

**ON EQUAL GROUND: RIGHTING THE BALANCE BETWEEN  
ENERGY DEVELOPMENT AND CONSERVATION ON PUBLIC LANDS**

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*As Prepared for Delivery*

Good afternoon.

Thank you for joining me once again here at the National Press Club.

My topic today is the connection between the production of oil and gas and the imperative of enhanced conservation initiatives on our public lands. Americans expect their public lands to supply more energy for today, but they also expect more parks, wilderness and open space for tomorrow. And that balance, between development and land conservation, is not being maintained.

Today, I will propose that President Obama embrace a simple, powerful, and practical principle that will – once again – place the conservation of America’s lands on equal ground with energy development.

We may begin, however, with a brief look back to acknowledge the achievements of the President's first term.

On many issues, he has already compiled an excellent record. He has negotiated tough new vehicle fuel efficiency standards, doubling average mileage to more than 50 miles per gallon. He has doubled the production of renewable energy. And he has taken historic action to regulate carbon dioxide as a threat to our planet.

On the issues that are closest to my heart, the stewardship of public lands, the Administration has also made notable progress.

Secretary Salazar, as he returns to Colorado, leaves a legacy that includes passage of the 2009 Omnibus Lands Bill that established some two million acres of wilderness and more than 1,000 miles of scenic river designations. He has pioneered new public private partnerships for land conservation, took action to protect the Grand Canyon from uranium mining, and set forth an innovative plan for management of the Alaska Arctic. And, together with Secretary Vilsack, he has been instrumental in recommending the use of the Antiquities Act by President Obama to designate four new national monuments at Fort Monroe in Virginia, Chimney Rock in Colorado, and Fort Ord and Cesar Chavez in California.

The President’s record on conservation to date, however, is only a beginning. In a second term, he must extend that work with the same clarity and vigor that he devoted to climate, energy, and conservation in his inaugural address.

In fact, that is precisely the President's mandate, set by the American people when they rejected Governor Romney's energy plan, which was – in essence – a 'drill only' approach. As a candidate last year, President Obama rightly criticized Governor Romney's proposal as being 'written by oil executives.' The President instead promised balanced policies that would expand energy production while also protecting our land and water.

We all know which energy plan voters chose at the polls.

But the call for balance comes not only from the voices of the voters last November, but from our own history.

Traditionally, the President and the Congress have cooperated in setting aside public spaces for future generations to enjoy. Throughout the last century, Congress has partnered with Presidents in enacting legislation to create wilderness, national parks, and conservation areas. And Presidents of both parties have regularly exercised their authority to establish national monuments and wildlife refuges.

This chart, showing the relative acreage of lands given permanent protection under recent presidents from Reagan to Obama, illustrates the fruits of this traditional conservation partnership. It shows not only total acreage, but also the relative contributions from the ongoing "conversation" between the two branches of government, legislative and executive.

Unfortunately, what the chart also shows is a dramatic decline, beginning in 2001, of that conservation tradition. Our public land conservation consensus has fractured and collapsed.

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Meanwhile, in contrast, the pace of oil and gas leasing on public lands has continued at a high rate. Just over the past four years, the Obama Administration has leased more than 6 million acres of public lands for oil and gas development.

Designating public lands for energy production – oil and gas and renewable – is of course an appropriate resource use. Yet, as we hear more and more strident demands for accelerated leasing and increased production, we should pause to ask:

“What about conservation?”

“Where is the balance?”

And we must recognize that use of public lands to produce oil and gas has real costs. Roads carve up and fragment the landscape. Streams are polluted and fisheries endangered. Sportsmen lose the backcountry places best for hunting. Archaeological sites are compromised, wildlife habitat degraded. Entire landscapes and ecosystems are despoiled in the manner of the Jonah field in Wyoming. Open space is ever harder to find and enjoy.

A look at the numbers will show how over recent decades the traditional balance between exploitation and conservation has been lost.

Industry, for its part, drives hard – year in and year out – to turn more of the public land to its purposes. And Presidents and Congresses should keep pace by setting aside lands for permanent protection. The second chart shows how the balance between exploitation and conservation has varied across recent Presidential administrations, from President George Herbert Walker Bush to President Obama.

Under George H.W. Bush, conservation ran neck and neck with oil and gas.

Under President Clinton, conservation moved ahead.

Then, under President George W. Bush, conservation fell far behind, with the oil and gas industry taking down 7.5 acres for every acre of permanent conservation.

So far, under President Obama, industry has been winning the race as it obtains more and more land for oil and gas. Over the past four years, the industry has leased more than 6 million acres, compared with only 2.6 million acres permanently protected. In the Obama era, land conservation is again falling behind.

This lopsided public land administration in favor of the oil and gas industry cannot continue.

Therefore, I am proposing today that the President adopt a common-sense principle: for every acre of land leased to the oil and gas industry during his tenure, one acre must be permanently protected for future generations. It's that simple: one to one.

This 'One-to-One principle' will ensure that the conservation of our public lands is *on equal ground* with energy development. The principle will ensure that tourism, hunting, fishing are *on equal ground* with the interests of oil and gas companies. And it will ensure that our responsibility to future generations and to the climate is *on equal ground* with the pressures and needs of today.

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Now, how can the President right the balance between development and land conservation by the end of his second term, and achieve that one-to-one balance?

He can begin by committing to make up the deficit of the past four years by placing an additional 4 million acres of land into permanent protection. And going forward he should then, too, commit to place one additional acre into permanent protection for each acre leased out to the oil and gas industry.

I emphasize permanent protection because permanence is what assures us that Yosemite will never be logged and that the Grand Staircase Escalante and the Canyonlands will never be strip mined. It is why the Wilderness Act provides for the protection of untrammeled lands as an

‘enduring resource.’ Permanent protection assures us that these places will remain *open to all* and protected for *all time*.

And permanence is particularly important in a world with a changing climate. Those things we once thought timeless – the flows of rivers, the migration of wildlife, the cycles of nature – are all shifting before our eyes. Now, more than ever, we need to protect open lands as buffers against rising seas, forests as healthy watersheds, and corridors for new migration patterns.

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Now some may ask: "Is this a realistic goal?"

Is it possible for the President to achieve a one-to-one balance of development and conservation by the end of his second term?

He starts with one significant handicap: unlike his predecessors, he cannot count on even minimal cooperation from a Congress that is more interested in throwing itself off metaphorical cliffs than protecting any real ones.

To meet this challenge, the President will have to make vigorous use of his executive powers beginning with the Antiquities Act in the manner of many of his predecessors.

Theodore Roosevelt used the Antiquities Act to save the Grand Canyon. Herbert Hoover used it to save Death Valley... Franklin Roosevelt to preserve the Grand Tetons.

Closer to where we stand today, President Eisenhower preserved the C&O Canal, creating one of the most heavily used recreational areas in the nation. At the other end of the continent, Jimmy Carter used the Antiquities Act to set the stage for passage of the Alaska Lands Conservation Act.

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The list of potential sites awaiting Presidential use of the Antiquities Act is long and well known.

In New Mexico, Senator Udall and Senator Heinrich have both asked for protection of Rio Grande del Norte and the Organ Mountains-Desert Peaks as national monuments.

In Washington, Senator Cantwell and Senator Murray have asked that a national monument be created in the San Juan Islands.

In California, Senator Boxer and Senator Feinstein have urged the President to expand the California Coastal National Monument.

And across the country – from Arizona and Idaho to West Virginia – local officials and community leaders from parties are publicly asking the President to use his authorities to protect spectacular places near them as national monuments.

Let us next consider the question of wilderness and land conservation legislation. The 112th Congress, recently departed, was the first Congress since World War II not to protect a single new acre of public land as a park, wilderness area, or national monument.

This inaction is not for a lack of wilderness bills to consider. As of December, 2012, there were 30 wilderness and conservation land bills stalled in Congress that were sponsored – as per custom – by home state Senators or Representatives, reflecting popular support from their constituencies. These 30 bills would protect areas in thirteen states from Oregon to Maine, totaling some 5 million acres.

Some opinion has it that, since wilderness areas are created by legislation, it must follow that Presidents have no real power to advance the cause of wilderness.

That is not the case.

President Clinton discovered that he could motivate the Congress to act on conservation legislation by suggesting the possibility of a monument proclamation as a substitute for stalled legislative proposals. In our experience Congress, faced with the possibility of an executive order creating a national monument, often moved promptly to share the credit by legislating a conservation designation.

With prompting from President Clinton, Congress awakened and took action to establish the Otay Mountain Wilderness and the San Jacinto National Monument in California, the Steens Mountain Cooperative management Area in Oregon, the Colorado Canyons National Conservation Area in Colorado, and the Las Cienegas National Conservation Area in Arizona, among others.

With these precedents, and considering widespread public support, President Obama should turn his attention to the wilderness, parks, and conservation area bills pending in Congress. If, for example, Senator Feinstein's bill to protect the more than a million acres of the Mojave Desert with a legislative Monument remains bottled up in committee, the President should work with her to examine use of executive authority as an alternative pathway to monument status.

In this way – bill by bill, place by place – the President can help advance deserving proposals on which Congress is failing to act.

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To accomplish the one-to-one objective, the President will need to set clear annual goals for permanent land conservation that put him on track to conserve as much land as he has leased by the end of his presidency.

He should therefore ask his Secretary of the Interior and his Secretary of Agriculture to develop annual recommendations for areas to be considered for permanent protection, including national monuments, national wildlife refuges and wilderness and other Congressional designations.

If the President's annual goals for land conservation are not met, he should suspend quarterly lease sales until they are. The threat of lease suspension will provide a strong incentive for the Congress, and industry lobbyists, to act upon pending conservation legislation.

Now, I expect the usual suspects will oppose this plan from the outset. The oil and gas industry will be insulted by the suggestion that the public's use of public land should be on equal ground with their profits. Right-wing Republicans in the House will take up Big Oil's cause, and will again call for a fire-sale of public lands for corporate use.

However, if you asked most Americans whether they think we should set aside as much land for parks and open space as we are leasing to oil and gas companies, I believe you would hear a resounding 'yes!'

That's because there is a clear logic to connecting energy extraction with land conservation.

Secretary Salazar's recently released management framework for the National Petroleum Reserve-Alaska on the North Slope is an instructive example. The NPR-A plan makes eleven million acres available for potential leasing – including 72% of all oil resources. It also designates eleven million acres as 'special areas' for protection of caribou, migratory birds, and other wildlife. Even if those special areas aren't under permanent protection, the idea is right: one-to-one.

There are several other clear and popular ways of helping put conservation and energy on equal ground. Revenues from oil and gas development should be reinvested in the permanent protection of parks, forests, and open spaces through a dedicated and fully-funded Land and Water Conservation Fund. Congress should create a mitigation fund for both onshore renewable and conventional energy development. And there are, certainly, many other good ideas that will arise in the context of the upcoming debates on energy and climate change.

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In December, 2011, President Obama travelled to Osawatomie, Kansas, to give one of the most important speeches of his first term.

He picked that spot because it was where President Theodore Roosevelt, a century earlier, gave his famous address on 'The New Nationalism.'

TR's 'New Nationalism,' President Obama reminded us, was about building a free market economy where the rules are fair... where businesses and workers can prosper... and where everyone gets a square deal.

But we should also recall that in that speech, President Roosevelt made a powerful case for conservation.

"Of all the questions which can come before this nation, short of the actual preservation of its existence in a great war, there is none which compares in importance with the great central task of leaving this land even a better land for our descendants than it is for us...."

Our conservation tradition, as Dayton Duncan and Ken Burns remind us, is "as uniquely American as the Declaration of Independence."

It now falls on President Obama, the Congress, and on all of us to continue in that tradition by righting the balance between energy development and conservation on public lands, and building a legacy of which our children and grandchildren can be proud.

Thank you.