

TO: Center For American Progress

FROM: Hart Research Associates

DATE: June 12, 2013

RE: Equal Ground—Balancing Conservation And Drilling On America’s Public Lands

Hart Research conducted qualitative and quantitative research on public opinion about the recent oil and gas boom, its impacts, and preferred uses of public lands. Following four focus groups, a telephone survey was conducted from May 2 to 10, 2013, among 993 voters living in nine states in the mountain west region.¹

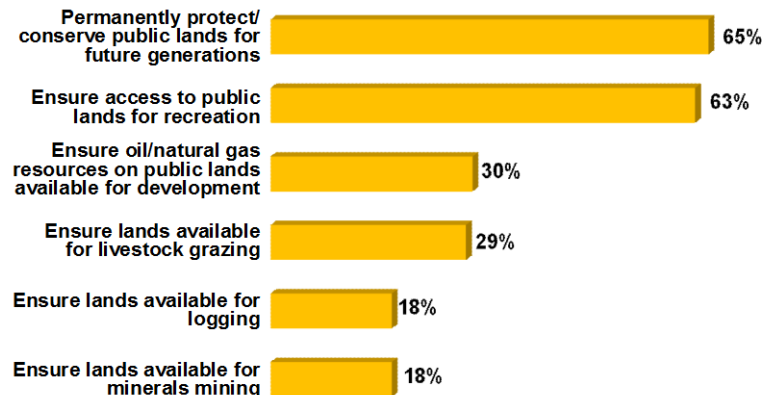
The survey results highlight several key factors that put moderates and progressives in a strong position to win both the policy and political debate over 1) how to appropriately develop oil and gas on public lands, and 2) the need for new national parks, wilderness, monuments, and outdoor recreation opportunities for the public.

1) Two pillars define what is at stake for public lands: ensuring access to recreational activities and permanently protecting public lands for future generations. Far fewer voters place top priority on ensuring that oil and gas on public lands are available for development.

About two in three (65%) voters say that permanently protecting and conserving public lands for future generations is very important to them personally, and another 63% say that ensuring access to public lands for recreation activities is personally important to them (as indicated by a rating of “9” or “10” on a zero-to-10 scale). By comparison, only half as many voters (30%) say the same about making sure oil and gas resources on public lands are available for development. Oil and gas even fails to make top priority among a majority of Republicans (45%). Along these same lines, voters favor a government approach to public lands that focuses more on conserving (49%) as opposed to opportunities for oil and natural gas drilling (29%).

There are two standout priorities for public lands: access to recreational activities and permanent protection.

Very important priority for public lands managed by federal government*



*9-10 ratings on zero-to-10 scale, 10 = extremely important priority

While permanently protecting public lands for future generations is a top priority among allies, ensuring access to recreational activities cuts across party lines. Majorities of Democrats (58%), independents (63%), and Republicans (66%) rate recreational activities as very important to them personally when it comes to public lands.

Voters' greatest concerns about federal management of drilling on public lands are environmental. Majorities of voters have major concerns that the federal government allows drilling in areas that could create environmental hazards to neighboring communities (60%) or allows drilling in environmentally sensitive areas (56%).

Oil companies being subjected to the hassle and inconvenience of bureaucratic red tape are substantially lesser concerns and can be trumped by informing voters that oil and gas companies are not using thousands of permits that they already have. Only 39% of voters have major concerns that the government places too many restrictions on oil and gas drilling on public lands and only 35% are concerned that the government places too many areas off limits for drilling.

In head-to-head matchups, oil and gas companies' inaction on current permits is a stronger pushback against restrictive government policies and red tape than arguing that government decisions are biased toward oil and gas companies. Voters are divided evenly between the position that restrictive policies and red tape are holding back energy development (39%) and that government decisions about whether to lease public lands are tilted in favor of oil and gas companies (39%). But more voters say that their opinion is closer to the position that oil and gas companies already are sitting on 7,000 permits on public lands where they are allowed to drill but are not drilling (45%) than the position that restrictive policies and red tape position are holding back energy development unnecessarily (38%).

2) The strongest arguments for protecting public lands center on preserving them for future generations, jobs, and economic growth.

The two arguments that voters find the most compelling acknowledge the value of energy development on public lands but contend that we must exercise caution in order to protect these lands for future generations. Highlighting the enormous contribution that public lands make to the economy through outdoor recreation also makes a strong case for voters. All three messages listed below are endorsed consistently among large majorities of voters across party lines in the same rank order.

- ✓ We need energy development, and the jobs and economic growth that come with it. However, some places are just too special to drill. We must make decisions carefully so we protect important places for future generations.
- ✓ Our public lands are huge economic engines for the nation. From energy development to tourism and outdoor recreation, our lands and waters power our economy and create jobs. We must manage our public lands wisely and sustainably so they are available for generations to come.
- ✓ Our nation's public lands and waters support a \$646 million outdoor recreation economy. Access to quality places to play outside is not only important for families, outdoor enthusiasts, and sportsmen; it is also critical to businesses, fundamental to recruiting employers, and at the heart of healthy and productive communities.

Parks, communities, and water sources rise to the top of places that should be off limits: nearly half of voters say drilling should not be allowed on national parks (48%), public lands near where people live (47%), and water sources (46%). Only 10% do not choose any type of public lands to be off limits.

When asked to choose among six succinct themes, voters overall say that the most important reason for the federal government to focus more on protecting and conserving public lands is so

that public lands are available for future generations to enjoy (24%). This is the top reason among Democrats (26%) and independents (29%) alike. Republicans are the outlier here in that they give approximately equal weight to conserving for future generations' enjoyment (21%) and public lands' contribution to the economy and job creation (24%).

3) Voters say we can protect and conserve more public lands AND develop domestic energy sources.

Voters reject the idea that there must be a single-minded, "either/or" approach to public lands. When explicitly given the opportunity to choose a third option, a majority (55%) instead say the government should put conservation on equal ground with drilling for oil and gas. This is the case among independents (59%), Republicans (64%), hunters and anglers (57%), and even among people who rate oil and gas as very important to them personally (57%). Democrats, in contrast, are divided between putting drilling and conservation on equal ground (44%) and focusing more on conservation and protection (47%).

Consistent with voters' overall preference for a balanced approach to public lands, voters also strongly prefer that the Obama administration's "all-of-the-above" energy policy include more protection for public lands. Nearly twice as many voters want an "all-of-the-above" energy policy to include more protection for public lands (59%) as want the administration to focus strictly on expanding energy development (32%).

4) Voters strongly endorse several proposals designed to address drilling for oil and gas on public lands, particularly using money from leases to repair damage from drilling.

A large majority (78%) of voters strongly favor using some of the money collected from oil and natural gas drilling on public lands to repair damage caused by drilling to land, fish, and wildlife habitat. This proposal receives strong bipartisan support with 69% of Republicans and 86% of Democrats endorsing it. A proposal to use money from leases to research and develop alternative clean energy sources also receives strong support (63%) albeit more modestly among Republicans (52% compared with 76% of Democrats). Voters even are amenable to the idea of making oil and gas companies pay more money to drill on public lands. Nearly three in five (58%) voters—including 69% of Democrats, 57% of independents, and nearly half (47%) of Republicans—say they strongly favor making oil and gas companies pay similar rates to what they pay on state and private lands to ensure that taxpayers receive a fair return for use of energy resources.

Framing how payment is procured from oil and gas companies, however, is key for ensuring bipartisan support. In contrast to taking some of the money oil and gas companies already pay or increasing the cost of leasing public lands, charging an upfront fee to address potential damage likely is a nonstarter for Republicans. While 57% of voters overall strongly favor charging oil and gas companies an upfront fee to address damage that drilling might cause to public lands, only 36% of Republicans say the same.

¹The sample included approximately 150 voters from Colorado (150), Montana (150), New Mexico (152), and Oregon (151) as well as approximately 75 voters in the following five states: Arizona (78), Idaho (75), Nevada (83), Utah (77), and Wyoming (77). The sample is weighted to include each state relative to the size of its actual registered electorate.