

**Together, we achieved a major win for wolverines! Wolverines are now protected as threatened under the Endangered Species Act and will receive the federal protections they need to recover in the lower 48 states.**

> Fighting for public health

> Safeguarding clean water

> Challenging fracking

> Defending wolves and grizzlies

> Protecting owls and salmon

> Youth climate win appeal





## AN ECOLOGY OF KINSHIP

We are honing our legal conservation and environmental justice strategy in an exciting new framework we're calling Western Horizons. This framework will further our vision of a thriving western U.S., abundant with protected and interconnected ecosystems, powered by renewable energy, and cared for by communities brought together in an ecology of kinship. That idea is rooted in our goal to restore and reconcile our relationships with each other and the world around us—not as a set of resources to exploit for human benefit, but as a system to nurture and grow so all elements thrive. This means caring for the land, water, air, flora, fauna, and communities—especially where environmental injustice exists—to bolster ecological and community resilience as we face some of humanity's greatest challenges.

# ACROSS THE HORIZON

We're always looking ahead.

For us, that means taking persistent and meaningful steps to achieve our mission: to foster thriving, resilient western U.S. lands, waters, wildlife, and communities in the face of a changing climate.

We want to take a moment to focus on a phrase important to that mission—an *ecology of kinship*.

It's a term, for us, that evokes our responsibility to reimagine humanity's relationship with the world away from the extraction, exploitation, and commodification of people and the world—toward a recognition of humanity's mutual interdependence with itself and the world around us. We thrive if the world thrives.

That's of course not the case right now. Wildlife and plant species are imperiled and disappearing. Resources are mined, drilled, and fracked for profit even as our climate unravels, lands burn, and rivers dry up. People are offered few choices to freely

participate in economic systems that do not rely on the sacrifice of the places they call home. And power and wealth are concentrated in the hands of the few, not the many.

One might despair at the present reality. Or, one may put in the hard work of sparking positive change in the world. For sure, that isn't easy.

But time and again, we have shown that laws can be crafted that do embody an ecology of kinship, that lands, waters, and wildlife can be protected and restored for present and future generations, and that communities can justly and equitably transition away from fossil fuels.

We will meet the turbulent confluence of challenges that this moment in the western U.S. presents with purpose, intention, courage and humility.

Change isn't simply *needed*, it is *possible*.



For the West,

A stylized, handwritten signature in black ink.

Erik Schlenker-Goodrich  
Executive Director

A stylized, handwritten signature in black ink.

Sristi Kamal, Ph.D.  
Deputy Director





## VICTORY GIVES WOLVERINES ENDANGERED SPECIES PROTECTIONS

**W**e, along with our partners, have steadfastly pursued protections for the wolverine in the lower 48 states for nearly 20 years. During this time, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service repeatedly denied this iconic animal the protection it deserved, despite a low population of roughly 300 in the entire lower 48 states. With climate change threatening the persistent snowpack habitat these animals need to recover—and merely exist—we never gave up even with the federal wildlife agency’s maddening refusal to help. Last winter, we finally won these protections for the wolverine.

Resulting from our multiple prior wins in federal courts, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service prepared a mostly strong road map to finally step up and aid in wolverine recovery, granting specific protections for the species. The agency will also prepare a recovery plan for wolverines, identify protected critical habitat, and explore possible reintroduction efforts into historic habitat in Colorado. Wolverines and

wolves coexisting in the wilds of Colorful Colorado could soon be a reality, with wolves reintroduced to the state about the same time as this win.

**This marks a breakthrough for conservation efforts after years of political intervention by states such as Idaho, Wyoming, and Montana that improperly outweighed the findings of wildlife biologists.**

That said, more work to conserve wolverines in the lower 48 states still must be done. We are concerned about the agency allowing some trapping in wolverine habitat, and we will stay involved in public processes to ensure trapping does not undermine recovery. Montana has also sent a notice of its intent to challenge the listing decision. We’ll intervene to defend it, if need be. Wolverines—a crucial species for many ecosystems in the western U.S.—deserve the fullest protections possible. Given their small population and climate change shrinking the snowy habitat they rely on to survive, time is of the essence.



## FIGHTING FOR PUBLIC HEALTH AND THE CLIMATE IN NEW MEXICO

**W**e’re supercharging our environmental justice and climate work in New Mexico to ease the burdens on communities at the front lines of an enormous oil and gas boom and to position the state at the cutting edge of climate-smart policy. We have successfully opposed state-funded false climate solutions including fossil gas hydrogen, carbon capture and storage projects, as well as a plan to treat and sell oil industry wastewater. These projects’ real purpose is to perpetuate oil and gas industry’s stranglehold on the state.

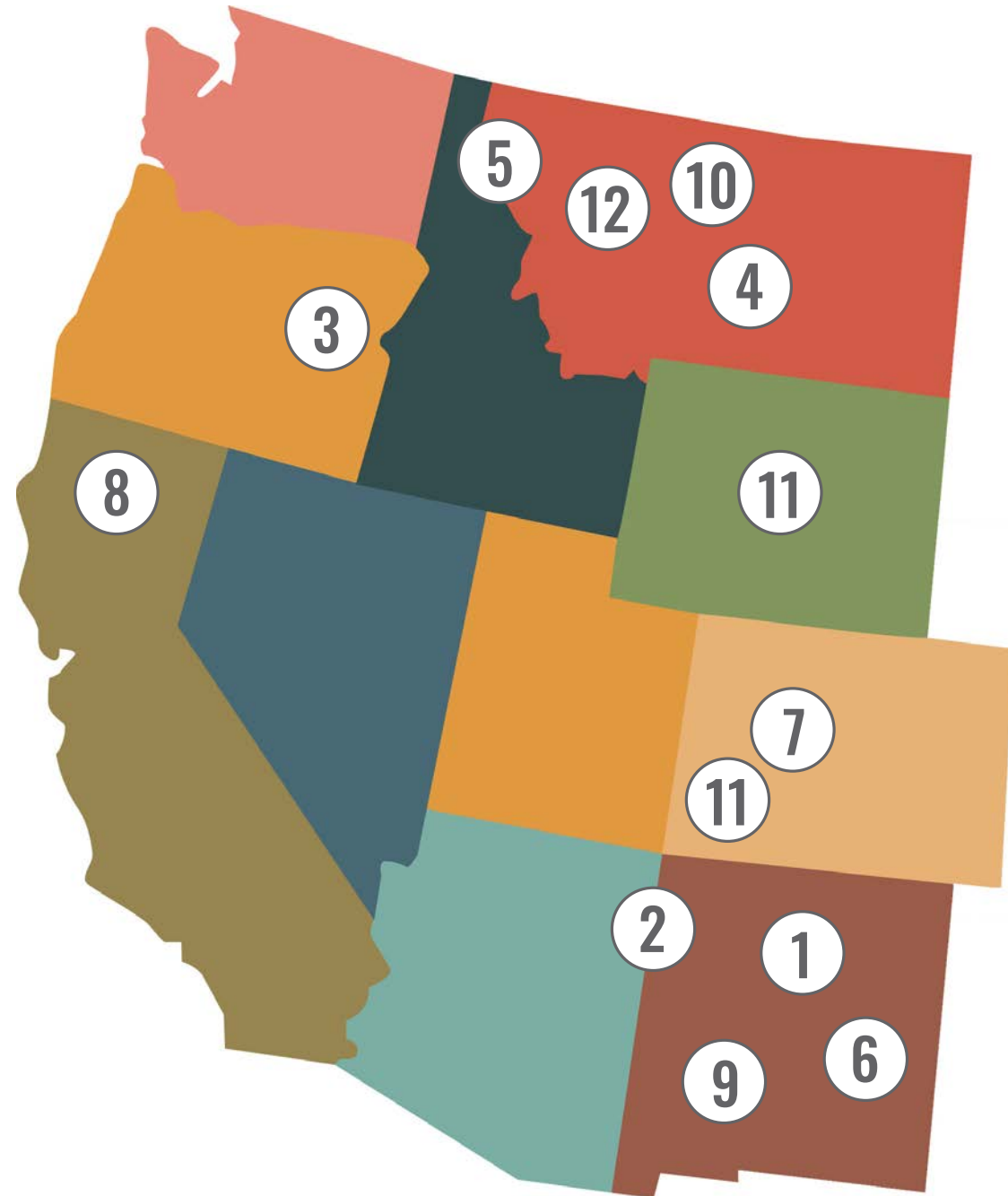
We are mounting a campaign to divest New Mexico state investment funds from oil and gas and create guardrails to prevent further reinvestment. This includes working to direct state economic development resources toward non-fossil fuel projects in the Four Corners, and to close the Four Corners Power Plant and its associated coal mine. We are also fighting to hold the oil and gas industry accountable by modernizing fees, penalties, and bonding for these companies. We are

working to rein in pollution and stop new orphaned and abandoned wells from adding to the \$8.1 billion cleanup liability the current system places on taxpayers. We are also advocating for new rules that would require hard deadlines for plugging and cleaning up inactive wells, and make operators pay bonding costs for plugging and cleanup of inactive wells in full.

**We are fiercely advocating for reform of New Mexico’s outdated 1935 Oil and Gas Act, including new laws requiring setbacks of new oil and gas facilities from homes, schools, hospitals, child care centers, water resources, and more.**

Research shows close proximity to oil and gas development creates chronic but avoidable public health problems, including asthma, birth defects, leukemia, tumors, and more. The oil and gas industry has run rampant over New Mexico for more than a century. We are working hard to ensure the public interest and a just transition are top priorities in the state.

# WE DEFEND THE WEST



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We provide legal representation to and partner with grassroots organizations, youth plaintiffs, indigenous communities, large national groups, and more. Please visit [westernlaw.org](https://westernlaw.org) to learn more about our cases and advocacy.

- 1 CLEANING UP WATERS NEAR LOS ALAMOS NATIONAL LABS**

Los Alamos National Laboratories in northern New Mexico entered the national consciousness this summer with the film “Oppenheimer.” What many people don’t know is that Los Alamos County has for years and years suffered from extremely high stormwater pollution. This winter, after 10 years of legal advocacy by WELC and our partners, the EPA will now require the labs and the county to address this toxic pollution—a huge win for communities, wildlife, and water.
- 2 FIGHTING FOR MEXICAN WOLF RECOVERY**

We are challenging the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service’s inadequate Mexican wolf management rule for failing to promote recovery required under the Endangered Species Act. The rule fails to promote crucial genetic diversity by leaving wolves vulnerable to being killed or removed from the wild, and by preventing wolves from occupying suitable habitat north of Interstate 40. The rule also says the 200 Mexican wolves in the wild are “not essential” to recovery. They are the definition of essential.
- 3 PROTECTING THREATENED COHO SALMON FROM AN OREGON DAM**

Our attorneys are in the midst of negotiations to secure an agreement with the owner of Murphy Dam on the Applegate River in southern Oregon to address harm to threatened wild coho salmon. If the agreement succeeds, the owner will agree to remove the dam and restore the area, granting coho and Chinook salmon uninhibited access to 100 miles of upstream habitat for the first time in 70 years.
- 4 FIGHTING LAND DEGRADATION AT MONTANA COAL MINE**

On behalf of our partners, we filed a citizen’s complaint with the federal Office of Surface Mining requesting an inspection of the Bull Mountains Mine, an expansive coal mine north of Billings. The mine is operated by Signal Peak Energy, which is responsible for large subsidence cracks that damaged land and water, creating a safety hazard to the community and surrounding area. Signal Peak is required to repair lands affected by the large cracks its mining operations caused, but has instead engaged in bullying, harassment, and litigation threats to force the remaining land users to abandon the area. It is true villainy, and the state regulator, the Montana Department of Environmental Quality, has turned its back on the local ranching community in the Bull Mountains.





# WILDLIFE & WILDLANDS

## DEFENDING COLORADO'S WOLF REINTRODUCTION PROGRAM

We are actively defending wolf reintroduction in Colorado. In December, livestock groups requested a restraining order to block planned wolf releases. We intervened, communicating the true, science-based relationship between wolves and livestock predation. The court sided with us, denying that restraining order by citing our evidence that in other states with hundreds or thousands of wolves, predation affects mere fractions of a percent of livestock populations. This is a huge victory allowing the reintroduction of 10 wolves into the wild that month. We will continue defending wolves across the western U.S.

## PROTECTING SPOTTED OWLS FROM 50 YEARS OF MEGA-LOGGING

With our partners, we challenged a 50-year permit the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service issued to Sierra Pacific Industries—the nation's largest private landowner—to harm or kill up to 115 northern and 650 California spotted owls across its 1.5 million-acre holdings in northern California and the Sierra Nevada. Northern spotted owls have been listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act since 1990 and face extinction within the permit's time frame, according to the Fish and Wildlife Service. WELC has fought to protect these owls since our inception in 1993, and we aim to see their recovery through.

## SAFEGUARDING CLEAN WATER IN NEW MEXICO

The Supreme Court gutted the Clean Water Act in its 2023 *Sackett v. EPA* decision. The decision left more than 90% of New Mexico's waterways vulnerable to pollution. New Mexico is one of only three states lacking a state water pollution permitting program. We are working with lawmakers to fund a state-level program to protect essential water resources and with the state Environment Department to stand up a robust program as soon as possible. *Agua es vida*, and we are dedicated to ensuring the state can dig itself out of the hole created by this extreme Supreme Court decision.



# CLIMATE JUSTICE

## GEARING UP FOR MONTANA YOUTH CLIMATE SUPREME COURT FIGHT

Last summer, we won our Montana climate case representing 16 young people in the first-ever U.S. climate trial to hold Montana's government accountable for its role in worsening the climate crisis through a misguided devotion to all forms of fossil fuels. Our case elicited what one expert called "the strongest decision on climate change ever issued by any court." Predictably, the state of Montana appealed the decision to the Montana Supreme Court. We are eager to defend this victory for our brave youth plaintiffs, all Montanans, and a livable climate for future generations.

## FIGHTING OIL AND GAS ON 144,000 ACRES IN SIX STATES

Building on previous victories requiring federal land managers to examine the cumulative climate effects of oil and gas leasing, we are challenging all lease sales from the first quarter of 2022 across New Mexico, Colorado, Montana, Wyoming, North Dakota, and Oklahoma. These sales represent the administration's abandonment of its leasing "pause," bowing to pressure from the fossil fuel industry. Our case demands the environmental review that reflects the urgency of the climate crisis, defining a threshold for harm and firm limits to ongoing climate degradation.

## UNDOING TRUMP-ERA OIL AND GAS PLAN FOR SOUTHWEST COLORADO

In 2022, we secured a legal agreement concerning a 20-year amendment of a Trump-era Bureau of Land Management plan for 1.64 million acres in Colorado. Our agreement stopped new drilling during the process to, we hope, rein in oil and gas development, minimize drilling harm to sensitive wildlife, and protect lands with wilderness characteristics. We're now working to ensure that plan minimizes harm to this area by considering a "no new leasing" alternative, and applies to all Bureau-owned minerals without excluding extensive holdings under U.S. Forest Service surface lands.





## OUR CAMPAIGN FOR GRIZZLY BEAR RECOVERY

**G**rizzly bears occupy about 6% of their historic range in the contiguous western U.S. These grizzlies number roughly 2,000, a sliver of the estimated historical population of 50,000, and about twice as many as in 1975, when they were granted threatened species protections.

In 1993, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service established six “recovery zones.” Today, the Service has taken meaningful recovery actions in only four—scrapping plans for the remaining two under political pressure. And grizzly populations have increased in only two recovery zones. To achieve real grizzly recovery in the lower 48 states, isolated populations must be connected and we must reestablish a population in the Bitterroot.

Our vision for grizzly recovery protects their habitat and facilitates migration outside recovery zones. With a wide array of cases now in motion, our strategic campaign presents a strong opportunity to achieve grizzly recovery across the western U.S.

We are challenging the huge South Plateau logging project in an area with high mortality and low habitat security for Greater Yellowstone grizzlies. In prime grizzly habitat in northwest Montana, Burlington Northern Railway Company (BNSF) trains kill grizzlies with impunity—63 bears since 2008. We’re suing BNSF for failing to take any action to address this problem. Outside Yellowstone National Park, we’re fighting the expansion of livestock grazing into important grizzly bear habitat linkages. In May, we’ll argue in court that bear baiting in grizzly habitat on Forest Service land in Idaho and Wyoming needs to be revisited given the species’ expanding range and killings at bait sites. We’ll also continue to fight for grizzlies in the Helena-Lewis and Clark National Forest and against Montana’s Wildlife Services predator control program which kills or removes dispersing bears needed for recovery.

Grizzlies belong in the wild, and you can count on us to use the power of the law to aid in their strong recovery.

## YOUR GIFT EMPOWERS WELC TO ACHIEVE GREAT THINGS

All of the cases, advocacy, and wins highlighted in this newsletter are made possible by our generous supporters. Individual, business, and foundation gifts allow us to fight in court to defend the western U.S. on behalf of our clients free of charge.

We offer a variety of donation options and planned giving opportunities including charitable gift annuities; gifts of stocks, bonds, and mutual funds; automatic monthly giving; workplace giving; and more. Donors who have included us in their estate plans join our honored Gil F. Staender Legacy Circle.

Make a lasting contribution by including WELC in your estate plans—or make a gift now to see your impact reflected in the issues that are important to you today. Gifts of all types and sizes sustain WELC to use the power of the law to foster thriving, resilient western U.S. lands, waters, wildlife, and communities in the face of a changing climate.

Please contact Jenna Kloeppel at 575-305-3993 or [jennak@westernlaw.org](mailto:jennak@westernlaw.org) for more information, or to learn more about planned giving options.

Your entire donation to the Western Environmental Law Center is tax deductible as a charitable contribution for federal income tax purposes, as allowed by law.







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We are a nonprofit, public-interest environmental law center.  
We use the power of the law to foster thriving, resilient western  
U.S. lands, waters, wildlife, and communities in the face of a  
changing climate.

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## MAKING A DIFFERENCE INSIDE AND OUT

Year after year Charity Navigator, the leading charity evaluator in the U.S., continues to award WELC a 4-star rating. We are also again certified as Platinum Level by Candid, formerly GuideStar Exchange Program, which rates nonprofit transparency and impact on a national scale. These are both programs' highest ratings and instill confidence in WELC's effectiveness and integrity alongside our rigorous Better Business Bureau charity accreditation.

We also have won awards for our achievements in taking care of our staff. *Outside* magazine, *Oregon Business*, and the *Nonprofit Times* recognized WELC with "best places to work" awards for many years in a row.

When you donate to WELC, you can give with confidence knowing your gift will be used efficiently and will have a true, on-the-ground impact across the western U.S.