

Opinion: Why are public lands public?

By William H. Meadows

As the Republican presidential nomination process moves on to the states of Nevada and Colorado, a new topic has arisen in a race that has already seen many twists and turns. That issue is the purpose and importance of public lands. In a recent interview with the *Reno Gazette-Journal*, former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney, the leading contender for the GOP nomination, was quoted as saying, in reference to the large acreage of public land in the state, "I don't know why the government owns so much of this land." As an organization whose mission is to protect wilderness and inspire Americans to care for our wild places, I think it is important to answer the governor's query for all people who enjoy and benefit from our public lands.

Our public lands, which include national parks, national forests, national wildlife refuges and national wilderness areas, among others, are vital to America's economy. Through recreation, such as hunting, fishing and hiking, and tourism, our public lands contribute over \$1 trillion to the nation, not to mention millions of jobs.

Public lands provide much of our clean drinking water and without protection, much of it might be contaminated. Our public lands have also played an extremely important role in energy development, and the economic importance that comes with it. Oil and gas exploration could not have exploded the way it did during the early 20th century without our public lands, and now as we move forward in the 21st century, public lands can help us advance renewable energy development. Public lands provide some of the best places in the world for solar and wind energy and the energy self-dependence that the United

States needs.

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