

FEDERAL LAND POLICY
and
PRESIDENT REAGAN'S DISPOSAL EFFORT
THE CONSEQUENCES and THE FUTURE

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INTRODUCTION

Public policy sways with the times. It comes about as a result of various factors, most notably the demands of the people as expressed through their chosen representatives in government. Although changing times dictate varying policies, the foundation of America's constitutional democracy continues to exist in a form similar to that originally created. It must, if for no reason other than simply to maintain a certain degree of law and order within society. Land, the cornerstone of America's economic as well as social system, is a good example. A citizen of the United States has always had the right to own, possess and utilize private property in whatever manner that person deems fit, as long as these actions do not encroach upon the rights of others. Nonetheless, public policy in regard to federal ownership and management of land has certainly progressed through numerous positions in the relatively brief history of the United States.

Changing policies are undeniably necessary. The basic fact is that land is no longer an immeasurable resource, capable of satisfying the many demands of its inhabitants, as was the case in the early nineteenth century when the West was still wild, and the horse was man's primary means of transportation. New technologies have evolved which permit man to exploit earth's natural resources at a far greater capacity than ever before. Man's population has continued to grow and grow. The effect has been an increased number of people with a much higher style of

living, all at the expense of these resources.

The President of the United States has the power to initiate public policy. Soon after his inauguration, President Reagan decided to use this power to make some fundamental changes in regard to public lands.² While these proposed changes raised a number of specific questions, which shall be studied in detail in the following pages, they also provoked debate about more fundamental issues: Should the Federal Government continue to own and manage one out of every three acres within the United States? What role should America's government ideally play?

There is no single, correct solution. Rather it is necessary for the Federal Government to achieve a balance between the many conflicting interests of its people. Yet by focusing on the changes that President Reagan has sought to implement, and the reactions stimulated, some answers to these crucial issues can be found.

² (Although the author is aware of the fact that the term "public lands" is not synonymous with that of "Federal lands", and that Federal lands constitute only one component of public lands, the two are used interchangeably throughout the following analysis.)