

Testimony

Before the Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests, and
Lands, Committee on Resources, House of
Representatives

For Release on Delivery
Expected at
1 p.m. EST
Thursday
March 21, 1996

FEDERAL LANDS

Information on the Acreage,
Management, and Use of
Federal and Other Lands

Statement of Barry T. Hill, Associate Director,
Energy, Resources, and Science Issues,
Resources, Community, and Economic
Development Division



Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

We are pleased to be here today to summarize the results of our work examining federal land ownership. Our report to the Chairman of the House Resources Committee and Representative Pombo, which is being made available today (Land Ownership: Information on the Acreage, Management, and Use of Federal and Other Lands, GAO/RCED-96-40), contains a substantial amount of data on the lands managed by the four primary federal land agencies—the Department of Agriculture’s Forest Service and the Department of the Interior’s Bureau of Land Management, Fish and Wildlife Service, and National Park Service. In addition, the report contains information on the acreage of nonfederal lands where these agencies had rights-of-use, the acreage held in trust for Indians, the acreage owned by selected states,¹ and the land transactions of three nonprofit organizations.

Before I present a summary of the information included in our report, I would like to offer some context and perspective on our work in this area. While the report I will discuss today is mostly an update of a report we issued in January 1995,² it also presents new data on the use of federally managed lands and on nonfederal lands where those four agencies had obtained rights-of-use. The data we are reporting were obtained, in almost all instances, from the four federal land agencies and were the most recent available at the time of our work; they reflect conditions as of September 30, 1994. Although we did not verify the accuracy and completeness of the data, we did reconcile inconsistencies in the data the agencies provided and they made some revisions to refine and improve the data’s accuracy. We believe that the data we are reporting provide a reasonable context and frame of reference for examining the amount of land the four agencies managed, the change in the acreage managed over the last 30 years, and the uses generally being made of these public lands.

Overall, our report shows that the four federal agencies managed about 623 million acres as of September 1994, which is about 78 million fewer acres than in June 1964. This decline in acreage managed during the last 30 years resulted primarily from the transfer of a significant number of federally managed acres to Alaska and to Native Alaskans. Of the acreage

¹We selected these 12 western states—Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon, Utah, Washington, and Wyoming—because the federal government owns at least 25 percent of the acreage in each of these states. In addition, we were asked to include Texas.

²Federal Lands: Information on Land Owned and on Acreage With Conservation Restrictions (GAO/RCED-95-73FS, Jan. 30, 1995).

the agencies managed in 1994, about 272 million acres (43.7 percent) were managed for conservation³ and thus had some limitations on their use.

In addition, our report shows the following:

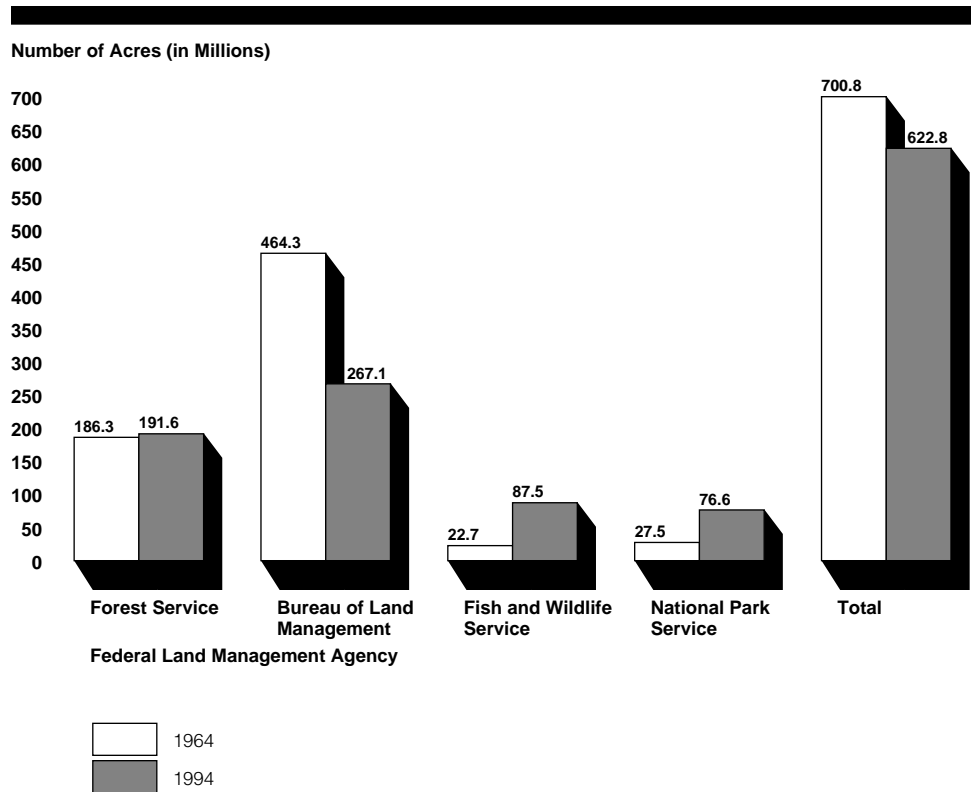
- The agencies had obtained rights-of-use for over 3 million acres of nonfederal land through leases, agreements, permits, and easements.
- The federal government held about 52.3 million acres in trust for Indians in 1995.
- Thirteen western states collectively owned about 142 million acres as of September 30, 1994.
- The land transactions of three nonprofit organizations—the Nature Conservancy, The Conservation Fund, and The Trust for Public Land—resulted in the transfer of about 3.2 million acres to other public and private entities between July 1964 and September 1994.

Lands Managed by the Four Federal Agencies

Over the roughly 30-year period between June 30, 1964, and September 30, 1994, the number of acres managed by three agencies—the Forest Service, the Fish and Wildlife Service, and the National Park Service—increased by a total of about 119 million acres. Offsetting this increase was a significant decrease of about 197 million acres of land managed by the Bureau of Land Management. Figure 1 shows the changes in acreage managed by these four agencies.

³Lands managed for conservation include, among other things, national parks, national wildlife refuges, wilderness and wilderness study areas, wild and scenic rivers, and areas of critical environmental concern.

Figure 1: Acreage Managed by the Four Federal Agencies, Fiscal Years 1964 and 1994



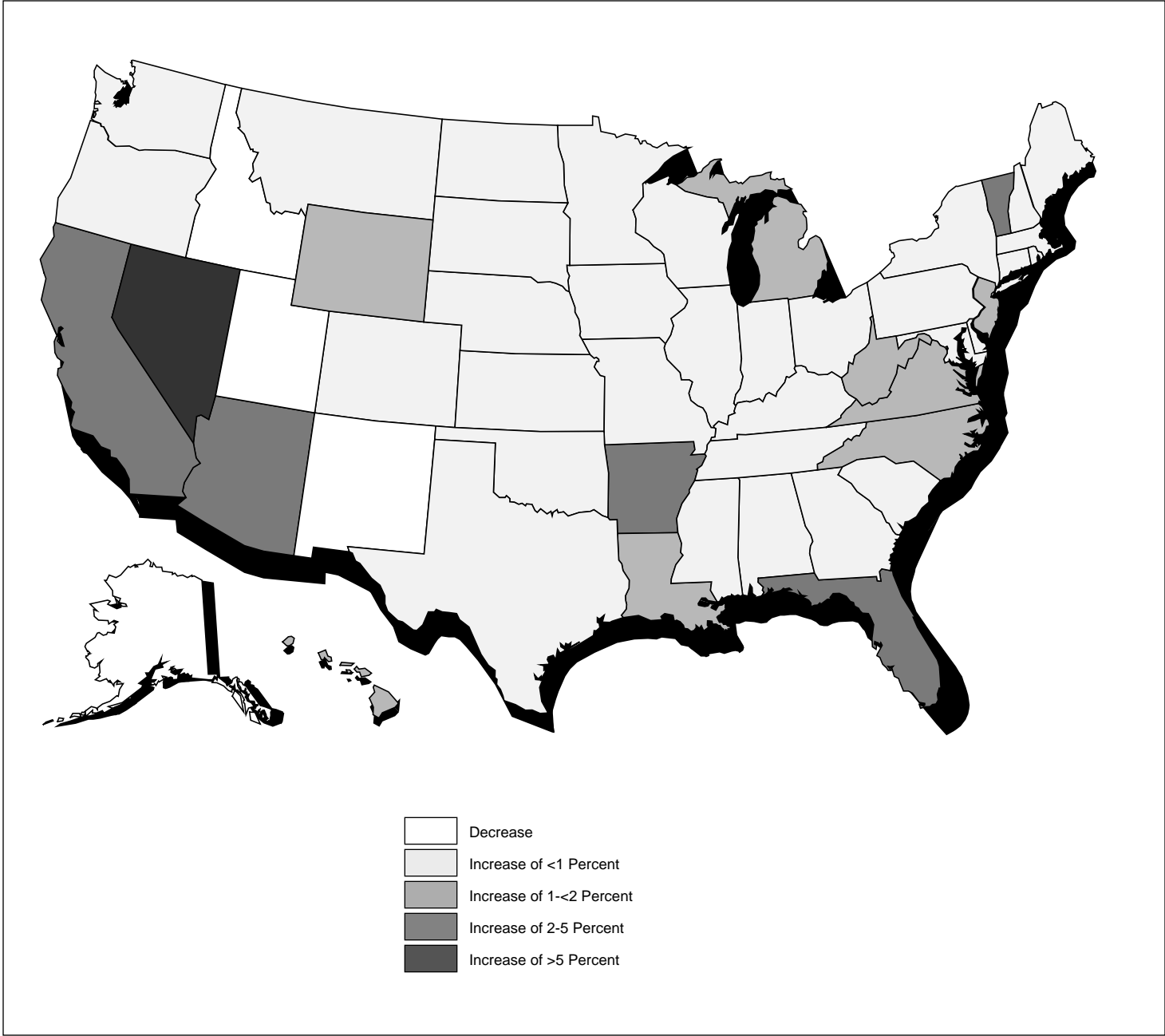
Source: GAO's analysis of data provided by the departments of Agriculture and the Interior.

A key factor affecting the change in the amount of land managed by the four agencies was the transfer of about 113.5 million acres of federally managed lands to Alaska and to Native Alaskans during this period. According to data provided by the Bureau of Land Management, of the acreage transferred to these two entities as of September 1994, all but about 10 million acres had been under its management. In addition to the acreage already transferred, Alaska and Native Alaskans are entitled to receive an additional 25 million acres that, for the most part, are expected to come from lands the Bureau manages.

The acreage managed by the four agencies increased in 46 states while it decreased in 4 states—Alaska, Idaho, New Mexico, and Utah. Figure 2

shows the percentage change in the acres managed in each state over the 30-year period.

Figure 2: Change in the Percentage of Federal Acres Managed by the Four Federal Agencies Between June 1964 and September 1994



Source: GAO's analysis of data provided by the departments of Agriculture and the Interior.

Although the overall acreage managed by the four agencies declined during this 30-year period, the acreage managed primarily for conservation increased by 206 million acres—from about 66 million acres in June 1964 to about 272 million acres in September 1994. These totals include all of the land managed by the Fish and Wildlife Service and National Park Service, as well as portions of the land managed by the Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management.

Data provided by each of the four agencies showed that, in total, they acquired about 10.9 million acres from nonfederal parties during the 1964-94 period. Overall, the acres acquired through purchases and exchanges accounted for most of this acreage. The means by which and the number of acres acquired by each agency is shown in table 1. In addition to the acreage already acquired, the four agencies planned, as of September 30, 1994, to acquire an additional 11.8 million acres in future years.

Table 1: Acres Acquired From Nonfederal Parties for the 1964-94 Period

Method of acquisition	Acres acquired (in thousands)				Total
	Forest Service	Bureau of Land Management	Fish and Wildlife Service	National Park Service	
Purchase	1,479.3	297.1	1,998.2	1,303.3	5,078.0
Exchange	2,179.6	724.4	256.6	90.7	3,251.3
Gift or Donation	522.3	14.6	586.4	631.7	1,755.1
Other ^a	105.1	35.8	35.0	601.3	777.2
Total	4,286.5	1,071.9	2,876.2	2,627.0	10,861.6

Note: Totals may not add because of rounding.

^a“Other” includes acreage acquired through condemnations and takings.

Source: GAO’s analysis of data provided by the departments of Agriculture and the Interior.

Acreage Included in Federal Rights-Of-Use, Held in Trust for Indians, Owned by States, and Involved in Land Transactions of Nonprofit Organizations

The four agencies had also obtained rights-of-use to over 3 million acres on nonfederal land through leases, agreements, permits, and easements as of September 30, 1994. Generally, these rights-of-use were obtained from nonfederal land owners to support management of adjacent federal lands, such as providing access to those lands. Table 2 summarizes the acreage associated with the various rights-of-use obtained by these agencies.

Table 2: Nonfederal Acres for Which the Four Federal Agencies Had Rights-Of-Use as of September 30, 1994

Acreage	Type of right-of-use				Total
	Leases	Agreements	Permits	Easements	
Number of acres	171,244	642,200	66,965	2,120,291	3,000,700
Percentage of acres	5.7	21.4	2.2	70.7	100.0

Source: GAO's analysis of data provided by the departments of Agriculture and the Interior.

In addition to the acreage managed by the four agencies, lands are held in trust for Indians, owned by states, and involved in the land transactions of nonprofit organizations. Information obtained during our review showed the following:

- In 1995, the federal government held about 52.3 million acres in 33 states in trust for individual Indians and Indian tribes.
- As of September 30, 1994, 13 western states collectively owned about 141.9 million acres, of which about 89.4 million acres represented state-owned acreage in Alaska.
- Three nonprofit organizations—the Nature Conservancy, The Conservation Fund, and The Trust for Public Land—collectively transferred by selling, donating, or exchanging about 3.2 million acres to federal, state, or local governments and others during the 1964-94 period.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes our prepared statement, which has highlighted some of the information contained in our report. We will be happy to respond to any questions you or any Member of the Subcommittee may have.

Ordering Information

The first copy of each GAO report and testimony is free. Additional copies are \$2 each. Orders should be sent to the following address, accompanied by a check or money order made out to the Superintendent of Documents, when necessary. VISA and MasterCard credit cards are accepted, also. Orders for 100 or more copies to be mailed to a single address are discounted 25 percent.

Orders by mail:

U.S. General Accounting Office
P.O. Box 6015
Gaithersburg, MD 20884-6015

or visit:

Room 1100
700 4th St. NW (corner of 4th and G Sts. NW)
U.S. General Accounting Office
Washington, DC

Orders may also be placed by calling (202) 512-6000 or by using fax number (301) 258-4066, or TDD (301) 413-0006.

Each day, GAO issues a list of newly available reports and testimony. To receive facsimile copies of the daily list or any list from the past 30 days, please call (202) 512-6000 using a touchtone phone. A recorded menu will provide information on how to obtain these lists.

For information on how to access GAO reports on the INTERNET, send an e-mail message with "info" in the body to:

info@www.gao.gov

**United States
General Accounting Office
Washington, D.C. 20548-0001**

<p>Bulk Rate Postage & Fees Paid GAO Permit No. G100</p>

**Official Business
Penalty for Private Use \$300**

Address Correction Requested
