ESP 172: Public Land Management

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Public Lands Background

Ownership Statistics
- Total land area of US: 2.27 billion acres
- 643.2 million acres of public land (about 1 million square miles)
- 27.7% of the United States
- 400 million acres, excluding Alaska (about 21% of lower 48)

Ownership Patterns
- BLM and Forest Service largest landowners
- Substantial variance across states
- Most Federal land in the West
- Alaska has largest amount of Federal land (250.28 million acres, 62.4%)
- Nevada highest percentage (58 million acres; 82.9%)
- California has 43.7 million acres, about 43.6% of the land in the state
Acquisition of the Public Lands

From Original Colonies
- Seven of 13 original colonies claimed Western lands; grounded in original charters from British crown
- Colonies gave land to Federal government as part of negotiations over Articles of Confederation

From Foreign Nations
- 1803; Louisiana purchase from France; 523 Million @ 3 cents/per acre, about $16 million
- 1818; Florida acquired from Spain
- 1845; Texas annexed after gaining independence from Mexico
- 1846; Oregon compromise; NW from British
- 1848; Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo; SW and CA from Mexico ($15 million)
- 1867; Alaska purchased from Russia ($7.2 million)
Disposition of Public Lands I

**Land Ordinance of 1785**

- Established survey system, square townships of 36 identical, numbered sections, 640 acres each (one square mile)
- Surveyed lands auctioned a minimum of $1/acre
- No limits on speculation or protections for squatters
- Square system of townships has legacy in public lands today; “checkerboards”
- Do square townships follow ecological boundaries?
Disposition of Public Lands II

Statehood Grants
- On statehood, Congress gives states certain amount of lands, and also revenue from fed sales
- “In-place” grants of specific numbered sections for public schools (with later states receiving more sections); “indemnity” lands
- “Quantity grants” of specified amount of acreage selected by state; revenue generation
- Each statehood grant had specific terms for public lands; no single formula; become more liberal over time
- Congress made other grants to states over time for public improvements, including Morrill Act of 1862, which gave 30,000 acres for each Senator or representative for A&M Schools (I.e. UC Davis and Land Grant Universities)
- In total, states received 328 million acres
Disposition of Public Lands III

Grants to Settlers

- Constant debate between Madison and Jefferson; revenue versus agrarian ideal
- Land Act of 1796: Offers cash-and-credit (5% down) sales at auction; Congress continually liberalized credit terms and had many debtors
- General Preemption Act of 1841: Allows squatters to obtain maximum of 160 acres of public land for $1.25/acre
- Homestead Act of 1862: 160 acres of public land for free; settlement and cultivation for 5 years grants title
- Many problems with settlement: speculation; fraud (e.g., going over acreage limit); taking resources and abandoning claims; incomplete surveying; fencing of public lands for grazing
- In general, the best lands went to private ownership, and remaining Federal lands were not as economically valuable or ecologically productive
- In total, 591 million acres went to settlers through purchase or homesteading
Disposition of Public Lands IV

Grants to Railroads

- Congress made massive grants to railroads in late 1800s
- Right-of-ways, construction loans, plus odd-numbered sections of surveyed land; for example, for each mile built, railroad gets 20 odd-numbered sections in a 20 mile belt
- Establishes the checkerboard pattern of alternating Federal and non-Federal ownership
- Railroads supposed to dispose of their land at $1.25 per acre, and use revenue to finance construction and operation
- Huge influence on western development; opened up Western agricultural markets, promoted tourism, coordination point for development
- In total, railroads received 94 million acres
Myths of the “Great Barbecue”

- Term coined by historian Vernon Parrington
- Manifest Destiny and the frontier
- Wilderness is evil (or, is it a source of spiritual sustenance?)
- Rugged individualism
- Rights to public lands
- No government intervention (hmm…what about subsidized logging, ranching, and water?)
- Infinite resources
- Resource dependent communities
- American majesty in nature
- Lords of Yesterday
Public Lands, On-Shore Federal and Indian Minerals in Lands of the U.S.
Responsibilities of Bureau of Land Management - Lower 48 States

- Of the approximately 700 million acres of Federal mineral estate, about 160 million acres have been withdrawn for mineral, water, and oil, except for valid existing rights.
- Sand and gravel royalties are the responsibility of each federal surface management agency.
- The map depicts only Indian reservations at least 0.3 million acres in size; not all Indian trust lands.

Categories of Lands:
- BLM - Surface and Minerals (262 million ac)
- Other Federal Lands - Minerals (380 million ac)
- Non-Federal Surface (includes 58 million ac of Split - Estate Federal Minerals)
- Indian Trust Lands (56 million ac) except Mineral Operations for Osage Minerals
- BLM Administrative Boundaries

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