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Testimony

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FEDERAL LANDS

Information on Land Owned
and on Acreage With
Conservation Restrictions

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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee:

We are pleased to be here to discuss our report,¹ which is being released today, on the trends in the amount of (1) federally owned land and (2) federal acreage set aside for conservation purposes.² This work was done at your and Representative Pombo's request. The federal government owns about 650 million acres, or about 30 percent of the 2.3 billion acres of land in the United States. Our work covered the four federal agencies that manage about 95 percent of all federal land--the Department of Agriculture's Forest Service and the Department of the Interior's Bureau of Land Management (BLM), Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), and National Park Service (NPS). Most of their land is located in 12 western states.

In summary, for the 29-year period from the end of fiscal year 1964 through fiscal year 1993, the overall amount of federal land managed by the four agencies decreased 77.4 million acres, from about 700.5 million acres to about 623.1 million acres. However, the overall decrease is skewed because of two unique land transfers in Alaska--the transfer of about 75.6 million acres of federal land to the state of Alaska in accordance with the Alaska Statehood Act of 1958 and the transfer of about 36.1 million acres to Native Alaskans in accordance with the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act of 1971. Excluding these two large land transfers, the overall amount of land managed by the four agencies actually increased 34.3 million acres.

Over the same 29-year period, the number of acres managed by the four agencies that were set aside for conservation purposes increased from about 51.3 million acres at the end of fiscal year 1964 to about 271.1 million acres at the end of fiscal year 1993.

BACKGROUND

Each of the four agencies has its own unique mission and special responsibilities for the lands and resources under its jurisdiction. NPS manages the national park system for the enjoyment of current and future generations. FWS manages land for the conservation and protection of fish and wildlife. BLM and the Forest Service support a variety of uses for their lands,

¹Federal Lands: Information on Land Owned and on Acreage With Conservation Restrictions (GAO/RCED-95-73FS, Jan. 30, 1995).

²Federal acreage legislatively or administratively set aside for conservation purposes includes land for national parks, national wildlife refuges, wilderness and wilderness study areas, and wild and scenic rivers. The land can have restrictions for such things as the use of motorized equipment, the construction of buildings and roads, and the development of commercial enterprises.

including recreation, timber harvesting, mineral production, livestock grazing, fish and wildlife habitat, and rangelands.

Over the past 30 years, the Congress has enacted a number of laws, and federal agencies have imposed numerous administrative restrictions, to conserve and protect both public and private lands. Among other things, the laws and restrictions affect what can be done on these lands in connection with the air, water, soils, plants, and animals.

The General Services Administration publishes statistics on the amount of land managed by each federal agency. However, we found that this information was not current or reliable, therefore, we developed the information for our report by obtaining it directly from each of the four agencies covered by our review.

TRENDS IN LAND MANAGED BY FOUR FEDERAL AGENCIES

At the end of fiscal year 1993, the Forest Service, BLM, FWS, and NPS managed about 623.1 million acres of federal lands, or about 27 percent of the land in the United States. Over the 29-year period from June 30, 1964, to September 30, 1993, the amount of land managed by the Forest Service, FWS, and NPS increased. These increases were the result of (1) transfers from BLM for the purposes of creating new, or expanding existing, national forests, wildlife refuges, and parks and (2) new land acquisitions. The amount of land managed by the Forest Service increased by 5.2 million acres, rising from 186.3 million acres in 1964 to 191.5 million acres in 1993. FWS-managed land increased 65.0 million acres, from 22.4 million acres in 1964 to 87.4 million acres in 1993. NPS-managed land increased 49.1 million acres, from 27.5 million acres in 1964 to 76.6 million acres in 1993.

Over the same period, the amount of land managed by BLM decreased by 196.7 million acres, dropping from 464.3 million acres in 1964 to 267.6 million acres in 1993. This decrease was mainly due to the two large transfers of federal land in Alaska and to transfers of land from BLM to FWS and NPS in 1979 and 1980.

I have included as appendix I to my statement a graph showing the changes in the amount of land managed by the four agencies from the end of fiscal year 1964 through fiscal year 1993.

Since fiscal year 1993, the amount of land managed by the four agencies has continued to increase. The agencies acquired about 203,000 acres in fiscal year 1994, 72,000 acres by the Forest Service, 27,000 acres by BLM, 82,000 acres by FWS, and 22,000 acres by NPS. In addition, under the California Desert

Protection Act of 1994, BLM transferred approximately 3 million acres to NPS for the establishment of the newly created Mojave National Preserve, Death Valley National Park, and Joshua Tree National Park.

PERCENTAGE OF LAND IN EACH STATE
MANAGED BY FOUR FEDERAL AGENCIES

The amount of land managed by the four agencies in each state varied greatly--from less than 1 percent in Iowa to 81 percent in Nevada. The four agencies managed more than 25 percent of the total land in 12 western states. In five of these states, the agencies managed over 50 percent of the land. Besides Nevada, 66 percent of the land in Alaska is managed by the four agencies, 62 percent of Utah, 61 percent of Idaho, and 52 percent of Oregon. The amount of federal land managed by the four agencies ranged between 10 and 25 percent in 4 states and the District of Columbia, between 5 and 10 percent in 8 states, between 2 and 5 percent in 11 states, and less than 2 percent in the remaining 15 states. I have included as appendix II to my statement a map showing the percentage of federal land in each state managed by the four agencies at the end of fiscal year 1993.

Over the 29-year period, the amount of land managed by the four agencies increased in 46 states and the District of Columbia by almost 20.0 million acres and decreased in 4 states by over 97.4 million acres. Practically all of the 97.4 million acre decrease--about 96.2 million acres--occurred in Alaska as a result of the transfers of land from BLM to Alaska and to Native Alaskans. If these transfers are excluded, the amount of federal land in Alaska also increased over the 29-year period by about 15.5 million acres. The amount of land managed by the four agencies in Idaho, New Mexico, and Utah decreased by about 1.2 million acres during the 29-year period. The map in appendix III to my statement shows the change in the percentage of federal land managed by the four agencies in each state from fiscal years 1964 through 1993.

FEDERALLY MANAGED LAND SET ASIDE FOR
CONSERVATION PURPOSES

Over the same 29-year period, the amount of federal land managed by the four agencies that had legislative or administrative restrictions placed on its use for conservation purposes increased from 51.3 million acres (about 7 percent of the agencies' total acreage) in fiscal year 1964 to 271.1 million acres (almost 44 percent of the agencies' total acreage) in fiscal year 1993.

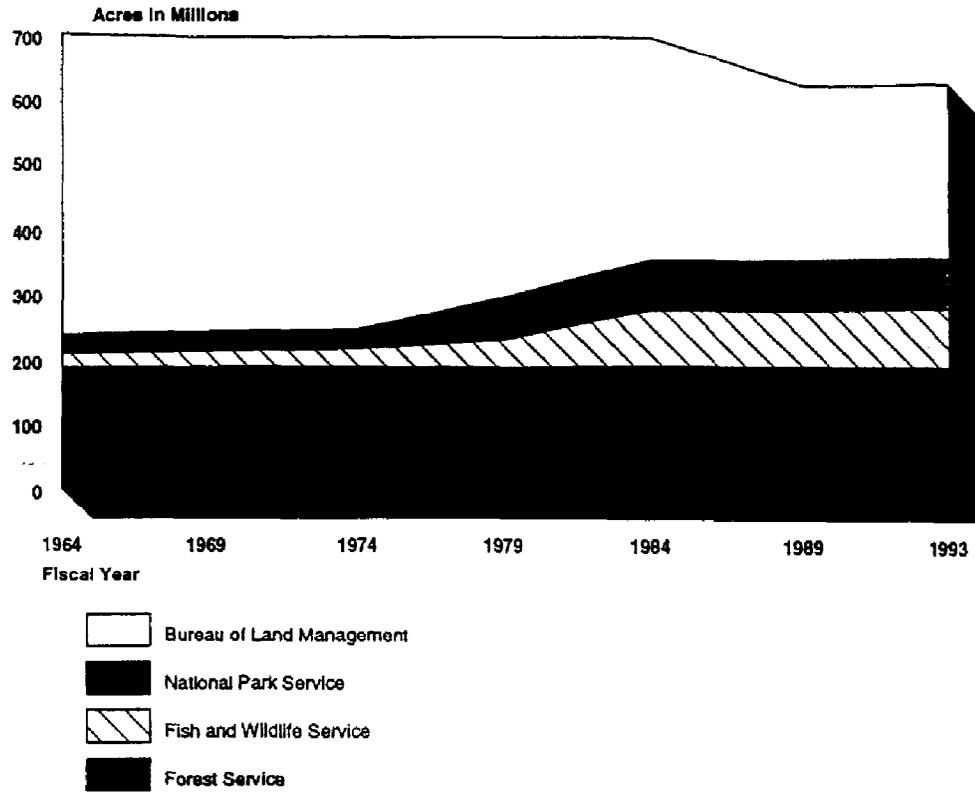
All of the lands managed by FWS and NPS are generally considered to be restricted for conservation purposes. The

Forest Service and BLM, however, do not restrict all of their lands for conservation purposes. Rather, by law, they manage their lands for multiple uses to best meet the present and future needs of the public and to sustain, in perpetuity, their economic use. Some Forest Service and BLM lands, however, are also set aside for conservation purposes, such as wilderness areas or refuges.

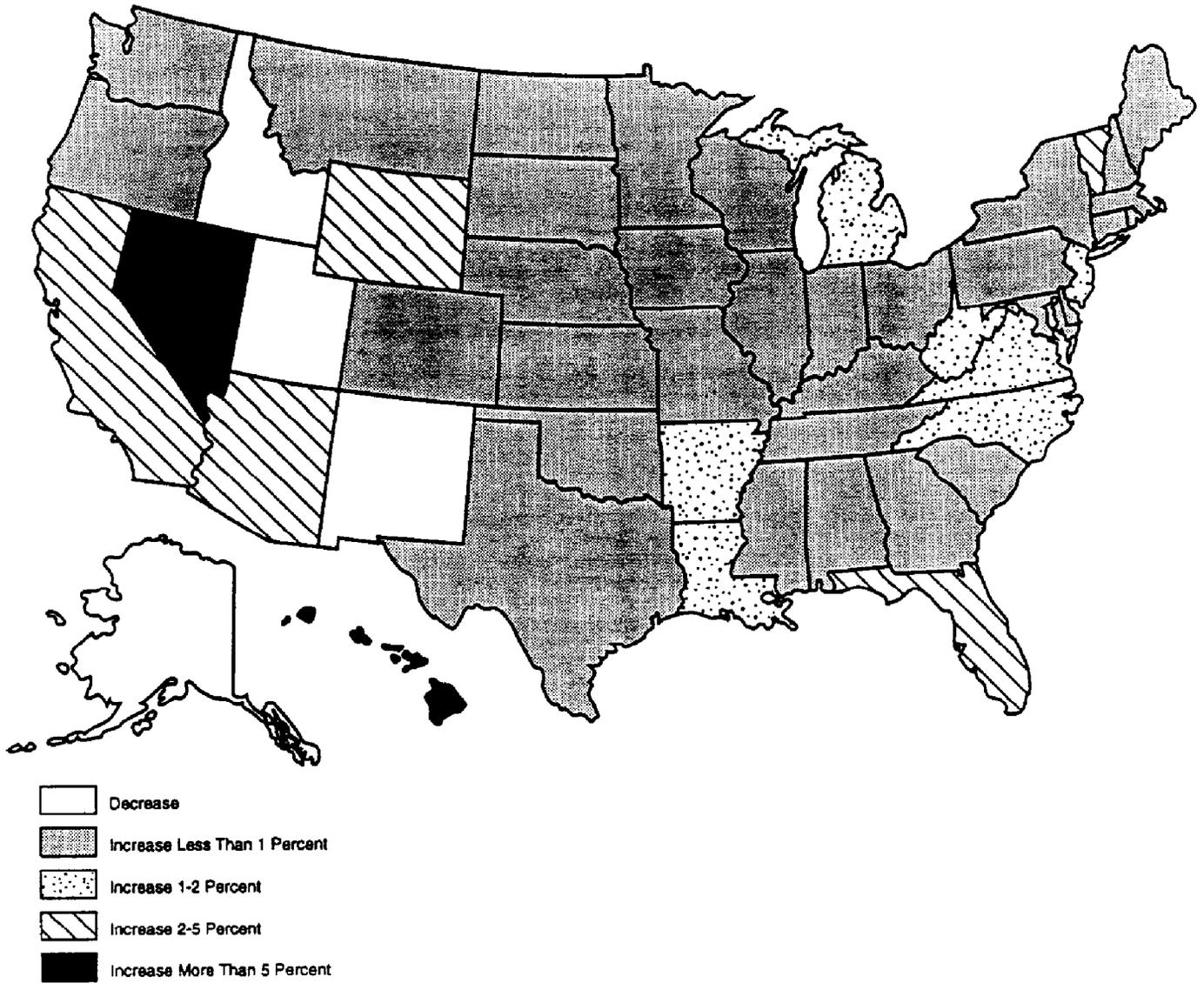
Most of the federal acreage with conservation restrictions is located in 12 western states. The map in appendix IV to my statement shows, as of September 30, 1993, the percentage of land in each of the 12 western states and Hawaii that are managed by the Forest Service, BLM, FWS, and NPS and the percentage of that land that is restricted for conservation purposes. The percentage of federal land set aside for conservation purposes ranges from a low of 17 percent in Nevada to a high of 100 percent in Hawaii.

Mr. Chairman, at your and Representative Pombo's request, we plan to issue a more comprehensive report later this year that will address, among other things, the reasons for changes in federal land ownership, methods used by the federal government to acquire land, and the amount of private land under federal regulatory control. This concludes our statement. We will be happy to respond to any questions that you or other Members of the Committee may have.

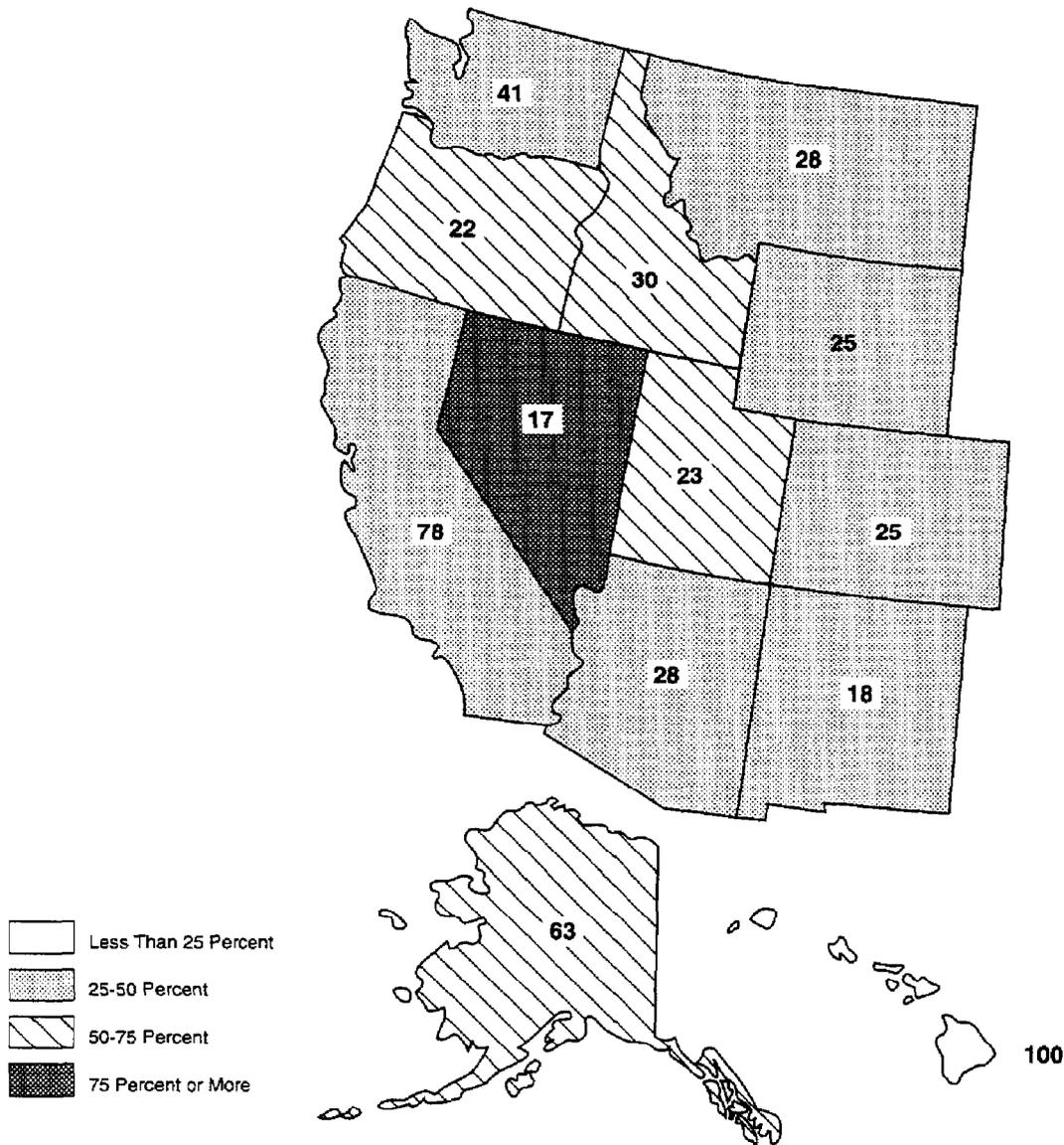
CHANGES IN THE AMOUNT OF LAND MANAGED BY FOUR
FEDERAL AGENCIES, FISCAL YEARS 1964-93



CHANGE IN PERCENTAGE OF FEDERAL LAND MANAGED BY THE FOUR
FEDERAL AGENCIES FROM FISCAL YEARS 1964 THROUGH 1993



PERCENTAGE OF FOUR AGENCIES' LAND IN WESTERN STATES
AND PERCENTAGE OF THAT LAND RESTRICTED FOR
CONSERVATION PURPOSES, AS OF SEPTEMBER 30, 1993



Note 1: The shading of each state indicates the percentage of land in the state that is managed by the federal government.

Note 2: The number in each state represents the percentage of federal acreage in that state that has conservation restrictions placed on its use.

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