

ON 

# OFF LIMITS, BUT WITHIN REACH

Unlocking the West's Inaccessible Public Lands



# LANDLOCKED PUBLIC LANDS ARE LOST OPPORTUNITIES

The American people are currently locked out of **9.52 million acres\*** of our own public lands

*Across the West, 9.52 million acres of public lands—from forests and prairies to riverbanks and foothills—sit inaccessible.* Although these lands, which offer some of our nation's best hunting and fishing opportunities, are owned by the American people and managed by public agencies, they can be accessed only with the permission of adjacent private landowners.

In some cases, isolated parcels of public land are wholly enclosed or "landlocked" by private-land holdings, through which no legal public road or trail passes. In other instances, a checkerboard of land ownership results in public and private parcels meeting corner to corner, and, by most interpretations, state trespass law prevents "corner-crossing" from one piece of public land to another.

Back when private-land permissions were readily acquired, this was not a serious obstacle to sporting access. But as land ownership patterns have shifted, sportsmen and women more and more frequently encounter no-trespassing signs and gated roads, and inaccessible public lands now present a major barrier to hunting and fishing.

In a [poll conducted by Responsive Management](#), half of all respondents identified insufficient access as a factor that diminished their enjoyment of hunting or otherwise discouraged their participation.

So pressing is this concern that the current Secretary of the Interior has twice directed federal agencies to research ways in which access for outdoor recreation on public land—including hunting and fishing—can be improved.

Sportsmen's access is practically synonymous with public land in the American West. According to data collected by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 72 percent of Western hunters depend on public lands for some or all of their access. And recent innovations in smartphone and GPS technology have revolutionized the ways that sportsmen find quality places to hunt and fish.

Now, anyone with an up-to-date handheld GPS or cellphone application has the ability to pinpoint his or her location in relation to property boundaries with unprecedented precision. With these tools, sportsmen and women can even utilize public land parcels that are unmarked by any sort of government-issued signage—without the risk of private-land trespass.

This technology helps us find our way to public-land adventures as easily as we navigate city streets. It levels the playing field between those of us with the time to scout all summer and those of us who need to make the most of a single day off. But it also means that hard-won easements, access roads, and public land acquisitions provide even more value to the average hunter, who can confidently navigate the often tangled boundaries of the public-private landscape.

In recent years, locked-up public lands have fueled spirited conversations around campfires and in the sporting press. Surprisingly though, little has been done to understand the full scope of the problem, its effect on our hunting and fishing opportunities, or what it might take to systematically unlock these lands—until now.

**Although these lands are owned by the American people and managed by public agencies, they can be accessed only with the permission of adjacent private landowners.**

Leveraging the brand's in-house expertise, onX has partnered with the Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership to assess the extent of the landlocked public land problem across thirteen individual states in the American West using today's leading mapping technologies. This report offers the most comprehensive and sophisticated analysis to date of where locked gates prevent Americans from hunting and fishing on public land and just how much of that land is inaccessible to the citizens who own it. We also identify the single most important program for securing future public access to landlocked lands, and what decision-makers can do right now to ensure its continued success for decades to come.



# A FRACTURED LANDSCAPE: WESTWARD EXPANSION AND ITS LASTING EFFECT ON ACCESS

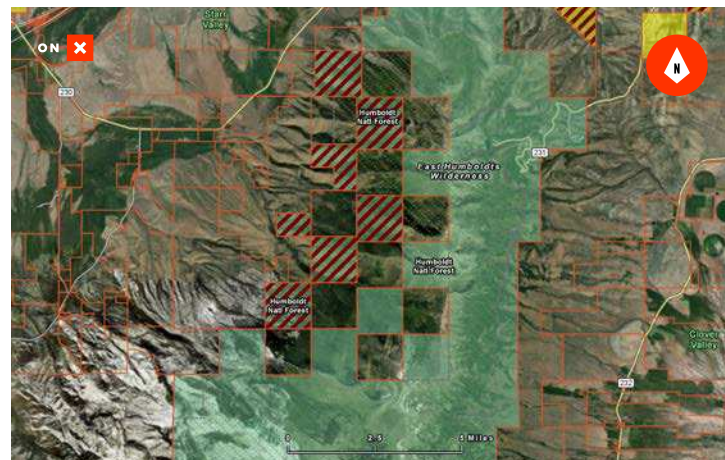
Landlocked public land parcels are a product of history, rooted in the federal government's aggressive land disposal policies of the nineteenth century. For much of America's past, Western lands served as a source of in-kind revenue for the federal government, used at the will of policymakers to achieve their desired aims.

To facilitate the extension of commerce and settlement across the continent, Congress granted railroad companies ownership of alternating sections of land on either side of the tracks, fracturing the landscape into the public-private checkerboard pattern familiar to any Western hunter. The rationale behind this policy was that development spurred by the railroad would double the value of the remaining public lands, which could eventually be sold, negating the cost of the giveaway by the federal government while simultaneously driving private enterprise.

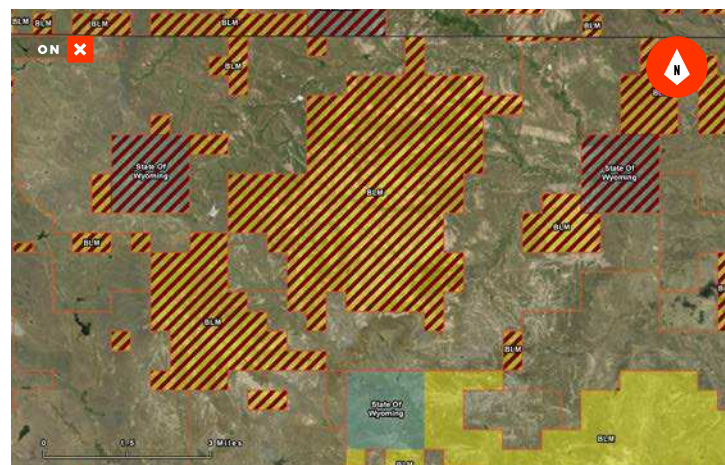
Meanwhile, in the piecemeal division of the public domain through the Homestead Act, public lands that had little economic value went unclaimed, and frequently became closed-in by adjacent private holdings. In other instances, some enterprising Western settlers accumulated so much land that public tracts were entirely surrounded by individual ranches or walled off against natural features like rivers and impassable terrain. Later, the abandonment of homesteaded farms and a high-profile railroad land scandal returned millions of acres of generally isolated and disjointed tracts of land to the Department of the Interior.

The idea of a permanently maintained system of public lands did not take hold until the turn of the twentieth century, when a dedicated model of conservation was championed by the likes of Theodore Roosevelt. It was not until decades later, in 1976, that the Bureau of Land Management, the nation's largest land management agency, shifted fully to a policy of land retention.

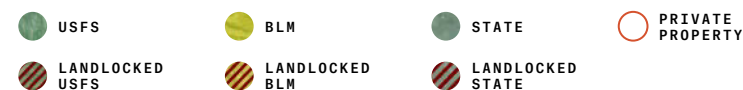
Now, we know better than ever before that these resources play a vital role in maintaining a vast \$887-billion outdoor recreation economy, and Americans value our public lands as a means of escaping crowded cities and schedules. In fact, there is a growing need to open overlooked and off-limits public lands to the general public.



**Checkerboard Landlocked:** This section of national forest land—nearly 4,000 acres of which is inaccessible—stretches along the East Humboldt Mountains in northeast Nevada. Note the corner-to-corner alignment of the individual parcels along the western slope.



**Isolated Landlocked:** The BLM lands shown here fall along the Wyoming-Montana border, in the Powder River Basin northeast of Gillette. Totalling more than 6,000 acres, the two largest, centermost parcels are surrounded on all sides by privately owned ranches.



# HOW IT ALL ADDS UP:

## A behind-the-screens look at onX's work to quantify the true scope of the landlocked problem (and the fine print on what was included in this study)

Using its refined data on public lands and roads, onX conducted an analysis to determine the accessibility of every piece of federal public land in the West. This first-of-its-kind, multi-step process produced the total acreage of all landlocked lands administered by the Bureau of Land Management, U.S. Forest Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Bureau of Reclamation, National Park Service, and other federal agencies in thirteen Western states.

For the purposes of this report, landlocked public lands are defined as federally managed lands that cannot be accessed directly from a public road (direct access) and cannot be accessed via adjoining public land by way of a public road (indirect access). Only permanent legal access was considered for this report, but existing access across some private lands may be given at the discretion of the landowner, and in many places permanent public access is assumed but not proven. Unless such access is legally documented, it was not included in our analysis.

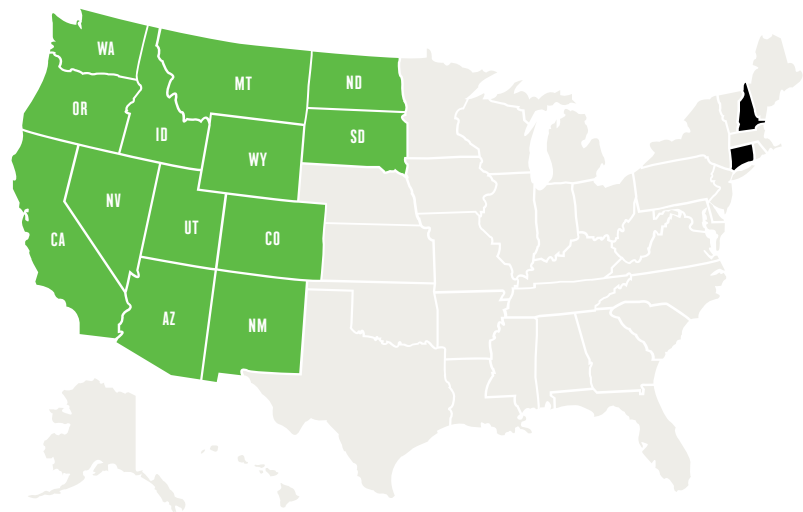
To create the most comprehensive picture of land ownership, dirt roads, and trails in the United States, onX compiles and refines data from a collection of carefully-vetted sources, including county, state, and federal agencies, using only the most trustworthy information from each after cross-referencing the various data.

The analysis was further refined through various means. All local- and state-owned lands factored into the indirect access assessment, unless research revealed a particular type of property as off-limits to the public—for example, most state school trust lands in Colorado are closed to hunting, fishing, and camping. Similarly, islands on lakes, rivers, and oceans without road access are not legally landlocked, so an effort was made to remove the largest islands from the total acreage calculations.

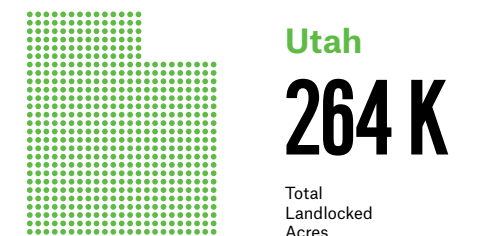
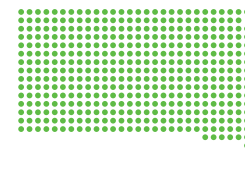
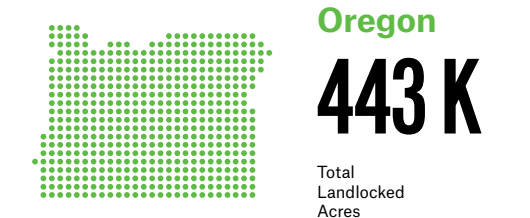
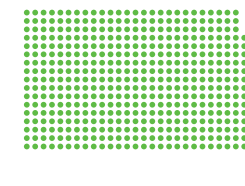
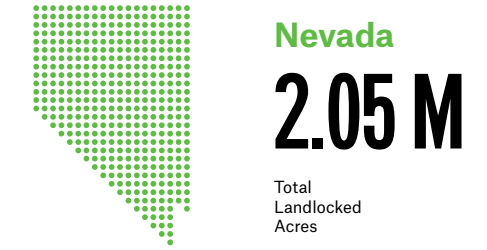
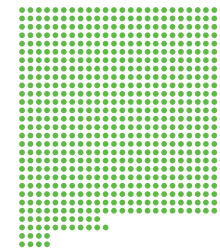
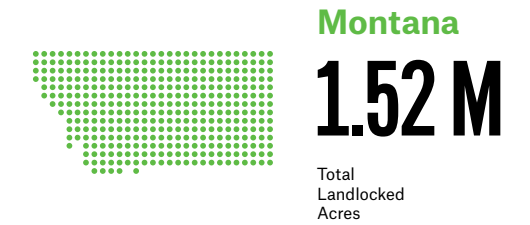
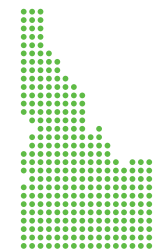
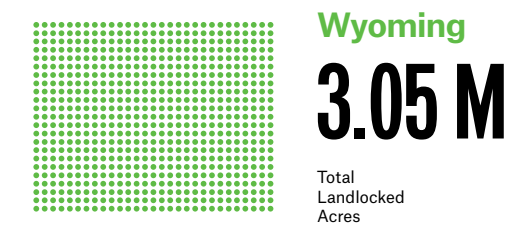
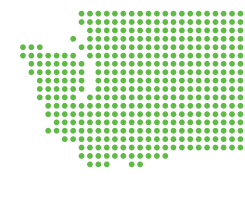
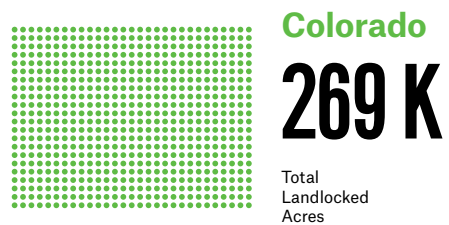
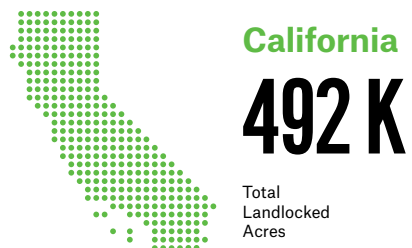
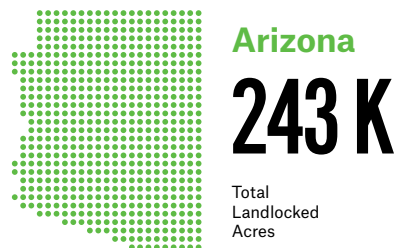
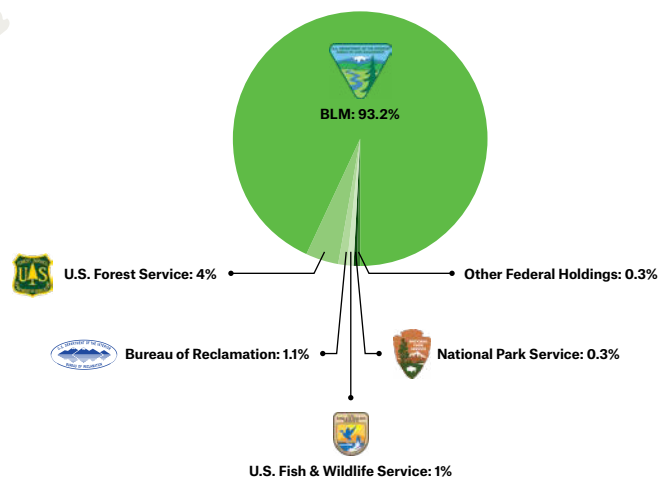
While this effort relied on the best existing data, the data are not always perfect. In some datasets, road rights-of-way next to public land parcels were removed by the data provider, causing our analysis to miss a connection between road and parcel by mere feet. In other instances, road segments are simply missing from the data or their classifications are inaccurate. Furthermore, parcel data is not "survey grade" at these scales, and can have bad topology, i.e. the real-life property corners might not be shown as corners in the data.

Numerous factors particular to individual parcels could not be included in an analysis of this scale. For example, some landlocked public lands may be accessible by other means—such as by boat or aircraft—or through private property, either because of the landowner's goodwill or due to special access permissions, as with state walk-in programs. Likewise, this report did not take into account physical or logistical barriers that can constrain access to a portion of a public tract. These might include bodies of water, seasonal restrictions on road-use, long geographic distances between access points, or extreme topography.

# 9.52 MILLION ACRES OF PUBLIC LAND— AN AREA GREATER THAN THE SIZE OF NEW HAMPSHIRE AND CONNECTICUT COMBINED—HAVE NO PERMANENT, LEGAL PUBLIC ACCESS



**Landlocked Acres  
by Public Agency**



For a full breakdown of the numbers, visit [unlockingpubliclands.org](http://unlockingpubliclands.org)



# LOCKED OUT IN...SOUTHEAST MONTANA

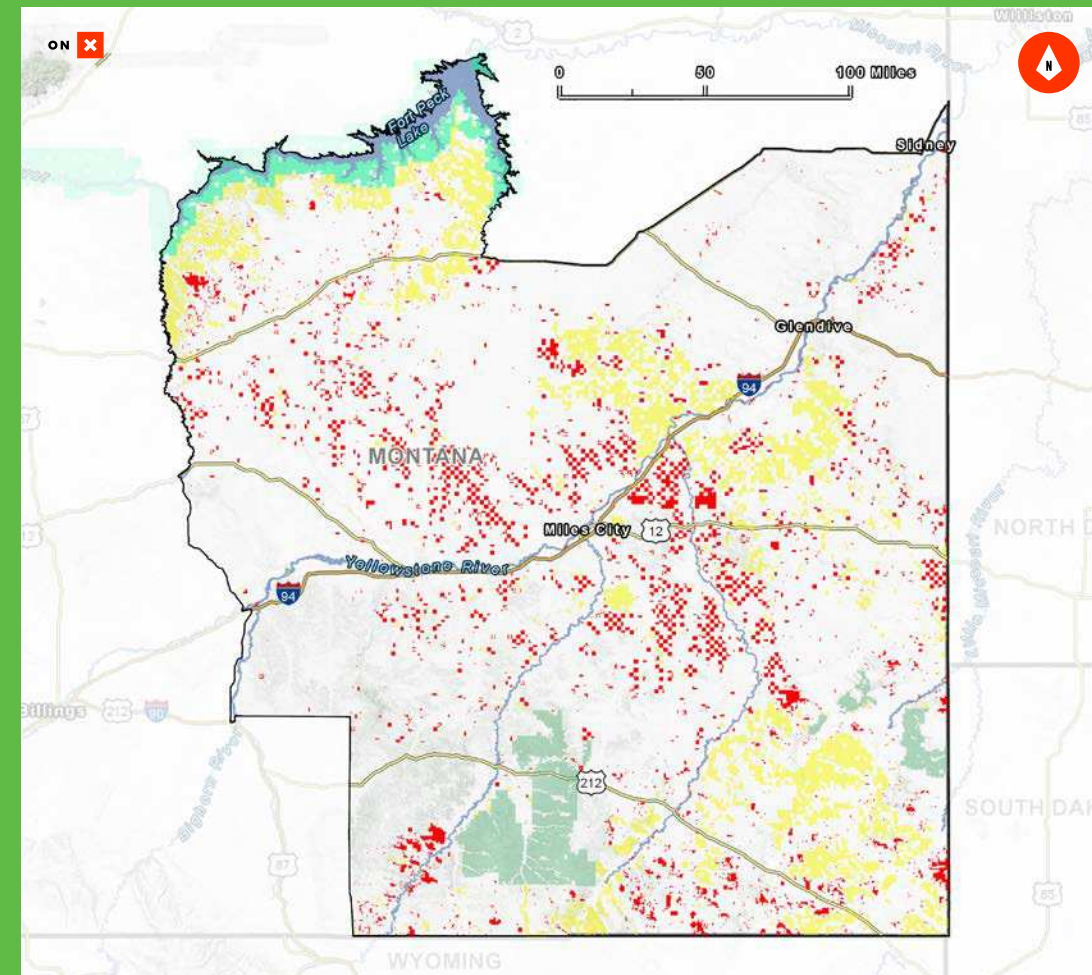


ANDREW MCKEAN

These landlocked areas represent missed hunting opportunities for sportsmen and women, but the current access situation could also be depriving local communities of potential tourism spending. The breaks, badlands, and plains of southeast Montana are popular destinations for in-state and out-of-state hunters alike, and motels, diners, meat processors, and gas stations in towns like Jordan and Ashland receive a welcome boost in business each fall.

Other sub-regions throughout the West, including eastern Wyoming and northern Nevada, contain similarly high concentrations of landlocked lands. Unlocking inaccessible public lands in these and other areas would both expand hunting opportunities and benefit small-town economies.

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## Montana FWP Region 7

- LANDLOCKED IN FWP REGION 7
- USFS
- BLM
- CHARLES M. RUSSELL NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

Landlocked Federal Acres

# 898 K

Total Acres of Federal Land

# 3.89 M

Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks Region 7 is a mule deer hunter's paradise—but it also contains a disproportionately high percentage of landlocked lands. From the shores of Fort Peck Lake to the Tongue and Powder Rivers, more than 898,000 acres of public land within Region 7 are not accessible, unless permission is granted from an adjacent private landowner.

## A CALL FOR MODERN DATA

As much as these findings identify a clear need for expanded access to public lands and waters, they also highlight the need for federal land management agencies to develop standardized data sets for easements, legal rights-of-way, and established corridors across private land to which the public has binding and legal public access. Many of these access rights were secured decades ago, and they remain housed locally at land management agency offices in paper and electronic files.

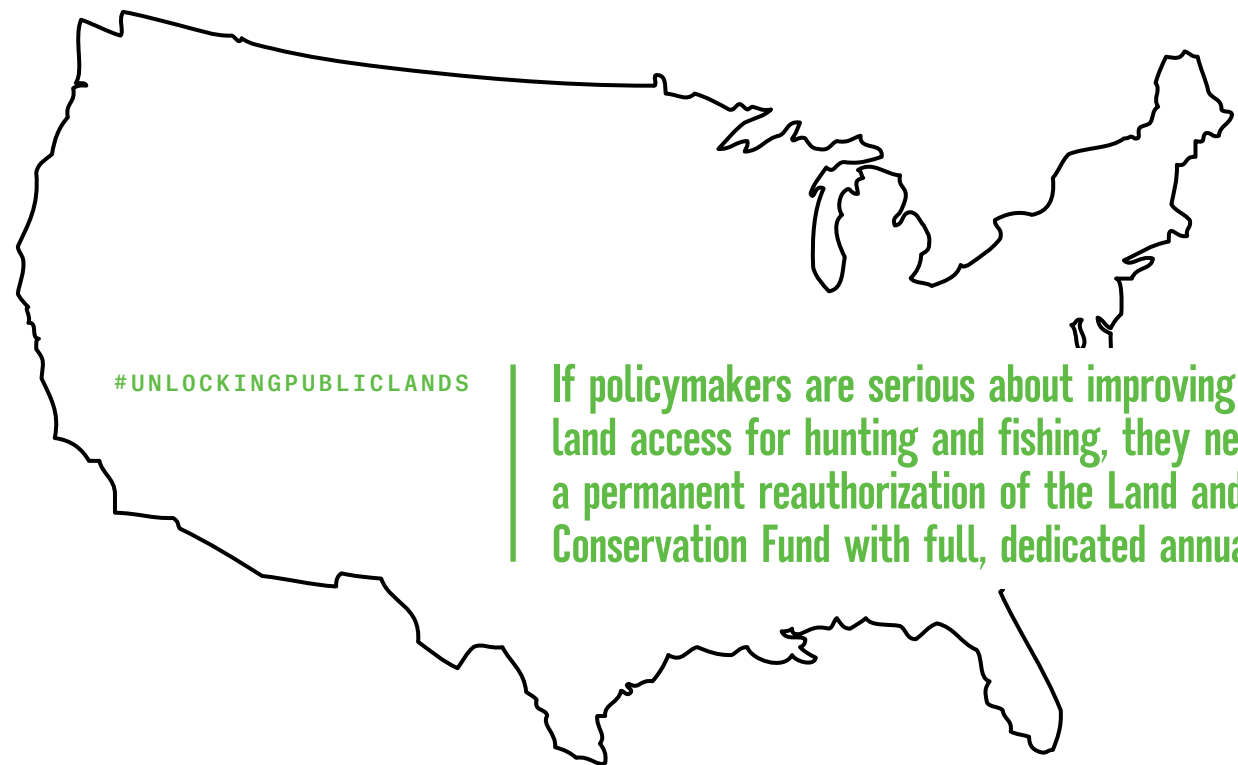
While this report's analysis is based on the most comprehensive road inventory currently available, the lack of readily obtainable data on

easements and rights-of-way makes it all but impossible for anyone—including the agencies themselves—to have a complete understanding of where public access exists, or does not exist, across private lands.

Compiling these data and converting them into consistent datasets would enable private and public entities to create maps that provide sportsmen and women with greater certainty about where public access is guaranteed by law. This information would also help the federal agencies and land trusts prioritize acquisition projects that would open landlocked public lands.



# THE LAND AND WATER CONSERVATION FUND: THE KEY TO UNLOCKING PUBLIC LANDS



#UNLOCKINGPUBLICLANDS

If policymakers are serious about improving public land access for hunting and fishing, they need to pass a permanent reauthorization of the Land and Water Conservation Fund with full, dedicated annual funding.

*Policymakers have limited control over many of the forces shaping hunting and fishing participation in the United States.* The increasingly fast-paced, urbanized, and digitally dependent ways of modern life have come between Americans and our sporting traditions, and it is difficult to address the impact of these changes through funding fixes, administrative rulemaking, or legislative action.

Access, however, stands as an immediate issue ready to be addressed. And if elected officials are serious about improving public land access for hunting and fishing, they need to pass a permanent reauthorization of the Land and Water Conservation Fund with full, dedicated annual funding.

This fund has helped conserve habitat and create public access to hunting and fishing across America for more than fifty years. Better yet, the program is budget-neutral, relying on revenue generated by the success of America's energy sector—not taxpayer dollars. Since 1964, the LWCF has opened more than 5 million acres of public

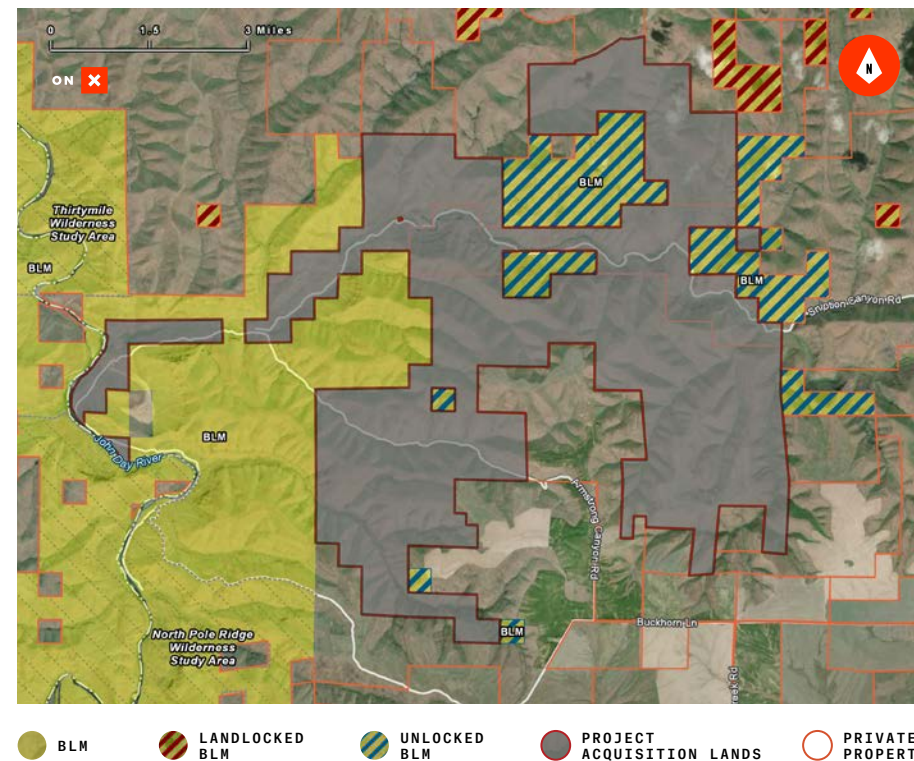
land, invested more than \$16 billion in conservation and outdoor recreation, established new public fishing areas, unlocked previously inaccessible public lands, and enabled the strategic acquisition of additional public lands for the benefit of hunters, anglers, and everyone who enjoys the outdoors.

Even though the Land and Water Conservation Fund is the single most powerful tool for opening landlocked public lands and connecting even more Americans to their best days afield, the program is set to expire on September 30, 2018. If this were to occur, conservation groups and public land management agencies would have limited ability to open and expand access to America's public lands, despite the commitment of many public officials to do just that.

There are a number of groups currently doing excellent work with LWCF funds. The following examples highlight the types of projects that could come to a halt if lawmakers fail to act.







In all, these efforts will add 11,148 acres of public hunting and fishing grounds to the public trust, unlock 2,323 acres of entirely landlocked BLM lands, and improve access to an additional 75,000+ hard-to-reach public acres.

LWCF ACCESS SUCCESS STORY:



# THIRTYMILE CREEK



MIA SHEPPARD

The John Day River and its tributaries have long been among the West's premier destinations for sportsmen and women. Anglers chase world-class steelhead and smallmouth bass in the unique setting of central Oregon's high desert, and hunters lucky enough to draw a tag for the area's elk, mule deer, or bighorn sheep will forever remember their time on this steep and rugged landscape.

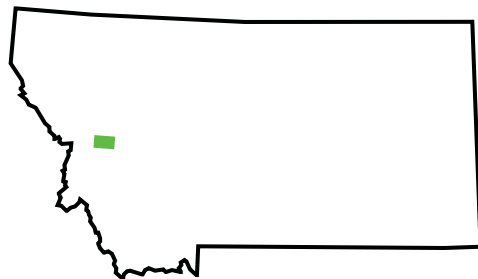
In 2014, Western Rivers Conservancy began an ambitious, multi-phase effort to secure permanent public access to the John Day River at Thirtymile Creek and create new recreational access to the wealth of public lands above and below the tributary. Working with willing sellers, WRC purchased two ranches to conserve 11,148 acres of fish and wildlife habitat and enhance public access to the John Day.

Near the small town of Condon, the John Day is joined by Thirtymile Creek, a critical spawning area for some of the watershed's most significant runs of wild steelhead. Up and downstream from Thirtymile Creek, more than seventy miles of the John Day Wild and Scenic River canyon are flanked on both sides by BLM public lands, offering outstanding fishing, hunting, hiking, and boating opportunities. Until recently, however, the only direct access to the river in its lower nine miles was controlled by private ranches and reachable only by boat or with adjacent landowner permission.

In 2018, WRC transferred the first 4,082 acres to the BLM using LWCF funding, forever securing access to the river and previously landlocked BLM parcels. The remaining ranchlands are slated for conveyance to the BLM by early 2019, again using funds from LWCF. In all, WRC's efforts will add 11,148 acres of public hunting and fishing grounds to the public trust, unlock 2,323 acres of entirely landlocked BLM lands, and improve access to an additional 75,000+ hard-to-reach public acres.



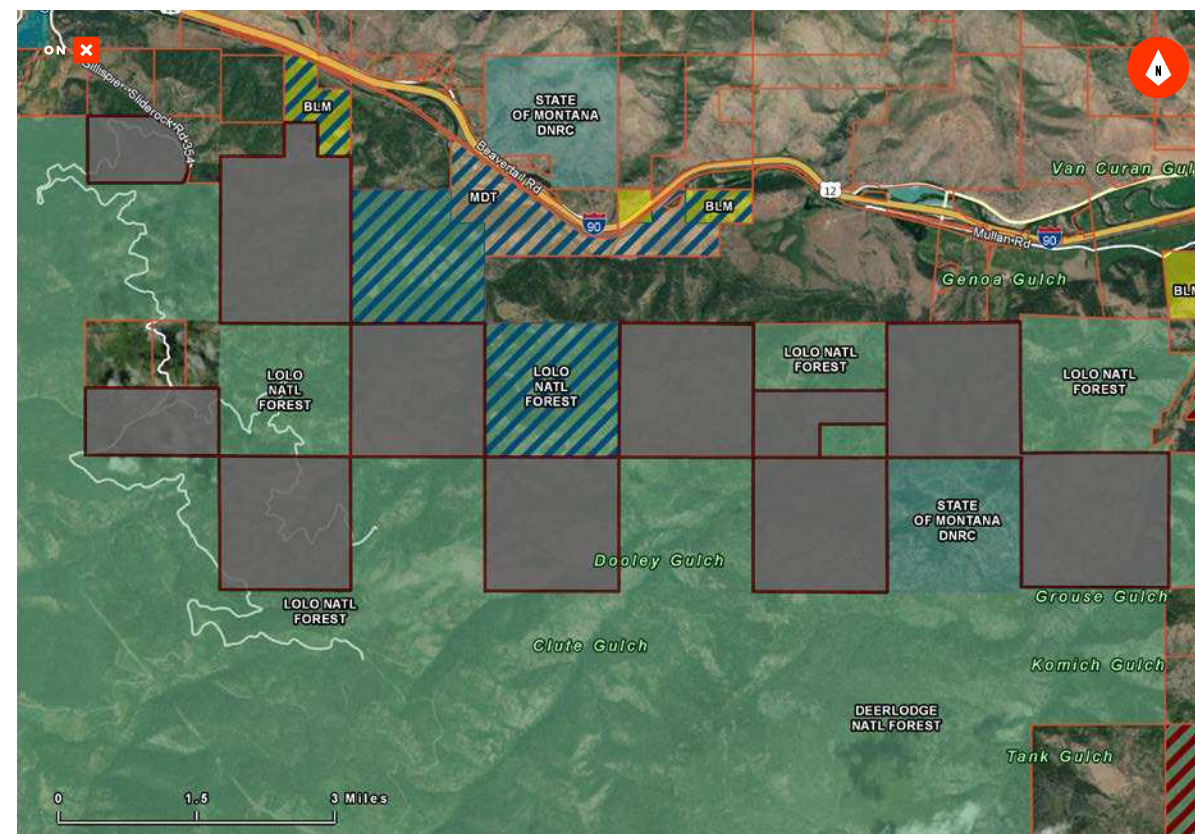
LWCF ACCESS SUCCESS STORY:



# THE BEAVERTAIL-TO-BEARMOUTH CORRIDOR



KRISTIN KOVALIK/THE TRUST FOR PUBLIC LAND



If the Land and Water Conservation Fund were to lapse, this checkerboard acquisition project could be put on hold indefinitely.

Just east of Missoula, Montana, the John Long Mountains rise from the southern banks of the Clark Fork River. When the Northern Pacific Railway's tracks stretched across this land nearly 150 years ago, the densely treed hillsides attracted timber companies that cut ties and lumber from parcels acquired through the railroad's land grants. The checkerboarded holdings following the river down the valley are remnants of this history, but these days the slopes draw hunters in pursuit of deer, elk, grouse, and bears, while anglers in driftboats and rafts ply the waters below.

Upstream from the Rock Creek confluence, a ten-mile-long section of that checkerboard land is slated for consolidation into full public ownership under the management of the U.S. Forest Service, thanks to the efforts of the Trust for Public Land. Known as the Beavertail-to-Bearmouth Project, this planned acquisition of parcels from the Stimson Lumber Company will secure valuable wildlife habitat from potential fragmentation and development, and it will enhance public access in an area where some parcels lack public roads.

The Beavertail-to-Bearmouth Project is currently the Forest Service's highest-ranking LWCF priority in the country, and has already added 640 new acres to the Lolo National Forest, eliminating the potential for sportsmen and women to be denied future access to more than 1,900 acres of public land. The project's second phase, an acquisition of another 6,140 acres, has been proposed for funding in Fiscal Year 2019, after the LWCF reauthorization deadline. These federal dollars would ensure that public-land hunters and anglers have guaranteed access to more than fifty miles of roads stretching east across the forest into the Flint Creek Valley, as well as to the numerous drainages and streams rolling down to the Clark Fork. But if the Land and Water Conservation Fund were to lapse, this checkerboard acquisition project could be put on hold indefinitely.



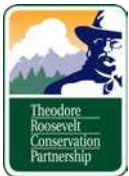
LIZ BRADLEY & DAN CROCKETT



**JOIN US. LET YOUR LAWMAKERS KNOW  
THAT THE FUTURE OF PUBLIC LAND ACCESS  
DEPENDS ON THE LAND AND WATER  
CONSERVATION FUND. WE ARE THE RIGHTFUL  
OWNERS OF 9.52 MILLION INACCESSIBLE  
PUBLIC ACRES, AND SPORTSMEN AND WOMEN  
WON'T STAND TO SEE THE BEST TOOL FOR  
UNLOCKING THESE LANDS CAST ASIDE.**

To learn more and take action, go to [unlockingpubliclands.org](http://unlockingpubliclands.org)

## ABOUT TRCP AND ONX



The Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership is a coalition of leading hunting, fishing, and conservation organizations, individual grassroots partners, and outdoor related businesses. Our mission is to guarantee all Americans quality places to hunt and fish. The TRCP works with its partners to preserve the traditions of hunting and fishing in America by expanding access, conserving fish and wildlife habitat, and increasing funding for conservation and wildlife management.

**ON**



The mission behind onX is to always know where you stand: to give outdoor enthusiasts more information about their surroundings than they ever thought possible. onX strives to create the most complete, current, and accurate mapping information available, including land ownership, roads, trails, and other access-related data. By providing people the most up-to-date data and GPS technology in the palm of their hand, onX seeks to help people have the best outdoor experiences possible.