

Renewing the Ground: A Call for Faithful Stewardship of Energy Resources on God's Lands

An Open Statement to Governing Bodies, Land Managers, and Concerned Citizens

Land – from towering mountains to wide-open fields – is one of the vessels through which God sustains the web of life. Land provides the foundation of terrestrial ecosystems and human communities, the soil and water for the crops that nourish us, material blessings like timber and minerals, and the wild and open spaces we go to for recreation and spiritual renewal. As leaders and members of faith communities across the United States, we view caring for the lands and wild places God has entrusted to us as a critical part of our moral and spiritual duty to protect creation. We also believe that stewardship of the land is a responsibility shared by all citizens and leaders. This is particularly true in the case of the 623 million acres of public land nationwide – our national parks and forests, wilderness and conservation areas, wildlife refuges, and other lands held in the public trust.

We applaud and affirm the ideals embodied in our national network of public lands: cooperation, community, equitable sharing of the earth's bounty, utilizing the blessings of the land for the common good, and preserving the stunning landscapes and irreplaceable wildlife entrusted to our care. As people of faith, we are called to manage God's lands justly and in a way that conveys love to our neighbors and the rest of creation – not as a commodity to be exploited or reserved for a privileged few. As Leviticus chapter 25 reminds us, we do not own the land in perpetuity. Rather, we are temporary “tenants” on God's lands, which we hold in partnership with all creatures and future generations. We help fulfill our duty as stewards and justice seekers by calling on those who govern and hold authority over public lands in our nation to place priority on preserving the health of the land.

In particular, we are concerned by the recent surge in energy development on public lands. Oil and gas drilling – with its requisite network of drill pads, pipelines, and roads – can present a major threat to the health of public lands and wild places. Erosion, noise, air and water pollution, soil contamination, and destruction of wildlife habitat can upset the harmony of natural systems, disrupt the solitude and wild character of a place, harm the health and livelihood of nearby communities, and preclude other uses of the land such as recreation and grazing.

In light of these dangers and our firm belief that all of God's creation deserves our care and respect, we join our voices to call for a new ethic for management of public lands in line with the following principles:

We have a moral responsibility to preserve some wild areas in a pristine state. Some public lands should be set aside for protection and closed to energy development – period. Areas with unique natural characteristics, rare wildlife species or ecosystems, important water supplies, or cultural treasures are simply incompatible with oil and gas drilling and should not be sacrificed. And whenever possible, we should protect and expand wilderness areas – the connective tissue of natural ecosystems.

All of God's lands should be treated with respect. On public lands where oil and gas development is allowed, it must be conducted in a responsible manner. This means disturbing as little land and wildlife as possible, protecting cultural artifacts and sites, not contaminating surrounding soil or drinking water supplies, planning for complete and prompt reclamation of the land once drilling has concluded, and ensuring that all environmental safeguards are adequately and fairly enforced. It also means that the public should be meaningfully involved in decision-making and that the rights of citizens to enjoy public lands for other purposes, such as recreation and solitude, should be upheld.

We must exercise prudence when making decisions about energy development on public lands. When in doubt about the environmental consequences of energy development, we should err on the side of caution. We seek a just transition from our current energy policies and habits to a clean, sustainable energy system that shows our reverence for all of creation. During this time of transition, we must not allow the destruction of natural landscapes, ecosystems, and cultural heritage or let our communities fall prey to the boom and bust cycles of oil and gas development. Instead, we should embrace energy conservation and renewable energy sources to reduce pressure on our public lands, balance natural resource extraction and global wealth, and lessen the harmful effects of fossil fuels, like air pollution and global warming.

Our faith traditions and denominational policies challenge us to be responsible caretakers of the land and thoughtful actors in the on-going energy debate. Together, we work to answer this challenge by affirming the importance of healthy public lands and calling on those who manage them to share in an enduring vision for clean energy and exercise great caution in decisions about oil and gas drilling. Specifically, we ask land management agencies and officials to:

- Make the long-term health of the land a top management priority
- Restore a culture of stewardship in the management of our public lands and energy resources
- Prevent energy development from becoming the dominant or sole use of public lands to the detriment of other activities
- Embrace and genuinely encourage public involvement by all citizens in the management and decision-making process
- Protect the health and viability of communities and ecosystems on or near public lands
- Recognize that some places are too valuable or unique to be drilled and keep them off limits
- Mandate the use of best practices that minimize ecological damage where drilling is allowed
- Require that companies plan ahead for reclamation to fully restore the land, air, and water to pre-drilling conditions
- Ensure enforcement of environmental safeguards and agency regulations already on the books

We hope and pray that citizens and leaders across the nation will join us in reexamining and improving our approach to oil and gas development on public lands and our role in shaping the energy future before us and the environmental legacy we leave behind us.

Signed,

To affirm this statement and add your name, visit <http://www.toad.net/~cassandra/landsignon.htm> or contact Christine Hoekenga with the National Council of Churches Public Land Stewardship Initiative at choekenga@nccusa.org or 202-544-2350. Thanks!