion of resources on the highest risk operations in order to examine safety equipment designed to prevent blowouts, fires, spills, and other major accidents.²⁶

A \$16 million cut to these operations could be dangerous for worker safety and well-being, as well as that of the ecosystems, communities, and businesses that rely on a healthy ocean.

Further reductions to the budget of the U.S. Coast Guard, which serves as the first responder in the event of an oil spill, could also affect its ability to respond to emergencies and are detailed later in this report.

Fewer wildland firefighters

Our land management agencies also make critical investments in fighting forest and wildland fires. This year saw devastating fires on both private and public lands but was particularly bad for national forests—a fire in the Gila National Forest, for example, was New Mexico's largest-ever fire.²⁷ And the National Interagency Fire Center has determined the amount of acreage burned by wildfires has been increasing in recent decades.²⁸ Land management agencies provide first-responder resources and capacity in terms of firefighters, equipment, and critical funding for fighting these blazes. They help keep American families safe in times of need, particularly those whose homes are close to wild places.

But the U.S. Forest Service faces tremendous cuts to its firefighting capabilities under sequestration. Its “Wildland Fire Management” account, which funds preparedness, fire suppression, hazardous-fuels removal, restoration, and state fire assistance, among other things,²⁹ is slated to be cut by \$172 million in fiscal year 2013 if the sequester moves forward. Additionally, the Department of the Interior’s “Wildland Fire Management” account faces a \$46 million cut next year. The department also funds the “FLAME Wildfire Suppression Reserve Fund,” which will be cut by \$7 million under sequestration. In total, funding for wildland fire prevention and assistance at the land management agencies will be cut by \$225 million.

Without such funding, not only will Americans’ property and lives be more at risk, but special places such as national forests and national parks will be less resilient in the face of future fires.

Closures of national parks

National parks—often referred to as America’s best idea—are well-loved and protect our natural, cultural, and historical heritage. In addition to famous national parks such as Yellowstone and the Grand Canyon, the 398 national park units managed by the National Park Service range from Cape Cod National Seashore to the Apostle Islands National Lakeshore to the Flight 93 National Memorial.³⁰ And yet many, if not all, of these national park units would face budgetary impacts under sequestration. These could include park closures, fewer visitor resources including educational programs, and a reduction in park staff such as rangers who help with upkeep on these sites. Combined, all of these changes could lead to far worse visitor experiences at national parks, making them less desirable vacation destinations for American and international tourists.

Specifically, the Office of Management and Budget determined that the National Park Service as a whole faces a \$218 million cut in fiscal year 2013. As seen in the chart below, the majority of this cut is in the “Operation of the National Park System” account, which funds programs such as protection of resources, law enforcement and park rangers, visitor services like education and interpretation, and maintenance such as trail construction and campgrounds.³¹

TABLE 1
Potential cuts to the National Park Service in fiscal year 2013

Account	Cut in FY 2013 (\$ millions)	Percentage cut (discretionary or direct spending?)
Operation of the National Park System	183	8.2
Construction and Major Maintenance	13	8.2
National Recreation and Preservation	5	8.2
Land Acquisition and State Assistance	8	8.2
Historic Preservation Fund	5	7.6
Other Permanent Appropriations	1	7.6
Recreation Fee Permanent Appropriations	3	7.6
Total	\$218	

Source: Office of Management and Budget

The “Operation of the National Park System” account also contains much of the funding for agency staff—in fiscal year 2012 nearly all of the funds to pay the National Park Service’s employees were housed in this account.³²

An 8.2 percent—or \$183 million—cut to the “Operation of the National Park System” account could cripple some of the most important functions of the National Park Service, which was already facing a decreasing budget and a serious maintenance backlog. While it is difficult to know for sure what exactly would be cut due to lack of information from the agency, the National Parks Conservation Association speculates that these cuts would “very likely lead to the furloughing—or indefinite closure—of national parks. A cut of this magnitude would also likely lead to the loss of many park rangers, particularly during the busy visiting season.”³³

The organization also warned that cuts of this magnitude could lead to park closures and calculated that an approximately 8 percent cut would be equivalent to closing up to 200 national park units with the smallest operating budgets, closing 150 parks with low visitation rates, or closing a handful of large and famous parks such as the National Mall and Memorials, Yellowstone, Yosemite, and Gateway National Recreation Area.³⁴ In addition to the fact that visitors may not be able to see these places, their closures could also lead to declines in revenue and even jobs—the National Park Service stimulated \$31 billion in economic contributions and 258,000 jobs in 2011.³⁵

Fewer places to hunt

America’s lands and oceans also provide important opportunities for recreation, including hunting and fishing. Many of the areas that are open to these activities also provide nonwildlife-related recreation opportunities such as hiking, camping, boating, and off-road vehicle use. Not only are these areas important places to play, they also are important economic

drivers: A recent report from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service found that more than 37 million Americans hunted or fished in 2011, contributing billions of dollars to the economy.³⁶

A number of agencies that oversee recreational hunting and fishing face budgetary cuts. The Bureau of Land Management, for example, manages 256 million acres of public lands, much of which is open to sportsmen. The agency's largest budget line item is "Management of Lands and Resources," which includes nearly all of its funds to manage wildlife and fisheries, wilderness, and other recreation resources.³⁷ And yet the Office of Management and Budget predicts this account will see an \$85 million cut in fiscal year 2013.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service also has an vital role in providing hunting and fishing opportunities because it funds wildlife programs and manages the national wildlife refuges that serve as fish and game habitats. The "Resource Management" account in its budget houses operations such as visitor services, law enforcement, refuge maintenance, habitat conservation, and national fish-hatchery operations.³⁸ This account would see a \$105 million cut in fiscal year 2013, according to the Office of Management and Budget. The North American Wetlands Conservation Fund, which provides federal grants to restore wetlands for fish and wildlife, would be cut by \$3 million, while the Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration program (Pittman-Robinson), which provides federal funds to states for wildlife management and restoration, would be cut by \$31 million.

The Forest Service also faces cuts that would impair its ability to provide American sportsmen with recreation opportunities. Its "National Forest System" account, which would be cut by \$129 million, funds priorities such as forest restoration, which provides new places to hunt and fish; planning in order to manage recreation opportunities; and an entire account devoted to "Recreation, Heritage, and Wilderness." In addition, its "Forest and Rangeland Research" line item, which has a small subaccount for "Recreation Research and Development," would be cut by \$24 million, and the "State and Private Forestry" account, which provides funds for open space conservation and new protected areas, would be cut by \$21 million.

While it is unclear exactly which programs will be cut at each of these agencies—we have merely predicted potential implications of budget cuts—there is little doubt that cuts would impact the hunting and fishing experience that Americans currently enjoy. And cuts of this magnitude could potentially lead to a decline in the quality of wildlife habitat, fewer places that are protected for their hunting and fishing values, less law enforcement, poorly maintained hiking trails, deterioration of visitor facilities, fewer education programs, unprocessed hunting and access permits, and the basic disintegration of visitor experiences overall—all of which means less revenue.

Less fish on your table

America's saltwater fisheries, both commercial and recreational, are managed by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Agency's National Marine Fisheries Service. Despite an onerous and costly legal mandate to end overfishing in U.S. waters and set strict science-based annual catch limits in all fisheries beginning in 2011, this service's budget has already declined by more than 10 percent from an all-time high of \$1 billion in 2010 to \$895 million for fiscal year 2012. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Agency's "Operations, Research, and Facilities" account—which includes funding for day-to-day operations of the National Marine Fisheries Service—will be cut by 8.2 percent if sequestration occurs. If the Office of Management and Budget applies that reduction equally across all the agency's departments, that would mean a further reduction of \$73 million from the National Marine Fisheries Service, on top of the 10 percent cut this year.

These cuts could have major impacts on getting fish to our kitchen tables. No matter how the sequestration cuts end up being distributed, they will mean the agency's fisheries scientists will have fewer resources with which to carry out research that informs the fishery stock assessments on which catch limits are based.³⁹ If scientists know less, they will have to be more conservative with catch limits to ensure overfishing does not occur. This means fishermen will be forced to catch less, leading directly to fewer recreational opportunities, less fish in the marketplace, and a loss of revenue to coastal businesses and communities.

The cuts will also have impacts on jobs because fishing in U.S. oceans is a massive economic driver in coastal regions. Saltwater anglers spent \$19.5 billion in 2009, according to National Oceanic and Atmospheric Agency estimates, and the recreational fishing industry was directly responsible for more than 300,000 jobs (these figures do not include costs such as hotel rooms, meals, travel, and other services). This same report found that commercial fisheries accounted for more than 1 million jobs and more than \$116 billion in sales impacts.⁴⁰

Members of the House of Representatives' Appropriations Committee stated in a report on the 2012 budget for the federal government's "Commerce, Justice, and Science" account that, "Healthy levels of investment in [fisheries] scientific research are the key to long-term economic growth."⁴¹ And yet the legislation accompanying that report still slashed more than \$200 million from the president's recommended budget.⁴² Sequestration will cut even more.

Diminished ocean safety

On October 28, amid Hurricane Sandy's 30-foot waves and wind gusts of up to 70 miles per hour, the tall ship *Bounty* began to founder about 90 miles off the North Carolina coast. As the 16 crew members were forced to abandon ship, the U.S. Coast Guard went to

work, launching two helicopters into the teeth of the storm. Tragically, the ocean claimed the lives of the ship's captain and one of its crewmembers, but just a few hours after receiving the distress call, the 14 other crewmembers were safely on shore.⁴³ All in a day's work.

Despite the Coast Guard's high-profile, action-movie-worthy heroics such as the *Bounty* rescue or the remarkable efforts to pluck thousands of stranded New Orleans residents from rooftops during and after Hurricane Katrina, the fifth branch of our armed services largely toils in anonymity. But since the Coast Guard was shifted into the newly created Department of Homeland Security in the departmental reshuffling following the 9/11 attacks,⁴⁴ its suite of missions has increased dramatically. In addition to carrying out search-and-rescue activities, patrolling our maritime boundaries to prevent narcotics and illegal immigrants smuggling, enforcing fisheries regulations, and coordinating response to offshore pollution events such as the BP oil spill, one of the service's core missions is now protecting our maritime border from threats including that of a terrorist attack. Sequestration will only reduce the Coast Guard's capacity to accomplish all of these tasks effectively.

Meanwhile, the ships the Coast Guard uses to carry out its vital missions are literally rusting beneath their feet. High Endurance Cutters—such as the 368-foot *Gallatin*, which led the search for the *Bounty*'s missing captain in the days after the rescue—are on average 43 years old and their age is showing.⁴⁵ According to the Government Accountability Office, the eight Cutters in the Coast Guard fleet together lost 528 operational days in 2011 alone due to unscheduled maintenance issues.⁴⁶ The report went on to state that 10 of the 12 vessels deployed to Haiti in the aftermath of the 2010 earthquake experienced “severe failures of parts or systems, which diminished their availability to deliver emergency aid and perform medical evacuations.”⁴⁷

As Shell and other oil companies look to expand oil drilling operations in the Arctic Ocean, the Coast Guard currently has just one functional icebreaking ship, with no plans to build any more.⁴⁸ This is important because the Coast Guard is responsible for overseeing drilling safety operations, and needs infrastructure like icebreakers in case of a spill or other disaster. By contrast, Russia, which already operates seven nuclear-powered icebreakers, recently announced plans to build 30 more ships by 2030—and three more by 2015.⁴⁹

The sequestration process will have significant negative ramifications for both the Coast Guard's effort to build new ships to replace their aging fleet and for the service's day-to-day operations. The deal would slash nearly half a billion dollars from the Coast Guard budget, which Republicans and Democrats alike agree is already too thin.⁵⁰ The reductions will include \$247 million from the “Operating Expenses” account, and \$115 million from the “Acquisition, Construction, and

Improvements”—the former account pays for Coast Guard personnel and missions, and the latter for the construction of new ships and aircraft. These cuts will result in decreased homeland security and maritime safety for all Americans.

Conclusion

It is clear that the looming budget sequester will have major impacts on our lands and oceans and the varied purposes they serve for all Americans. The critical services provided by the land and ocean management agencies require funding, but their benefits are widespread. We need a balanced approach to our country’s budget crisis, and it is imperative that new revenues be a part of the solution.

We urge members of Congress to look at new sources of revenue. Cuts to nondefense discretionary spending should not come without the closure of tax loopholes for the wealthiest Americans and getting rid of subsidies to some of our most profitable companies, such as ExxonMobil and Royal Dutch Shell. No longer can congressional Republicans try to take taxes off the table—a workable solution can only include a fair and favorable combination of both tax revenue and spending cuts.

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