Western Environmental Law Center

SUMMER 2026 NEWSLETTER

WINNING FOR WILDLIFE IN OREGON

Imperiled wildlife recovery depends on reliable funding.

We helped pass a historic new law in Oregon that will boost conservation in a big way.

> Emergent Horizons

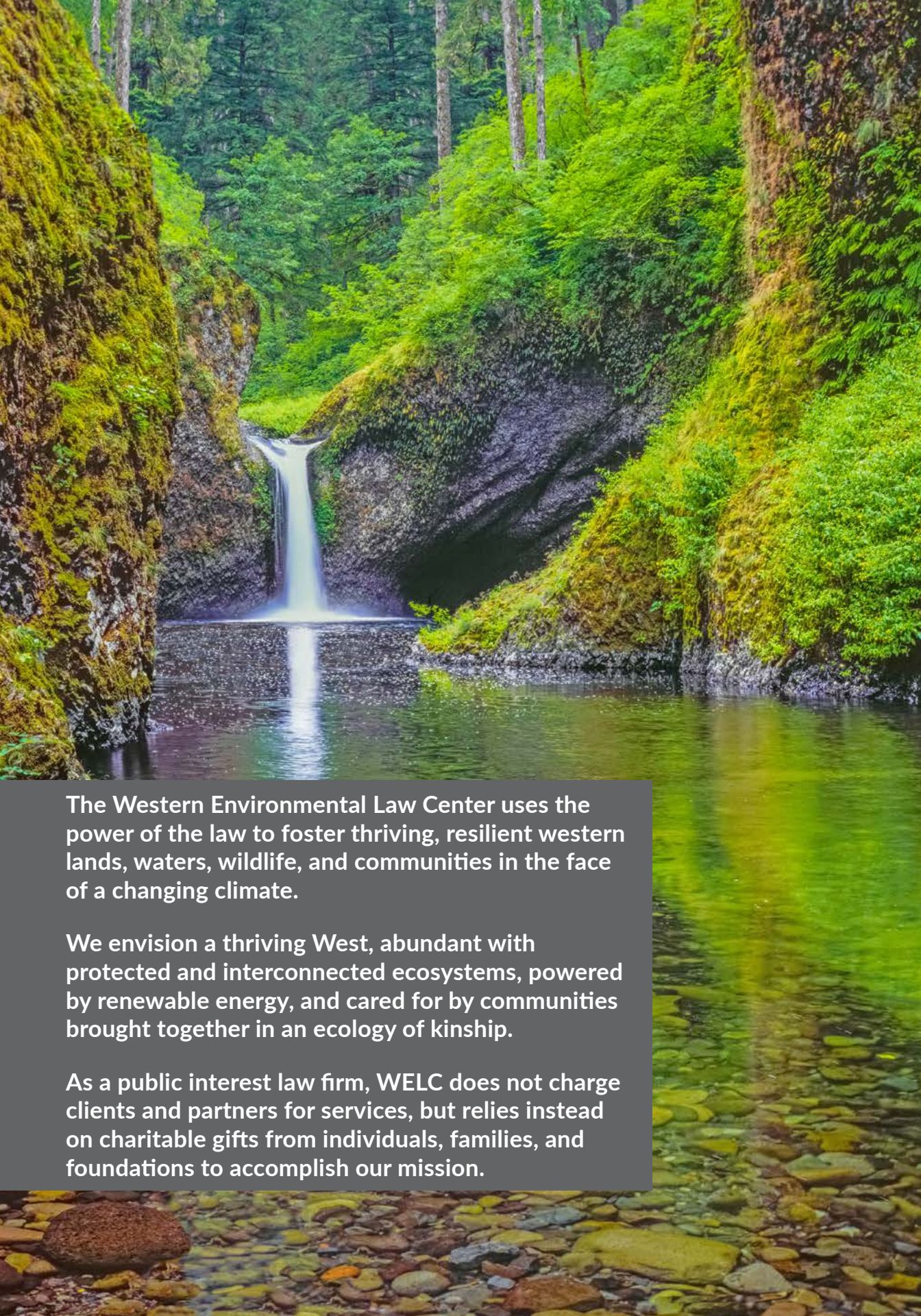
> Safeguarding bison, grizzlies, wolves, and owls

> Defending laws

> Fighting coal mines

> Protecting air, water, and public health

> Legacy giving



The Western Environmental Law Center uses the power of the law to foster thriving, resilient western lands, waters, wildlife, and communities in the face of a changing climate.

We envision a thriving West, abundant with protected and interconnected ecosystems, powered by renewable energy, and cared for by communities brought together in an ecology of kinship.

As a public interest law firm, WELC does not charge clients and partners for services, but relies instead on charitable gifts from individuals, families, and foundations to accomplish our mission.

EMERGENT HORIZONS

We are witnessing the sabotage of American democracy. We know the causes. We know the harms. We witness them every day.

Yet, we also see an emergent path to a thriving, prosperous future where we live in kinship with each other and the world around us—the world we love. Our home. Earth. We offer three ideas to nurture us along this path.

First, we must reject, in the words of the late poet John O'Donohue, the "fester of small mediocrities." Ill-conceived concepts such as "permitting reform" now debated in Congress by Republicans and Democrats alike would reinforce the status quo dominance of billionaires and extractive industries. Immediate bold—even radical—action is demanded in opposition.

Second, we must center ecological and community values. In the U.S.: 41% of ecosystems are at risk of collapse, over 1,600 species are at risk of extinction, more than 700,000 miles of rivers and streams are impaired, and air pollution causes up to 200,000 avoidable deaths annually. A thriving, prosperous world is contingent on protecting and restoring ecological systems, not just green infrastructure.

Third, we must prioritize people's values, communicating the real-world consequences of abstract policy to spark a shared sense of agency, belonging, and belief in a cause bigger than any of us individually. Together, we can create a counterweight to the insular, narcissistic elites who are looting our country for wealth, power, and influence.

With these ideas—which are embedded in the work you'll read about in this newsletter—we can build an ecology of kinship essential to our work in the ruins of this moment and our march to the emergent horizons. And together, we can prevail.

In Kinship,

Erik Schlenker-Goodrich
Executive Director

Sristi

Sristi Kamal, Ph.D.
Deputy Director

LANDMARK VICTORY FOR WILDLIFE AND THEIR HABITAT IN OREGON

Rallying cries of "Protect Our Wildlife Neighbors!" brought Oregon to a historic win this spring as HB 4134 was signed into law.

Alongside our partners, the WELC team successfully led the campaign for HB 4134, also known as 1.25% for Wildlife, a bill that establishes permanent, dedicated funding for the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW) to protect the state's most imperiled species and habitats.

Oregon, like other U.S. states, has struggled to address biodiversity loss as its list of at-risk species continues to grow. Most of ODFW's budget, tied to hunting or fishing licenses and equipment sales, goes toward managing hunted or fished wildlife.

This funding method perpetually leaves the conservation of non-game species—over 80% of Oregon's wildlife—with limited resources. Many states have tried fixing this systemic problem through alternative measures, with little to no success.

After years of effort, advocates identified a solution in the state tourism tax. By increasing the state lodging tax from 1.5% to 2.75%, Oregon would generate about $34 million annually to go toward its most imperiled species and habitats, connectivity, anti-poaching, wildfire mitigation, and more—without raising residents' cost of living. In a state with extraordinary outdoors and wildlife drawing 90% of visitors, 1.25% for Wildlife was a logical, if unconventional, solution.

HB 4134 also brought together unconventional allies from every corner of Oregon—wildlife conservationists, hunters and anglers, recreationists, farming and ranching groups, artists, entrepreneurs, elders, and students. Our coalition achieved the near-impossible: bipartisan backing on a critical issue and effort across sectors for something bigger than ourselves. We believe 1.25% for Wildlife will give Oregon's at-risk wildlife a fighting chance and inspire other states to reform fish and wildlife agencies.

FIGHTING THE NEWEST PUSH FOR COAL MINE EXPANSION IN MONTANA

On behalf of our clients, we took the Trump administration to court over its approval of a 58-million-ton expansion of the Bull Mountains Coal Mine near Roundup. The mine is an outsized contributor to climate change and a threat to the local water supply, and this expansion would intensify these harms and others.

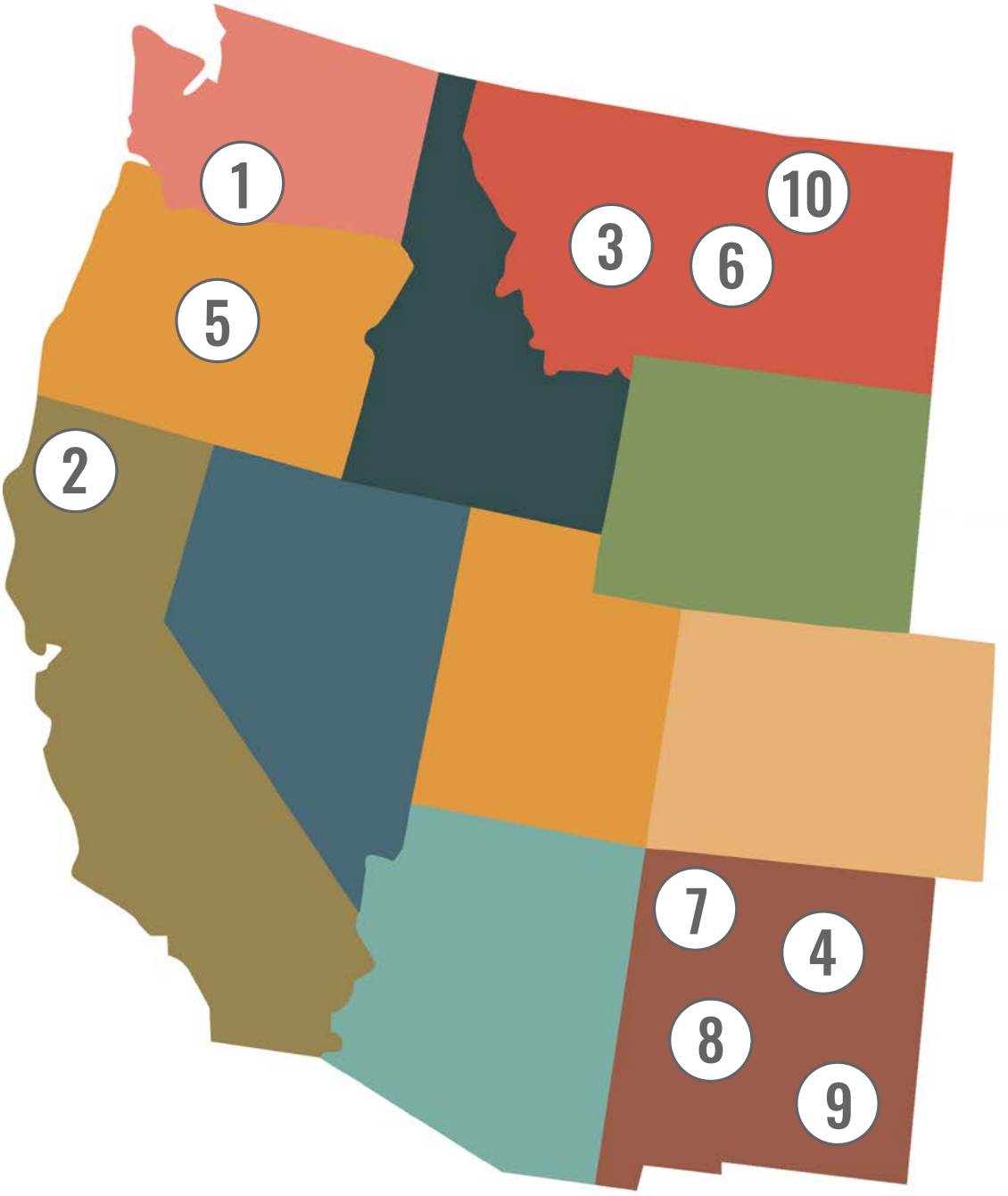
Normally, projects of this scale require a public environmental review process. But the administration bypassed that step, citing the president's "national energy emergency," contrived falsely to promote the fossil fuel industry. In truth, 2024 marked the highest fossil fuel production levels in American history, capping seven straight years of U.S. dominance in global energy. This coal mine expansion would do little to nothing to address domestic needs because 99% of the coal is exported to Japan, Chile, and South Korea.

In the arid Bull Mountains, ranchers and wildlife get their water from a tiny fraction of the land—roughly 0.1%—that contains springs, wells, and ponds. State and federal studies have shown that expanding this mine would permanently drain those water sources—a fact at the heart of our 2023 court victory against this coal mine expansion.

Cave-ins from the underground mine have torn cracks and crevasses through the Bull Mountains, causing springs and wells to go dry, and creating dangerous conditions for people and wildlife. Additionally, in an apparent effort to evade reclamation obligations, the mining company, Signal Peak Energy, has canceled ranchers' leases and bullied them into abandoning ranching in the area.

The energy "emergency" is yet another fraudulent abuse of power to silence the public, ignore environmental requirements, and approve this notorious coal mine's expansion no matter the cost to Montana's agriculture industry and wildlife. This expansion benefits foreign corporations—not American energy needs—and we aim to stop it.

WE DEFEND THE WEST



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We provide legal representation for and work alongside more than 165 partners and clients each year. Our partners and clients include community-groups, small nonprofit organizations, large national groups, Tribes, youths, and more.

Please visit westernlaw.org to learn more about our cases and advocacy.

1 CHALLENGING FLAWED WASHINGTON HYDROELECTRIC PROJECT

WELC and our partners are challenging the proposed Goldendale pump storage hydroelectric project. It would threaten Pushpum, a sacred Yakama Nation site known as "mother of all roots." In addition to destroying this significant Indigenous site, the project could leak 32 million gallons of water annually, threatening groundwater and the Columbia River. The Washington Department of Ecology does not intend to monitor groundwater for contamination. Renewable energy projects must not contaminate clean water or destroy irreplaceable Indigenous resources.

2 CONTINUING THE FIGHT FOR NORTHERN SPOTTED OWLS

We are challenging the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's scientific analysis used to justify a 50-year permit allowing a timber company to log up to 70% of active northern spotted owl sites on its lands in northern California. The plan ignores critical habitat for marbled murrelets, misinterprets science, and ignores climate change, while granting Green Diamond Resource Company broad leeway to clearcut its lands in a manner sure to accelerate these species' decline. We are standing up for imperiled spotted owls and other wildlife because they can't withstand another half century of destruction.

3 PROTECTING GRIZZLIES FROM FOREST SERVICE GREENWASHING

We are gearing up to challenge a 17,696-acre logging project called Larabee Hat in the Divide area of Montana in important grizzly bear habitat linkages. This project would include 1,266 acres of clearcuts, 1,854 acres of "intermediate" logging, and 16.8 miles of road construction over 15-20 years. For the project, the U.S. Forest Service relies on a new determination that a single acre of land is "secure habitat" for threatened grizzly bears—only 0.04% of the previously used 2,500-acre patches of secure habitat. Our case will also challenge this secure habitat rollback.

4 DEFENDING NEW MEXICO'S STRONG HAZE EMISSIONS RULES

In 2025, we helped achieve a victory for clean air in New Mexico in a rulemaking by the state Environmental Improvement Board to reduce emissions from the largest oil and gas operations that contribute to regional haze. New Mexico's new haze rules are among the strongest nationwide and will reduce nitrogen oxide emissions by nearly 18,000 tons per year and sulfur dioxide by more than 5,000 tons per year. Unfortunately, fossil fuel interests have appealed this rule. We have intervened to defend these clean air protections in court.

CLIMATE JUSTICE

PROTECTING THE CHACO BUFFER ZONE, REGION, AND COMMUNITIES

Chaco Canyon is a sacred Indigenous site, yet heavily exploited—over 90%—by the fossil fuel industry. In 2023, then-Interior Secretary Deb Haaland protected a 10-mile buffer zone around Chaco Culture National Historical Park from new oil and gas leasing. Now, the Trump administration plans to eliminate those protections. Despite a lightning-fast 7-day comment period over Pueblo feast days and Easter, we helped generate 70,000+ public comments in opposition. We will continue to fight for protections for the Greater Chaco region and its living communities.

IMPROVING AIR QUALITY IN NEW MEXICO

We participated in a hearing before the New Mexico Environmental Improvement Board representing frontline community groups in favor of modernizing air quality permit fees that had been flat for about 20 years. The board unanimously approved the fee update, which will provide funding for inspections, monitoring, and enforcement. These changes will help deliver stronger protections to people who need them the most, funded by the industry applicants whose duty it is to ensure their enterprises do not endanger the communities in which they operate.

PREVENTING FRACKING WASTE DISCHARGE TO NEW MEXICO WATERS

The oil and gas industry in New Mexico desperately wants the state to allow it to discharge “treated” oil and gas waste to rivers, streams, and groundwater. Despite the Water Quality Control Commission enacting a rule prohibiting discharge only a year ago, the industry keeps proposing extremely permissive rules, requiring WELC and our partners to intervene over and over again. We are currently back before the commission to defend arid New Mexico’s clean water. Our team will fight discharge of this “produced water” using the power of the law.

WILDLIFE & WILDLANDS

DEFENDING BISON CONSERVATION

For 20 years, the conservation group American Prairie has worked to restore bison to their historic range on public grasslands in Montana. In 2022, the Bureau of Land Management found that bison are better for the land than cattle, and approved permits for bison grazing. The Trump administration reversed course and asserts bison are not legally "livestock" that can graze on public lands. This misreads the law and could negatively impact Tribes and others who also graze bison on public land. We plan to defend the law and help restore bison to the land.

DEFENDING WOLVES FROM POLITICALLY MOTIVATED ATTACKS

We are in court defending two legal victories for wolves in the western U.S. Our first victory forced the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to reconsider providing endangered species protections to western wolves, including those in the northern Rockies previously delisted. Interests hostile to wolf recovery appealed that decision, but the science shows listing is warranted. We are also defending our 2022 victory restoring wolf protections nationwide. We're advocating for the best available science—not politics—to guide wildlife management in the West.

PROMOTING WHITEBARK PINE PROTECTIONS

Whitebark pine trees are referred to as "high-elevation heroes" because they are a foundational species that helps build biodiverse, high-mountain ecosystems. Due to stressors including blister rust, pine beetle, altered fire regimes, and climate change, mortality levels for whitebark pine are sky high. Just over half of all standing whitebark pine trees in the West are now dead and in some regions over 80% are dead or dying. We are planning a case to force the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to designate critical habitat to help this threatened tree species survive.

DEFENDING BEDROCK ENVIRONMENTAL AND COMMUNITY LAWS

People and nature must be at the center of climate and conservation action. Yet, heeding the calls of energy and technology industry lobbyists, Congress is targeting bedrock environmental and community protection laws for "permit reform"—a euphemism for legislation that would weaken bedrock safeguards essential to public lands and wildlife as well as clean air and water.

WELC led a coalition of 73 environmental, conservation, faith, and Indigenous organizations in a letter urging Congress to reject permitting reform legislation because it would gut the laws that protect communities, public lands, and wildlife from harmful industrial development.

We called, instead, for our elected leaders to stand with us in defense of climate action and the public lands, waters, wildlife, and communities of the West.

To us, this means clear-eyed acknowledgment of the gravity of the Trump administration's transgressions and the reality that any permitting legislation that could conceivably emerge from the Republican-controlled Congress would unacceptably erode—or even destroy—bedrock community and environmental safeguards.

As we fight these regressive and destructive attempts at "permit reform," we must also work hard to create the conditions necessary to not merely rebuild after Trump, but to renew and strengthen government's capacity to further the public interest.

It is this work that will inspire the green infrastructure of the future, wind down fossil fuel production, and safeguard the people and places we care about.

Call your senators at 202-224-3121 and tell them: Congress must stand strong, defend existing environmental and community safeguards, and pursue policy ideas that advance the public interest and center people and nature—not profit-driven energy and technology oligarchs.

JOIN OUR LEGACY CIRCLE AND MAKE A DIFFERENCE FOR YEARS TO COME

By naming the Western Environmental Law Center in your will, trust, or other estate plans, you'll make a lasting contribution to the protection of the public lands, wildlife, and communities of the West.

We offer a variety of donation options and planned giving opportunities. Here are a few examples:

- Will, trust, and estate plans
- Charitable remainder trusts
- Charitable gift annuities
- Stocks, bonds, and mutual funds
- Automatic monthly giving
- Workplace giving
- Real estate and car donations

We fight in court to defend the western U.S. on behalf of our clients free of charge, but we can't do it without your support.

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. WELC's federal tax identification number is 93-1010269.

Please contact Jenna Kloeppel at jennak@westernlaw.org or 575-305-3993 to join our Gil F. Staender Legacy Circle or to learn more about planned giving options. We appreciate gifts of all sizes.

Gilbert F. Staender was an adventurer who was passionate about the outdoors and built his life upon perseverance. He lived simply and saved his earnings. Gil was a devoted WELC supporter who passed away in 2016, leaving more than half a million dollars to WELC in his will. Close friends presented us with this amazing gift, and we shared a warm conversation, hearing stories of Gil's life. Learning about the individual behind the gift makes it so much more meaningful. In his honor, we named our legacy giving circle after Gil.

Gil Staender by his Alaska homestead in 1965. His love of nature lives on through his legacy gift to WELC.

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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 lands, waters, wildlife, and communities in the face of a changing climate.

WESTERNLAW.ORG

Charity Navigator ★★★★ FOUR-STAR

Platinum Transparency 2026 Candid.

NPT's BEST NONPROFITS TO WORK FOR ★2025★

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LOOK GOOD WHILE SUPPORTING OUR MISSION TO DEFEND THE WEST

New summer designs are available at our online store! Show your support for public lands, wear clothing featuring the animals you love including beavers and wolves, and find a gift for a family member or friend.

You can pick from a variety of styles and colors, including tank tops, shirts, and hoodies. All designs are by WELC staff with 100% of proceeds going to our mission to Defend the West. These are just a few examples. You can choose from many more options on our site.

Scan the QR code or visit: bonfire.com/store/western-horizons