



Writers on the Range: What Westerners would love to ask the candidates

BY BY ED QUILLEN
WRITERS ON THE RANGE, AUGUST 2008

For a Westerner, this year's presidential campaign has been both exciting and disappointing. There was excitement when Sen. Barack Obama and the entire Clinton family fought for support in Wyoming; who could ever have imagined that Democratic presidential candidates would be battling for delegates in a state that no Democrat has carried in 44 years? The pundits who analyze such matters also predict that New Mexico, Colorado, Nevada and Oregon will all be competitive states that will get a lot of attention when the campaign heats up after Labor Day.

So why the sense of disappointment? Because I haven't heard much mention of "Western issues," even though we're supposed to be important players this time around. To be sure, the presidency is a national office of international stature. It is right that national matters like energy, Iraq and the economy dominate the campaign. We're Americans as well as Westerners, and we care about those things, too.

So how do we define "Western issues"? Or to put it another way, how is the West different from the rest of the United States? One of my favorite histories is *The Great Plains* by Walter Prescott Webb. It's an oldie, published in 1931. Webb argues that if you consider factors like aridity — less than 20 inches of precipitation a year — then the Plains environment extends roughly from central Kansas to the crest of the Sierra Nevada.

Aridity explains another peculiar factor of the West — our abundance of public land. After the federal government acquired the West, much of it in the Mexican War of 1846-48, it gave away vast chunks of land to the railroads. It tried to give away land to anyone who would work it with the General Mining Act of 1872, and the Homestead Act of 1862 and its successors. But even at that, there weren't a lot of takers. There just wasn't enough water to make the land productive for private owners.

Thus we have an abundance of federal land. I ran some numbers with U.S. General Services Administration data from 2004, omitting Alaska, Hawaii and the District of Columbia. In the West, the proportion of federal land ranges from 29.9 percent in Montana to 84.5 percent in Nevada. In the rest of the country, the range is from 0.4 percent in Rhode Island and Connecticut to 13.4 in New Hampshire.

To put it another way, of the 624,995 square miles of federal land in the Lower 48, 88 percent are in the 11 Western states: Arizona, California, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon, Utah, Washington and Wyoming.

This plays out in a lot of ways, from the Sagebrush Rebellion to EarthFirst. Our major industries, from tourism to resource extraction and agriculture, are all connected to our abundance of federal land. That's why I long to see a presidential forum that features questions like these:

"It would be presumptuous to ask you now about who you would appoint as secretary of the Interior. But it would be fair to ask you which secretary, since the department was created in 1849, was your favorite. Was it Bruce Babbitt, James Watt, or someone else?"

"Currently, about half the budget of the U.S. Forest Service is devoted to fighting wildfires. Is this a reasonable allocation of public resources?"

"Continuing with the Forest Service, its budget for fiscal year 2009 is \$4.109 billion, a drop from \$4.126 billion in fiscal 2008 and \$4.191 billion in fiscal 2007. Is this decline a trend that should continue?"

"In Colorado, the BLM has approved an oil and gas drilling plan for the Roan Plateau. The state's governor and many other elected officials opposed the plan. Was this a good decision by the BLM? And further, how much consideration should the federal government extend to state and local officials in the administration of public lands?"

"What, if any, changes are needed in the General Mining Act of 1872?"

"The federal government currently charges \$1.35 per month per animal unit for grazing on public lands — considerably less than the going rate on private land. On the other hand, some argue that helping ranchers stay in business helps preserve open space. Where do you stand on the federal grazing fee?"

"This summer, the U.S. House of Representatives has scheduled hearings on the Federal Lands Recreational Enhancement Act, also known as the Recreation Access Tax, or RAT. How much should Americans be charged for parking and using unimproved areas on land we already own?"

Of course, there are many other questions that could be asked, ranging from off-road vehicle use to National Guard deployments that deprive states of the Guard's help in dealing with wildfires on public lands. It would be wonderful if the candidates scheduled a Western debate, televised from Casper or Bozeman or Provo or somewhere like that. Somehow, I'm not holding my breath waiting for it to happen.

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