Dear Friends,

We know it’s a challenging time if you care about the American West’s public lands, wildlife, and communities. That is why we are so very grateful for your support.

You provide us with the ability to hold the line in federal court against the Trump administration, to advocate for conservation, and to build power for change with our partners and clients.

We couldn’t do this without you—and we are making a great impact, despite the forces against us.

Please take a moment to reflect on the amazing achievements you helped make possible and the difference our steady, strategic, and bold legal advocacy made this year. With your partnership, we can achieve our shared vision of a thriving, resilient American West.

Together, we’ll get it done.

With Gratitude,

Karin P. Sheldon,
Board President

Erik Schlenker-Goodrich,
Executive Director
“When I first joined WELC in 1998, I was fresh out of law school. I remember feeling thrilled and grateful to be part of an organization that was working on the front lines to defend the West. It was my dream job. Twenty years later, it still is and I feel more motivated than ever to go to work each day, knowing we’re making a difference one case at a time.”

Matthew Bishop, WELC attorney since 1998

MAKING AN IMPACT ACROSS THE AMERICAN WEST: 1993-2018

This year, the Western Environmental Law Center celebrates 25 years of defending the West—from harmful management of our treasured forests, rivers, and wildlife and from timber, fossil fuel, and mining industry exploitation.

We advocate for policies based on the best available science, for community resources and resilience, and for governance that gives future generations more hope on climate change. Reflecting on our accomplishments excites us about our future, defending sound land and wildlife management, and ensuring lasting results together.

WELC originated in the environmental law clinic at the University of Oregon School of Law. The first such clinic in the nation, it provided free legal representation to grassroots conservation groups across the American West. In 1987, clinic professors Mike Axline, John Bonine, and their law students, together with the Sierra Club Legal Defense Fund, filed the first legal actions to protect the northern spotted owl and the Pacific Northwest’s ancient forests. The legal case set a new standard for environmental protection.

This success led the Oregon legislature, at the behest of the timber industry, to threaten pulling public funding from the University of Oregon. Responding to that threat, in 1993, Axline and Bonine formed the Western Environmental Law Center and moved the clinic off campus. By advocating for national forest management based on the unique needs of a bioregion rather than one-size-fits-all management, WELC sparked the creation of the groundbreaking Northwest Forest Plan—the first regional ecosystem-based management plan in the nation.

WELC soon expanded to New Mexico, partnering with pioneering environmental attorney Grove Burnett and opening an office in Taos. We brokered a historic agreement with Los Alamos National Laboratory to protect New Mexicans and the Rio Grande from nuclear and other hazardous waste. With Mexican wolves extinct in the U.S., our litigation prompted the first wolf reintroductions into the wild in 1998. This year, we’re still following through with our commitment to el lobo by beating back harmful management policies, going after poachers, and challenging a detrimental plan that fails to recover these wolves.

Ten years ago, when WELC learned the fossil fuel industry sought to lease and drill northern New Mexico’s beloved Valle Vidal, the “Valley of Life,” for oil and gas, we successfully organized a community campaign to legally protect the area’s 100,000 acres. Today, we continue community work through our participation in several collaborative forest restoration efforts in eastern Oregon.

Over the years we have expanded by opening offices in Helena, Montana, as well as Seattle, Washington. In Montana, we have already kept billions of tons of carbon pollution in the ground, prevented the first grizzly bear trophy hunt in over 40 years, and permanently stopped developers from threatening Montana’s water supply. In Washington, we’ve won cases to protect wolves, prompted efforts to rein in coal train pollution, and advocated to restore Puget Sound and its salmon, steelhead, and orcas.

Ready to embark on our next 25 years, we are creating lasting solutions for environmental challenges on behalf of the people and places we love. Thank you for making it possible.
We stopped a federal Mexican wolf management rule that blatantly defied the law—it would have increased allowable killing, set an arbitrary population cap, and restricted the wolves’ range. Due to our legal action, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service must develop a better rule to help these wolves recover.

PROTECTING CANADA LYNX

The Trump administration announced it would attempt to remove endangered species protections for Canada lynx in the next year. Just as we’ve done for grizzlies, wolves, and wolverines, we will challenge this unscientific, politically based decision. We’re also using the power of the law to demand impact analysis of a federal fur export program that harms lynx and bobcats.

DEFENDING WOLVERINES

We’re also expecting the Trump administration to deny endangered species protections for wolverines, of which only 250-300 remain in the lower 48 states. We have a history of success in protecting wolverines, and we stand ready to defend this imperiled carnivore again.

SAFEGUARDING BEAVERS

We threatened a federal wildlife-killing program run by Wildlife Services with litigation over its rampant killing of beavers in Oregon. In response, administrators agreed to study the ecological and wildlife impacts of killing beavers and to stop killing them in the interim. We’re dedicated to reforming how beavers are managed in Oregon and beyond.

SAVING WILD SALMON AND TROUT

Wild salmon and steelhead trout runs in Oregon have dwindled to a fraction of historic levels. Gold mining in streams via suction dredges, where miners use a powerful hose to vacuum the streambed, harms these fish. Our attorneys successfully defended a state ban on this harmful practice.
PROTECTING OUR PUBLIC LANDS AND NATIONAL FORESTS

We believe our national forest management policies should be based on science and we’re advocating on numerous fronts to ensure science is incorporated into forest management decisions. This is particularly important in the face of environmental stressors such as wildfires and beetle-kill. Often, such events prompt efforts to log our national forests, even when the best available science shows dead and decaying trees are important to forest and wildlife health. Especially with climate change impacting lands across the West, there is no reason to disregard science.

FIGHTING FOR CLEAN, FREE-FLOWING RIVERS

A misguided plan to re-energize Enloe Dam, an ecologically harmful and economically wasteful project, on Washington’s Similkameen River hit another roadblock. When our partners documented Chinook salmon jumping at the dam’s base we prepared a legal case against re-energizing this dam due to its harm to imperiled wild fish.

CLEANING UP WASHINGTON’S PUGET SOUND

Excessive nutrient pollution is strangling Puget Sound. This has a huge impact on orcas, salmon, and water quality. Poorly regulated industrial agriculture and municipal wastewater facilities that do not use modern treatment technology are the main preventable sources of this pollution. To achieve a cleaner, healthier Puget Sound, we’re enforcing the requirements of one of our country’s bedrock environmental laws, the Clean Water Act, which mandates the use of common-sense measures to reduce the discharge of pollution.

PROTECTING SIERRA NEVADA MEADOW HABITAT

In two legal cases, we are fighting for imperiled Yosemite toads and mountain yellow-legged frogs in the Sierra Nevada. These animals are threatened by cattle grazing in high elevation meadows, and we are defending a rule designating 1.8 million acres of their critical habitat.

PROTECTING NATIONAL MONUMENTS

Our public lands are worth fighting for. We are in court to defend the expansion of the Cascade-Siskiyou National Monument in Oregon and California from timber interests’ attempts to steal this treasure from the American people. The first national monument designated for its wealth of biodiversity, its expansion represents the realization of years of effort by the scientific community to better conserve this unique place. Timber companies want to log this area for profit, and we are here—with the law on our side—to protect our public lands.
TRANSITIONING OUR COUNTRY AWAY FROM OIL AND GAS

We are using the law to strategically fight rampant fracking in the West. In Montana, we’re in court challenging fracking leases on 100,000 acres in the iconic Tongue River Valley. In Colorado, we’re challenging leases on 150,000 acres between Vail and Grand Junction and 45,000 acres in the western Rockies, where one lease is within a half-mile of a K-12 public school. In New Mexico, we successfully defeated a plan to frack 20,000 acres in the Santa Fe National Forest. On top of all that, we’re challenging the entire federal leasing system for failing to study climate impacts. Our challenge covers 463,553 acres of public lands including Colorado’s Pawnee National Grassland, Wyoming’s Red Desert, and Utah’s Fishlake National Forest.

KEEPING COAL IN THE GROUND

As Hurricane Florence’s floodwaters poison rivers in North Carolina with toxic coal ash, WELC is taking the lead to reduce this risk in the western U.S. Coal is the dirtiest fossil fuel on Earth—it fouls our air, harms the climate, and poisons our waterways and wildlife. To speed America’s transition away from coal power, we target the nation’s largest power plants and mines. We’re challenging a 25-year license for the Four Corners Generating Station and Navajo Mine in New Mexico. We successfully challenged a proposal that would have made Montana’s Bull Mountain Mine the largest underground mine in the country. And we’re fighting to keep 100 million tons of coal in the ground at Montana’s largest mine.

FIGHTING METHANE POLLUTION NATIONWIDE

WELC led the fight for a federal rule to reduce methane waste and pollution from oil and gas drilling on our public lands, and now we have successfully defended that rule three times. Unfortunately, the Trump administration has gutted the rule to let oil and gas companies off the hook for climate pollution. We continue to lead the resistance against this draconian policy rollback that harms public health and our climate in federal court.

KEEPING 11 BILLION TONS OF COAL IN THE GROUND

WELC attorneys scuttled federal plans for coal mining and oil and gas drilling in Wyoming and Montana’s Powder River Basin comprising 15.4 million acres of public mineral rights. The plans would have green-lighted an estimated 11.1 billion tons of coal and 18,000 new oil and gas wells. The court found the Bureau of Land Management failed to consider alternatives to unfettered coal mining and the climate impacts from vast exploitation of coal, oil, and gas resources. This represents another big courtroom success in our mission to defend the American West’s environment and communities from harmful fossil fuel exploitation.
WHY PROTECTING OREGON’S OCHOCO FOREST MATTERED TO US

We choose our cases to maximize our positive impact to the wild places of the American West. When we learned of a plan to expand a motorized off-highway vehicle (OHV) trail system in central Oregon’s Ochoco National Forest by 137 miles through old-growth forest, we knew we had to prevent the damage it would cause.

In our successful fight to protect the Ochoco, we were lucky to have an amazing ally who knows these mountains better than perhaps anyone: Sarah Cuddy. Born and raised in Prineville, Oregon, at the base of the Ochoco Mountains, Sarah’s stimulating childhood full of outdoor exploration called her to a career in environmental science. She worked for the U.S. Forest Service from 2004-2011 and lived at the Lookout Mountain Ranger Station in the Ochoco National Forest in 2009 and 2010.

Sarah was instrumental in our victory protecting these public lands from OHV traffic that would have introduced noise pollution, fragmented wildlife habitat, and ruined some of the last, best places for redband trout fishing in the Ochoco National Forest.

She took legal action with us, filing court documents as part of our case, sharing compelling personal stories on how new motorized trails would harm this special area. She recounted an unforgettable experience on a day trip to Big Springs Campground, where she encountered a black bear—an exceedingly rare and special opportunity made possible by the area’s tranquility.

She told of fly-fishing trips with her family along steep slopes of old-growth ponderosa pine stands, catching dozens of prized redband trout from the cold water of Deep Creek, an important tributary to the Wild and Scenic North Fork Crooked River. She noted to the court the exact sites where these memories took place and how they would become motorized trails under the proposal.

Areas proposed for motorized trails also included Rocky Mountain elk calving habitat and migration routes for wolves and mule deer. She expertly noted to the court that the area’s scablands are recognized as among the most fragile ecosystems on the Ochoco, where damage to the soil is nearly impossible to repair.

“I have spent thousands of days living, working, and recreating in the Ochoco National Forest and find it to be the finest place for recreation and wildlife in the state of Oregon.”

Sarah Cuddy
Community Member and Standing Declarant

We’re certain her stories impacted the judge hearing the case. Because of Sarah’s passion, combined with WELC’s legal advocacy, the Ochoco National Forest will remain among the finest places for recreation and wildlife in Oregon.
As a public interest law firm, we do not charge clients and partners for services, but rely instead on charitable gifts from individuals, families, and foundations to achieve our mission. Your donations make a direct impact on the public lands, wildlife, and communities of the American West. Our victories are not possible without you—thank you.
Climate Solutions
Clean Water Action
Clean Air Task Force
Clark Fork Coalition
Citizens for Sustainable Development
Citizens for Clean Air
Chama Peak Land Alliance
Chaco Alliance
Chama Peak Land Alliance
Citizens for a Healthy Community
Citizens for Clean Air
Citizens for Sustainable Development
Clancy-Unionville Task Force
Clark Fork Coalition
Clean Air Task Force
Clean Water Action
Climate Solutions
Coalition for Clean Affordable Energy
Coast Range Forest Watch
Columbia Riverkeeper
Community Association for Restoration of the Environment
Concerned Citizens of the Yakama Reservation
Conservation Angler
Conservation Colorado
Conservation Northwest
Conservation Voters New Mexico
Cottonwood Environmental Law Center
Crag Law Center
Dakota Resource Council
Defenders of Wildlife
Dire Citizens Against Ruining Our Environment
Earth Island Institute
Earthjustice
Earthwise Law Center
Earthworks
Environment America
Environmental Defense Fund
Environmental Protection Information Center
Food and Water Watch
Footloose Montana
Friends of Animals
Friends of the Bitterroot
Friends of the Clearwater
Friends of the Columbia Gorge
Friends of the Earth
Friends of the Wild Swan
Friends of Tappens Creek
Fuso Washington
George Waterthorn
Gifford Pinchot Task Force
Grand Canyon Trust
Grand Canyon Wildlands Council
Great Basin Water Network
Great Old Broads for Wilderness
HECHO: Hispanics Enjoying Camping, Hunting, and_outdoors
Helena Hunters and Anglers Association
High Country Conservation Advocates
High Sierra Hikers Association
Honey Creek Water Users
Hydropower Reform Coalition
Institute for Fisheries Resources
Interfaith Power and Light
Kake' tribe
Katrin and Kevin Chandlee
Kettle Range Conservation Group
Klamath Forest Alliance
Klamath Riverkeeper
Klamath-Siskiyou Wildlands Center
Kootenai Environmental Alliance
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We balance and offset our environmental footprint by purchasing Renewable Energy Certificates, Carbon Offsets, and Water Restoration Certificates.
We use the power of the law to safeguard the public lands, wildlife, and communities of the American West in the face of a changing climate.