



PRINTABLE VERSION: Thursday, January 3, 2008

1. 2007 REVIEW: Wildfires, climate change, preservation, water restoration efforts top year in resource news (01/03/2008)

As we begin a new year, the editors of *Land Letter* offer this sampling of some of our best and most popular stories from 2007.

Land Letter puts a spotlight on original reporting about natural resources and how our public lands are used and managed – whether for recreation or commercial applications such as mining, timber harvesting, or oil and gas drilling. While the vast majority of federally held or managed lands are in the western United States, we investigate issues from all parts of the country and look for state and local angles on developments of national importance.

Policy and politics are mainstays of E&E Publishing's brand of news coverage, and *Land Letter* attempts to go beyond the D.C. Beltway by reporting on important issues in the context of how they play out in the communities most affected by them.

We also benefit greatly from the interplay among E&E news services, drawing on the collective resources of our staff of terrifically talented reporters and editors. Often a story initially reported on deadline for *Greenwire*, *E&E Daily* or *E&ENews PM* may be repeated or developed more fully in *Land Letter*. Even so, we strive to give each weekly issue its own distinct personality and exclusive news focus, as illustrated by several of the stories we have chosen to highlight from the past year.

Individually, these stories illustrate issues, trends and events that profoundly impact how our national resources are managed. Collectively, they reflect a more than 20-year tradition of providing engaging and meaningful articles on natural resource subjects that bring complex matters of policy and litigation to life with on-the-scene reports, images and informed analysis.

We remain open to your comments and suggestions for stories that help our readers understand the crucial aspects involved in balancing management priorities for public lands and natural resources. And we hope you will continue to share stories of interest with your colleagues and clients, so that they, too, will become part of the E&E community. – *The Editors*.

Wildfires consume more than 9M acres, billions in response costs

For the second year in a row, wildfires plagued our public lands at a level unprecedented in modern times. More than 85,500 reported blazes raged across the continent during 2007 – destroying thousands of homes and businesses along with some 9.3 million acres of forests and grasslands. Among the most notable and stubborn of these fires was a huge conflagration in drought-plagued Georgia and Florida that threatened Lake Okeechobee. Massive, deadly fires in California, a smoldering tundra in Alaska and dozens of burned-out sites in Montana, Idaho and Nevada also testified to the growing problem of how best to manage extensive wildfires with increasingly limited resources.

Beyond documenting specific blazes, *Land Letter* in 2007 brought a special focus to the issues surrounding wildfire management policies, including projects to restore previously burned areas and experiments into the best methods for prevention and fuels management.

Related stories:

- States on hook for increased firefighting costs (Tom Arrandale, [Land Letter](#), July 5)
- Reduced fleet limits Forest Service's aerial firefighting ability (Eric Bontrager, [Land Letter](#), July 26)
- Idaho fire spotlights new 'let it burn' philosophy (Dan Berman, [Land Letter](#), Sept. 6)
- Northern Ariz. experiment tests effectiveness of fuel treatments (April Reese, [Land Letter](#), Nov. 1)

- Life renews in Hayman Fire area, but full recovery will take centuries (Eryn Gable, [Land Letter](#), June 7)

Climate change poses new challenges to lands, resources

Although climate change has been an issue of scientific concern and political debate for decades, 2007 was the year that global warming became a global media obsession. The implications for public lands and resources are both complex and profound. As temperatures increase, pine-bark beetles in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park could eat away one of the largest remaining tracts of old-growth forest in the eastern United States. Florida's low-lying Everglades National Park could be submerged by increasingly powerful hurricanes and sea-level surges. More arid conditions in the West would result in larger wildfires that burn paths through such iconic places as Yosemite National Park. Already on the front lines of climate change, Alaska offers both a clear warning and ideas for early actions to deal with the threat.

Related stories:

- Warming causing birds, plants to move northward, experts say (Russell J. Dinnage, [Land Letter](#), Jan. 25)
- Global warming could devastate wilderness areas (Katherine Boyle, [Land Letter](#), July 12)
- Last frontier is front line for warming effects (Arthur O'Donnell, [Land Letter](#), Sept. 13)

History, culture, resource preservation efforts spread across the land

Federal agencies already manage hundreds of millions of acres of public lands in many forms: parks, forests, ranges, refuges, historic sites and military bases; but 2007 saw a resurgence of local and national efforts to set aside even more property for special protections or recognition. Given continued constraints on federal dollars to manage these properties, some resource agencies are wary of adding to their budget burdens, while all across the nation debates rage over the benefits and costs of making new designations. And a continued wariness among its many neighbors has driven the Department of Defense to look for new ways of collaborating with local groups to provide effective conservation buffers around military lands.

Related stories:

- NPS tries to keep up with proposals for new heritage areas (Debra Kahn, [Land Letter](#), Aug. 9)
- Potomac refuges shoulder staff and funding cuts (Allison Winter, [Land Letter](#), April 19)
- Southwest towns act to preserve starry nights (April Reese, [Land Letter](#), Sept. 20)
- Will Northern Rockies wilderness designation benefit regional economy? (Arthur O'Donnell, [Land Letter](#), Oct. 18)
- Mount St. Helens, volcano monument, park or forest? (Katherine Boyle, [Land Letter](#), Nov. 1)
- Base buffer program an effective defense against encroachments (Arthur O'Donnell/Katherine Boyle, [Land Letter](#), July 5)

Endangered species protections encounter political pressures

The year saw major advances in long-term efforts to stabilize populations of certain endangered or threatened species, including the removal of bald eagles and some grey wolves from the special protections afforded by the U.S. Endangered Species Act. Such positive news was frequently overshadowed by revelations of how internal agency politics influenced resource decisions within the Bush administration. What many consider a continuing battle between science and ideology will undoubtedly continue into 2008.

Even when politics do not directly intervene in management decisions, however, there remains a delicate balance between the stewardship of public resources and the desires of wildlife advocates and the public for greater protections and added resources.

Related stories:

- Bush admin still dragging its feet on ESA listings, critics say (April Reese, [Land Letter](#), Feb. 22)
- Even success breeds controversy for ESA listings (Arthur O'Donnell, [Land Letter](#), May 17)

- FWS to revisit rulings influenced by political appointee (Dan Berman, [Land Letter](#), Nov. 29)
- Nevada refuge plan would cull wild horse herds by 90 percent (Arthur O'Donnell, [Land Letter](#), April 19)
- Predator control program needs light of day, wildlife advocates contend (Eryn Gable, [Land Letter](#), Nov. 29)

Water restoration projects raise familiar issues in disparate locations

Efforts to restore the ecological health of valuable waterways continue to generate both hope and frustration among environmental advocates and government officials from coast to coast. During the year, *Land Letter* reporters documented many such projects – including the cleanup of toxic waterways, the restoration of estuaries and bays, and the removal of hydroelectric dams from rivers – illustrating the challenges of protecting our most precious waterways for the benefit of the many plant and animal species that depend on their health, as well as for the commercial and recreational opportunities they provide.

Related stories:

- Chesapeake Bay resists best efforts to reverse 20-year decline (Debra Kahn, [Land Letter](#), Feb. 22)
- Elwha River a living laboratory for dam removal, restoration (Arthur O'Donnell, [Land Letter](#), March 15)
- Rising sea, frequent storms strangle once-thriving Fla. seashore (Daniel Cusick, [Land Letter](#), April 5)
- Road to recovery littered with obstacles for James River (Katherine Boyle, [Land Letter](#), June 14)
- San Francisco targets Yosemite Slough as restoration beachhead (Arthur O'Donnell, [Land Letter](#), Aug. 16)

People, ideas form the core of resource policies

The above categories merely skim the surface of the comprehensive coverage provided by *Land Letter* during the year, with hundreds of articles and reports. Often triggered by the release of a study, the introduction or passage of legislation, or the filing of a lawsuit or a judge's ruling (and inevitable appeal), these stories represent the core of our brand of accurate and objective reporting.

Occasionally, we are able to also provide a glimpse of the people behind the stories – offering a reminder that policies and decisions are made by individuals and that understanding their personalities and motivations helps illuminate sometimes complex issues. The dedication of resource professionals and a committed public is often the deciding factor in the success of a difficult program or project, and this same dedication spurs even greater efforts when things do not turn out as planned.

We cannot list all of what we consider the best of these stories, but here are a few that stand out:

- Smaller is better, farmer and author Wendell Berry says (April Reese, [Land Letter](#), Jan. 25)
- Mount Rainier cleanup relies on students and other volunteers (Katherine Boyle, [Land Letter](#), April 26)
- NPS chief historian brings field experience to new post (Katherine Boyle, [Land Letter](#) Sept. 20)
- Federal whooping crane relocation program suffers setback (Russell J. Dinnage, [Land Letter](#), Feb. 8)

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