
Why the Sagebrush Revolt Burned Out

Robert H. Nelson

FEDERAL OWNERSHIP of vast areas of western land is an anomaly in the American system of private enterprise and decentralized government authority. Not surprisingly, it has been the target of periodic challenges—two of which have recently come to prominence. One, known popularly as the “Sagebrush Rebellion,” was a movement to transfer much federal land to the states. The second was the Reagan administration’s proposal to sell large areas of public lands into private ownership—a process sometimes called “privatization.”

Both the Sagebrush Rebellion and the privatization movement generated wide debate, but few substantive consequences. Indeed, both by now are effectively defunct. Matters seemingly have returned to normal—with the federal government expected to retain its hold on the public lands after, at most, minor adjustments in boundaries.

Robert H. Nelson is an economist in the Office of Policy Analysis of the U.S. Department of Interior and the author of The Making of Federal Coal Policy (Duke, 1983). The Interior Department does not necessarily agree with the analysis or conclusions of this paper. This is the first part of a two-part article on public lands.

This paper examines how the Sagebrush Rebellion and privatization movements evolved. It concludes that their momentum was largely dissipated, not because the problems of public land management are minor or have been resolved, but because both movements were caught up in critical contradictions on basic principle. These contradictions became apparent, and lethal, as soon as proponents made significant efforts to move from rhetoric to action. In the future, those who want to reform federal land ownership will need a sounder base of ideas—a better ideology, if you will. They will have to abandon some myths about the role of the public lands in the West—including some myths that westerners themselves hold dear.

The Origins of Western Dependence

Historians and other writers on the West have often commented on a central paradox. While the West sees itself as the land of rugged individualism (and votes more conservatively than the rest of the country), it is also the region of the country most dependent on the federal government. Although the narrow strip

of Pacific coastline from San Diego to Seattle has secured a wealthy and diverse economic base, the intermountain West, the Rocky Mountains, and the western Great Plains still depend significantly on federal support. Paradoxically, it is in these areas of greatest dependence on the federal government that the western ethic of rugged individualism flourishes most. Today, the federal government owns around 50 percent of the land in the West, including 86 percent of Nevada and 47 percent even of California, a leading urban state.

Today, the federal government owns around 50 percent of the land in the West, including 86 percent of Nevada and 47 percent even of California, a leading urban state.

Throughout the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth, the federal government promoted the development of the West. Federal funds built the dams and aqueducts that supply the West with critical water supplies and the high-speed highways that link its cities. Defense and space programs have fueled the growth of western economies. Federal employment provides a major part of the employment base in some rural areas.

The federal government has also assumed the financial burdens of managing western public lands. Western ranchers, for example, benefit from federal willingness to bear the costs of administering grazing rights and making investments on public rangelands. The federal government gets far less revenue from grazing lands than it spends to administer them. In 1981, the costs of Interior grazing administration were somewhere between \$100 million and \$200 million, depending on the assumptions made. By comparison, grazing fees amounted to only \$25 million, about half of which were earmarked to benefit ranchers through the Range Improvement Fund.

Although there was never any formal document, the federal government and western states for many years effectively had a compact with the following implicit terms. First, the federal government paid most of the cost of western water projects and other public works

and of maintaining western land. Second, the West consented to the federal ownership of these properties and the resulting federal control over much of what goes on in the West. Third, this federal power was kept under substantial though not complete control by the West's congressional representatives.

This control was greatly facilitated by the importance of the West in the U.S. Senate. Ten "public land" states (Arizona, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon, Utah, Washington, and Wyoming), with 8 percent of the population of the United States, have 20 percent of the votes in the U.S. Senate. These senators also tend to accumulate seniority: seven Senate committees are currently chaired by Republican senators from the public lands states.

In the 1970s, however, cracks began appearing in this traditional arrangement. There were several reasons. For years, members of Congress from other regions had voted support for western economic development on the belief that western growth was good for the nation as a whole. By the 1970s, however, many eastern and midwestern economic interests had come to see the growth of the West as a threat to their own industrial success.

A second and equally important factor was the growth of the environmental movement. The West itself, like the rest of the country, is internally divided on the proper balance between economic development and environmental amenities. Traditional ranching, mining, and farming pursuits have become less important with the influx of retirees, scientists, government workers, and other white-collar employees. These latter groups place a higher value on recreation and environmental quality, and do not necessarily welcome the arrival of new industry as a sign of progress.

Environmentalists objected to many aspects of the federal role in the West. They began to challenge federal support for water projects, cheap transportation, and other means of promoting western economic development. They challenged the use of public lands for such activities as livestock grazing, timber harvesting, and coal mining, and called for more in the way of creation of wilderness areas, protection of endangered species, establishment of wild and scenic rivers, and the setting aside of archeological and historic sites. They were

Table 1
KEY ENVIRONMENTAL LEGISLATION
WITH PRESERVATION OBJECTIVES SINCE 1964

Law	Year Enacted	Main Preservation Provision(s)
Wilderness Act	1964	Created national wilderness system
National Historic Preservation Act	1966 (amended 1980)	Expands scope of historic preservation; directs federal agencies to examine impacts on historic properties
Wild and Scenic Rivers Act	1968	Created national wild and scenic rivers system
National Trails System Act	1968	Created national trail system
Bald Eagle Protection Act	1969 (amended 1972)	Forbids killing of bald and golden eagles and protects habitat
National Environmental Policy Act	1969	Requires study of environmental impacts associated with major federal actions
Wild and Free-Roaming Horse and Burro Act	1971	Provides for federal management and protection of wild horses and burros
Endangered Species Act	1973	Bars federal actions that would jeopardize an endangered or threatened species
Eastern Wilderness Act	1975	Extended wilderness system, creating first eastern wilderness areas
Federal Land Policy and Management Act	1976	Requires wilderness review of BLM lands
Surface Mining Control and Reclamation Act	1977	Requires restoration of mined land to original condition
Endangered American Wilderness Act	1978	Added 1.3 million acres of new wilderness
National Parks and Recreation Act	1978	Made important additions to the wild and scenic rivers system, national scenic trails system, and national wilderness system
Public Rangelands Improvement Act	1978	Sets goal to restore rangelands to earlier productivity
Archeological Resources Protection Act	1979	Requires permits for site excavations and artifact removal; provides other protections for archeological resources on federal lands
Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act	1980	Establishes large new parks, wildlife refuges, wilderness areas, and other "conservation system units" in Alaska

Source: Robert H. Nelson, "The Public Lands," in Paul R. Portney, ed., *Current Issues in Natural Resource Policy* (Washington, D.C.: Resources for the Future; distributed by the Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982).

joined, increasingly, by those who sought to protect eastern industry and, on some of the public works issues, by those favoring budget-cutting as well. Table 1 shows how Congress responded to these concerns with a flurry of legislation, starting with the Wilderness Act of 1964, most of which significantly affected public land use in the West.

The strength of these new forces is illustrated by the resistance to the growth of western coal production. National environmental groups joined with mid-western and Appalachian coal miners and other eastern mining interests to seek to limit the development of western coal. As has been widely noted, this coalition succeeded in attaching provisions to the 1977 Clean Air Act amendments that made little sense except as an attempt to block growth of western coal production. More recently, the same alliance helped stop legislation to promote coal slurry pipelines.

The environmental movement had perhaps its greatest successes in the federal courts. In the 1974 case of *Natural Resources Defense Council v. Morton*, a federal judge in effect ordered the Interior Department to conduct a massive, thirteen-year review—it still has four years to run—of the status of livestock grazing on the public lands in relation to other uses. This massive undertaking would require the preparation of 212 new land use plans (later reduced to 144), costing many millions of dollars. The first land use plans completed by the department under the court order proposed significant cuts in grazing, which were the aim of the environmental groups that brought the suit.

Ranchers were outraged. To add fuel to the fire, the case had been decided by the U.S. district

court in Washington, D.C., far from the lands at issue. The *NRDC* case became perhaps the single most important event in precipitating the Sagebrush Rebellion.

Another key cause of the rebellion, it is often said, was the Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976. That act declared an intent to retain most public lands in federal ownership, mandated land use planning as the basis for management decisions, and generally provided the first formal legislative charter for the system of lands overseen by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). Nevertheless, the changes it made in public land management were more symbolic than substantive, largely consolidating and formalizing policies that had been put into place well before 1976. For example, the era of disposal of the public lands had pretty much ended with the Taylor Grazing Act of 1934, although the 1976 act made it official. It might also be noted that the act was endorsed and, in significant part, developed by western leadership. In any case, as a symbol of changing times, and as representative of the body of legislation shown in Table 1, the act came to represent for many in the West the new and unwelcome federal policies on western issues.

Western-federal relations deteriorated further when the advent of the Carter administration brought staffers of environmental groups into key policy-making positions in the White House and the Interior Department. The Carter administration proposed in 1977 to cancel a "hit list" of western water projects already under construction and to make water users pay a higher share of the costs of future projects. It proposed strict enforcement of an existing 160-acre limit on the size of farms that could receive low-cost water from the Bureau of Reclamation. It curtailed grazing and limited the use of off-road vehicles on public lands. It aggressively moved forward in reviewing public lands and forest areas for wilderness designation. It proposed legislation to replace the Mining Law of 1872 with a leasing system. It effectively extended for another four years a moratorium on the leasing of federal coal that in 1977 had already lasted six years.

Carter officials were somewhat taken aback by the depth of resulting western antagonism. In their view, they were simply asserting broader national and also western inter-

ests against more parochial western interests. Indeed, some argued that they were still faithfully representing western needs; it was just that true western needs had shifted toward recreational and environmental constituencies and away from livestock, mining, and other development activities. As Undersecretary of the Interior James Joseph put it in 1979,

The old interests which have for so long dictated public land policies have lost control. Many of you have been saying for years that more than stockmen have a stake in how the public lands are grazed; more than miners have a right to suggest how, when and where mining will be done on the public lands; more than loggers care—and may rightfully comment on how our timber resources are managed.

There is nothing particularly mysterious, I now believe, in what is being called the "Sagebrush Rebellion." Indeed, it is the time-honored response of the fellow who upon finding he can no longer dictate the rules of the game decided to take his ball and go home.

No doubt there is some truth to this interpretation. Carter's policies, however, managed to alienate not only the old-timers but the newcomers as well—especially since some of his proposals, like the gigantic synthetic fuels program, threatened environmental as well as traditional western interests. It was a "new politics" Democrat, Governor Richard Lamm of Colorado, who charged that "with regard to public lands, and issues related to public lands, the Carter administration was a western nightmare." By 1979, a *New York Times* headline proclaimed: "West taking South's place as most alienated region."

An Economically Maturing West

During these years, the financial and other assistance contributed by the federal government was becoming less important to the West. In the first place, the West had become the fastest-growing region of the country. From 1970 to 1980, the two states with the most rapid population growth in the country were Nevada (64 percent) and Arizona (53 percent). Five other mountain states placed in the top ten. In 1980 Alaska, California, Nevada, and Wyoming

placed among the half-dozen highest states in per capita income. Wyoming's per capita income increased by 197 percent from 1970 to 1980, the fastest in the country. Some of the Mountain states still lag behind the U.S. average, but their economies have been catching up rapidly.

With this growth came a richer base for state taxation. Most western states impose severance taxes on production of oil and gas, coal, timber, and other key resources, and also get a major share of the royalties the federal government collects on resources it owns. Partly as a result of the OPEC price hike of 1973-74, these revenue sources rose sharply in the 1970s. As Table 2 shows, three states—Alaska, Wyoming, and New Mexico—are particularly well endowed. Wyoming and New Mexico in 1980 collected \$571 and \$465 per capita respectively in these levies.

The economic gains of the West in the 1970s fed the flames of rebellion in several ways. First, they increased eastern pressure against federal public works and subsidies for western development. The West could hardly expect its poorer cousins in the Midwest to keep on sending checks; if anything, perhaps it should consider sending checks back. Second, as other sources of income grew relative to federal subsidies, some westerners began to conclude that

perhaps the financial and other gains were no longer worth the trouble of having to deal with growing federal restrictions. Finally, the burden of land management costs no longer looked so frightening. To take the clearest example, the federal Bureau of Land Management spent \$35.6 million in 1981 managing public lands in California that amount to 17 percent of the state's total area. If the state had taken over management of BLM land and had spent the same amount on management, it would have added only one-tenth of 1 percent to its 1980 budget of \$32.8 billion.

Proposals for the federal government to transfer public lands to the states have arisen sporadically for at least 150 years, most often in times of sectional conflict.

The Rebellion Stirs

Proposals for the federal government to transfer public lands to the states have arisen sporadically for at least 150 years, most often in times of sectional conflict. In the 1830s John C. Calhoun proposed ceding federal lands to the states in order to weaken the power of the federal government and thus the threat it posed to slavery and other southern interests.

Another push for cession arose in the second decade of this century, led this time by westerners. Among the sources of conflict was the newly created national forest system, which removed more than 150 million acres from the public domain; the fledgling Forest Service stirred rancher resentment by beginning to charge fees for grazing in national forests. In 1913, 1914, and 1919, meetings of western governors passed resolutions asking Congress to transfer the remaining public land (outside the national forests) to the states.

In 1930, in the wake of another bitter conflict between ranchers and the Forest Service over grazing fees, a commission appointed by President Herbert Hoover recommended transferring the surface rights on federal lands to the western states. The states rejected the offer, however, saying that they did not want the

Table 2
STATE REVENUES FROM NATURAL RESOURCES,
INCLUDING FEDERAL RESOURCES
(millions of dollars)

State	1970	1975	1980
Alaska	\$942.4	\$ 84.5	\$1,389.5
Arizona	9.7	12.1	33.0
California	62.3	167.1	431.0
Colorado	9.0	44.1	99.2
Idaho	5.8	10.3	29.3
Montana	18.1	38.0	151.5
Nevada	1.5	1.8	20.5
New Mexico	85.8	174.0	604.6
North Dakota	4.8	9.5	117.5
Oregon	62.3	95.3	278.7
Utah	10.4	20.5	51.3
Washington	15.8	47.2	100.8
Wyoming	31.4	65.3	269.0
Total	\$1,259.3	\$769.8	\$3,575.9

Source: U.S. Department of the Interior, Office of Policy Analysis, *Past and Projected Revenues from Energy and Other Natural Resources in 13 Western States*, September 1981.

surface rights unless they got the mineral rights as well.

Western resentments flared anew after the Taylor Grazing Act in 1934 imposed new controls on public land users, and in particular extended the system of grazing permits and fees to all public lands. After World War II proposals for major tenure changes emerged again, not just to transfer grazing lands to states—the thrust of a bill introduced in 1946 by Senator Edward Robertson of Wyoming—but also to provide for sale of such lands directly to rancher-users, in what would today be called privatization.

The recent Sagebrush Rebellion thus falls into a familiar pattern. Like past efforts, it was precipitated by a period of increasing federal control over public land users. Once again, the greatest irritant to westerners was controls on livestock grazing on public lands. Ranchers led the Sagebrush Rebellion as they had led previous movements. And the outcome was also similar: the federal government responded not by divesting the land, but by making management concessions to conciliate western interests.

The rebellion of the 1970s more or less began in Nevada, a state that has long shown a particularly strong interest in the question, no doubt because it is the state with the highest percentage of federal land ownership. In 1970 the Public Land Law Review Commission rejected a formal request by Nevada for a land grant of 6 million acres to be selected over twenty years, along with a similar request from Arizona. In 1976 a Nevada state commission urged the state attorney general “to assert, in the normal course of litigation, all possible claims the State of Nevada has to the public lands within its borders.” Two years later the state legislature formally asserted a claim to public-domain lands within the state. Other western states joined in 1978 in forming the Western Coalition on Public Lands, for which the Nevada Legislative Counsel Bureau agreed to serve as a clearinghouse.

It was not until 1979 that the rebellion made it into the national headlines. In June of that year the Nevada legislature enacted the “Sagebrush Rebellion Act,” which flatly declared the public domain lands in Nevada to be the property of the state, specified steps for state management of the lands, and provided

support for litigation to achieve the purposes of the bill.

The legislature asserted in the bill that the vast extent of federal land holdings in Nevada—97 percent or more of five counties and 86 percent of the state as a whole—was unconstitutional. It based this claim on several legal theories, the most important being the “equal footing” constitutional doctrine, which requires that in certain matters affecting basic state sovereignty all states must be admitted to the nation on equal terms (see “The Fall of the House of *Usey*,” *Regulation*, May/June 1983). Now, Nevada’s basic sovereignty is surely reduced by its status as little more than some scattered urban islands surrounded by a sea of federal land. When Nevada gained statehood in 1864, so the state argues, it joined the Union on the implicit understanding that this insult to its sovereignty would eventually end: the federal government would dispose of its land holdings according to the practices of that time. (In most of the states admitted to the Union prior to 1864, the majority of federal land had in fact already been sold, homesteaded, or otherwise divested.) The subsequent federal decision to hold on to the land, Nevada claims, was an after-the-fact violation of the statehood agreement that left its sovereignty fundamentally impaired.

Thus far the courts, along with virtually all legal scholars, have rejected these arguments; even the Sagebrush rebels have not seemed to take them very seriously. No doubt it is partly the archaic sound of the claim, although long-ignored Indian treaties of 100 years ago (or more) have been dusted off and enforced. But more important, informed national opinion simply has not been convinced that it would be desirable on policy grounds to divest federal lands to the states.

After Nevada passed its “sagebrush bill,” the legislatures of Utah, Arizona, New Mexico, and Wyoming followed suit in 1980. Sagebrush bills also passed the California and Washington state legislatures, but the California bill was vetoed by Governor Jerry Brown, and in Washington the voters turned down, in a later referendum, provisions on which the bill was contingent. Sagebrush legislation gained strong support and active consideration—if not final passage—in virtually every other western legislature as well.

Candidate Ronald Reagan, for his part, said in the summer of 1980, "I happen to be one who cheers and supports the Sagebrush Rebellion. Count me in as a rebel." President-elect Reagan later promised, "My administration will work to ensure that the States have an equitable share of public lands and their natural resources."

Some western representatives in Congress began to lend a legislative hand. In 1978 Senator Jake Garn (Republican, Utah) introduced a bill authorizing the secretary of the interior to convey public lands to states that applied for them. In 1979 Senator Orrin Hatch (Republican, Utah) and Representative Jim Santini (Democrat, Nevada) introduced bills providing for cession to the states of ordinary federal lands.

In May 1981 Hatch and Santini again introduced land transfer bills, both of which required that lands be managed by the states under multiple-use principles. The Hatch bill applied to both BLM and Forest Service lands, while the Santini bill was limited to BLM lands. These Sagebrush legislative efforts, like the legal challenges, never made any real progress.

Political Co-optation

Many key western political leaders in fact embraced the Sagebrush Rebellion more as a symbol of western unhappiness with federal management practices than as a genuine policy proposal. They adopted the pragmatic and time-honored course of using the rebellion as

Many key western political leaders in fact embraced the Sagebrush Rebellion more as a symbol of western unhappiness with federal management practices than as a genuine policy proposal.

an occasion to work for concessions in federal land management practices.

One important westerner who held this view was James Watt. Asked at his confirmation hearings whether he favored large-scale transfers of land to the states, Watt replied:

I do not think that is needed. That is not the first order of priority, certainly. What we must do is defuse the Sagebrush Rebellion.

The Sagebrush Rebellion has been caused by an arrogant attitude by the Department of Interior land managers, who have refused to consult and include in their decision-making process State and Local governments and land users. The law says they must, I realize, and you have been an author of that type of legislation. Yet the fact remains that they have not. (January 7, 1981)

As secretary of the interior, Watt adopted what he called the "good neighbor" policy. It involved several elements. First, Watt sought to expedite a variety of "in lieu" and other land transfers to the states that had long been in the works but had never been completed, potentially involving up to 500,000 acres of land. Moreover, he announced, Interior would consider transferring other federal lands to western states on a selective basis if the states could identify specific reasons they needed the land. In many cases the lands would be transferred at a highly preferential price, although not for free. All these transfers could be accomplished within the limits of existing law.

Western governors eventually identified 973,000 acres that they were interested in acquiring. As of early 1984, the BLM had in fact transferred about 65,000 acres to states and local governments under follow-ups to the good neighbor policy. Direct BLM land transfers to the states under other procedures have equaled another 294,000 acres during the Reagan administration, a sharp increase over the rate of transfer of the 1970s.

Finally, Watt pledged to make federal land managers in the West much more responsive to western concerns and needs. Indeed, this latter effort was to prove highly successful in dissipating the momentum of the Sagebrush Rebellion.

The Rebellion Runs into Contradictions

The rhetoric of the rebellion suggested that federal land ownership was being forced on the western states by a domineering federal government. But the West long ago became politi-

cally strong enough that, by taking a united stand, it could have successfully demanded transfer of the federal lands. The reality was that the West had until recently found the rewards of federal ownership to be worth the annoyances; in fact, it was still of two minds on the issue.

This reality set in when it came time to fill in the specific details of transfer proposals. Western ranchers, for example, benefit from the federal presence in various ways. Most im-

... the West long ago became politically strong enough that, by taking a united stand, it could have successfully demanded transfer of the federal lands. The reality was that the West had until recently found the rewards of federal ownership to be worth the annoyances. . . .

portant, informal understandings have evolved over fifty years or more that effectively give them the right to graze certain public lands at less than market rates. If the lands were transferred to the states, these arrangements would be up for renegotiation. What assurances would ranchers have that state land administrators would be bound by the de facto property rights embodied in past federal practices? Indeed, several western states now impose grazing fees on state-owned land that are significantly higher than federal grazing fees.

Thus, when the government of Utah proposed "Project Bold," a large-scale exchange of state for federal land, it ran into opposition from the ranchers grazing on federal land. The *Salt Lake Tribune* reported in October 1981 that

during their successful crusade for state legislation to take over all BLM lands, the "rebel" cattlemen denounced BLM land management practices and actual or threatened cutbacks in grazing permits. They contended the state could do a better job of management and Utah revenues would increase.

However, in the Project Bold meetings, they opposed state takeover of the proposed BLM properties, voicing fears that the state, as new landlord, might not honor

their present federal grazing permits.

In a complete reversal, the feds are now the good guys and the state is apparently not to be trusted. For instance, a rancher at one of the meetings said, "BLM has been very cooperative and has put half of the revenue back into the land."

In New Mexico, where Sagebrush legislation was also enacted, one rancher complained in a letter to the *Albuquerque Journal* that

the State Land Office has a philosophy of "optimizing the dollar return," all right. Dollars are the only language they speak up there. Any communication with them must be accompanied by a fee. Every year the high leases get higher with no consideration given to what is on the land that year or how many cattle can, or are, grazing on the land. If we had to pay as much to lease the BLM portion of our ranch as we do for our two sections of state land (which are some of the least productive on the ranch) we would go out of business.

It might seem odd that ranchers would not wield as much political clout in state legislatures as they do at the federal level. Of course, with the rapid population growth of the West, livestock interests have diminished in political power in state legislatures. Moreover, tapping the federal till often seems virtually costless, whereas western state budgets have come under close scrutiny after periodic taxpayer revolts.

Ranchers were not the only group with second thoughts about the rebellion. Mining interests also wondered what would happen to their easy access to land for mineral exploration, along with the huge number of existing mining claims on federal lands. State land administrators also might reverse the federal policy of free access and begin charging mineral royalties for gold, copper, nickel, and other "hardrock" minerals.

The other possibility—that states would continue to manage public lands as the federal government had done—raised a different sort of threat, this time to the budgets of the less wealthy states. Studies commissioned by Governors Scott Matheson of Utah and Richard Lamm of Colorado, among others, showed that the fiscal impacts on the states would be negative. Table 3 shows the fiscal situation in 1981, assuming for the purposes of analysis that the

Table 3
REVENUES TO STATES FROM PUBLIC DOMAIN LAND
(thousands of dollars)

State	Net State Gain (Loss) from Transfer, All Land	Net State Gain (Loss) from Transfer, Surface Only
Alaska	\$ (66,947)	\$ (23,800)
Arizona	(15,115)	(15,882)
California	(4,089)	(25,193)
Colorado	(6,324)	(17,828)
Idaho	(23,025)	(42,821)
Montana	(9,815)	(14,855)
Nevada	(18,835)	(26,323)
New Mexico	107,328	(13,076)
North Dakota	43,629	35
Oregon	(6,106)	(4,352)
Utah	(2,411)	(18,040)
Washington	(878)	(739)
Wyoming	114,055	(11,469)
Total	\$111,463	\$(214,346)

Source: Robert H. Nelson and Gabriel Joseph, *An Analysis of Revenues and Costs of Public Land Management by the Interior Department in 13 Western States—Update to 1981*, U.S. Department of the Interior, Office of Policy Analysis, September 1982.

states would incur the same management expenses and reap the same total revenues on BLM land as the federal government. As the table shows, ten of the thirteen western states would have had to absorb added financial burdens, some as high as \$10 million to \$25 million per year. The adverse fiscal impact would be much greater if the federal government transferred only surface rights and kept its current share of mineral revenues: in that case, the thirteen western states would have experienced a new fiscal burden totaling \$214 million in 1981.

Recreationists, unlike livestock operators and miners, did not have to reverse their original position to oppose the Sagebrush Rebellion; they had never supported it in the first place. But their opposition sprang from the same fundamental reason as that of the others. Hunters, hikers, and fishermen had free access to public lands under the existing system. Although the federal government has from time to time considered various proposals to charge fees on general recreational use of public lands, it has never adopted any of them. Who could say what would happen under state ownership? It might also prove to be simply a transitional stage on the way to private ownership. Even if it did not, recreationists might find themselves

paying some market-clearing price or facing no-trespassing signs.

The responses of public land users to the Sagebrush Rebellion all had a common thread. Over many years, by dint of much political effort, these groups had won recognized entitlements to use parts of the public lands in certain ways. In some sense, they had established what amounted to property rights, some held individually, such as grazing rights, and others collectively, such as wilderness and other recreational rights. If they were to be persuaded to give up these rights, or at least subject them to new uncertainty in the rough-and-tumble of state politics, they would have to be shown some clear countervailing benefit from state ownership. The Sagebrush rebels were never successful in showing—indeed, hardly tried to show—that these benefits in fact existed.

Political movements need both interest-group support and an ideological base if they are to succeed. While the Sagebrush Rebellion had interest-group support, it never had a well-developed ideology. Leaders of the Sagebrush Rebellion could effectively rouse the troops, but they could not present a consistent theory to explain why state ownership would serve the broad national interest or the cause of fairness. Thus they could not rebut either the perception in the rest of the country that the rebellion mainly served the narrow sectional interests of the West, or the perception in the West that the rebellion would endanger the benefits the West traditionally has received from the rest of the country.

These circumstances reflected the absence of intellectual or academic enlistees in the Sagebrush Rebellion. For many people the rebellion appeared as an emotional, populist movement that could not attract the support of "serious" thinkers. In the end, although the Sagebrush rebels opened a useful debate in the West on land tenure, they did not persuade the region's opinion leaders or most of the key western members of Congress. Within the Reagan administration, a different cause—the cause of privatization—soon came to preeminence. ■

The second part of this article will discuss the movement for "privatization" of public lands in the West.