

VICTORY REPORT



Western
Environmental
Law Center

With your support, 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. Many of the victories we achieved this year were years—even decades—in the making. These wins prove our dedication and commitment to the western U.S., and show we have what it takes to win. We are pleased to share with you a report on the highlights of our 2024 victories—all made possible with your continued, loyal partnership. THANK YOU!

WE PROTECTED 480,496 ACRES IN THE SONORAN DESERT NATIONAL MONUMENT FROM RECREATIONAL SHOOTING

Our attorneys have advocated and fought in court for over a decade to protect the Sonoran Desert National Monument in Arizona. When we started this work, the Bureau of Land Management astonishingly allowed recreational shooting everywhere within this monument. Yet its own analysis concluded this was unsuitable given the monument's extensive Indigenous cultural history, ancient petroglyphs, large saguaro cactus forests, and three wilderness mountain ranges that provide excellent habitat for a wide range of native wildlife. After many rounds of litigation, we achieved a huge victory this summer. Our steadfast legal involvement led the federal agency to close 98.9% of the monument to recreational shooting, and now nearly half a million acres are protected from the destruction, litter, and danger of widespread shooting.



WELC ADVOCACY LEADS TO ENDANGERED SPECIES PROTECTIONS FOR WOLVERINES

Thanks to your support and our steadfast legal advocacy, wolverines are now protected as threatened under the Endangered Species Act. As a result, these imperiled, awesome animals will receive federal protections to aid in their recovery in the lower 48 states. Even as the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service refused to do its duty, and as their numbers dwindled to roughly 300 wolverines in the entire lower 48 states while climate change threatens the snowpack they require, *we never gave up*.

With our partners, we have dedicated nearly 20 years to protect wolverines. The Endangered Species Act protections now in place for wolverine mark a significant breakthrough for this iconic animal to recover and thrive in the wild.



ENDING COAL LEASING FOR 48 BILLION TONS OF COAL



Our persistent, successful legal advocacy led the Biden administration to end future coal leasing in the largest coal-producing region in the U.S.—the Powder River Basin. This basin stretches 13 million acres across Montana and Wyoming, producing more than 85% of all federal coal. We proved that mining and burning the region’s coal would cause significant impacts to the climate, human health, and environment. This win keeps 48 billion tons of coal, and its massive climate pollution potential, in the ground.

On behalf of our amazing clients and colleagues, our attorneys litigated this case over 10 years, through three presidential administrations, two district court wins, and three rounds of National Environmental Policy Act review. Additionally, this victory represents an historic change in federal management of coal in the region and a recognition that our country is moving beyond coal as an electricity source and toward a cleaner and more affordable energy future. This is a shared win for public health, clean air, and the climate that will be felt for generations.



WINS FOR WATER IN NEW MEXICO

We have two victories to highlight regarding water in New Mexico. One is for Los Alamos County, where for years, its residents have lived with extremely high water pollution. After 10 years of legal advocacy by WELC and our partners, the Environmental Protection Agency will now require the Los Alamos National Laboratories and Los Alamos County to address this toxic pollution. In a second win, the state is funding the creation of a statewide water quality permitting program. This “safety net” is urgently needed because 90% of New Mexico’s waterways were stripped of Clean Water Act protections by the U.S. Supreme Court. You can count on us to safeguard clean water in New Mexico and across the western U.S.



NATIONAL POLICY WINS

We have several important wins that demonstrate WELC’s success in shaping national policies while integrating a regional perspective using the local knowledge of our 185+ partner groups. In a win affecting 245 million acres, we helped modernize—if modestly—public lands management for conservation and climate protection. We led a coalition of 30 groups to petition the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) to improve the balance of its multiple-use mission, elevating conservation uses. This victory benefits all public lands, mostly in the western U.S., and sets us up for future advocacy to strengthen public lands as a cornerstone of our country’s heritage and climate resilient future. In another win, we successfully advocated for the BLM to create a rule to limit how much methane oil and gas companies can waste by venting directly to the air and by burning off in flares on public land. This victory will conserve energy, protect taxpayers, rein in climate pollution, and protect public health in frontline communities. We also advocated for action to strengthen implementation of the National Environmental Policy Act, a bedrock community and environmental protection law. Thanks to our coalition’s involvement, the final rule adopted by the Council on Environmental Quality will better promote climate-smart policies, advance environmental justice, and recognize fully informed decision making.





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RESTORING SALMON HABITAT IN OREGON

One of our goals is to restore healthy salmon runs in the Pacific Northwest. Wild salmon are critical to coastal and freshwater ecosystems as well as many coastal economies, but many runs are now more than 90% depleted. Through collaboration and litigation, we focus our efforts on preserving and restoring freshwater habitat and spawning grounds.

Thanks to a WELC dam-removal lawsuit, coho salmon, which are federally recognized as threatened with extinction, will have access to 100 miles of upstream habitat for the first time in 70 years. The owner of Murphy Dam, on the Applegate River, a tributary to the Rogue River in Oregon, has agreed to remove the dam, which has caused harm to wild salmon for decades. We are pleased to be part of this wild salmon restoration victory.

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